Listening to situated textuality

Working on differentiated public voices

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Abstract Ethics is enabling of agency, but also normative and conventional. At the moment a gendered ethics, or the gendering of ethics, is a helpful approach because it is concerned with issues to do with people often peripheral to and excluded from power. At the moment it can work to keep ethics responsive, but how do we halt the drift into the normative, both as prescriptive and as ideological? A feminist ethics maintains the responsive and undermines prescriptive categories, and is committed to involving disempowered voices in the conversation. The article is particularly concerned with the articulation of the situated, and raises questions about attending to, learning how to listen to and learning how to speak, so that many people from different places can get involved in ethics. Otherwise ethics isn't ethical.

keywords *democracy, ethics, feminism, knowledge, narrative*

The discussion in this article is about something quite simple: for me, ethics is not a set of standards, it is about talking, discussing and negotiating over grounds that we come to agree on in order to make decisions and take actions. As someone who works on rhetoric, or persuasion, what I am trained to do is look at how we agree to grounds and to some extent make decisions, and I am particularly interested in looking at whether the way we do this has any effect on the actions we take. Any connection between the agreement and the actions is going to be rooted in the historical and social, and it is often difficult to discern what it might be.

Ethics is a two-edged sword, both responsive and engaging, enabling of agency but also normative and conventional. At the moment a gendered ethics, or the gendering of ethics, is a helpful approach because it is concerned with issues to do with people often peripheral to and excluded from power. At the moment it can work to keep ethics responsive, but how do we halt the drift into the normative, both as prescriptive and as ideological?[1] A feminist ethics for me is first of all one that maintains the responsive and undermines prescriptive categories, and, second, one that is committed to involving disempowered voices in the conversation. Even though much work on gender and ethics or a feminist ethics is concerned

with the implications of these strategies, it is precisely the voices of the d empowered that ideologies deny, and that still cannot be heard in m communication. I know from my own work with various communities tl many people speak but cannot be heard; the words walk silently past ı ears. So I would like to raise questions about attending to, learning how listen to and learning how to speak so that many people from differ places can get involved in ethics. Otherwise ethics isn't ethical.

Recent work on ethics works across the supposed split betwe epistemological and materialist approaches to gender and ethics: tl epistemologically based ethics puts pressure on the way canonical eth excludes so many people, and that materialist ethics focuses on subst tives such as trust, care and empathy (Bubeck, 1998; Walker, 1998: 17f Bringing together these two traditions is vital for a situated ethics, an eth based in specific practices. By 'situated' I intend the kind of work we do fairly small communities or groups of people, which are often quite in mate, where we hammer out ways of living together and talking abc events that mean a lot to us, but for which we often have no words and way of communicating (see Lovibond, 1983). This is quite different wc from what we do when we take up subject positions within nation-st ideology, or when we work discursively to challenge or oppose those p itions and try to shift them. Neither of these activities acknowledges t situated and local as a primary context for ethical work, because they a both anchored conceptually to metaphysical presence and its univers that make up the representative base of those positions. Of course a sit ated practice is contingent to the others, as they are to it, but it is still qu different because of its focus on difference rather than on the similarity co veyed by universal representations (see Hunter, 1999a: chapters 1, 5 a 6). The situated practice of working on words is what I signify by the wo 'articulation'.

There is a remarkable consistency in what people are trying to do witl situated practice of ethics. The central impetus comes from recognizing t diversity and plurality of access to ethical debate as opposed to t restricted and self-selecting basis of canonical ethics (Code et al., 19 15–23). Many people are trying to find alternatives to normative ethic standards based on a priori grounds, claiming absolute truth or at least ne trality: an ethics traditionally with selective access, restrictive practices the concept of 'rights', and offering profoundly inappropriate represe tation to everyone else. Instead, the alternatives are trying to develop ethics not based on a rhetoric of similitude but on one of difference (Be habib, 1992; Young, 1997: 38–59). Rather than tolerating or hiding elemen that do not 'fit', a rhetoric of difference involves negotiating procedures th move toward sharing some values, respecting others, as well as the pos bility of personal change.

