

## Introduction: “Writing, Teaching, Performing an ‘Anxious Nation’”

In his essay on the need to think of literacy in the plural, as “literacies,” writer Roger Martin notes that, in its increasing cultural and technological diversity, the United States is becoming more polarized.

We are . . . an anxious nation, one in which the polarization bred of anxiety about our various ideologies is ever more deeply felt. If we are to avoid the fate of increasingly abrasive class, race and ideological conflict, we need to learn each other’s languages—to become ‘literate’ in terms of how our diverse communities speak and write and otherwise transact business. Because we do not live by words alone, but ‘say’ what we mean in many ways—including our music, art and games, for example—we need to become ‘literate’ in the multiple styles of communication, verbal and nonverbal, favored by various groups.<sup>1</sup>

Martin might well have added theatre and performance to his list.

In an effort to address the need for multiple literacies on the stage, in our reading and writing, and in the classroom, The American Theatre and Drama Society and The University of Kansas jointly sponsored “Writing, Teaching, Performing America,” an interdisciplinary conference held in Lawrence, Kansas, from March 3-5, 2005. William W. Demastes, then president of ATDS, and Iris Smith Fischer, chair of the KU organizing committee, coordinated the planning. For ATDS, founded as a focus group affiliated with the Association for Theatre in Higher Education, holding its own conference was a first. For the KU Department of English, which has offered an annual conference since 1953, “Writing, Teaching, Performing America” has been a new development in a tradition of conferences designed to bring together college and university faculty, students, and high school teachers to discuss writing and teaching.<sup>2</sup> In 2005, the organizers sought to engage this audience of English teachers and students with writers, performers, directors, and drama and performance scholars in a discussion of what it means to be “American,” how that identity is changing, and in what ways the writer, teacher, and performer might shape the future of United States culture.

Over three hundred people attended the conference. A sampling of the session titles conveys the rich variety of discussion. “Dramatizing, Dancing, and Narrating Blackness” and “American Nativisms: Social Definition and Conflict in 19<sup>th</sup> and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Theatre,” for example, investigated ethnic differences

in United States culture, past and present, while “Opera as a Performance of America in the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century” and “*Lineage: A Song Cycle Based on the Poems of Margaret Walker*” approached the intersection of music, literature, and performance. Individual authors and artists were examined in sessions such as “Zora Neale Hurston: From Page to Stage” and “Tony Kushner and American Historical Memory.” The roots of contemporary United States cultural circumstances were explored in “Greek to U. S.: Reimagining Greek Myth and Rethinking America” and “Politics and Religion in America” (the latter papers included here). “American Musical Voices: Composing, Training, and Performing Women in the Musical” was only one of several sessions that encouraged participants to think about the intersection of performer training, pedagogy, and gender identity in American theatre. Readings, performances, and workshops abounded. From the featured conference event, a University of Kansas production of *You Can't Take It With You*, to readings of the original scripts “Sam’s Club,” *Weaving the Rain*, and *The Four Horsemen*, to workshops on “Exploring the Borderlands of Cross-Racial Performance” and “Writing as Performance: Using Somatic Knowing for Teaching Creative Writing,” multiple literacies were created to cross over and articulate United States cultures and experiences.

