

WHAT ARE YOU READING? EDITED BY EDWARD ZITER

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AMERICA: SOCIETY: THEATRE: RESEARCH.

Most of the books I'm reading don't have covers yet. Bearing that in mind as the membership anticipates the 2006 ASTR conference and a lively discussion of its eponymous keywords—*America, society, theatre, and research*—I thought that it might be useful to profile a few of the manuscripts (among those currently on, around, or under my desk) that speak to the trends suggested by some new approaches to these familiar terms. By offering one reader's preview of how the field will look when these forthcoming books are duly bound and distributed (and some of them may be out in time for the conference), I'm hoping to insinuate the underappreciated art of the blurb into the more exalted practice of augury.

As an umbrella term that covers the national, the societal, the theatrical, and the empirical, the word *performing*, no longer content with its lot as a present participle, secretly aspires to the condition of a gerund. Following grammatically and thematically on Jeffrey Mason and J. Ellen Gainor's ground-clearing *Performing America: Cultural Nationalism in American Theater* (Michigan, 1999) and Susan Castillo's *Performing America: Colonial Encounters in New World Writing* (Routledge, 2006), there will shortly arrive the more specialized and contemporary, but no less nationally and imperially imagined *Performing Consumers: Global Capital and Its Theatrical Seductions* (Routledge, 2006) by Maurya Wickstrom. Under the obligatory citational sway of Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (Harvard, 2000) and McKenzie's *Perform or Else* (Routledge, 2001), Wickstrom's argument is global, but her exemplary performances are local: standing in for what might still be called "American society" and inducing what she calls "Identifications" are the phantasmagoric (trans)national emporia of Niketown and Ralph Lauren, the Forum Shops at Caesar's Palace, the hyper-Disneyfied Times Square, and the American Girl Place, home of the American Girl Doll. Wickstrom's research method—shop till you drop—extracts the drama

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of everyday life from four retail spaces where arguably the ultimate product is not really the commodity but the consumer: hence the mordant title of her final chapter, “Making Americans.” *Performing the mall* is not only what Americans do, she demonstrates, employing the emerging methodology of critical performance studies, but also what does them.

An eerily similar usage of *performing*, innovatively put to quite different subjects, animates Sue-Ellen Case’s extraordinary *From Alchemy to Avatar: Performing Science and the Virtual* (Routledge, forthcoming). Illuminating a long-developing crisis in the way we think about how we live in an emerging environment of resurgent religious fundamentalism and insurgent information technology, Case theorizes an alternative history of belief, experience, and even consciousness itself. She dusts off a classic of European theatrical history—Goethe’s *Faust*, Parts I and II—and follows a thread that runs through it, linking medieval alchemical experiments before *Faust*, in which the Faust character from folklore participated, to the technoscience of modernity after it, in which he is also dangerously implicated, as the Jedermann of damned intellectuals, the Sorcerer’s Apprentice of virtual reality. The Virtual is the dark thread of faith-based science that Case, Theseus-like, follows through labyrinths of protocyper- and cyber-generated simulations, which reproduce actual environments or, more efficaciously, create them—worlds with no “real-life” equivalent, no everyday counterpart, except in the outer imaginative reaches of philosophy, fantasy, and faith. Increasingly, as Baudrillard and Žižek prophesied, these are the most probative arenas of what’s really happening.

The key feature common to the many séancelike performances that Case encounters and reports is the avatar, a form of embodiment in which a spirit is incarnated materially in visible form. As such, avatars morph terrifyingly from Faustian homunculi to AOL SuperBuddies and combat simulations, whether military, as in DOD training software, or civilian, as in *Grand Theft Auto*. To this mind-blowing conclave of improbable figures from history and contemporary popular culture, Case also invites Theosophist Helena Blavatsky (she of the “Astral Light”), Thomas Edison and George Bernard Shaw (on the magic of intellectual property), Mao (touting the alchemy of revolution), *Aelita the Queen of Mars* (the 1924 futurist-constructivist film), Brecht, the National Security Agency (under the rubric of “Cold War Alchemy”), Mark Ravenhill, and Shirley MacLaine. They all log onto Case’s chat room and, even more astonishingly, each one seems to have something urgent to say to the others. The research method that makes *From Alchemy to Avatar* possible (and even inevitable) is Net surfing, backed up but never usurped or sentimentally second-guessed by printed sources. The ambivalent emotions that drive this daring book, however, are the spiritually ancient ones of wonder and dread.