Political theory and philosophy is another area concerned with the issues, probably because politics and ethics are completely intertwine and not only with each other but also with rhetoric. We can't have one the three without the other two.[2] Recent work in politics has been spru into action by the same impetus – the diversity and number of people wl

can now claim access to democracy – and political theorists have been looking at the implications for the nation-state democracies many of us live in and the kinds of citizenship and problems of representation that have resulted (Walby, 1992). Particularly interesting are the strategies for deliberative democracy, offering modes of participation which, in common with many ethicists dealing with gender, indicate that one way of including people who are conventionally excluded is by providing different ways that they can be heard, and by listening to the different modes of communication they use (Benhabib, 1996a). This kind of political theory and ethics work, both often impelled by gender issues, especially the way gendered communities have been excluded from discussion for so long, point to narrative, anecdote, story, autobiography, analogy and other similar genres, and claim their rhetorical efficacy for inclusion.

The rest of this article is concerned first to problematize this claim; second to consider a particular rhetorical event – the drift from the responsive to the normative; third to think about ways in which different voices can be listened to and included in the political and ethical conversation; and finally to question the impact of the global – given that political theorizing gains impetus from the sudden shift in access to power in nation-states and given the focus on small communities in ethics.

Problematizing theories of deliberative democracy

The argument, as we well know by now, runs something like this: that democratic structures of social contract liberal humanism were established for a small, relatively coherent group of propertied, white Christian men. Their singular achievement, to deflect the physical destruction of a militaristic culture into the controlled aggression of capitalism, went hand in hand with national imperialism and the growth of state institutions, and in England with the party political system of oppositionality which is inherently conservative. What happens from the 19th to the 20th centuries when a large number of nations extend the franchise is that there are suddenly many different interest groups, with many radically different needs, claiming political, social and cultural power. One answer has been proportional representation, and there are other attempts at resolving the anomalies that arise. But 'democracy' has frequently not answered this challenge, with the result of civil unrest, overthrows, coups and revolutions.

The writing of Seyla Benhabib and others with whom she has worked is particularly helpful here in combining procedural democratic strategies with substantive issues (Gould, 1990: 272; Mansbridge, 1996: 48) into a 'responsive' universalism (Benhabib, 1995: 339). To encourage the procedural aspect of ongoing engagement, many writers have been concerned to elaborate the idea of 'differentiated public spaces' (Habermas, 1995), in other words claiming that public space is not only institutional, governmental space, but also for example environmental (Benhabib, 1996a: 87) or ecological – it can involve Parent-Teacher Associations, trade unions, voluntary women's communities (Mansbridge, 1996: 56), healthcare providers (Cohen, 1993: 147) and so on. These are places where people who

are motivated by concern but not necessarily trained in formal debate other institutional techniques can go to discuss, argue through speci issues, find ways of articulating their concerns, and eventually put them larger policy-making bodies. These spaces allow for the practice of a si ated ethics. Habermas terms similar public space 'civil society' (197 Nancy Fraser (1992: 121) calls it 'subaltern counterpublics'. In these kir of public spaces a well-argued position can gain a hold, give legitimati to the group and make it easier for it to be heard next time around (Coh 1993: 156).

I agree that this aspect of deliberative democracy is a helpful strate even though it is energy expensive and puts enormous pressure on sm groups to justify themselves. But it raises another question: institutio structures are almost always ethically normative. These days there are in grating 'ethics committees' to deal with the problems that normativ raises in places such as the British Medical Association or even the Briti civil service. So how does a small group using situated ethics interact w an institutional structure with normative ethics? The whole point about t former is responsiveness and ongoing engagement, and the defining featu of the latter is corporate stability. This leads to my second concern that fr this perspective every situated articulation has to be partially normaliz before it can become politically effective (Wolin, 1996: 43–4), and t moment it does so it becomes co-opted out of the responsive.

