



STAGING DIFFERENCE
CULTURAL PLURALISM IN
AMERICAN THEATRE AND DRAMA
EDITED BY MARC MAUFORT

Staging Difference

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Marc Maufort, Editor

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Staging Difference: A Challenge to the American Melting Pot

Marc Maufort

I

This volume seeks to determine how the current debate on cultural pluralism in the United States is reflected in American theatre and drama. A number of American playwrights and theatre practitioners, while offering re-visions of the American Melting Pot, challenge its idealistic assumptions, thus inscribing in their work the cultural difference of American minorities. In addition, this new vision often coincides with a radical departure from conventional stage realism, resulting in the creation of new dramatic forms. These new shapes serve to express the minorities' ambivalence towards cultural assimilation into mainstream America.

A study of the major publications in the field reveals that up to now scholars have restricted themselves to one aspect of cultural pluralism in American theatre and drama. Excellent studies on women's drama abound; so do studies on African American drama. The appended bibliography provides an overview of these publications, of which those by June Schlueter and Errol Hill stand as prominent examples. Few studies encompass the multiple issues related to cultural pluralism and therefore fail to provide a comprehensive vision. This volume tries to fill this gap.

While this collection conflates a variety of critical discourses, such as those offered by text, theory and performance analysis, it also purports to move towards a more precise definition of terms like multiculturalism, cultural pluralism and difference, at least in the field of American theatre and drama. The terms "cultural pluralism" or "multiculturalism" are considered here in their broadest sense. They do not necessarily involve the social and anthropological underpinnings from which they emanate. Nor does this volume thrive on the political advocacy suggested by these terms, i.e., the affirmation that America's minorities have a right to self-expression and political autonomy. In many instances, I have thought it appropriate, therefore, to use the terms "diversity" and "difference" rather than multiculturalism, as these words are less politically loaded. Consequently, cultural pluralism, as the word is used here, comprises more than ethnic difference; rather, it focuses on the more general concept of the "other," i.e. any member of American society that does not belong to the hegemony. In other words, this volume concentrates on

cultural pluralism, on difference, in the combined aspects of gender, class and ethnicity. Confirmation for the validity of this view is offered by critics such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. who have underlined the relationship between multiculturalism and sexual identity, the latter being defined as a “difference within, something culturally intrinsic” (Gates 6).

As John Higham reminded us in a recent article in *American Quarterly*, the contemporary notion of multiculturalism is at odds with the very foundations of American thought, which pre-supposes a kind of universalism, advocating the fusion of all minority groups. The American revolution reflected a dream of inclusiveness. Since the 1960s, the era of the Civil Rights Movement, this idea has been challenged by various minorities, which saw this ideal of universalism as excessively hegemonic. The rights of the minorities to assert the individuality of their own cultures is now flourishing in various forms, not least of which is political correctness, i.e., a linguistic implication of multiculturalism. In the view of some commentators, these newly empowered minorities may in some extreme cases be led to display the hegemonic tendencies generally exhibited by the established culture. A typical example of this paradoxical reversal of traditional power roles can be found in the excesses of political correctness, which David Mamet explores in his play *Oleanna*, discussed elsewhere in this volume.

While the American Melting Pot, which foregrounds fusion, loses importance in the American society of the 1990s, the new multicultural playwrights, who emerged in the last thirty years or so, dramatize the facets of what is now called the American mosaic, in which people are compelled to re-interpret their ethnic and gender identities. This phenomenon was intensified by the appearance of postmodernism in the 1960s, which maintained that the center, including American traditional culture, could no longer hold, thus introducing the notion of marginalization. The advent of deconstruction in the 1970s further contributed to enhance the status of minorities, as this school of thought and criticism sought to undo the logocentrism inherent in Western society. The concept of the ex-centric, coined by Linda Hutcheon, progressively became prevalent in our postmodern age. A concomitant factor consisted in the re-evaluation of the notion of power, i.e., the cement that unifies or separates the various cultures interacting in a given society. In short, cultural pluralism, or at least difference, “otherness,” deconstructs American universalism and liberal humanism, offering multicultural or feminist revisions of reality in the U.S. Essays collected in this volume examine the various modes in which this process of re-vision works in different aspects of American theatre and drama. It will be no surprise to the reader that most of the dramatists considered here are postmodern. Indeed, they belong to the

artistic culture which problematized the very notion of a unified society. In Richard Schechner's words, "multiculturalism inverts the American Melting Pot" (Schechner 30).

If the critical idiom of the essays gathered here is as varied as the cultural diversity they describe, ranging from traditional criticism to theatre history criticism, marxism, psychoanalytical theory, feminism, and poststructuralism, a common perspective nevertheless informs them. They consistently seek to avoid what, in some of their publications, Susan Bennett and Richard Schechner call the "tourist gaze" towards multiculturalism. Thus, their perspective shows affinities with Schechner's "interculturalism." In "An Intercultural Primer," Richard Schechner distinguishes the impulses towards fusion (American universalism), multiculturalism (complete differentiation) and interculturalism (which pre-supposes interaction). In his opinion, multiculturalism often tends to degenerate in "institutionalized, homogenized" presentations of the multicultural, in mere touristic and colorful presentations of difference (Schechner 30). This indirectly reinforces the power of the hegemony. Such a debate is noticeable in the two contributions on David Henry Hwang, which differ in their appraisal of the playwright's "authentic" or "touristic" multiculturalism. As Homi Bhabha suggests, an accurate representation of opposed cultures must evoke the tensions, the fractures, within or without these different cultural groups. Or, as Patricia Schroeder puts it in a recent issue of *Theatre Topics*, the tendency to hyphenate the other, to consider him/her by reference to the dominant culture only constitutes a serious threat. Therefore, if a cultural pluralism study does not wish to indirectly promote the status quo, it must simultaneously investigate the polarities of race, class, and gender, a pattern precisely followed in this volume, in an attempt to problematize "difference."