Three plenary speakers addressed the conference theme from the perspectives of drama criticism, performance studies, and directing. In “Arthur Miller: Un-American,” Christopher Bigsby reflected on the reception of the works of the late playwright. Citing him as quintessentially American, a playwright whose calm, forthright voice still speaks relevantly to intolerance and injustice, Bigsby pointed out that Miller’s plays, even the canonical ones, were better received abroad than in the United States. Often celebrated in high school classrooms and community theatres, Miller has been consistently dismissed by American critics and scholars. Only one of his many plays received a Pulitzer Prize. Many of Miller’s eulogists still find him too Jewish and too leftist, and his plays too indebted to melodrama. While Henry Ford, said Bigsby, called history “bunk,” Miller had an Ibsenian respect for the past and its consequences. Yet Bigsby was reluctant to claim Miller for Europe. A child of immigrants, Miller shared forward-looking sensibilities and ideals with his fellow citizens and, in his work with PEN, sought to protect writers’ freedoms around the world. In a sense, Miller, if he were alive, might be “feeling brown,” to borrow a phrase used by José Esteban Muñoz in his plenary, “Globalization, Tropicalization, and Latina/o American Theatre and Performance.” Celebrating the emergence of Latina/o playwrights in an America where “majority” and “minority” populations are switching places, Muñoz critiqued the tendency to “tropicalize” depictions of Latino/as, even as theatre responds to and reflects the globalization of United States culture. The affective responses of Latino/a spectators to plays such as Nilo Cruz’s *Anna in the Tropics*, which won the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for drama, result from Cruz’s familiar representational techniques. The author has tropicalized

himself, Muñoz claimed, while Cruz's mentor, playwright Maria Irene Fornes, maintains an edgier, presentational approach and has been overlooked by the Pulitzer committee. In her plenary presentation, director Anne Bogart, co-founder of the Saratoga International Theatre Institute (SITI), maintained that of the "six things I know for sure about being an artist in the American theatre," the first (at least on that day, for Bogart's six things vary) is that "certainty leads to violence." More valuable for her is the silence that ensues when words fail. Bogart found value in the silence that fell on New York City on September 11, 2001, and urged the audience to locate in that silence a productive space, an opportunity for creativity.

The following cross section of theatre- and performance-related papers, revised for this issue, traces these and other themes in creative ways. Cheryl Black, in "'Making Queer New Things': Queer Identities in the Life and Dramaturgy of Susan Glaspell," takes a fresh look at O'Neill's contemporary, who in light of recent developments in queer theory is still emerging as an American writer. Black writes: "[Glaspell's] works emerged at the advent of the invention of compulsory heterosexuality as a political and economic institution in American life, and they resonate with new vitality in our current cultural climate's attempt to reify the 'sanctity' of heterosexual unions and to constitutionally prohibit any other kind." In reminding us of the history of twentieth-century debates on sexuality and gender, Black highlights Glaspell's innovations in language, character, plot, and staging. Glaspell was leaping "out" of conventional gender and artistic boundaries—creating, in effect, new literacies by means of her plays.<sup>3</sup>

Nancy Cho, in "Beyond Identity Politics: National and Transnational Dialogues in Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* and Chay Yew's *A Beautiful Country*," finds new forms of cultural dialogue in the work, and working methods, of the Singapore-born playwright and the United States-born writer and performer. Cho joins Muñoz in calling for a critique of representation in post-identity theatre; in fact, she flags it as a conscious problem in Smith's play: "*Twilight* succeeds not in accurately representing all the voices of Los Angeles but in calling our attention to the limits of representation even as we see that such efforts to understand one another are vital to our own survival." Cho finds such survival strategies also in Chay Yew's display of "in-between-ness" in "coming from Asia, living in America, being in LA, going to New York" . . . Yew's series of gerunds—"coming," "living," "being," "going,"—offers a particularly fluid way of conceptualizing identity and hints at the significance of transnationalism in the making of culture." A post-identity theatre, says Cho, emphasizes "collectivity rather than individuality, American horizons rather than ethnic roots, and transnational contingencies rather than national belonging."

The three papers from the panel "Performance and Religion in America" urge recognition of a similar complexity and contingency in the contemporary experience of religion and spirituality. They connect richly with other papers here, e.g., Black's

discussion of Glaspell and queerness, by investigating how the religious left might join cultural debates usually considered the purview of the more audible secular left and religious right. Anthony Kubiak, in “Soul Death and the Death of Soul in Critical Theory: A Polemic,” historicizes the interweaving of politics and religion in the United States by tracing the origins of liberation theology in the 1950s, through the civil rights movement, to the “neutralization” of these movements and the resulting “soul-death” of more recent leftist activity. Having returned to the United States through European Marxism, the ideas of the secular left, including political and cultural theory, have become isolated from a political dialogue increasingly framed in religious and spiritual terms.