The drift from the responsive to the normative

Central to the procedural or ongoing aspects of deliberative democracy a words and phrases such as 'narrative' (Code, 1995: 155; Young, 19 60–74), 'dialogue' (Cohen, 1990: 89), 'expression' (Lovibond, 1983) 'articulation' (Mouffe and Laclau, 1985: 113).[3] To deal with the la because it is different in kind from the other three, Mouffe and Laclau u the word 'articulation' in a manner different to my own because they loc its work within 'discourse'. They seem unconcerned with any activity th occurs outside of hegemony, yet elsewhere (Mouffe and Laclau, 19 135–6) they seem to allow for both 'antagonism' and 'articulation' to oc without hegemony. The agonistic rhetoric of their political theory clai that co-optation into the normative is inevitable, as does the later develc ment that theory concerned with consensus communication is a threat democracy (Mouffe, 1993: 6). However rhetoric is not inevitably agonist In other places negotiation and responsive engagement do not inevitab involve 'force'. Rhetoric was developed precisely as a system to distingui among different kinds of persuasion, forceful and not (Hunter, 2000), a I do not find it helpful to place physical coercion and intimidation on t same scale as responsive negotiation. The former will always insist that is right, whereas the latter will always entertain the possibility of chan or at the very least of agreeing to differ.

At the same time, the other three examples each beg the question of hc situated need is translated into articulation and how it can resist being n malized into the discursive and hegemonic, let alone the subjective a

representational, when it does so. Some political theory has claimed that story or narrative or even rhetoric in themselves resist co-optation (Walker, 1998: 66; Young, 1997: 60–74). But, as rhetoricians have always argued, whether a strategy is more or less likely to be co-opted is to do with historical particularities (Code, 1995: 60; Hunter, 1999a: 162–76). Margaret Walker's insights in her extensive discussion of narrative collaboration (Walker, 1998: 112–27), which produces a self that is a 'layered, nested, and "ensemble subjectivity"' (Walker, 1998: 117), may not have been co-opted in the reception of the 'slave narratives' to which she refers (Walker, 1998: 127). However, the production of any kind of subjectivity indicates that co-optation has occurred.

Recently Iris Young has argued that there are discursive modes that can resist co-optation, and a strong argument against such a possibility has been put by Seyla Benhabib. However, Benhabib's arguments fall short of understanding the historical specificity of each mode. She addresses the suggestion from Young that 'story-telling', rhetoric and 'greeting' are possible models of resistance, and asks: first, what happens if we don't understand the story? I would answer that not understanding is a valuable first step in recognizing differences we have to work on; the danger of story lies far more in its normative power. Second, Benhabib finds greeting too affective, yet, as Young notes, greeting involves the whole etiquette of valuing others, respecting them, showing care toward them. And finally, Benhabib's criticism of rhetoric deals with only a few aspects of its technique and not at all with its strategies and stances. For example, she argues against it because 'it induces people to engage in certain courses of action rather than others', yet goes on to state that we need 'a discursive language that appeals to commonly shared and accepted public reasons' like 'the rule of law'. Not only do the criticism and the approbation sound similar, but the structure of the rule of law is precisely a form of judicial rhetoric.

Although I do not think that Young is aware enough of the historical constraints on the modes she proposes, I would agree with her that the rational and argumentative, agonistic forms of the debate (elsewhere commended by Benhabib, 1996a: 76) are usually learned in privileged situations. Therefore they privilege certain people over others, and put in place a restrictive practice that inexorably makes normative other modes of articulation. If we could find a way of validating non-rational logics or structures, a lot of people currently excluded from participating in political and public discussion would find it more accessible and would be able to contribute, and we could start dealing with difference as a resource and not as an obstacle.

The normative as a coercive stance

As Nancy Fraser suggests in the context of politics, we cannot simply turn to a set of communicative devices and offer them as solutions to the issue of articulation (Fraser, 1992: 119, 121). For example, Julie Cruikshank, who has worked for many years with Yukon women in northwestern Canada, speaks of the way that story-telling is a legitimate and valued way of organizing political action. She also notes that the same strategies are

beginning to play a role in larger policy debates (Cruikshank, 1998: xv), times in an attempt to manipulate and control. When mediated to sou ern Canada by television, these attempts may seem successful, convinci those viewers that the politicians are trying hard to understand the nor ern constituents, and this is a not inconsiderable political achievement itself. However, the structure of oral story-telling in the north is so compl and culturally specific that, among northern viewers, the politicia (happily) seem naive and opportunistic.