II

The phenomenon of cultural pluralism in American theatre and drama is three-fold. It manifests itself in performance; it has its origins in the canon of American drama and flourishes in the new (mostly contemporary) multicultural drama. These aspects in turn consistently reflect four major concerns: the process of re-vision of the Melting Pot; the ambivalence towards assimilation; the conflation of gender/class/race conflicts; and, four, the challenge to traditional realism. Stage representations of the dichotomy assimilation/differentiation are examined in articles by Blackstone, Smith, Holton, Sorgenfrei, and McConachie. Their perspectives take into account stage directions, theatre history, dramaturgy, intercultural directing and the

structure of the musical. Further, Marra's article probes similar issues from the actress' viewpoint, while Felicia Londré discusses political correctness in American theatrical practice. These critics make abundantly clear that ambiguity of ethnic or gender allegiance plays a decisive role in production.

The second part of the volume concentrates on the dramas of canonical American playwrights. Although the idea of difference develops fully in recent American drama, writers like O'Neill or Williams already pave the way for such a dramatic motif. These playwrights re-vision the American "melting pot," affirming the validity of cultural pluralism, albeit in a sometimes veiled or oblique manner. They initiate the breakdown of the American canon in favor of a plurality of aesthetic stances that is so evident in contemporary drama. More contemporary mainstream/canonical playwrights, like Mamet or Shepard, voice similar concerns. Articles by Miller, Bower, Robinson, Callens and Piette clearly point to the same conflict between assimilation and resistance, between margin and center, as that which was found in the performance section. The link between the two parts of the book is even further emphasized by Piette's analysis of Mamet's *Oleanna*, which focuses on the linguistic extension of multiculturalism, political correctness. Piette stresses the dangers inherent in political correctness, i.e., the limitations it imposes on the freedom of speech. His conclusions parallel Felicia Londré's in her analysis of political correctness in production.

The third part concentrates on the works of marginal or emergent multicultural playwrights, who have recorded the disappearance of the American Melting Pot already announced in the works of their more established peers. This division successively deals with Asian American, Hispanic American, Jewish American, African American and women's drama. Like the articles collected in Part II, the essays of Part III underline the writers' Janus-faced stance towards the Melting Pot. Further, these essays re-state that gender, ethnic and class issues are inextricably intertwined. Two examples will suffice here: articles in the section on African American drama also deal with women's drama—as is the case with the Alice Childress contribution. Likewise, Watermeier's piece on Wendy Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles*, while showing that this play is not merely a feminist manifesto but also a fine instance of the subtle use of psychological realism, echoes Glenda Frank's article. Second, this third division exemplifies the playwrights' wish to transcend the narrow boundaries of conventional realism to express the new multicultural realities of the United States. Witness thereof is Harry Elam's discussion of magic realism in August Wilson and Milcha-Sanchez-Scott. When viewed together, the sections of Part III show common ground, i.e., the way in which sub-cultures now occupy the foreground in American drama.

The volume closes with two appendices, offering tools for further research. The first such appendix is Cooperman's interview with David Henry Hwang on the subject of cultural difference. The second is a bibliography of secondary sources that hopefully provides the basic works to be consulted by anyone interested in a study of diversity in American drama.

In conclusion, the essays assembled here seek to present the myriad ways in which the conflict between the individual and society in America can be approached, in its literary and performance manifestations. Walt Whitman's poetic vision once made me discover the fundamental American ambivalence towards separation and unity. While Whitman sought to establish a balance between the individual and the group in *Leaves of Grass*, today's America likewise needs to discover new ways of implementing this balance, taking into account the new challenge of multiculturalism. It is to be hoped that the essays gathered here will offer a modest contribution towards this goal.

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Cultural Pluralism and Performance

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Simplifying the Native American: Wild West Shows Exhibit the “Indian”

Sarah Blackstone

The dominant white culture in American has long been content to view the Native American as a representative of a single homogeneous culture (Indian), and within the binary construct of noble savage/barbarian. Native Americans have not often been portrayed as, or considered to be, complex individuals who are members of many complex cultures. This strategy of marginalizing and simplifying the Native American began with the first European explorers and continues in the 1990s.¹

This practice developed out of the complex relationships formed among Native Americans and the settlers and soldiers of various European cultures during the conquest of the Americas. Some individuals developed a great respect for, or a great hatred of, individuals of other cultures. Through years of unrest, negotiation, fighting, and captivity individuals formed opinions about who (and by association, what culture) could or could not be trusted. While the various cultures fought to win or preserve the land for their families and their herds, deep hatreds, grudging friendships, and confused loyalties emerged.

White Americans learned about the Native American through stories, dramas, and newspaper accounts of the conquest of the wilderness featuring settlers and soldiers as actors and heroes. The ambivalent attitude toward the Native American displayed by the various authors, showmen and reporters was communicated to the white cultures through the literature and popular entertainment of the time.

Native Americans learned about the white cultures in a similar manner. Tales of battles, encounters, treaties, and friendships with the whites were spread by the individuals involved among their people and neighboring groups. Whatever impression (good or bad) the whites left on the tale-telling individual was communicated to Native American societies through these stories.

The Wild West shows fostered this admiration/aversion dichotomy from the 1880s when such shows were first conceived, into the 1920s when they finally disappeared. For fifty years members of various Native American cultures toured the United States and foreign lands, learning about the white men's world and participating in events that taught the white men little about actual Native American life, but encouraged white cultures to think about Native American cultures in binary terms.

Most of the men who conceived and created the Wild West shows had been intimately involved with the conquest of America, and they wished the world to see a way of life that was rapidly disappearing. Their shows became full-blown propaganda—glorifying manifest destiny, and declaring to the world that America had won a resounding victory in its efforts to subdue the wilderness (and by association the native peoples who lived there). These shows were seen by millions of people in America and abroad during their peak years (1883–1923).

