

## ONE SINGS, THE OTHER DOESN'T?

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My initial response to Deanne's provocative and challenging analysis of the tension in constructing an emancipatory agenda and feminist pedagogy within a traditional literature education setting was blatantly subjective. I tried to ignore the image or metaphor that kept surfacing as I read and thought about "When is a Singing School not a Chorus?" But the metaphor remained, so I have employed it in organizing my thoughts and in illuminating the struggles inherent in how we come to know through critical/feminist practices.

I grew up reading a multiplicity of narratives, not just print in bound and codified volumes. I learned to 'read' the color of wheat stalks in a field, the shape and direction of cloud formations in the sky and the cycles of the birds and reptiles who lived in the badlands north of my home. It was the rattlesnake's cycle that I recalled as I followed Deanne's description of her students' struggles with readers' presuppositions and decentering of meaning making processes.

On the high plains of Montana, when summer hits its stride and heat shimmers off the ripe grain fields and grit blows down from brown hillsides, rattlesnakes shed their old skins. As children we roamed the badlands, but we were warned to stay out of them for a week or two in the late summer because the snakes' behavior was unpredictable at this time. I remember the explanation of this process as — the old skin gets tight and dry and begins to crack, the last section to fall away is around the head and for a short period the snake is blind because the skin is coming off over its head. But the snakes' response to shedding was also explained in that we were told the snakes were very irritable. Mrs. Redwing, who knew her snakes, told us how the tight skin and temporary blindness made the snakes "ornery and mean". In other words, our usual methods of coexisting with the snakes as we crawled in and out of shallow caves, turned over rocks in search of fossils or arrowheads or waded along the edges of the Milk River would not protect us during molting season. By late August the snakes could be seen again sunning themselves on the high boulders and we resumed our familiar roaming around the badlands.

I do not intend to drift off into universalist claims that all learning is a process and change is always about growth or into New Age admonitions that we should all learn from our sisters the snakes, rather I want to attempt to connect my metaphor to Deanne's metaphor of a singing school or chorus in order to move us forward in the critical analysis of feminist pedagogy.

The ideal in Deanne's decentered classroom is "accepting the Other on the Other's own terms." Implied in this ideal is a criticism of the traditional (institutionalized) responses to literature — self-fortification or self-confirmation or as Deanne has described the process, "academic rigor or personal empathy". And this criticism shifts the readers from simply demythologizing an external object — the text, to questions of "how we come to know" or "to refuse knowledge" in the classroom. This is central to Deanne's project because to simply accept the other's position without questioning how the knower came to her own position is to arrive at the cul de sac of relativism rather than an avenue towards issues of power. By issues of power I mean, whose stories get told, how readers are taught to read a specific text, and which texts are legitimated by inclusion in institutional settings, or the rationale for a canon.

The "feeling, power and location problems" surrounding issues of power surfaced in Deanne's class when the curricula shifted to "explicitly feminist concerns". And this is also the section in Deanne '

s description of two students, Ellen and Kevin, where I was reminded of the shedding snakes. As these two students felt the constrictions and restrictions of their 'knowing as usual' responses (their old skins), their discomfort became apparent to their teacher, Deanne. What was most compelling (to me) in this section of the paper was the difference in Ellen's and Kevin's resistance to feminist curricular content. As observed by Deanne, one student, Ellen "already knew too much and perhaps wanted to know less" while another student, Kevin, "couldn't cope with his own awareness of what he didn't yet know." Clearly the two students were responding from "feeling, power and location problems" but Ellen was temporarily silenced by how powerfully she felt herself shedding her 'usual way of knowing' when confronted with feminist symbolic activity — fictions, in which she could hear the singing voices. While Kevin's response was to speak from the location of self-fortification and to focus not on his refusal to know the text. Instead he chose to reclaim the power of "academic rigor" (old skin) in his reading of Kristeva.

Both of these readers/knowers suffered from the fear and paralysis of momentary blindness as their old skin or ways of knowing slipped over their heads and, as Deanne's perceptions of their struggle suggests, they were "ornery and mean" during the process. But it is at this point that Deanne moves beyond the descriptive power of metaphors and asks the hard question, how do we respond to and learn from the "monumental significance of the intervention by 'words with power' in the emotional lives of people who really might be changed by what they learn in school"?

And just as learning is much more complex than snakes annual shedding of old skin, it is also more complex and obscure than metaphors developed from within traditional literary criticism (no apologies to Frye or Yeats). Such traditions presume an ideal of a unified response (a chorus) by simultaneously presuming a unity of experiences that result in a symbolic activity, in this case, literature. Thus, the presupposition of unity always/already contains the promise of a literary canon. Feminist pedagogy and critical theories of literature challenge this ideal of unity, the aesthetic privileging of imagination and the imposition of harmony because the ideal does not recognize the other on the other's own terms. Rather, the traditional ideal of unity assumes a hierarchy of knowing and the authority of selected texts that often exclude otherness.

Again, it is the student Kevin who assumes that the traditional model of criticism and of learning is always/already in place and that when an "explicitly feminist content" and feminist pedagogy is introduced, the (hierarchical) model will remain, but his way of knowing will no longer offer him a "safe house." I would argue that Kevin's assumptions of being victimized by 'militant feminists' (with help from Robert Bly) signify his refusal to know and his refusal to recognize the other on the other's own terms. Such a refusal is also a refusal to "alter [his] autobiographical significance" in part, because to do so would result in a loss of privilege.

Ellen's initial resistance to knowing begins to shift towards an expanded, inclusive way of knowing, of accepting the other on the other's own terms and prompts Deanne to re-imagine her own ideal classroom. And it is the re-imagining of her own project, a feminist/critical pedagogy that claims an emancipatory agenda, that speaks most eloquently for her "collaborative experiment" of learning across differences. In re-imagining the ideal of a chorus, Deanne expands the metaphor of harmonious unity to the possibility of listening for dissonance and resonating to the tuneful quality of a multiplicity of voices.

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Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London: Routledge, 1980).

Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).

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