

consistent with his concept of an American philosophical alternative to the scepticism of European thought, particularly in its Cartesian legacy.

I have dwelt on Sheriff's epistemological exploration, but in conclusion should briefly indicate a second major contribution of this book in its significance for theorists of discourse. Neither Peirce nor Sheriff use that term, but in chapters five, six, and seven, Sheriff demonstrates how Peirce's thought deals with distinct (though never "pure") discursive categories for possibility, fact and reason into which fall art, criticism, and theory. Poststructuralists do not make these distinctions because, as Sheriff points out, their view of language is monofunctional:

Derrida's definition of language as 'writing' is an assertion that all language is of the nature of a class-10 sign/symbols representing symbols as symbols. Therefore, much of structural and Derridean theory of language is consistent with Peirce's theory of class-10 signs. It should be clear now why deconstructive theorists cannot distinguish between literature and history or philosophy. (127)

Peirce provides a theoretical base for the ludic and empirical as well as the conceptual functions of language, and Sheriff draws out its implications.

Charles Peirce's work has attracted steady attention from philosophers and semioticians over the years, but for the past two decades in literary studies European thought drawing on Saussurean insights has been dominant. This book shows, with considerable originality, the significant poverty of that tradition.

IAN ADAM

Sue-Ellen Case. *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990. pp. 327. \$39.95; \$14.95 pb.

The carefully worded, multivalent title of this collection of essays is a clue to the variety, complexity, problematics, and sometimes intramural tension of the twenty pieces assembled by the person who is arguably the *grand-dame* of feminism and theatre within American academe. "Performing" is intended as both gerund and participle; the plural it precedes is an acknowledgement of the variety of endeavours that share the same rubric. The theory offered does not always have traditional theatre as its target; many kinds of performances—including critical writing and self-presentation—are considered. Some of the discussions of theatre betray social feminist assumptions so tame as to appear virtually mainstream.

The essays, with two exceptions, were selected from issues of *Theatre Journal* published between 1984 and 1989. During that period, Case and Timothy Murray were the journal's editors and, as Case states in her introduction, the two were criticized by the publication's parent organization (American Theatre in Higher Education) for publishing femi-

nist critique and critical theory in theatre studies. *Performing Feminisms* stands as both a record of the concerns of a group of thinkers and writers in the mid-to-late 1980s and as testimony to Case's pursuit of a then brand new intellectual agenda (one that is still controversial to many people). The value of reading the entire book (which most special interest readers probably wouldn't do, as the writers cover a spectrum of topics including contemporary lesbian representation, English Renaissance courtly rhetoric and medieval Japanese women demoted from court morticians to prostitute-singers) is that it suggests questions about the whole endeavour of feminism(s) within the academy, where specialization is prized. Do these specializations in the aggregate help accomplish the book's oft-repeated goal of "social change"? Or do they emerge as so many esoteric slingshots fashioned against the goliath of patriarchalism in (mostly theatrical) representation? Ideally, the precision, originality, care, and fluidity of most of the pieces will influence the thinking and praxis of other scholars and of students in the interest of overhauling the treatment and perception of women that, as this eclectic gathering of work shows, are virtually ubiquitous.

The concerns of many of the writers cut across the book's four categories, which are, roughly, marginalization, ethnicity, English Renaissance texts, and performance. The "Cult of True Womanhood" that Glenda Dickerson cites as a turn-of-the-century ideal that was not only anathema to black women but socially impossible for them to realize is, in fact, the same ideal that informs Judith L. Stephens's readings of American Progressive Era plays. These two essays are positioned in different parts of the book, but Case herself champions "shak[ing] departmental and genre assumptions" (3). Dickerson embraces a black "womanism" (a term borrowed from Alice Walker) for all classes and declares her mission to create performances as a "guardian of the archetypes of her culture's collective unconscious" (118). Stephens deflates the idea that "feminist" plays written between 1890 and 1920 did much more than offer "compensation and recuperation" to spunky, middle-class heroines who speak out only to return to the realms of domesticity and moral duty, "thereby reproduc[ing] dominant gender ideology" (283).

The theme that runs throughout the book is the constructedness of gender in language, literary form, and social practice, and the importance of foregrounding this artifice in writing and in performance to deny its reification and prevent its reinscription. Judith Butler posits gender itself as constituted through performance, which she defines as "a stylized repetition of acts" (270). People perform gender as a "strategy of survival" (273) under threat of punishment. The "act" both precedes the individual performer and is perpetuated by her. Butler shares with Teresa de Lauretis a concern with breaking down the idea that there is anything given about a binary gender system and with making visible how codes of representation and behaviour operate as historic ideas, not as expressions of anything essential or biological. Sara

Eaton's essay on *The Changeling* demonstrates that a fictional character's attempts to embody and reflect dual opposing facets of courtly love render her a two-faced mirror with no voice or stance of her own. Lorraine Helms's work on the women's roles in Shakespeare suggests that *only* a feminist performance can recuperate these characters for contemporary audiences. The very language and dramaturgy of Shakespeare's female speeches and scenes supports a performance tradition in which boys needed all the help they could get to pass as girls and women.

