Book Reviews

DANGEROUS TERRITORIES: STRUGGLES FOR DIFFERENCE AND EQUALITY IN EDUCATION

Leslie G. Roman and Linda Eyre, eds. New York: Routledge, 1997.

by Sheila Cavanagh

Dangerous Territories: Struggles for Difference and Equality in Education is an exciting piece of work. The editors (Roman and Eyre) tell us that the idea for the book emerges from a panel presentation, at the 1992 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association. At this meeting, questions were asked about the "limits and possibilities of 'anti-oppression' pedagogies" in the context of higher education. It was suggested that progressive educators have been confronted by a Right-wing "backlash." This backlash was perceived to be a threat to progressive education. The book is meant as a follow-up to this discussion and attends to the important questions facing progressive educators in the university today.

The concept of backlash is central to the organization of the book. Roman and Eyre say that they have been forced to adopt a more critical understanding of the concept as it became clear to them that they had originally

> accepted rather unproblematically the transhistorical and binary oppositional framing of such terms as backlash/progressive, Right/Left, and so on, allowing them to function as "keywords"—words that legitimated some radical social change struggles for equality and delegitimated others battling within them.

It is also suggested that the conceptualization of backlash, informed by the work of Susan Faludi, obscures the more complex divisions and crossovers between the Left and Right. Roman and Eyre explain that the term backlash

> elide[s] the diverse constituencies of and divisions between Left and Right, focusing almost exclusively on the elaboration of the agendas of the latter. As a result, what gets ignored "on the ground" are the many diverse communities of Leftist and feminist practice that, in the search for social justice, articulate different versions of equality and radical difference.

Following this more critical discussion of backlash comes a broad range of interdisciplinary work in the areas of feminist, anti-racist, postcolonial, gay/lesbian/bisexual and queer studies. What unites the contributions to this volume is an uncompromising belief in the radical, subversive, democratic, and/or queer potentialities of education. As Roman and Eyre explain, the contributors to this volume are "informed by their respective disciplines but not imprisoned by them."

What I like about this book is that it is not constrained by one theoretical orientation or model of education. As mentioned, it captures the exciting developments in progressive education and sets the stage for important debates—one of which is about the utility of the term backlash. The essays attend to questions of power, identification, and social difference in a vast array of educational sites. I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in critical pedagogy and democratic education.

The only real critique I have of the book is that it provides an account of progressive education only from the position of teacher. Chandra Talpade Mohanty explains, in the preface, that feminist educators are responsible for the "creation of truly democratic public spaces where people of all 'races,' classes, genders, and sexualities are authorized to act as citizens—to understand, organize, and demand justice and equity." How does this sentiment apply to the student of our radical and democratic classroom? As Roman and Eyre note in the introduction, it is often the case that we collude in the Right-wing agendas against which we define ourselves. It seems to me that the critical student is well positioned to comment on the contradictions of activist work in the university because she is often subject to the incongruity of our rhetoric and practice. If we are wanting to tread on "dangerous territory" it will be necessary to subject our own pedagogical explorations to the comment of progressive students. This has yet to be done!

KNOWING WOMEN: ORIGINS OF WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AUSTRALIA

Marjorie Theobald. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

by Susan Archer

When I read the title of this book, I was immediately intrigued. As a history buff with a particular interest in the Victorian era, I jumped at the chance to learn more about Australian women of the same time period. Approaching this book as a naïve reader, I hoped to fill in some of my

"knowledge gaps." Theobald herself views her work as an important departure in the study of women's education. According to her, most previous historians have spent little effort exploring women's education in Australia before 1900, and have failed to connect the women's experiences to the political and social fabric of the period. In her introduction she explains that she wishes to provide new directions for feminist theory in this area, with the goal of "inspir[ing] a new generation of younger feminist historians." Due to her theoretical objections to "generalist history," Theobald pays scrupulous attention to the different experiences of women from different geographical, class, and racial backgrounds.