A less happy example is told by Beverly Sauer, a writer who research ethics and rhetoric in business communications. She tells (Sauer, 1993) the way that the widows of men killed in a Kentucky mining disaster 1981 formed their own response in the aftermath to what the compa should do. The account also includes a lucid analysis of the institutior report on the disaster, and how its narrative privileges industry assum tions about risk and safety, and in the process obscures the lines of aut ority and responsibility. More important are her conclusions about t women's words themselves. She points out that the women had their ov standards for judging danger, and among a number of examples quot Jewelene Centers:

> When Tommy worked at Irishman, he never came home as tired or dirty or up as he did when he worked for Adkins Coal Co. While he worked for Adkins, constantly kept a headache, and he couldn't even walk across the floor witho leaving a trail of coal dust. He told me he had to find another job because t company just didn't care about the men's safety and it was too dangerous to wo there. (Sauer, 1993: 74)

Sauer continues by noting that the women also had their own domestic ev dence for the causes of the disaster, and quotes Annis Ashley:

> Dillary [Ashley] would come home filthy from the mines, and his work cloth always required two or three wash cycles to get all the coal dust out of them. . And had the mines been properly rock dusted the explosion would never ha happened. (Sauer, 1993: 74)

The analysis that follows concludes that the recommendations that t women put forward as a result of their discussions were well grounded ar clear, but that because they challenged the assumption that individua caused accidents they were not heard. Sauer cites several elements:

1) The women lacked elements of credibility including technical expe tise, favourable reputation, corporate status, values similar to the co porate reader, and rhetorical techniques that would have coded the position as understanding, well informed, carefully organized, artic late and fair minded in that reader's view.
2) The women were excluded from power structures that control di course in the ongoing daily work of the mine.
3) The conventions of discourse from which they were excluded maintai power structures, such as the use of the passive voice.
4) The women to some extent internalized these power structures an depreciated the value of their own testimony.

The report from the women used a discourse that is 'inarticulate, unstructured, and unobjective, but like Cassandra, they speak the truth in the face of agreement addiction' (Sauer, 1993: 79). Nevertheless, their lack of credibility means that they were silenced and excluded.

Sauer herself offers a clarified, normative list of the women's recommendations to show how helpful it would have been. And certainly, if the women had adapted their response and understandings to institutional discourse, they would have added much to the report. However, it is unlikely that if they had set out to produce a normative report they could have made the recommendations they did. They would probably have recognized the 'triviality' of measuring ppm (parts per million) of dust in laundry washes and so on, and may well not even have got to the point of articulating any of their ideas. Situated work often doesn't know what it will say until it is said. The women's speech does not lack value; it simply needs other ears. Sauer can hear; she is trained as a feminist to do so. But she is also publishing in a journal that addresses a large community of normative readers, and as a result the article talks explicitly about why the women's recommendations failed rather than about the positives in the syntax, vocabulary, grammar and structure.

Situated ethics do not become normative simply under institutional pressure. A well-recognized rhetorical drift frequently occurs, and for good reason. Situated practices take energy, time and commitment, and if another case arrives that looks similar to one in the past, and if we have fewer resources, then we are likely to work by analogy and to try the past strategy on the present case. If that works, we may be led inevitably into repetition until someone shouts and screams that it's not appropriate for them – and then they are lucky if we hear them because we may have lost the skill of listening to that voice. Perhaps the situated articulation is for ever lost to larger groups? Conceptually perhaps we need to recognize that the 'situated' is precisely that. Once 'heard', the situation is different. But, most urgent, I think we have to resist the pull into thinking of the interaction between large and small political publics as one in which the situated ethics is engaging with another system that has 'normative' as a need. The normative is not a need, it's a stance that underwrites coercive stability, that maintains the shift to the inexorably normative terrain of state structures and policies, which make the situated impossible. As Seyla Benhabib notes, treating someone in accordance with norms is to treat them as a 'generalized' other, while to recognize and confirm someone as 'a concrete, individual being with specific needs, talents and capacities' (Benhabib, 1992: 281) is to treat them with friendship, love and care. The 'concrete other' signifies 'the unthought, the unseen, and the unheard' in normative theories (Benhabib, 1992: 281).