One of the peculiarities of the early Wild West shows was their dedication to authenticity. Showmen recruited their performers from ranches, reservations, mining towns, jails, and hideouts. Some of these people had done work on the stage as melodrama heroes and villains, but most were new to the world of show business. The props and livestock were also authentic. Real elk and bison were rounded up, as were unbroken range horses. Teepees were bought, stages purchased from defunct freight companies, and covered wagons were recovered from barns and pastures where they had been left when the transcontinental crossing was completed.

The authentic props and people were arranged in shows that became increasingly theatrical, patriotic, and extravagant. In the midst of all this, hundreds of Native Americans were introduced to white cultures—sometimes to their benefit, but often to their detriment.

The managers and owners of the Wild West shows wanted Native Americans in their shows for various reasons. Most of the events being depicted in these shows required Native American characters. These cultures, were after all, a vital part of frontier life. The Native Americans could have been played by non-Native Americans (a solution adopted by Hollywood), and much trouble and expense could have been avoided. However, the Native Americans were one of the main attractions in the shows. Nothing promised quite the thrill of seeing the ‘Indian who killed Custer.’ Even the Bureau of Indian Affairs recognized that Indians, “were not desired by the show people for any purpose but as an attraction, something to stimulate attendance and lure more half dollars into the treasury” (Annual Report, 1899 42), and without the Native Americans the Wild West shows would not have been as successful. They attracted huge audiences of curious people (hence great amounts of money), and provided wonderful publicity material (both free press and planned campaigns). All this may not have been recognized during the first seasons, and Native Americans were probably included as a part of the general push for authenticity. But it took almost no time at all for managers and publicity people to realize that any expense or trouble was worthwhile to keep Native Americans in the shows.

There was a concerted effort to get troublemakers and Native American leaders off the reservations, where they were thought to be aggravating feelings of discontent among their people. The Wild West shows provided an easy solution to the need for alternate environments for these individuals. Geronimo was asked to attend the St. Louis exhibition (Rennert 15). Sitting Bull was “sold” to the highest bidder for his first tour (Vestal 255). Chief Joseph first came to Washington to ride in the dedication parade for Grant’s tomb, and ended up appearing in an exposition that was showing there (Fee 296). There were thirty Indians, who were considered hostile, captured at Wounded Knee, who were forced to tour with Buffalo Bill (Russell, *Lives* 369). The managers clothed, fed, and for the most part kept these Indians under control, and the government had little or no additional responsibility. It was hoped that these individuals would return to the reservations, and counsel peace and acceptance.

There were those who did not feel the Wild West experience caused such reactions, however. Daniel Dorchester of The Bureau of Indian Affairs thought that the “Indians” were, “rendered utterly unfit to again associate with the reservations” by their work in Wild West shows, adding that “the excited, spectacular life of the shows, disinclines them to settle down to labor, and dooms them to the life of vagabonds ...” (395). Chauncey Yellow Robe concurred in an article for *The Quarterly Journal of the Society of American Indians*, saying, “The Indians should be protected from the curse of the wild-west show schemes, wherein the Indians have been led to the white man’s poison cup and have become drunkards” (225).

A few of the managers (notably Buffalo Bill and Pawnee Bill) wished to give the Indians a chance at a better life than was offered on the reservations. They paid a regular wage, fed the Native Americans well, and most importantly let them relive moments of glory and re-enact some of their old customs.

The shows were carefully rehearsed to depict many features of frontier life. Standard events included an attack on a stagecoach, Cowboy Fun (trick roping, riding, bronco busting, and steer roping), many exhibitions of shooting skill by men and women, a cowboy band, and some type of “Indian” village. The order of events was determined at least in part by the need to prepare the audience and the horses for the excessive gunfire needed in the big battles. The shows were structured to get more violent as the performance progressed.²

Within this structure the Native Americans participated in many events. There were the relatively peaceful events such as horseback races, foot races, and the “Indian” village. The Native Americans lived here when the show was doing one-night stands, and spent their non-sleeping hours here even if quartered elsewhere during long runs. Audience members were allowed to

wander around the village for the hour before performances. These “peaceful” events sometimes included individual appearances by famous chiefs or warriors. Sitting Bull, for instance, simply sat on his horse and allowed people to boo and hiss at him at the beginning of each performance. He also sold his picture and autograph at his teepee in the “Indian village” (Russell, *Lives* 316).

The more violent events included such things as a “Cremation Ceremony by Mohave Indians” (performed by Sioux actors), a battle between rival tribes, and attacks on wagon trains and settlers’ cabins. For Buffalo Bill’s show during 1883, one of the Sioux helped Cody re-enact his supposed hand-to-hand combat with Yellow Hair. This event culminated in Cody’s “killing” the brave and “scalping” him. This event was removed from the show after the first season as audiences considered it too barbaric.

Each show contained several large cowboy/Indian battles. There was usually an attack on the Pony Express rider, the attack on the stagecoach (which usually held three or four of the most impressive dignitaries attending the show that day), and the re-enactment of a famous battle (Custer’s Last Stand, Summit Springs, Mountain Meadows Massacre, etc.). The Native Americans either lost these battles and were chased from the arena by triumphant cowboys, or when historical accuracy demanded that they win, the audiences’ sympathy was directed to the poor, slaughtered white men. For Cody’s “Custer’s Last Fight” the Native Americans left the arena in triumph, Cody and the cowboys entered, doffed their hats at the terrible sight, and the orator intoned “Too Late.”