A similarly expressive aggregation of mixed feelings pervades Martin Harries’s *Forgetting Lot’s Wife: On Destructive Spectatorship* (Fordham, forthcoming). In chapters on Antonin Artaud, Renaissance and modern painters, and Hollywood’s noir filmmakers, Harries works though—and in a harrowing “Coda,” lives through—the abiding, even primordial fear of looking back. We fear looking back not only on the disasters that pertain to us, he suggests, but

also on those that pertain chiefly to others, as we face away from the ruins that also compel us, as if in voyeuristic guilt, and shuffle off furtively, turning schadenfreude inside out and upside down as the shame of remembering the pain of the victims. As a physically unharmed eyewitness to the burning and collapse of the Twin Towers on 9/11, Harries knows what he's talking about; and as a prescient observer of twentieth- and twenty-first-century cultural production, he has found some distinguished company to share his lot.

First and foremost, there is Artaud. Introducing the subject matter of modern "destructive spectatorship" in the apocalyptic terms that Harries evokes throughout the book, the French theatrical theorist made explicit and implicit use of the biblical parable of Lot, his wife, and his violated daughters, engendering from them "fantasies about the potential for spectatorial damage." The lunatic seer of the theatre of cruelty was morbidly drawn to the Louvre painting, attributed to Lucas van Leyden, titled *Lot and His Daughters* (ca. 1520), the clairvoyant visions of which find their way into the "Preface" of *The Theatre and Its Double* (1938). Here Lot's wife, a tiny figure turned to a pillar of salt before the tableau of a fire-and-brimstone-chastened city, becomes the image of a general crisis of looking: Artaud, after all, goes on to analogize the actor and the spectator to victims who signal each other through the flames as they are being burnt at the stake. *Forgetting Lot's Wife* ends with a haunting and haunted memoir of the falling Twin Towers, sickeningly compared by evangelistic exegetes at the time to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. In that American augury, not only the catastrophic spectacle but the entire wounded society spills its guts. Such perfidious moralizing prompts Harries to conclude by performing a scalding reenactment of the forbidden gesture itself: looking back.

Looking back, of course, is what historians must do. Judging from the evidence that is crossing my desk, they are rethinking the meaning of *America* in light of newly intersecting hemispheric and global intercultural and *research* in the context of a range of renovated ideas and practices. Drawing on Diana Taylor's vision of the pluralized "Americas," for instance, they are creating a new field of comparative colonial and postcolonial studies that, at once historical and theoretical, operates at a high level of methodological sophistication. Already out is Jill Lane's exemplary *Blackface Cuba, 1840–1895* (Penn, 2005) [reviewed in this issue—EZ], which exfoliates the hugely popular *teatro bufo* as the creolized scene of emergent anticolonial nationalism. More recently published is Sean X. Goudie's *Creole America: The West Indies and the Formation of Literature and Culture in the New Republic* (Penn, 2006), which advances the idea of "parabonism" to describe what the fledgling United States practiced in the Caribbean among its fellow creoles, as performed, by way of telling example, in J. Robinson's deeply racialized island fantasy *The Yorker's Stratagem* (1792). Daphne Brooks's exhilarating *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (Duke, 2006) companionably does for the nineteenth century the multigeneric work that David Román has generously done for the twentieth and twenty-first in *Performance in America: Contemporary U.S. Culture and the Performing Arts* (Duke, 2005). Just accepted by Penn is Thomas Jason Shaffer's *Performing Patriotism: National Identity and the Early American*

Theatre Survey

Theatre, which, along with published and in-progress works by Jeffrey Richards, Heather Nathans, and Kathleen Wilson on eighteenth-century theatre in the Americas, will give breadth and depth to the performance calendar recently revised by Odai Johnson and William J. Burling in *The Colonial American Stage, 1665–1774* (Farleigh Dickinson, 2001). In that expansive spirit, Elizabeth Maddock Dillon's *New World Drama: Theatre of the Atlantic, 1660–1860* (Duke, forthcoming), by treating transoceanic performance as an avatar of the global economy of the long eighteenth century, epitomizes the dynamic future of the newly conceptualized scholarship evoked by the terms *America*, *society*, *theatre*, and *research*.