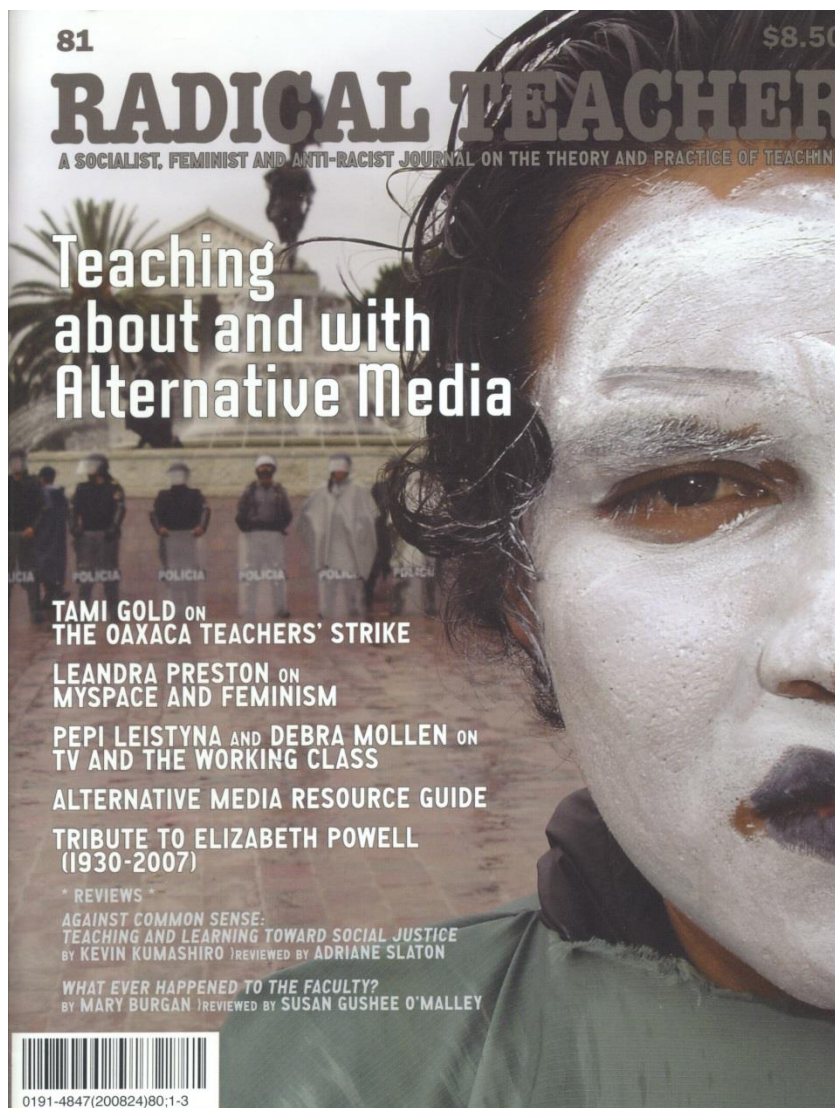


# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## Tribute to the Life and Work of Elizabeth Powell (1930-2007)

by Nick Thorkelson



Elizabeth Powell was a master cartoonist, though virtually unknown as such to anybody who didn't read this journal. With no tools at hand but her own perceptiveness, passion and drawing skill, she could conjure up a zany alterkocker lifting hourglasses instead of weights (figure 1), a daydreaming bag lady (figure 2), a low-income mother attempting to bear her burdens with dignity, an arrogant pastor or president, or an entire cast of random characters engaged in an impromptu discussion of media and politics.