When sideshows were added in 1889, it became popular to exhibit “squaw” men and their families, “Indian princesses,” and “Indian babies” as oddities. Luther Standing Bear’s wife and child were being shown less than twenty-four hours after the birth. That Standing Bear did not seem too concerned about this practice, saying, “. . . the work was very light for my wife, and as for the baby, before she was twenty-four hours old she was making more money than my wife and I put together. . .” (266) indicates one reason why Native Americans continued to tour with the Wild West. Another popular attraction in these sideshows were children who had survived various “Indian massacres.” This exhibit was given a new twist by Cody who exhibited a Sioux child found on the battlefield at Wounded Knee.

The structure of the shows gives a clear view of the two depictions of the Native American that white cultures expected. In the village and while running races or dancing “traditional” dances, the Native American was shown as a noble savage—different, primitive, but basically non-threatening. But during the more violent events they were depicted as blood-thirsty barbarians—screaming, shooting, and better off vanquished or dead.

It could be argued that the Native Americans did not have to subject themselves to all this, and had the option of staying in America. In most cases this was true, but there was little to hold anyone on the reservations, where starvation and boredom were prevalent, and the shows offered money and excitement. The Native Americans saw the shows as a way to keep from starving and a way to keep their families clothed, fed, and warm.

Many Native Americans agreed to tour to learn more about white cultures, and perhaps help their people. This reaction varied from He Crow's saying he, "wanted to see the lands where the palefaces originally came from" (Thorpe 180), to Black Elk's greater need, "Maybe if I could see the great world of the Wasichu (whites), I could understand how to bring the sacred hoop together and make the tree bloom again at the center of it" (Neihardt 182).

In 1894 the Bureau of Indian Affairs set up guide-lines for using Native Americans for exhibition purposes. These required that a bond be posted for the safe return of the "Indians" (usually \$10,000 for 100 individuals, although this price was applied to as few as thirty people), that "Indians" be returned to their reservations by a set time, that "Indians" be taken only from approved reservations, that an approved interpreter be appointed to care for the "Indians," that a salary and traveling expenses be paid, that food and clothing be provided and that medicine and medical attention be provided when needed. Also, managers were to "protect them from all immoral influences and surroundings" (Russell, *The Wild West* 67).

The application of these guidelines was haphazard at best. Bonds were posted, and most of the Native Americans were returned to their reservations on schedule, but managers tended to receive permission to remove Native Americans from one reservation while actually recruiting them from another.

The interpreters were appointed to communicate all the details of show life to the Native Americans, and to communicate any Native American grievances to the management. Sometimes white men filled these positions, but more often Native Americans interpreted for their people. Luther Standing Bear, for example, was deeply concerned for his people and felt his job as an interpreter was a great responsibility. He reflects on the dangers posed to his people by the Wild West:

In all my experience in show business I have met many Indians of various tribes, as well as many interpreters, and to me it did not seem right for Indians who cannot understand a word of the English language to leave the reservation to engage in show business. They are certain to meet with some abuse or mistreatment unless they have an interpreter who is "right on the job" and who will watch out for their interests. . . . (261)

The pay was reasonable for the more famous chiefs (up to \$75 a month plus picture and autograph sales), but wages for most Native Americans (\$25/month for each individual) were considerably below the average wage of \$20/week paid to other performers (Russell, *Lives* 316). The wages of Native Americans were held by the managers throughout the tour and released to the performers only at the end of their contracts. It was thought that the Native Americans were too irresponsible to receive their wages on a weekly basis, and would return to the reservations penniless, if given their wages during the tour.

Travel, though paid for by the managers, was very hard on the Native Americans. Either they were put in railroad cars that were stuffy and noisy (the only people reported killed in the numerous train wrecks that plagued the shows were Native Americans), or put in the steerage of boats for crossings to foreign lands.

It is probable that the medical attention received by the Native Americans was not good at all, as many died on tour, and others were sent home with their health destroyed by malaria, influenza, or small pox. One village was even infected with venereal disease by returning performers (Foreman 192).

There was drinking among the Native Americans with the shows, and it caused problems on tour. Standing Bear spent much of his time trying to keep the Sioux under his care out of drinking establishments. Doc Carver had two Native Americans taken to court in Australia for having a drunken fight with each other. The only thing that kept them out of jail was the fact that the Australian judge was afraid of the damage they might do and wouldn't accept the responsibility of caring for them (Thorpe 213).

With the big shows the food was good and plentiful, but there were persistent reports of starving and abandoned Native Americans returning to America complaining of their treatment. Black Elk talks of being left behind when Buffalo Bill sailed from England in 1888:

When the show was going to leave very early next morning three other young men and myself got lost in Manchester, and the fire-boat went away without us. We could not talk the Wasichu language and we did not know what to do, so we just roamed around. Afterwhile we found two other Lakotas who had been left behind, and one of these could speak English.
(190)

Carolyn Foreman in her study of the experiences of Indians abroad, tells of thirteen Sioux who were taken illegally to Germany from the Rosebud Agency in South Dakota by Giles Pullman and his partner William Casper. The United States Embassy in Berlin advised the Secretary of State that "the Indians were

likely to be abandoned, were practically prisoners at Duisburg, were not provided for, and were without passports.” The Bureau of Indian Affairs went only so far as to advise the Department of State that if these individuals became stranded and were sent home by the United States Ambassador, the Ambassador would be reimbursed out of the Sioux tribal fund (205).

While the overall experience of being in the Wild West shows may not have been pleasant for the Native Americans, they were enthusiastic tourists. They enjoyed buying foreign goods to take home, and were usually anxious to see the sights in a new city if they were taken as a group on a tour. A reporter for the *New York Journal* reported on an incident of consumer buying in 1894, “Several of the Indians in Colonel Cody’s show appeared at the Friday afternoon performance wearing blue glasses. . . . It seems that a peddler hit the camp, and when the Indians found that they changed the color of everything they were infatuated. Every brave and squaw in the camp owns a pair” (25 June, n.p.). Black Elk enjoyed the parts of the show “the Sioux made, but not the part the Wasichus (whites) made” (Neihardt 184), and Standing Bear enjoyed the days he was allowed to play the part of a cowboy (254).

