

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

but distinct from oral impulses in narratives as diverse as *The Canterbury Tales* and *Don Quijote*, Jones embarks upon a series of stylistic analyses that are repetitious and, for the most part, divorced from the promise of the jacket flap: to reveal how "literary technique is never far removed from its social and political implications."

Her analysis, which makes no mention of any criticism written after 1981, seems remarkably out of date. In the Postscript, Jones explains that she completed the book in 1982 and then left for Paris, where apparently she remained blissfully unaware of the important theories advanced and new directions taken in African American studies. She identifies a few of these "new" critics, and concludes that it is *they* who are too narrowly focussed:

One of the failures of insight of the new critics, which I have emphasized, is that the problems of the freed voice apply not only to African American literature and criticism, but to all the world's literatures and criticisms: European versus American, Anglo-American versus Chicano, French Standard versus French Creole, Canadian English versus Canadian French, Russian versus Estonian, and so on.

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The above comment is as confusing as it is ironic: one must ask, if Jones believes that orality as a structuring principle is a basic device used to combat *all* forms of literary hegemony everywhere, why make the case, as she appears to do, that this is a specifically African American narrative feature? If her intent is to show the universal voice of the African American oral tradition, it would seem more logical to identify the basic operating features of the oral mechanism and then attempt to fit the African American narrative into that schema rather than the other way around.

That being said, Jones does have some interesting ideas on how orality works as a structuring device, though the trajectories of her arguments tend to get lost in the fog of stylistic description. The focus of her project, to trace an oral tradition stylistically, is ambitious. She argues that African American narrative evolved out of a linguistic hierarchy, with the classic Western novel at its apex, and black vernacular at its nadir. Because of this chasm, the major struggle of African American writers is—or should be—to "liberate" their narrative from the "framed story" (John Wideman's coinage), which is the standard Western literary narrative in which the vernacular stories are contained. The frame has a dual intent: to validate the use of the African American vernacular and to illustrate the author's ability to meet the recognized standard of literary excellence. This resulted in the burlesque minstrel tradition evident in early twentieth-century African American narratives. As such, Jones asserts, the question is not how to convert orality into literature, but rather, how to *return* it to its original complexity; how to lose the caricature effect.

With this premise in mind, the book then traces African American narratives which engage orality with varying degrees of success, from poetry to short fiction and the novel. While Jones generally gives high

marks to the poetry's ability to synthesize oral and literary forms (though she finds Langston Hughes's blues poetry "pedestrian"), she believes that much work needs to be done in synthesizing the oral forms of the folktale and the blues ballad with the literary narrative. (For instance, she makes the interesting assertion that the notion of character is inherently antithetical to the African American tradition, because like the Akan oral tradition it emphasizes character *types*. Unfortunately, she does not pursue the question of how this affects the *reading* of oral structures.) Part of the problem, Jones argues, is that the literary narrative is trying to address an external white audience as well as an internal black audience, and consequently is self-limiting and self-conscious. She contrasts the "problems" of narrative with the relative "success" of African American music in reflecting black aesthetic sensibilities, and claims that a truly successful—and thus, presumably, a more black—narrative must incorporate the musical structures of blues and jazz (one feels compelled to ask, what of rap?).

Yet Jones's depiction has its own problems. On the one hand, she understands that a literary work's merits are decided by criteria external to the text; on the other, she adheres to the notion of an "objective" literary criticism. Moreover, her insistence on assessing the effectiveness (rather than the intent) of narrative in terms of its ability to integrate "the artistic and social imagination" implies two distinct spheres of existence, where the artistic represents the emotive plane of black cultural life and the social—or, more accurately, the political—is represented by black society's dialogue with white society. That black musical forms are de facto made synonymous with black life, and that black literature must first prove the relation, is an equation that holds dangerous implications.

Furthermore, Jones bases her assessment of black music's aesthetic superiority in part on its ability to develop its own standard and thereby judge other musical forms accordingly, thus setting the stage for racial one-upmanship. She cites the conclusion of one critic who compares African American and European American avant-garde music: the latter, she gloats, "simply does not meet the standard." By contrast, she describes African American literature as a literature of "transition and experiment," never fully establishing itself because of its "vexed" relation to audience; and as evidence she repeats Ernest Gaines's observation that most of the militant 1960s narratives were purchased by Northern white liberals and radicals. Presumably, Jones thinks that black music does not have this problem, yet it is a common complaint of African American jazz and blues musicians that if it were not for white audiences they would be out of business. Even so, the crucial issue of how reading communities interpret and fix the meaning of narrative is not addressed here.

Another inconsistency in the text is its disconcerting use of comparisons made either on a whim or to further emphasize the universal nature of the African American writers' predicament. Jones quotes variously from Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*, nineteenth-century Russian

novels, and contemporary Latin American authors, without providing any sustained reasoning as to why these are noteworthy comparisons. She is also given to rather effusive prose: Zora Neale Hurston's writing is "like a shining hummingbird" (125); Ellese Southerland employs "shimmering, malleable prose" (137); Ernest Gaines writes with the "clarity of crystal, the lucidity of obsidian"; and African American writers have "searched and wandered until they have been surprised by the blooming orchid" of success. The book also provides a glossary, with extensive definitions of terms such as "coherence," "duality," "criticism" (descriptive, prescriptive, and proscriptive), "ironic attitude," even "hero and heroine." It would appear that Jones anticipates a remarkably ill-informed audience for this work—or a very young one.

BELINDA EDMONDSON

Iain Chambers. *Border Dialogues: Journeys in Postmodernity*. New York & London: Routledge, 1990. pp. 146. \$55.00; \$16.95 pb.

The topic of postmodernism continues to draw the attention of writers whose critical definitions often seem to contribute to the genre, so difficult is it to address this highly uncentred and uncentring modality from a distance. But the poststructural critical methodologies that often inform such analyses also diminish the notion of a distanced critique in which the writer's own interests and desires were not implicated. In *Border Dialogues*, Iain Chambers presents a set of five lucid and often lyrical essays that offer some distinctly useful and at times highly stylized commentaries on contemporary Western, and in particular British, culture. Chambers takes a turn on the familiar languages of poststructuralist and postcolonial criticism by intensifying the implicit but usually repressed tones of romantic enchantment that so often lurk in descriptive analyses of contemporary culture. In an inviting though at times syntactically troubled voice, Chambers takes his readers on a series of intellectual tours suggested by the names of his chapters: "An Island Life," a brief but closely detailed analysis of the history of British nationalism and the culture of "Englishness" in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; "Some Metropolitan Tales," a meditation on the textures of modern and postmodern western cities that draws on Walter Benjamin's readings of Paris from the position of the *flâneur*; and "Voices, traces, horizons," in which the open-endedness, *unheimlichkeit*, and wandering of postmodern and postcolonial culture are explained as major symptoms of the complexity and heterogeneity of late twentieth-century global life.

In "A Handful of Sand," Chambers uses the New Mexican desert as a trope for these symptoms and for those of another, antithetical attitude provoked by postmodern thinking. The desert suggests, on the one hand, the endlessly revisionary and hybridizing effects of the Derridean paradigm as applied to the postcolonial West; and, on the other, the zero-degree myths of origin and originality in traditional systems of