

# **INTERSECTION IV: RE/GENERATIONS • APRIL 7-9, 2006**

## **REPORTS / Closing Session**

### **Closing Session**

On Sunday afternoon a final plenary session was held. Poet/activist Suheir Hammad delivered the closing keynote address, the two working groups reported out on their deliberations, and participants offered constructive feedback on the conference's activities.

### **Suheir Hammad – Closing Keynote**

Suheir Hammad's keynote speech reflected on the theme of Re/Generation that ran through the conference – an intergenerational regeneration of ideas, energy, commitment, imagination, and inspiration. “It is not enough to create art and feed on your imagination. It is not enough to follow your dreams and dive off of whatever platform the status quo has erected for you,” she said. “When we are inspired there are infinite possibilities. When we are inspired we move in surprising ways and re-generate what has been given us.”

She read a piece she had written in Baton Rouge, La., in September 2005 after spending a day touring New Orleans and visiting an evacuee shelter in Baton Rouge in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. She was inspired by the stories she heard from the refugees and they were inspired by her determination to act as a witness to their situation. She connected the Katrina evacuees with other refugees throughout the world, including in her family's ancestral home, Palestine. She also read a poem, “Beyond Words,” which reflected the spirit of many of the discussions that had occurred throughout the weekend. The poem stressed the need to find and use language today, at a time when words so often fail in the face of worldwide horrors. “I still hunt for language to gather into a poem / That I pray will feed those like me / In need of proof they are not alone.”

After her keynote, Suheir fielded questions from the audience. One audience member asked, “What is the artist's role as a witness?” She replied that you have to have a 360-degree perspective and create a reflection of the human experience. She also stressed that we should focus on keeping our spirit alive – citing that the martyrs we look to “worked to live and not to die.”

*The complete text of Suheir Hammad's keynote address is available on the New WORLD Theater <http://www.umass.edu/fac/nwt/Intersection-Conference.htm>*

### **Working Group Reports**

#### *Language of Multiculturalism*

The working group discussed the definition and history of the term “multiculturalism,” concluding that it is problematic and not very useful today. It has been co-opted and watered down to a generalized, a-historical sense of racial and ethnic identity that is disconnected from cultural affiliation and specificity. It has become a catchall that cannot accommodate complexity.

There is a need to define identity politics in a new way, and this is a discussion that needs to continue.

### *Re/Generating a National Movement*

This group proposed strategies for taking steps forward in creating art that deepens and agitates towards change and art that inspires youth to become activists. The segment of the group on developing programming suggested creating a map of networks in funding, arts and activism and proposed “connecting the dots” to begin conversations leading to change. They put up posterboard for all participants to write names of groups they knew about or were affiliated with, to start a chain of correspondence.

*This list became the Progressive Networking List, which is available <http://www.umass.edu/fac/nwt/Intersection-Conference.htm>*

*See also the Language of Multiculturalism and Re/Generating a National Movement session reports, at Sunday Sessions, <http://www.umass.edu/fac/nwt/Intersection-Conference.htm>*

### **Conference Feedback**

An intergenerational team of volunteer facilitators from among the conference participants led attendees through a collective feedback and closing process. Native American scholar **Marta Carlson** began with feedback on “what went wrong” at *Intersection*: the representation of Native Americans in the conference and performances. The Indigenous Artists Showcase on Saturday, which was held during lunchtime at the concurrent Pow Wow on the UMass campus, had suffered from acoustic and technical problems, and therefore did not give proper exposure or respect to the artists who performed.

Critical comments during the discussion included that holding the Showcase in a separate venue from the rest of the conference was non-inclusive and disrespectful, that the indigenous artists had been relegated to “second-stage” status; that there had been insufficient consultation with Native people on campus (“You can’t just go to one Indian person you feel comfortable with”); that there was a lack of representation of, and conversation with, New England indigenous people; that “black and Latino youth were represented but not Native youth” (although one Native youth representative, from the Lakota Action Network, expressed satisfaction at participating as a panelist); that there is an untapped outreach opportunity with Native students at UMass.

The Showcase had been presented as a collaboration with the Dr. Josephine White Eagle Cultural Center at UMass, sponsor of the Pow Wow, and held there at their request. New WORLD Theater has been criticized in the past for paying insufficient attention to the Native communities, and the indigenous representation at the conference was a first step toward rectifying that. It was acknowledged that more comprehensive and longer-term communications with the area’s Native communities is both necessary and desirable. The missteps and subsequent feedback constituted “a learning moment” and an opportunity to “move through the light of the criticism to the light of greater understanding.”

**Javiera Benevente** then asked participants to reflect on what was positive in the conference. Here is a sampling of those comments:

“I’ve been searching for myself. This weekend empowered me ... I was touched by so many people.” (A young artist)

“There was so much positive energy.”

“I get this inspiration, it’s like getting water.” (UMass undergrad)

“I particularly enjoyed the Asian-American Women Playwrights Archive session. It was so focused. It made me feel like I wasn’t alone.”

“The first guy who ever read poetry to me in jail – seeing him here was amazing!” (Young artist/organizer) Response to previous speaker: “You are an example of transferring the work. I want you to be on a panel [at the next conference]. Bring the kids you work with. Give tickets to the kids. It’s all about carrying on the work.”

“It was inspiring to see other artists who ‘give a damn.’ I felt empowered.”

“The intergenerational differences made me feel that I’m not alone.” (Young artist)

“I can now carry on my work with enthusiasm.” (Several participants said this)

*Intersection* closed with a ritual that invoked the conference’s intergenerational theme. **Nobuko Miyamoto** led the group in a participatory Healing Circle in which the elders, facing outward, each offered a sound, song, or thought related to the artistic and activist work being done and still to be done.