Ann Pellegrini continues Kubiak’s call for attention to such issues in “Testimonial Sexuality; or Queer Structures of Religious Feeling: Notes Toward an Investigation.” Here she draws attention to the genre of “religious self-narratives, the coming out *of* homosexuality story” as a way of explaining how the religious right is creating, to borrow Raymond Williams’s term, “a new phase of the dominant culture.” She urges re-examination of the *residual* as both a “living remnant” of possibly useful cultural forms and a “vehicle” for the expression of non-dominant views. Leftist defenses of gay rights, often expressed performatively, should be expanded to a broader defense of sexual freedom by complicating the apparent antagonism between religion and sexuality.

Janelle Reinelt, in “The Ambivalence of Catholic Compassion,” calls attention to the “counter-performances” of women on the religious left who champion social justice. Maintaining that belief cannot be divorced any longer from social commitment, Reinelt cites Sister Helen Prejean’s performance of celebrity in her fierce struggle against the death penalty. The secular left needs to recognize that, in a time of anxiety and paranoia, the desire is great for recognizable forms of certainty. For those whose religious beliefs do not encompass all aspects of their lives (and perhaps for those whose beliefs do) the religious left’s uses of performance, Reinelt asserts, offers the assertion of a presence based on an acknowledged fiction. She argues that “adjacency,” the tendency of audiences to apply their knowledge of the performer-celebrity, can “complete and/or verify representation.”

Without using Reinelt’s term, Christy Rieger also addresses the value of counter-performance—demonstrated, in this case, by the films of Michael Moore. Having screened *Fahrenheit 9/11* in the writing classroom, Rieger outlines the uses of defamiliarization in making students aware of the rhetorical techniques being used by Moore, and by other pundits and media personalities, such as Al Franken, Ann Coulter, Bill O’Reilly, and Sean Hannity, who have commented on the film. Terming current political debates a “theatre of argument,” Rieger suggests that college-level writing instructors can lead their students to interrogate, by means of their writing, such “hyperbolic” argumentative strategies. Rieger’s paper speaks to others at the conference that addressed pedagogical and writing issues. She reminds us of the

ancient connections among theatre, rhetoric, and politics in the development of public dialogue. American politicians and pundits, as well as college students in the writing classroom, need to re-locate their sense of themselves and others as “real author[s] appealing to . . . actual audience[s].”

These six papers represent only one set of strands in the lively discussions that took place at the conference on “Writing, Teaching, Performing America.” As Nancy Cho notes, framing the need for new literacies in the form of a gerund—i.e., a part of speech suggesting an ongoing activity—puts the emphasis not on personal identity but on the fluidity of action and the limits of representation. In the awareness of those limits, we become aware of ourselves as speaker-performers and perhaps become more imaginative in our performances as writers, teachers, citizens. The success of embracing “new literacies” hinges on the delicate balance between “the things we know for sure” and the need to remain in contact with and open to the world, particularly with those whose performances encourage us to fruitfully interrogate ourselves.

—Iris Smith Fischer

## Notes

1. Roger Martin, “What Is ‘New Literacies’?,” Writing, Teaching, Performing America conference website, Department of English, University of Kansas, 20 June 2005 <<http://www.ku.edu/~nlc>>.

2. The Conference on Composition and Literature ran from 1953 to 2001. It was renamed The Conference on New Literacies under the leadership of Prof. Maryemma Graham, who organized the first such meeting in 2003, when it was held in conjunction with The Langston Hughes February Festival. No meeting took place in 2004.

3. Six other papers were presented by members of the Susan Glaspell Society on the author’s innovative work; the Society also sponsored a staged reading of Glaspell’s 1921 play *Inheritors*.

