

Resonance and Education

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Abstract:

This essay addresses the relations between recent reassessments of critique in literary studies and current debates in the field of education. Drawing on the work of Hartmut Rosa, it argues for the relevance of “resonance” as an educational concept. Resonance is not an emotion but a relation: not a positive feeling but an often ambivalent experience of aliveness, excitement, and connectivity. As a sociological as well as phenomenological concept, it encourages us to acknowledge the institutional factors that shape the treatment of education as either resonance or resource. A brief comparison of John Williams’s *Stoner* and Dionne Brand’s *Theory* is used to question dichotomies between “love of literature” and “critical detachment”; both literature and critical theory can serve as powerful sources of resonance.

Keywords:

education; postcritique; resonance

How do reassessments of critique in literary studies link up to current debates in the field of education? Most recently, I’ve made a case for *attachment* as a keyword for the humanities. The acquisition of new skills, techniques of perception, and forms of knowledge depends on identifications and attunements that make learning possible. Professors and students forge ties to the works they analyze, the methods they use, the intellectual identities they inhabit. Being attached is not something to be outgrown – the index of a naïve or woefully underdeveloped sensibility – but a condition of any conceivable form of intellectual life (Felski, 2020a). In this essay, I’d like to pursue this line of thought by making a case for *resonance*: a word that can encompass differing facets of intellectual engagement without pitching feeling against thought or sentimentalizing the teacher-student relationship.

In recent books on higher education, the language of critical thinking is being counter-balanced by a stress on positive affects and attitudes: see, for example, Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s call for *Generous Thinking* (2019) in academic institutions and Kevin Gannon’s advocacy for a practice of teaching inspired by *Radical Hope* (2020). Most recently, inspired by the call for papers for this issue, I’ve been reading the *Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy* (Hodgson et al., 2017). I’m very much in sympathy with the authors’ main concerns; their weariness with the ubiquity and predictability of certain styles of critique and their belief that we need a richer vocabulary to capture the value of what teachers do.

Yet I want to push further on the consequences of a turn to emotion in education, whether generosity, hope, or – as in the *Manifesto* – love. One of the key interventions of *postcritical* scholarship is to highlight affective orientations: to point out that critique is not just a style of argument, but a stance, an attitude, a disposition. And yet postcritique is not just a matter of replacing a wary or suspicious stance with an affirmative one. As I wrote in *Hooked*:

Calling for more positive affects or less guarded postures will not, by itself, provide a compelling alternative unless their intellectual pay-off can be clarified. Caring about texts can prime us to approach them differently – but it is not, in itself, a *replacement* for thinking. (Felski, 2020a, p. 130)

We need to clarify how alternatives to critique can enrich or enhance understanding: how they affect or alter our view of what counts as knowledge.

In his response to the postcritical *Manifesto*, Stefan Ramaekers points out that love can be misguided or misdirected – smothering, indiscriminate, possessive, narcissistic, or objectifying – though of course it is not *only* these things. Citing a xenophobic Flemish politician who is rallying in defense of “a European way of life,” he asks: is this the kind of love for the world that we wish to champion? Given the vastness and vagueness of the concept of love, how useful is it to the philosophy of education? (Ramaekers, 2017, pp. 63–67). In their response, the authors offer some helpful clarifications. Educational love, writes Joris Vlieghe, has to

do with “caring for things” and is therefore “highly impersonal”; Naomi Hodgson explicates what Hannah Arendt means by “loving the world enough”; and Piotr Zamojski observes that love should not be taken in a phenomenological, but an ontological sense: “signifying the labour of studying, thinking, exercising. This is love for the world – not for a person” (Hodgson et al., 2017, pp. 71–101).

And yet, given the ubiquity of *love* in everyday usage and its loaded history, it is hard to see how the word can be invoked – in conversations with deans, students, parents, politicians – without triggering endless misunderstanding. In an era of escalating revelations of sexual harassment, for example, should we be issuing calls for a pedagogy based on love or passion? Female professors, especially, may balk at such language, given the stereotypical expectations that they nurture and care for their students. Not to mention professors and students of color struggling to navigate white-dominant spaces, to whom such language is likely to seem stunningly insensitive to their experiences of alienation, exclusion, or misrecognition. It seems all too likely that the various nuances and qualifications we give to a vision of teaching as love will go unheeded.

