Awakenings: Developing a Regional Identity through Women's Writings

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be. It is Anna's letters to her mother that have enabled her to reach out to me and helped me to see into her world, and to come to a better understanding of my own. These letters were Anna's way of extending back to her old world, of keeping in touch with those she loved. Little did she realize that one day they would also reach forward into time.

Sue was able to create and sustain the necessary tension which recognizes the value of both the analytical, universal dimensions and the personal, experienced dimensions of the letters and of the research process itself, without confusing them. This dynamic intimacy with the materials and the ability to evaluate them on their own terms, not judge them by preconceived ideas of what they should be, was possible because the students had learned to relate to one another on that basis.

In fact, I am convinced that none of these challenges could have been met, none of the hard questions asked, none of the exciting, truly original scholarship produced, if the mode of operating had not been sharing and if the extra energy had not been spent to build a bond of trust and support among the class members. And that, I believe, could not have happened if we had not committed ourselves to the principle that true unity grows from the mutual acceptance of differences as well as similarities. We had to work very hard to make this principle a functioning way of life. We developed a little colloquy we recited in seriousness and later as a joyful affirmation:

I recognize the right of each person to her perception
I may disagree with it
I may challenge it
I may offer alternatives to it
I must listen with openness
in order to understand it and
to discover what I can learn from it
I may not demean or attack
the person's worth because of it

Because we were able to allow each woman in the class to be who she is and because we learned to affirm her right to her perceptions, we could also trust and share without fear among ourselves. Consequently we could allow the women we studied to be who they are and could learn from them and evaluate their real contributions without prejudging or being blinded because of preconceived assumptions of what they should be.

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Awakenings: Developing a Regional Identity through Women's Writings

By Sally Brett

Before you can write about a Civil War mother's letters to her son or edit the courtship letters of a young Tarboro woman, you have first to find the letters. For some researchers, this means finding people—informants—and then, hopefully, the family manuscripts in the attic or barn or cupboard. For my class, I took a different—some might say easier—route: I identified manuscripts of interest in the university's manuscript collection. Actually, that is not as easy as it sounds. Most manuscripts come from prominent men of the region. Thus the emphasis of cataloguing falls on male activities—and male names. What you do is search very, very carefully for the note stuck at the end of the last paragraph which reads, "Also, letters of wife." Or daughter. Or "Some household and domestic journals."

As the students and I discovered, beginning with the manuscripts is just that: a beginning. Students tend to look blankly at the assorted letters or diaries or journals and say, "Now what?" It's a panic point, and the best way to get beyond it is to provide parallel readings. These readings should help the students learn to do two things: (1) to read the archival materials in a new way and (2) to observe the methods of researchers who have worked with similar materials. To start

with the latter: possibly the best models are furnished by Anne Scott's book The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics and by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's article "The Female World of Love and Ritual." I stress that Scott and Smith-Rosenberg (as well as Barbara Welter) provide not only content information but also highly impressive answers to the questions of citation and use of archival materials.

Further, beyond the mechanics of citation and usage, the selected parallel readings provide analytical models—models for reading. Students have to learn how to read between the lines. I had my students read excerpts from published memoirs—for example, Susan Smedes's Memories of a Southern Planter. Then we asked questions that Anne Scott or Carroll Smith-Rosenberg might have asked when she faced her manuscripts. Questions like: What does this woman write about? What does she not write about? What does she repeat? What are her favorite topics? What are her characteristic or idiosyncratic phrases? How does she see herself or report herself? How does she see others? Is her penmanship revealing? Does she seem to have been educated? Several of these questions are identical to those used to ascertain the reliability of a first-person narrator in fiction.
Frequently, students found that they needed more background information before they could fully understand the materials with which they were dealing. To take one example, when student Denise Kinlaw began editing the courtship letters of Della Barlow, she complained that her subject was too coy, too anxious to marry. As Denise began to analyze the letters, however, she found that she needed to learn more about the lives of Southern women during the Reconstruction. After some rereading, rethinking, and study, Denise realized why Della Barlow was pressing her fiancé to marry. Della’s father was dying; her brother-in-law was dead. No men in the family meant no financial support. In her twenties at the time, Della was past the usual age of marriage and attractiveness. How she must have feared another, younger woman would attract Colonel Perry at one of the many Beaufort balls he attended! She could hardly go out and become a secretary; despite her obvious intelligence, she was not educated for anything other than a domestic career. She had to determine whether Colonel Perry’s reluctance to marry signaled a change of heart or was—as he said—a determination not to take Della as a wife until he could properly provide for her.

Piece by piece the portrait of Della emerged as Denise read and reread the letters and the history texts. There was no other information: Della’s letters had been found in a trunk bought at auction. Denise, like other students, tracked down donors and searched courthouse records, as well as census reports, church documents, school records, and family bibles. Manuscripts lead to people just as people lead to manuscripts. In the process of searching out family connections and histories, students discover the concept of region—and what is meant by “regional identity.” Eastern North Carolina is and always has been an isolated and “different” part of the state. It isn’t Appalachia—what everyone thinks of when you say “North Carolina.” It’s a coastal area—flat and swampy—and it was settled early in America’s history. But because the coastline tended to make most of the area inaccessible, settlement was either down from Virginia or up from South Carolina. Consequently, the regional family networks tend to be established, strong, and pervasive.

Although students from eastern North Carolina have a “regional identity,” it tends to be a negative or apologetic one—because, I suspect, the isolation of their geographic region has been interpreted as cultural exclusion. Their awareness of regional history and culture was minimal. As we began to try to recreate the situations in which our women writers were writing, we became aware of our ignorance of history, folklore, etc. Our readings helped—but even more helpful in remedying ignorance were my colleagues. A retired writer-in-residence, whose novels dealt exclusively with eastern North Carolina and/or Southern experiences, explained the settlement patterns and literary history of our region. The department folklorist, whose forte is family folklore, talked about oral narratives and family mores. The manuscripts curator shared data-gathering techniques with the class—and was interested enough in each student’s project to offer individual assistance and advice.

We came to see the life of the woman writer as a microcosm of the region. Perhaps more clearly in this class than in any other, students perceived that literature—writing—is the record of experience. As the students themselves began to write—to put down all they had learned of the woman, her life, her writings, her place in history—they began to understand that writing is a form of experience, too. They couldn’t speak glibly of “region” and “identity” and “lost women” anymore. They had to come to terms with those ideas before they could write about them, could communicate what they perceived about these women. Each student took the “raw” material of letters or diaries and shaped it into a coherent statement, a piece of literary art. And that takes not just skill but understanding.

The product of the class, a book called Awakenings, was reward in itself for the students and for me. But an extra bonus has been its enthusiastic reception by the community. I spoke about it recently to the university’s board of trustees. To my surprise, half of them had really read the book. And they were full of ideas on further topics for research. Mostly, they were proud that their region had inspired such enthusiastic student work. The awakening, they said, was not just my students’ and mine, but theirs and the community’s—an awakening to what being an eastern North Carolinian has meant and means.

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