Listening to and including different voices

It is not enough to have a differentiated public space that produces that initial articulation; we need differentiated public voices with rhetorical strategies to maintain the situated articulation and we need more responsive

reading and listening strategies to ensure they can be heard. But given t difficulty of being effective, finding a way of being 'heard', without beco ing normative, or at least losing situatedness, how can the particularity situated voices enter discourse? A large part of the answer lies in educatic We still live with an education system that was initiated by white, ma Christian and propertied people, and we have been educated to listen the situations appropriate to them. I am not suggesting that these situatio are without value, but in practical terms it is impossible to learn to list to the situated particularities of everyone, so we need to make choic about where we will direct our energy.

An analogy can be made with the resistant voice – one that has inform poetics for centuries and by definition resists the normative. Despite t proportional relation between resistance and size of audience – the mo the text resists convention, the smaller the audience – people seem alwa to have recognized the value of training ourselves to engage with resista words and practices, either resisting subjectivity or engaging in the d cursive challenge – neither of which are to do with articulating but wi the recognition that an articulation of something previously unheard h taken place. Although most engagement has hitherto been with poetics pr duced by privileged people, there is no reason why we should not car out this kind of reading for voices that are different. It would require lear ing how to listen as a resistant practice within a personal and situat context appropriate to ourselves, and all of us cannot do it for all voice But we can do it for some. Which voices we work with depends on sit ated practice, time, energy and commitment.

However, resistant work may not be enough: we may well need not on to counter the representations in place in discursive systems but attem to value the articulations on which we work while we work on them. Sit ated practice on texts will not take place with a focus on either hegemor or indeed ideology. Ethical feminist practice must know the situation of t text appropriately, and hence its epistemological strategies must be pr pared to work outside of hegemonic plausibilities (Code et al., 1991: 1 Or, as Daryl Koehn (1998) puts it, for feminism to better carry out respe for an ethic of care and trust, it must not limit itself to identifying specif issues, but engage in a dialogical interaction with the situation by whic an interaction of respect for difference seems to be signified.[4] I have spoke elsewhere about Marilyn Frye's concept of 'hearing each other into speech and will quote again her salient description:

> It is speaking unspoken facts and feelings, unburying the data of our lives. But the naming occurs, each woman's speech creating context for the other's, the da of our experience reveal patterns both within the experience of one woman an among the experiences of several women. The experiences of each woman and the women collectively generate a new web of meaning. (Frye, 1993: 107)

An example from my own work might be the book *Footprints* by MAM the East African women's group in Sheffield made up largely of Soma refugees. Their previous book, *Shells on a Woven Cord*, was a collection stories about where they draw their strength from in a war-torn, divide

brutal life. *Footprints* is a more integrated attempt to speak to their surrounding society and offer the difference of their lives in England. The book is a combination of oral story-telling and graphic form, and is doing a number of complex things. But superficially it is a recipe book interspersed with stories. Recipes are considered a lowly form of writing,[5] the English language used is not standard and is interrupted with Somali words, and the book is illustrated: all semiotic indications that this is not a 'valuable' text. But there is exceptionally subtle manoeuvring through the language, a dislocation of expectation, and there are demanding formal properties. Sometimes these are as simple as injecting lyric into technical instruction (MAMA, 2000: 25), and at other times they ask for a reading that reads across the normative in a wholehearted way (MAMA, 2000: 46–59). Yet the notion of 'difficulty' and difference is countered by situating the texts in discussions of food and other domestic matters.