Perhaps different words are called for. And here we might look for inspiration to other intellectual contexts and movements of thought. German critical theorists, for example, are also displaying a deepening concern with relation as well as negation; the affirmative as well as the critical. I’m currently writing a book on key figures in the contemporary Frankfurt School (Axel Honneth, Hartmut Rosa, Rahel Jaeggi, Robin Celikates, Nikolas Kompridis) whose work is *terra incognita* in literary studies. An obvious obstacle to their reception is that these writers pay little attention to literature and none to literary criticism: their feet are planted squarely in sociology, political theory, and philosophy. And yet in recent years these thinkers have revised the tradition of critical theory in major ways, while grappling with a question that is also exercising literary scholars: is it possible to orient away from negativity and skepticism without lapsing into dubious universalism or naïve affirmation? “Many adherents of critical theory,” remarks Rosa, “believe that critique should be purely negative. . . A vital critical theory needs to do more than this” (Schiermer, 2018, p. 7).

Rosa’s *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relations to the World* enacts this shift toward a more affirmative vision via an encyclopedic blend of the phenomenological and the sociological, the philosophical and the aesthetic. What, then, is resonance? It denotes a process of *becoming attuned* that forms and informs one’s being in the world and that possesses bodily, emotional, and cognitive dimensions: those moments when something crackles or reverberates or comes alive.

Rosa reflects at length on its etymology and connotations; resounding and vibration, the tuning of forks and the striking of chords. Yet resonance is not to be confused with consonance or harmony: “resonance means not merging in unity, but encountering another as an Other” (Rosa, 2019, p. 447). To resonate is not to echo; each party retains its own voice. Nor does it require positive feelings; we can feel attuned to a melancholic aria, a desolate landscape, a historical site that memorializes suffering. Resonance is neutral with respect to emotional content – it is about mattering rather than making happy, not just a question of pleasure, but about how things come to concern or affect us. And as a counter-concept to autonomy, it speaks to the vital role of relations in forming the self and the limits of our capacity to predict or control them.¹

Resonance, then, is not an emotion, but a relation; not a feeling of warmth or tenderness or care, but a heightened sense of aliveness and connectivity that can assume varying forms. It offers a way of thinking about intellectual engagement that stresses transpersonal attachments rather than personal feelings. Everyone knows what it’s like, Rosa remarks, when “our *wire to the world* begins to vibrate intensely,” while also being familiar with “moments of extreme *thrownness* in which the world confronts us as hostile and cold” (Rosa, 2019a, p. 15). Resonance, in this sense, is not identical to pleasure or positive affect; things that we find stimulating and fulfilling can be a source of stress or ambivalence. It is not simply opposed to alienation, but also interrelated with it. Meanwhile, resonance avoids the moralism that often clings to discussions of education, especially in the United States: the call to mold our students – depending on the writer’s viewpoint – into democratic citizens, empathic persons, or radical activists. While resonance does not exclude any of these possibilities, it is not reducible to them. As the philosopher Susan Wolf points out (2010), much of what human beings do is not motivated by individual pleasure and self-interest or by ethical or political goals – the two main concerns of philosophers – but by a desire for meaningfulness. The idea of resonance covers similar terrain while extending beyond the domain of meaning, strictly understood, to include the sensual, corporeal, and non-conceptual: the crackle of energy and visceral excitement in a classroom discussion; a slow attunement to the sounds and rhythms of a foreign language; the *aha* moment of adding a final brush stroke to a painting in art class.

On the one hand, resonance speaks to the force of intellectual engagement for its own sake, conveying a non-instrumental vision of education (Lewis, 2020). On the other hand, as an intrinsically relational concept, it avoids the problems of scholasticism by alerting us to the factors that

shape its absence or presence. It is not just a matter of what goes on in the classroom – the relays of connectivity between teachers, students, and subject matter – but also the guiding values and practices of academic institutions (is the university home page devoted to research and teaching or to sports teams and donor opportunities?) as well as economic and political pressures (increasing adjunctification; skyrocketing tuition). And here Rosa contrasts experiencing the *world as relation* to treating *the world as resource*. The latter denotes an instrumental stance that is geared toward both accumulation and acceleration; a logic of constant growth via an increase in quantity per unit of time. The relevance of this logic to higher education is all too evident, as education is increasingly defined in terms of metrics of efficiency and productivity. The idea of resonance thus pushes back against regimes of accounting in the contemporary university: the ubiquitous rhetoric of metrics, impact factors, and citation indexes. Such a view, it insists, fundamentally mistakes the mechanisms by which learning happens: as involving not just acquisition, but self-transformation, as bringing into play both cognition and emotion, analysis and affect, and as a process whose outcomes cannot be known in advance.

