

# COLUMBIA SPECTATOR ARCHIVE

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## Graduate History Conference Grapples With 'Why We Write'

**BY MATT GRICE**

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Although it offered an array of influential speakers and writers, undergraduate students largely missed out on last weekend's on-campus graduate student conference, "Why We Write: the Politics and History of Writing for Social Change."

On Friday and Saturday in Buell Hall, the interdisciplinary conference sponsored by the History Department brought together experts from across the country to talk about writing inside and outside the academia. The event was organized as a series of round-table dis-

cussions with titles such as “Contemporary Feminist Print Culture” and “Put Your Pencils Down! Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Class on Campus.”

The audience for the conference was a mix of Columbia College students, graduate students, and Manhattan residents. Most undergraduates were not informed about the conference, as no mass e-mails were sent out and posters on campus were sparse.

For these reasons, undergraduate students learned about the talks entirely by chance. Avram Alpert, CC '06, spotted a poster the first day of the event but said, “they only had them in Philosophy Hall.”

The event began with an opening address from Dorothy Allison, author of *Bastard Out of Carolina*, in which she spoke of her difficulties explaining why she chooses to be a writer.

“Why write a novel when the world is going to hell? Why write a poem when children are being blown up?” Allison asked. She then answered, “Write to stop the earth from racing toward destruction! There are people willing to look foolish, willing to risk hurt, to simply stand up and say, not in my name.”

Allison’s comments received laughter and strong applause, especially when she suggested that elected officials should be asked to “write a personal essay about what they want to give their children and grandchildren.”

Allison roundly denounced the current war on Iraq, and at one point explained that part of her resurgent motivation to write was “so as not to have to scream, to shout.” The author received a standing ovation at the end of her speech.

The round-table “Historical And Literary Responses to the HIV/AIDS Crisis” featured Kylie Thomas, a University of Capetown, South Africa student currently studying at the University of California at Berkeley and writing her dissertation on the AIDS epidemic that is ravaging this country.

“I am writing because I think that being and writing are connected, and I am writing about people who are every day ‘written out’ of social being,” Thomas said during her emotion-

al speech.

Fellow speaker Christopher Capozzola of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology discussed the now-defunct organization, AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power, or ACT-UP. He explained that while the organization is essentially history, the epidemic certainly is not. "Writing about ACT-UP as history" makes a statement about AIDS that belies the still overwhelmingly dangerous nature of the disease, Capozzola said.

The conference "Writing Theories of Gender and Sexuality" featured four speakers who discussed their attempts to find new and different ways of studying men and women as sexual beings.

"I'm interested in the failure of imagination about sexuality," Elsa Barkely Brown of the University of Maryland said. Thomas Foster, from the Social Science Research Council, defended his research on sexual politics in eighteenth-century Massachusetts by asserting that the social norms of the time still carry into today.

To look at writing outside of academia, one panel rounded up men and women working on such creative projects as a Holocaust musical and a film about the late civil rights figure Bayard Rustin.

"There are far more people writing outside of academia than are writing in it," said poet Melanie Braverman, who never completed college herself. "We need to work toward funding and supporting those writers working out there in the world."

The closing panel on Saturday evening returned to the omnipresent talk of the current war. Robin Kelley, a Marxist historian from New York University, related the anti-war movement to the struggle to institute ethnic studies courses on college campuses in previous decades.

Seemingly countering the message of the entire conference, Christine Stansell of Princeton University said, "I do not believe that [writing] history can change the world." She separated history and action into two different categories, ending the discussion on an ambivalent note.

Katia Harwood, a Manhattan resident who heard about the event from a friend in the graduate history program, attended two round-table discussions. "I would have wished for a little less theory," she said. "The speakers often acted too concerned about sounding smart."



STEPHANIE CURRY—ASSOCIATE PHOTO EDITOR

Gayatri Spivak, Avalon Foundation professor of humanities, spoke in a panel as part of Friday and Saturday's minimally-publicized conference on the purposes and methods of academic writing.