The Native Americans continued to tour principally because they could make a better living performing in the Wild West than they could on the reservation. Young men were most often recruited, and the prospect of a life spent touring and performing was an exciting alternative to tilling barren land. The tribes on the reservations that experienced the most recruiting pressure (principally the Sioux reservations in the Dakotas) soon learned which managers treated their people the most fairly, and young people were encouraged to tour only with these shows.

White audiences of the Wild West shows all over the world were given two images of the Native American to choose from—the noble savage or the barbarian, and they saw none of the diversity of cultures that the term Native American implies. Nearly all the Native Americans that appeared in the Wild West came from the Northern Plains tribes, and were billed only as “Indians,” further simplifying the image of Native Americans held by the dominant white culture.

Outside the arenas the audiences saw the Native Americans in groups as they toured various landmarks or attended white entertainment events. Occasionally white audience members might encounter a few individual Native Americans in a bar or shop. Little communication was possible because of the language barrier and any action, by either side, could be badly misunderstood. In cases where individual audience members did try to make contact with individual Native Americans, a few real friendships did emerge. Only in these instances did any real understanding or appreciation for other cultures

develop.³ The Wild West shows simply carried on the well-established practice of marginalizing and simplifying Native American cultures into the single category "Indian," and helped to reduce that image to include only the Northern Plains tribes. Such "Indians" could be viewed as noble or barbaric, but not as complex human beings from diverse cultures.

Notes

1. See Robert Berkhofer, Jr.'s *The White Man's Indian* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) for a complete analysis of these images. For information on how these images effected public policy see Angie Debo, *A History of the Indians of the United States* (Norman, OK: U of Oklahoma P, 1970).

2. See Don Russell, *The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill* (Norman, OK: U of Oklahoma P, 1960); Sarah Blackstone, *Buckskins, Bullets, and Business: A History of Buffalo Bill's Wild West* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1986); Raymond Thorpe, *Spirit Gun of the West* (Glendale, CA: A.H. Clarke Co, 1957); Glenn Shirley, *Pawnee Bill* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1965); and, Collings and England, *The 101 Ranch* (Norman, OK: U of Oklahoma P, 1937) for complete descriptions of the structure of various Wild Wests.

3. The most notable of these relationships was that formed between Black Elk and a Parisian family who nursed him back to health after he was abandoned by Buffalo Bill and mistreated by "Mexican Joe." See John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, (New York: Willam Morrow and Co., 1932) for a full accounting of this relationship.

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The Semiotics of Difference: Representations of Ethnicity and Nativism in Early Twentieth Century American Theatre

Beverly Bronson Smith

Writing about the post World War I era of American history, historian Sean Cashman observes that “the American people were essentially wary and suspicious of ... alien cultures” (Cashman 412). The shock of the war caused the nation to assume an isolationist mood, and old stock Americans insisted on conformity to their values and modes of behavior in addition to national loyalty. Those who sought to enter this country were now inspected for more than physical and mental health; they were also inspected for their acceptability into the hallowed ranks of “American.” Such scrutiny brought into question the very nature of American society. The extensive programs of Americanization that followed seemed designed to marginalize rather than include, since they “came to mean that there was only one kind of acceptable American” (Gleason 46). Americanizers took for granted that true Americans understood American values. Thus the label “American,” the physical characteristics and behaviors of “Americans,” and the way language was used by “Americans” came to be instruments of hegemonic control and nativism, defined by John Higham as “intense opposition to an internal minority on the ground of its foreign (i.e. ‘un-American’) connections” (Higham 4).

Though theatre is not mentioned in the list of institutions usually associated with the spread of nativism, plays of this era become a demarcation of society’s absorption with defining what an American was and what it was not, since they encapsulate verbal and nonverbal coding systems that helped to determine and maintain relationships, social divisions, and inequalities. This study will focus on nonverbal coding systems as powerful influences in accepting and perpetuating society’s preoccupation with nativism. Such nativism was not necessarily advocated; it was simply there, blatantly and subtly, indicating the degree of its acceptance. The samples here are representative of pervasive nativism in a society which denied its power.

Typical of the exclusionary tendencies of nativism, Mrs. Patrick’s movements in Susan Glaspell’s *The Outside* signify more than simple time-wasting nervousness. The play’s title indicates that spatial configurations are explored both diegetically and mimetically. Standing in the door of the life-saving shed, Mrs. Patrick is a symbol of restrictionist Americans as she toys with the sand that has piled up against the door, the transition point between

inside (acknowledged and approved) and outside (rejected and held down). She uses the sand to bury clumps of the sparse grass struggling to grow by the shore, symbols of non-Americans, and makes her metaphorical rejection clear in her literal refusal to aid a stranger who has washed ashore. These actions align with the strong element of emotionalism within the ecology of nativism: "Nativism cut deeper than economic jealousy or social disapproval. It touched the springs of fear and hatred; it breathed a sense of crisis" (Higham 162).

This sense of crisis is further exemplified in John Howard Lawson's *The International* when Karneski, a Russian revolutionary, sends David, an idealistic American youth, on an errand so that he can sort through David's knapsack. Karneski is figuratively moving into American territory, reinforced by the objects he finds and his reaction to them: a passport, representing American citizenship and privilege, which he rejects; a book, representing American education, which he rejects; a hunk of bread, representing American plenty, which he confiscates. The demarcation between American and non-American behavior reads clearly, since the American David is open, friendly, trusting, and well supplied, while the foreigner Karneski is deceitful, needy, and offensive as he rejects those elements of American life most valued.