In thinking through the relevance of resonance for education, I've recently been inspired by two works of fiction: *Stoner* (1965/2003), by the American novelist John Williams, and *Theory* (2019), by the Canadian-Caribbean writer Dionne Brand. What might possibly connect Williams' portrayal of a professor of medieval literature in early-twentieth-century Missouri to Brand's fictional memoir of a contemporary Ph.D. student toiling away at a dissertation whose title morphs from *Gender Genealogies: The Site of the Subaltern, A Foucauldian Reading to A Conceptual Analysis of the Racially Constructed?* While both are novels about academia, they are not *academic novels* à la David Lodge: satires or comedies of manners. Rather, beyond their differences, they are anchored in the existential force of intellectual commitments: how books and ideas come to define a sense of who one is. The protagonists of *Stoner* and *Theory* have differing investments – in medieval and renaissance literature; in critical theories of race and gender – yet they are both drawn to the sense of intellectual aliveness that I've called resonance. For both of them, to quote from *Stoner*, their studies are “life itself and not a specific means to a specific end” (Williams, 2003, p. 249).

“Every resonant experience,” Rosa writes, “inherently contains an element of ‘excess’ that allows a different form of relating to the world to shine forth” (Rosa, 2019a, p. 445). Both *Stoner* and *Theory* attest to this shining forth, capturing moments of intellectual aliveness, without idealizing either their flawed protagonists or the academic milieu in which they find themselves. That resonance does not – cannot! –

entirely escape the corporate and bureaucratic logics of higher education does not mean it is not worth striving for. Stoner is a passive, awkward and lonely figure who plods through a life of routines and compromises, of duties and disappointment. Cold-shouldered and scapegoated by sadistic colleagues, he acknowledges, as he approaches his death, that he has been a mediocre teacher and undistinguished researcher. And yet the novel returns repeatedly to the almost painful intensity of a felt connection to books: an “excitement that was like terror” (Williams, 2003, p. 278). Early modern literature remains an enduring source of solace; a miraculous escape from the life of farm labor to which he had been condemned.

Dionne Brand's novel, meanwhile, is a reckoning with the protagonist's inability to complete a dissertation she's been working on for fifteen years – her director dead, her committee long disbanded, three torn-up versions buried in a kitchen drawer – as well as her love affairs with three women; how intellectual commitments are enabled yet also imperiled by the university. “One has no friends in academia. One has colleagues. One has assassins” (Brand, 2019, p. 66). Her account of graduate school nails down with wit and exactitude the often paralyzing isolation and anxiety; the sparring and posturing; the trading of “multi-syllabic words and esoteric concepts.” Meanwhile, she and her dissertation committee live in different worlds: her existence as a woman of color is affected by their unseeing. And yet, the alienation of academia is interwoven with moments of intense absorption; the narrator is lifted up by the exhilaration of wrestling with difficult ideas.

My thesis, qua thesis, was a pleasure to me. Anyone would think I found it difficult. Well I did find it difficult, but not only difficult. Sometimes I would lie on the floor among my books and among the realm of papers I'd produced, and I would feel a purity. A breathless purity. (Brand, 2019, p. 167)

This, too, is resonance. Even as it is wielded to dissect and demystify the sentiments of others, critical theory can inspire intense attachment, even enchantment.

One reason I'm ambivalent about the word postcritique is that it is easily misunderstood. I was disconcerted, after the publication of *The Limits of Critique*, to find myself portrayed in some quarters as being anti-theory and anti-critique. Yet in writing the book, I was not slaying a dragon but reckoning with an intimate life partner of forty years. The sheen is long gone; quirks you once found endearing now drive you up the wall; you've heard their stories a few too many times. Yet to recognize that a relationship has fallen into a rut is not to deny its formative importance; trying out

other options is not necessarily a betrayal. I've never thought of myself as repudiating critique, but as stepping away from it temporarily in order to reset the terms of our relationship.² And in this light, I see dichotomies between aesthetic appreciation and critical detachment, a love of literature and a commitment to theory, as part of the problem rather than

the solution. The rubric of resonance might allow us to gain a better grasp of their affinities as well as differences.

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¹ This paragraph is taken from my review article on Rosa, “Good vibrations” (Felski, 2020b).

² Here I am very much in sympathy with Kai Wortmann’s crucial distinction between critique as a demystifying reduction of phenomena to their hidden causes and critique as a process of discrimination and disagreement. In my new book on the Frankfurt School, I argue against the former and for the latter.