The strength of this book lies in Theobald's attention to detail, but it also becomes a major weakness through her neglect of structure and organization. Theobald provides the reader with many fascinating details on a range of women's educational experiences: the stories of working-class girls who were educated in inhospitable "reformatories"; the gradual marginalization of the woman teacher; the popular demand for ladies' schools where girls could learn "accomplishments"; the moral debate over coeducational schools. The list of topics is large, and Theobald's research on each is substantial. Once in a while the stories of the women get bogged down in too many details of names, places, and dates, but in each chapter there are many compelling moments (particularly when letters and diaries are used). Unfortunately, Theobald's laudable emphasis on specificity over blanket generalization has resulted in a hodgepodge of structure that could easily have been avoided. Each chapter is organized differently, and none of the chapters is adequately introduced or concluded. Many times I found myself saying, "So that's what she was getting at!" two-thirds of the way through a chapter, after struggling through a mass of detail that was seemingly unrelated. A simple "road map" introducing the agenda for each chapter would have eliminated this difficulty, and provided for a more enjoyable reading experience.

This lack of structure also limits the efficacy of Theobald's use of feminist theory, which she is at such great pains to emphasize in her introduction. Once in a while a bit of theory is thrown in; Theobald does not use it to underpin the work, and her theoretical conclusions suffer as a result. Although I do not claim to be an expert on feminist theory by any stretch of the imagination, I was surprised at how basic many of her theoretical concerns were—I had heard some of the arguments and questions before, and only occasionally did her observations surprise and intrigue me (such as her compelling argument that women teachers' need to justify female education in secondary schools resulted in the grooming of top students to win scholarships and prizes—which actually prevented the average girls from experiencing a true "education"). Theobald's theoretical forays are also limited by her use of language. The text is rife with run-on sentences and convoluted paragraphs, and this makes her observations more obscure than they should be.

Knowing Women can be a frustrating book to read, and yet it is also full of fascinating detail. It is unfortunate that the contents of the book have been betrayed to bad organization and confusing diction, but the text is still worth reading. I will not soon forget the story of fifteen-year-old Annie S., who was beat across her breasts with a cane during a courageous and rowdy riot protesting the horrible conditions at the Bioela Reformatory. Nor will I forget the words of Louisa Macdonald, the first principal of the Women's College of the University of Sydney, when the financial situation of the college was in doubt: "There is one great comfort I have. It seems to me that ... the College ... has a tendency to create a feeling of solidarity amongst the women of the country ... and I think if it accomplished that, all the labour of collecting for it and planning it have not been empty."

TO THE GLORY OF HER SEX: WOMEN'S ROLES IN THE COMPOSITION OF MEDIEVAL TEXTS

Joan M. Ferrante. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997.

GENDER AND IMMORTALITY: HEROINES IN ANCIENT GREEK MYTH AND CULT

Deborah Lyons. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

by E. Lisbeth Donaldson

In 1405 Christine de Pizan initiated *les querelles des femmes* by publishing her *Book of the City of Ladies*. Peopled by "ladies of the past and present" and guided by the muses of Reason, Rectitude, and Justice, this City was to be a refuge for women of the future. The radical arguments this widowed mother of three presented included statements such as it "is as natural for women to write books as it is for them to have babies" and "the intellectual spirit" is "equally good and noble in the feminine and masculine bodies" because the soul, more so than the body, correctly represents the image of God. Thus initiated, these *querelles* provided a major topic of debate among scholars for nearly three hundred years. "Another standard topic opposed the ancients and the moderns" (Anderson and Zinsser). Five hundred years after the publication of this incredible book, twentieth-century feminists are still learning about their intellectual and spiritual roots: many would not recognize Pizan's name and many, hurt by patriarchal religions, still do not understand the profound connection between spirituality and creativity. Therefore, the two books reviewed here are valuable scholarly contributions but their contents are not easy