Scheflen tells us that even casual observers can distinguish the behaviors that ethnic group members use in common, such as forms of speech, posture, and kinesic movement, and "may react to the foreignness rather than what is being said or done" (Scheflen 86). Italian emotionalism, for example, is typically represented with a range of broad gesticulations—shrugging shoulders, rolling eyes, smacking foreheads with the palm of the hand, sighing deeply, and kissing finger tips. In one of many such instances, Count Gionelli in Rachel Crothers' *39 East* does all of these when speaking of his homeland. His American auditors choose to interpret the behaviors as discontent with American life instead of simple cultural characteristics and natural nostalgia. Since the illustrative nature of such patterns is not typical of mainstream American behaviors, those exhibiting them become targets for differentiation and rejection. "Americans" frowned on broad gesturing and actually taught their children not to gesticulate because it "looks foreign" or is "impolite" (Scheflen 88).

Eastern European Jews were characterized as gesticulating more frequently (as opposed to broadly) than Italians, commonly using whatever they had in their hands as an implement, poking or even grabbing lapels or shirt fronts to emphasize points.¹ These kinesic codes categorize the character, and the ethnic group he/she represents, as not yet acculturated or, worse, encroaching into personal territory and, symbolically, social territory. Abraham Kaplan in Elmer Rice's *Street Scene* repeatedly injects himself into

conversations of others, waving his arms and using his glasses or his newspaper as supplemental emphatic behaviors. But America is a non-contact country: we position ourselves farther away and use less touching in our communicative behaviors (Watson 86). Thus his neighbors wish to reject Kaplan not only because of his constant dialogue about socialist ideology, but also because the territorial trespassing of his gestures labels him as "other." Such generalizations exaggerate a few behaviors yet trivialize characters by removing other attributes that would cause the spectator to accept an individual illusion. Empathy is reduced, the character is dehumanized, and he/she is marginalized by becoming a "type."

Another means of marginalizing foreign-born characters was to deactivate them. In Sidney Howard's *They Knew What They Wanted* Amy, a robust American female, displays a degree of the affection expected of her as Tony's wife, patting his hand or his head, but is incapable of seeing him as a potential lover. Two distinct spheres of inside and outside space exist in physical reality in this play, in contrast to the metaphorical spheres of *The Outside*, and these make relatively short work of its Italian immigrant character, Tony. In his eagerness to meet Amy's train, Tony runs his car off the road and is severely injured, proxemically restricting him. In Act I he is carried in on a stretcher and is quickly isolated in the bedroom; in Act II Tony's cot occupies the living room, but he is still isolated, since his wedding festa goes on outside, with dancing in which he cannot participate and fireworks which he cannot see. When Amy is summoned to receive Tony's wedding gift, the bride places herself in public space as far away from her husband's cot as possible and sits stiffly. To her, Tony is not only a stranger but a foreigner. When Tony calls her closer, Amy quickly exits to the outside, claiming interest in the fireworks: "Tony beckons again and Amy takes further refuge in conversation" (172).

Amy's spatial relationship with Tony is a natural outgrowth of her perception of him as deceptive, a non-American trait. The play's coding establishes a dialectic between animate and inanimate; she is the moving character, and Tony's action level drops to zero, making him in effect a prop. A photo from the original New York production (Toohey 47) confirms Tony's ostracism in Amy's lack of eye contact with him. Tony stares adoringly at Amy and reaches out to touch her, which she merely permits while locking gazes with Joe over Tony's head. The audience sympathizes with American Amy as the victim of foreign Tony's deceit, while he is objectified.

Marginalizing by moving a character horizontally out of the sphere of action is fairly common. Sigmond Rosenblatt in Kaufman and Connelly's *Merton of the Movies* is distanced in this way. He is rarely center stage, nor

does he stay near any other character for long. In Act III, Scene 2, for example, Rosenblatt occupies center stage as the scene begins, but he remains there only for two speeches before exiting. He annoys with rapid-fire entrances and exits, eventually becoming merely a voice as he “directs” the movie scene from offstage beyond the proscenium arch before he vanishes entirely.

To cite another example, in Clare Kummer’s *The Rescuing Angel* Meyer Kolinsky experiences the opposition of nativism in his exclusion from the main action. While not a lead character, Kolinsky is by no means a minor one. He performs valuable services as a lawyer for the family, demonstrating the sort of extrinsic characteristics that would normally lead to his acceptance.² But he is not accorded this status: instead he engenders hostility or bare tolerance from some of the characters (Mrs. Deming says of him, “But what a name—why it’s a little animal they use for trimming” –10–). Kolinsky is marginalized by placement outside the main focus of action, supporting Mrs. Deming’s dialogue that he is an unwelcome guest.

Kolinsky enters not from the center, as even the butler has done, but from stage left, requiring that he move around the butler for access to the family congregated within a central furniture grouping. Deming keeps him outside of this circle by intercepting him as he crosses rather than allowing him access to the others. When the leading character, Demings’ daughter Angela, enters, Kolinsky “has retired to L” (11), outside the sphere of action and on a more distant horizontal plane both from the audience and the other characters. Kolinsky remains outside this circle and is forced to touch Mr. Deming’s shoulder, oriented away, to gain his attention. Kolinsky then is juggled with repeated entrances and exits. In scenes in which he remains on stage, he is in the background; his action level reduced to nothing, he functions as a part of the scenery, not as a character.

The same effect applies in Edward Childs Carpenter’s *The Bachelor Father* when Maria becomes pretty set decoration as Tony controls the stage. The timing of Maria’s appearance and departure exposes her secondary or even tertiary status within the family. Each of the three children is introduced in a separate scene. Maria is the Italian middle child of Sir Basil’s extra-marital liaisons, and her entrance is buried between those of the other children: Geoffery (English), and Tony (American). Ranking these scenes by length, variation breaks down along lines of ethnicity, with Maria having the shortest. She also has the fewest total lines in the play and appears in the fewest scenes. At Maria’s imminent farewell, Sir Basil makes an attempt to persuade her to stay but gives up in only one half page, although he wrangles over Tony’s departure at length. Maria is the first to be removed from the action, excluding her from the climactic final scene. Even in the description of characters at the

beginning of the play Maria is given but one line; only servant characters receive so little mention.