I have permission to quote one section in full:

> Recipe for Leaving a Rude Husband
>
> Remember the proverb '*silic ku nool sgaal nin guursataa dhaanta.*' Better marry nine than put up with the insults and abuses of one
>
> Never doubt yourself
> Drink more coffee in honour of your Sar
> Sing yourself a song, 'I see a footprint in the grains'
>
> Tell him, 'my shoes are strong'
> 'my shoes are ready'
> 'the path in front stretches'
> 'my shoes are at the door step'
> 'I am standing with my toes'
> Tie a robe around your waist
> Take enough *sahay*, food, to tie
> to the *faraq*, tassels
>
> Take your first stride
> Don't look back
> Quicken your pace
> You never know what's ahead
> of you
>
> (MAMA, 2000: 47)

Can this voice be 'heard' outside of a situated practice? Does it need to be? In some instances I think it does need to be; whether it can be is another question. It requires a slow process of education, recognition and acquiring of legitimation – *Shells on a Woven Cord* received the Raymond Williams prize for community writing. As it does so it moves into the discursive as a commodity, but its textuality can remain situated as it opens up an area of engagement and hence value for other people.

In my own teaching area there is still a consensus about canonical literary value, and a poor understanding of why it may be important. There is also an enormous resistance to taking alternative writing and speaking seriously. Literary critics seem happy to deal with 'popular culture', the

content, but not with the rhetoric of the text and how that both engag value and constructs legitimacy. There has been slow progress with diari letters and journals, yet they are still peripheral, and I suspect the progr will be even slower with writing more distanced from the normative a representational. But educators have an ethical responsibility to articul the value of these texts or their value will slip away, not get circulated read (Hunter, 1999a: 162). And what we value becomes thin and confin and does not extend out and inform other ways of life. We need to find wa to recognize and agree to accord value, to repeat that value in textual acti which is the acquiring of agency.

Coda: the impact of the global

I would like to end with a brief note on how the interaction among situ edness, discursivity and subjectivity may be changing in the face of glob ization. Globalization is impelled by capitalism and the identification a exploitation of specific markets, just as nationalism was before it in i perial desire. As globalization recognizes more and diverse markets, the differently situated constituencies will need to be recognized with t state. This is a cynical view, but also points up the probability that ma of the constituencies will not provide viable markets and will find legi mation even harder. It seems to me that the problem here is that we ne to resist the analogy between the state and the situated today, and t private citizen and the wife in earlier times, otherwise situated practic in the wife's position analogically, will become the silent exploit mainstay of the nation. This may already be an element in certain practic of multiculturalism.

If ethics has always described a potentially responsive stance, it has co ventionally been articulated and disseminated by a small select group privileged people. What is new for us now is size. The sheer number a diversity of people engaging in ethical debate is huge; the potential effe of decisions is enormous and the responsibilities are of a different scale. the franchise posed questions of size concerning access and representatic for ethics, globalization, and particularly global finance and economic poses questions of size in terms of obligations and rights and respons bilities, and the internet media pose questions of size in terms of how w arrive at agreed grounds and what stances we take up in terms of how w wish to interact with larger audiences.

The last time anything of this scale happened in England at least was i the 16th to 17th centuries, when there were similar changes in the co stituency of people claiming access to power. As globalization makes stat negotiate in different ways, they will have to become more responsive an less fixed, albeit temporarily; and as nation-states are placed into specif positions, they will need to resist that positioning. If, in the 17th centur nation-state ideology was generated out of and imposed on civic an regional power, nations may find ways of responding to the generation global ideology by turning to ongoing civic strategies, but the energy of suc discursive resistance will come from the situated. So there is hope in th

comparison since solutions were found for that change, although every hope comes with a warning since the solutions for the nation-state brought their own problems. Hope, like situated work, is often only recognized in retrospect.

Notes

1. See Hunter (1999a: chapter 1) for a detailed study of ideological strategies.
2. See Code et al. (1991) for the proposal that the merging of ethics and the political is a particularly feminist approach.
3. Mouffe and Laclau use the word 'articulation' in a manner different to my own because they locate its work within 'discourse' and seem unconcerned with any activity that occurs outside of hegemony. However, on pages 135–6 they seem to allow for both 'antagonism' and 'articulation' to occur without hegemony.
4. See Hunter (1999b) for a discussion of the difficulties with the word 'dialogical' among feminist writers.
5. Not only are they considered lowly, but study of them is also frequently dismissed, as I found while coordinating the research on bibliographies of domestic books during the 1980s and early 1990s.

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