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Book Review

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Book Review

Bonnie Poitras Tucker, *The Feel of Silence*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995. Pp. 210.

Reviewed by Marianne Wesson

Imagine this: you are different from almost everyone else. (Or Different. Others like you disagree about whether to capitalize the term.) During the early years of your childhood, you never knew you were different, but later you saw some people whispering about your difference and you realized that, although it was nothing you could change, it would be the basis for others' judgments about you. Your parents, who were not different, were unable to come to terms with your difference and so insisted that you were not different at all—a little peculiar, perhaps, but not different. They forced you into situations in which it was nearly impossible for you to perform without revealing your difference, but they expected you to do precisely that. You underwent an enormous amount of abuse by people who took your difference for stubbornness or rudeness or thoughtlessness, and of course you could not defend yourself by explaining that it was difference and not those other things. For many years you never sought out different others; when you were nearly forty years old, you could say that you had met only three people in your life who were different.

Your parents were no doubt well meaning: perhaps they believed that if they did not acknowledge your difference, or permit you to do so, it would vanish. Even though you have now written a book about your difference, to this day you cannot talk to them about being different. You became very good at pretending to be no different from anyone else. Nevertheless, over time various people did come to know that you were different, usually because you told them. Some refused to have anything further to do with you after learning that you were different. Some continued the relationship on the implicit understanding that you would not burden them with your difference or expect any acknowledgment of it.

You married someone who was not different, pleased to think this made you less different, but after many years of marriage your partner left you, claiming it was just too hard to cope with your difference. You have managed to accomplish extraordinary things despite the difficulties posed by your difference, but you do not encounter universal admiration: there is resentment from some who accuse you of enjoying special privileges because of being different.

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Oh, you are thinking, I've already read about that, I know about that. It was in that book about being gay, or that book about the black man who passed for white until he was an adult. Or, oh yes, you are thinking, I have read Derrida, or at least I have read *about* Derrida, and I understand about the varieties of difference.

But unless you have read Bonnie Poitras Tucker's *The Feel of Silence*, or unless you are deaf (or Deaf), you have not experienced or imagined very precisely the difference that shaped her life, both while she denied it and while she acknowledged it. Like other practitioners of what Nancy Mairs calls the "literature of personal disaster" (in which one might include also Lucy Grealy's *Autobiography of a Face*, William Styron's *Darkness Visible*, and some of Mairs's own work), Tucker shuns pity but treasures empathy, and she has learned how difficult it is to inspire the latter when you refuse the former. In her determination (the sources of which she renders quite clearly) to do everything hearing persons can do and more, without seeking or expecting accommodation, Tucker learned to sing and play the piano, became an expert dancer and skier, and (most important to her self-definition and her place in the divided deaf community) learned to speak and to lip-read with an astonishing degree of accuracy. (One well-known deaf educator—Merv Garretson, quoted on the dust jacket—calls Tucker "one of the world's best lip-readers.") These accomplishments permit her to conceal her deafness from many people, even close associates; her accomplishments also make it impossible for some people to believe that she is deaf, or to remember it even if they do believe it. One of the most remarkable of Tucker's many remarkable stories is that of the agent who, having just read and admired a draft of her book, behaves as though Tucker is just being difficult when she declines to take a telephone call in the agent's office. "She says she can talk but not listen," the agent explains to the party on the phone, as though at a loss to account for this eccentricity (page 210).

After her husband left her, saying that he was tired of the "hassle" of being with a deaf woman, Tucker, then a thirty-seven-year-old single mother of three, put herself through law school, became editor in chief of the law review, graduated at the top of her class, and clerked for a court of appeals judge. She then became a very successful litigation partner at one of the most prestigious law firms in Arizona, and after that a tenured professor of law at Arizona State University and a nationally recognized scholar and expert on disability law.

This is all humbling enough for the rest of us, burdened as most of us are with our comparatively minor differences, and it's not too difficult to believe Tucker's accounts of the hostility she encountered when her highly visible success was coupled with an occasional expectation that she would be excused from some minor bureaucratic routine or granted some small extra consideration on account of her deafness. In the pre-ADA period when Tucker was becoming a lawyer, accommodations were favors, not rights. Tucker managed law school (she did her second and third years at the school where I teach) by missing some classes, in which she often could not lip-read successfully because of factors like classroom size or professorial facial hair, in favor of the extra reading that made possible her extraordinary performance. I cringed

when I read about my (unnamed) colleague who required her to write an extra paper to compensate for classes she had not attended. I was glad that another painful episode occurred at the law-school where Tucker spent her first year: there other students challenged her to justify the special treatment she received by not being required to recite in class. "You don't go through the same stress we do every day in class, knowing we could get called on at any time," they complained to her. "It's not the same" (132). ("Not the same!" one wishes to shout at these long-gone students, meanwhile shaking them until their teeth rattle. "No *shit*, Sherlock!")

Tucker herself now wonders whether she should have been more aggressive about asking for—or insisting on—accommodation; she says one of her few regrets is having trained her children to make little or no allowance for her deafness. And it may be that those who have seen her in action have a hard time understanding the nature of her daily struggle: she makes it look too easy. One of many tragicomic episodes in the book occurs at a drive-through drycleaning establishment. Tucker is waiting in line in her car to pick up her clothes, unaware that her horn is blowing merrily away and that the others in line are becoming increasingly enraged. Finally an employee of the drycleaners comes out and confronts her; Tucker apologizes, explaining that she is deaf and has not heard the horn. "Don't give me that bullshit," retorts the employee. "You've been coming here for years; don't you think I'd know if you were deaf?" (94).

"Being different has shaped my life," writes Tucker. "But I'm weary of being different" (128). Always the Socratic, she ends her book with a series of questions for which she offers no final answers. "Is it possible to succeed too well," she asks, "to be so successful at attaining the goal that you have set that you defeat the very purpose of that goal?" (210).

Tucker's singular, eloquent, and astonishing memoir is not merely another piece of "crip lit." It invites and inspires empathy (although, as the story of the agent suggests, perhaps not enough), but it also interrogates many of the concepts employed daily by lawyers and legal educators. No thoughtful reader will come away with her notions about equality, difference, merit, or accommodation undisturbed, and no educator should fail to reflect on what Tucker's account has to show us about teaching and learning.

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