Although in *The Rescuing Angel* territorial defense against Kolinsky is tangential to the main action, in Aaron Hoffman's *Welcome Stranger* it becomes a central metaphor. Whitson, Tyler, and Trimble, the leading citizens of the town, gather around the table center, creating an "inner circle" and leaving Isidor Solomon, a Jewish entrepreneur who travels to a New Hampshire town to establish a general merchandise store, standing alone. The hotel desk with two chairs serves as protective barrier for the reception clerk and the hotel safe. Although the rest of the stage is open to Isidor's movements, markers clearly indicate territorial limits. In spite of the play's title, Isidor is obviously not welcome from the moment the other residents recognize his ethnicity, signalled both in dialogue and spatial representation. Isidor enters center flanked by two townsmen who welcome him. Almost immediately he moves into isolation stage right. The stage directions indicate that "all recognize he is Jewish," and from this point in the act, territory is at issue (14).

At no time do any other characters enter Isidor's territory; their territory becomes any place he is not, such as when he crosses to the group gathered center to greet new arrivals.

All turn and freeze Isidor. Trimble, in disgust, thrusts hands in pockets and goes up. Tyler and Whitson turn to each other behind table and Clem goes up to center door and shows Ned piece he tore from paper. (20)

Movement, body orientation, and lack of eye contact, characteristic defenses to invasion of territory which here is not so much physical space as inclusion within the group, are used as characters alternate fixed and moving territoriality. When Isidor returns to a segregated position in "his" territory at the writing desk stage right, the other characters roam; when Isidor invades territory, others repeatedly abandon it. Possession of physical space is not important; keeping it exclusive, personal, is.

"It is a simple matter for most of us to make what we consider virtues in ourselves into vices where they are found in the behavior of a minority-group member" (Simpson and Yinger 155). Sound business sense, entrepreneurial skills, ambition: all of these are American characteristics.³ Yet when they represent rivalry, territorial proxemics are invoked. Community residents in this play fear a Jew invading their territory to set up a competitive business and cite Abraham and Strauss, Gimbel, and other large-scale merchants as examples of the potential this incursion represents. Indeed, the fear of

“foreign” competition for jobs and profits has been a feature of American nativist rhetoric since the early nineteenth century.⁴ As ethnic groups, particularly Jews, began to move up the economic ladder, social structures shifted to institutionalize exclusion (Baltzell 112–3, 206–7).

Characters as objects can serve a dramatic function, as in Eugene O’Neill’s *Welded*, in which the foreign prostitute is simply a prop to be used and discarded. Michael, the lead character, enters with a character with a foreign accent, physically described but unnamed. Michael’s dialogue clarifies her role:

Do you know what you are? You’re a symbol. You’re all the tortures man inflicts on woman—and you’re the revenge of woman! You’re love revenging itself on itself! You’re the suicide of love—of my love—of all love since the world began! (289)

The foreign woman is indicted and dehumanized; she becomes an encoding artifact which presents proximity to a foreign-born character as punishment. Although she is a prostitute, there is little physical contact between her and Michael, and what there is repulses him. “He kisses her on the lips, then shrinks back with a shudder” (287); “he kisses her again and again.... Finally with a groan he pushes her away, shuddering with loathing” (289). Whether he loathes himself or her, the result is the same: this foreign-born character is his penalty for straying from his wife, confirmed by vertical levels as Michael kneels before her.

This street walker is identified only as “a woman ... with the strong trace of a foreign intonation” (284–85). Although the woman is present for an entire scene, the exchange is unbalanced, as the prostitute’s monosyllabic or paralinguistic responses reduce her status to sounding board for Michael’s self-recriminations. Her time on stage allows conversational inequality to build on other bits of information—her accent and description (“stupid” and “bovine”)—to objectify her (285).

Characters can be further objectified by the way their movements are modified through the use of an artifact which visually makes the character associated with that artifact and even one with it. In Eugene O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape* the ethnic stokers are objectified by association with their shovels, which force them into the bent postures of pre- or sub-human life forms. According to the stage directions:

They bend over, looking neither to right nor left, handling their shovels as if they were part of their bodies, with a strange, awkward, swinging

rhythm.... A flood of terrific light and heat pours full upon the men who are outlined in silhouette in the crouching, inhuman attitudes of chained gorillas. (55)

Their permanently crooked postures encode more than the Neanderthal similarities to which O'Neill refers. The group is composed of an array of ethnic types without names, distinguished only through their accents; they are to be viewed as a mass of the foreign-born rather than as individuals. Their foreignness burdens them with lack of identity, reinforced as they respond in lock-step to the work whistle.

The proximity between characters or groups of characters, as well as the alignment of vertical and horizontal planes, placement of objects and set pieces, and construction of the spatial environment, among other elements, is part of the stage picture. These elements can also be used as the signs through which nativism speaks. In *Street Scene*, for example, the vertical plane of the tenement building becomes a frame within the proscenium frame, encouraging spectators to consider the relationships represented by occupants further framed within its windows. These windows, as they climb from basement to upper floors, can symbolize the social ladder. The solidity of the tenement becomes an inflexible boundary to upward mobility as it orders ethnicities as they are ordered in the society of this era.

The stage directions describe this structure as a "walk-up" (311), placing emphasis on the top levels. Despite the fact that these tenements rarely had elevators and so in reality the lower floors might have been more desirable, the visual coding of top to bottom is a strong semiotic system because of its usual connotations. In front of the structure is a "stoop" (311), denoting a lower, crouched, humbled posture, which becomes a gathering spot for tenement residents of whatever ethnicity as those from upper floors "come down" to share it. On the first floor, in the same vertical plane as this stoop, are second wave immigrants; the Fiorentinos reside stage left, Abraham Kaplan and his two children live stage right. Both families suffer lack of privacy, another reason that the upper floors encode advantage.