Psychoanalysis figures heavily in about half the essays. Barbara Freedman's "Frame-Up: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, Theatre" presents the shared goal of feminism and psychoanalysis as "intervening in the cultural reproduction of sexual difference" and "exposing the arbitrary and divisive construction of subject positions" (61). For Freedman, theatre is the ideal vehicle for this intervention because it allows for a gaze that is returned in ways that can't be predicted or controlled by the spectator and because it always involves a tension between representer and represented. Sharon Willis writes about Hélène Cixous's *Portrait de Dora*, offering a psychoanalytic reading of a play whose subject is psychoanalysis. Jeanie Forte's piece on women's performance art stresses the genre's importance for refiguring a female subject position through self-scripted, sometimes wordless aesthetic performance. Besides psychoanalysis, several of the writers share an anxiety about realism. Jill Dolan declares it has been less than helpful in lesbian representation because of its insistence on validating dominant order and its erasure or punishment of difference. Elin Diamond's assessment of the damaging workings of narrative and her interpretation of the anti-realist work of Churchill, Duras, and Benmussa are illuminating and persuasive as she eschews what she calls the romanticism of identity.

If I have a single complaint with this book, it is about a utopianism regarding spectators. Forte, Willis, and Diamond especially are, I think, unrealistically confident in their declarations about the revelations, refusals, and disruptions generated by the texts and performances they discuss. Their projected spectators seem nearly as astute as the writers themselves, or at least as initiated. Forte dismisses any concern that the nude female body, reappropriated by the feminist performer for her own use and pleasure, might not be able to escape centuries of connotation. Forte insists that a nude feminist performer can "reclaim the body from its patriarchal textualization" (259) and alludes to but declines to take on the specific charge that intention may not be able to overcome entrenched reception in this crucial area. Forte's and Butler's refusal of the possible application or intrusion of a semiotic code other than the ones they approve are the largest problems in their essays. They cannot conceive of a spectator who reads personal, experimental, feminist work with any other optic than their complicit, already-informed one. Case acknowledges the audience issue briefly in her introduction, when she says that "avant-garde forms, if they do not reach out to a majority of women as effectively as popular culture, do adequately perform femi-

nism for some members of the movement" (10). This is disappointing as far as effecting social change goes. It may also be an American weakness; Janelle Reinelt's essays points out how British feminism has been allied to the working class from the start. The plays she discusses were all commissioned by specific companies for known, large audiences and were widely seen and understood. Despite the "materialist" position of some of the American writers, actual production circumstances are often ignored or glossed over and social change through popular performance forms is either uninteresting or ineffective for these theorists.

Performing Feminisms is a valuable, provoking, important addition to any theatre scholar or practitioner's library, especially since feminist theory is a relative newcomer to the world of theatre. I have just one lingering, non-textual question after reading the book. Only one of the twenty contributors—all women—was a full professor at the time of publication. I hope this is merely because the writers (of whom I have only met three, so I'm speculating about the others) are all young.

DOROTHY CHANSKY

Gayl Jones. *Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP. pp. 236. \$27.95.

The renewed interest in African American literature over the past decade has resurrected the debate over black aesthetics that began with militant black scholars such as Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal in the 1960s, only this time around the terms of the debate are very different. Whereas the first generation of black aestheticians, envisioning a black literature uncompromised by "white" theories, defined black art through an undifferentiated notion of blacks and blackness, the advent of deconstruction and other poststructuralist theories has radically realigned black discourse such that the leading question of the debate is not, What is black literature? but rather, What is blackness? And how do we identify its discursive properties?

Recent criticism, struggling to retain the notion of an essentially black literary mode while acknowledging the essential constructedness of blackness, has identified the "oral" structures of African American narrative as the central defining feature of the genre. It is with this in mind that I read Gayl Jones's recent book—her first critical work—on oral tradition in African American literature. I expected that Jones, as a well-known African American writer herself, would do much to dissolve that unfortunate distinction our discipline makes between the producers and the interpreters of art.

This was not the case. Indeed, Jones, with her tendency to use personal anecdote in lieu of scholarly evidence, has if anything deepened the divide. After a promising introduction which contextualized the close readings as part of a "deliberate correlation of form and content that is found in the twentieth century's use of oral technique," related to