Possible condescending opinions from the native-born can be further analyzed by examining this horizontal plane. Filippo Fiorentino has married a German woman, representing more acceptable Northern European ethnicities of the first wave. Stage left is audience right, traditionally the "correct" or "positive" side, so Filippo's objectionable status is somewhat blunted. The Jewish Kaplan family, however, is characterized politically: the audience left stage position reifies the Kaplan's socialist leanings, making the Kaplans the more debased of this level.

Time also appears as a nativistic signifier in this play. The permanence of the set in *Street Scene*, over-shadowing individual characters, gives the audience time to speculate on the tenement; its flat facade coincides with the flat character portrayal; no individual character receives sufficient stage time for the audience to see him/her as more than one-dimensional. Since those events dealing with native-born, first wave, or ethnically undetermined characters are given a greater proportion of time, and since none of the major events of the play happen to second wave characters, the foreign-born seem like bystanders to the American scene; they become nonparticipants, merely sitting in their windows watching events go by. Closer to the street, they have greater access to the comings and goings of the others, as though placed there for lessons in mainstream life.

Bayard Veiller's *The Trial of Mary Dugan* signals marginalization vertically as well as horizontally. Pauline Agguerro, an Italian on trial for her life, is "seen standing in [the] cage with [an] attendant" while all others in the court room are seated. She is led before the judge's bench, raised on a platform, for sentencing: "She is a pathetic figure as she stands looking up at the judge" (9). No other character except her guard and her lawyer is placed in this position, hemmed in by their flanking positions that visually underscore American superiority through the institution of the courts. Although Pauline Agguerro is present only in the opening moments of this play, the impact of her role lasts for the duration of the performance. She is a double for the main character, since both are accused of murdering their lovers, and the timing of this scene gives it expository status as it seems to provide a clue to the outcome of Mary's trial. However, until Pauline's name is called, she is identified only as an Italian, and contrasting outcomes for Mary Dugan and Pauline Agguerro are reminders that their status is not so similar as first appeared: Mary is acquitted while Pauline is executed.

John Dos Passos's *Airways, Inc.* uses several fixed feature proxemic codes to portray barriers between nativistic characters and second wave foreign-born. Claude, attempting to argue his sister Martha out of a relationship with Walter confronts her through an open window. Going into the house to challenge her brother, Martha leaves Walter, a Jewish labor organizer, alone on the porch. His isolation outside the structure of the American home as he "sits looking down the empty street" hearing "noises of Saturday night from a distance" (51) demonstrates the remoteness of his nonconformity from mainstream American life.

In Frederick & Fanny Hatton's *Lombardi, Ltd.* the space is divided into levels by a platform "running the entire length of the back wall" (7). Phyllis uses these levels to distance herself from Tito, supposedly her fiance, as she

greet him by extending her hand across the barrier of the railing. In another scene Tito assists Phyllis with her wrap, whereupon "she immediately exits up steps" (27). Further, she repeatedly crosses in front of Tito, placing him in the background.

More importantly, Tito Lombardi also chronemically encodes in many ways that conflict with American norms, neutralizing possible empathy for him as the lead character. The play's title itself is a chronemic code: Lombardi is limited, an image bolstered by Tito's persistent refusal to accept his imminent business disaster and by the sharp contrast with accountant James Hodgkins, the epitome of sound American business sense. Hodgkins strives to meet deadlines while Tito ignores time. For example, when faced with an irate customer whose order hasn't been filled, Tito says he will lie now and worry later. His stereotypical "domani" attitude is incompatible with the mainstream's obsession with objective time, not to mention his casual use of deceit. Tito willingly abdicates control to others and exhibits no pattern except unpredictability. Indeed, time seems in reverse for Tito, as he is overpowered with a desire to purchase antiques without regard for the erosion of his financial base. Lombardi's positive characteristics are swallowed in a flood of qualities antithetical to an American way of life.

Simpson and Yinger indicate that minority group members may become targets of "a 'free-floating' hostility" because social contexts, such as those in which these minorities exhibit conflicting behavioral codes, favor displacement or frustration. Society is inseparable from its individual members; conversely, individual behavior is impossible to interpret without its social dimension. Ultimately, individuals need prejudice, creating social norms that permit its use to acquire power. "Newcomers to a country, because they can be easily identified by their differences and because they are relatively powerless, are convenient targets for random aggressions," codified into a tradition of nativism which "tells the members of a group what the proper scale of social distance is" (Simpson and Yinger 64, 67, 115, 153) and which becomes part of cultural heritage, taught by jokes, histories, rewards for actions toward particular groups, and, in some cases, public events such as theatre.

Although this article studies plays from the 1920s, the principles of marginalizing and the use of ethnic difference to promote social control remain integral aspects of American society. These plays provide a gauge of the boundaries within which the definitions of "American" and "non-American" were negotiated and of the means by which American society determined its social balances.

Notes

1. See Weston La Barre, "Paralinguistics, Kinesics and Cultural Anthropology," *Approaches to Semiotics*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok, Alfred A. Hayes, and Mary C. Bateson (The Hague: Mouton, 1964), 205; Mary Ritchie Key, *Paralanguage and Kinesics* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1975), 28.

2. See Milton Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origin* (New York: Oxford UP, 1964), 79. These include dress, manner, patterns of emotional expression, etc.

3. See Edward T. Hall and Mildred Reed Hall, *Understanding Cultural Differences* (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural, 1990), 148–9. See also Simpson and Yinger on inverse stereotypes (154–5).

4. There is considerable controversy among historians as to whether immigrants actually jeopardized native-born jobs. See William S. Bernard, ed., *American Immigration Policy: A Reappraisal* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1950), 68, 78, 71; and John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985), 93, 68–9.

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