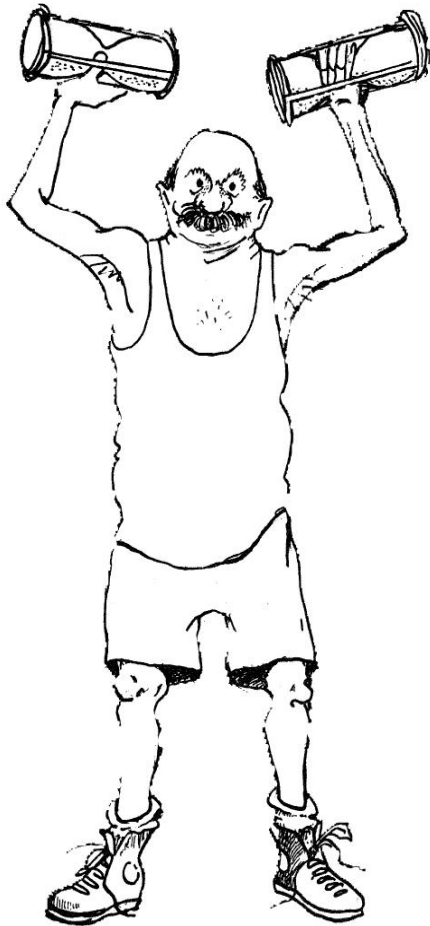


FIGURE 1. FROM RT #71

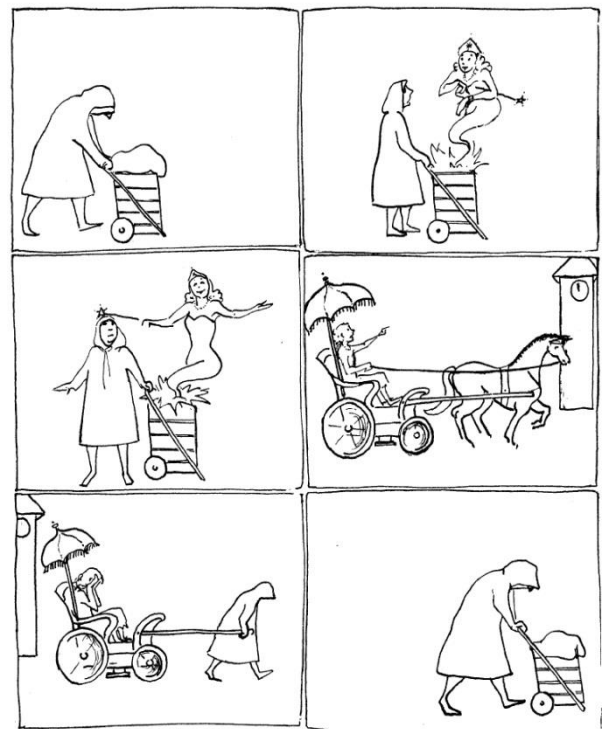
The most striking quality of her drawings was empathy. Though lack of thoughtfulness was an inexcusable crime in the worlds she created, even her thoughtless characters had life, weight, and bones beneath their flesh.

A central problem of cartooning is that a cartoon communicates in generalities and yet, for the cartoon to be compelling, each character should come across as autonomous and self-determined. We male cartoonists tend to use vivacious or ingenious technique to mitigate our reliance on stereotypes. Liz was like many of the best female cartoonists — Nicole Hollander, Lynn Johnston, Alison Bechdel, and Sharon Rudahl are others that come to mind — in her ability to give characters physical and personal specificity, at the same time that they are rendered symbolically or simply enough to speak for whole classes of people.

She had a few continuing characters: the bag lady mentioned above; George W. Bush, whose studied hypermasculinity Liz nailed very nicely; a philosophical pair of pigeons (figure 3). In three different versions of a poor family in its kitchen, the sharp and experienced yet bewildered profile of the grandmother contrasts with the open faces of her daughter and grandchildren (figure 4). Uncle Sam appears often, borderline handsome, bland, gone-to-seed but vain nevertheless. In one drawing he flashes his naked self to a group of females. They are all cracking up except one girl who, in a very Liz-ish touch, is too busy studying to take notice (figure 5).

METAMORPHOSIS

FIGURE 2. FROM RT #71



Not all of Liz's drawings for *Radical Teacher* were cartoons. A pencil drawing of a globalizing devil figurine (figure 6) showed her fine color sense and her drawing virtuosity. A disturbing drawing of two naked figures joined at the head, simultaneously embracing and striking each other (figure 7), is indicative of her emotional fearlessness. A relief print of a lynching, with slivers of moonlight tracing the spectators' faces, acknowledges the dreadful humanity behind race violence, without posturing or flinching (figure 8).

I should mention what a pleasure it was to work with Liz on *Radical Teacher* for eight years, not least because of my admiration for her talent. On the one occasion when we met face-to-face, I found her to be surprisingly self-effacing, considering her forthright angry cartoons. Perhaps this is a confirmation of the theory that cartooning is the art of shy people who are boiling inside.

Our collaboration was characterized by the kind of mutual trust and co-inspiration that you long for in work, politics and friendship. Thank you, Liz, and thank you

Radical Teacher for providing a platform for this original and amazing artist.

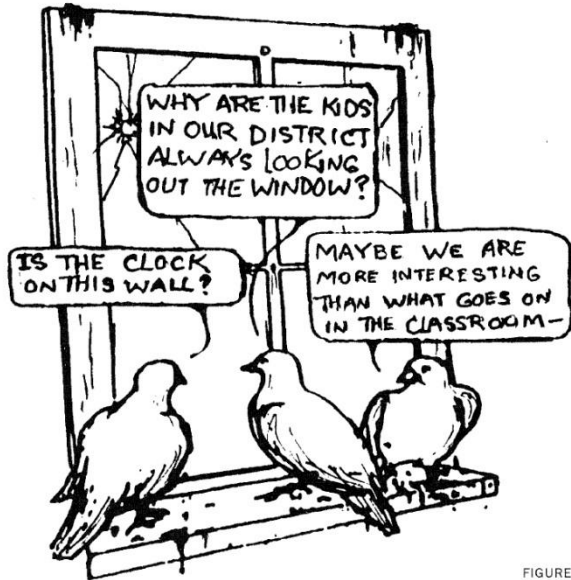


FIGURE 3. FROM RT #64



FIGURE 4. FROM RT #59



FIGURE 5. FROM RT #71

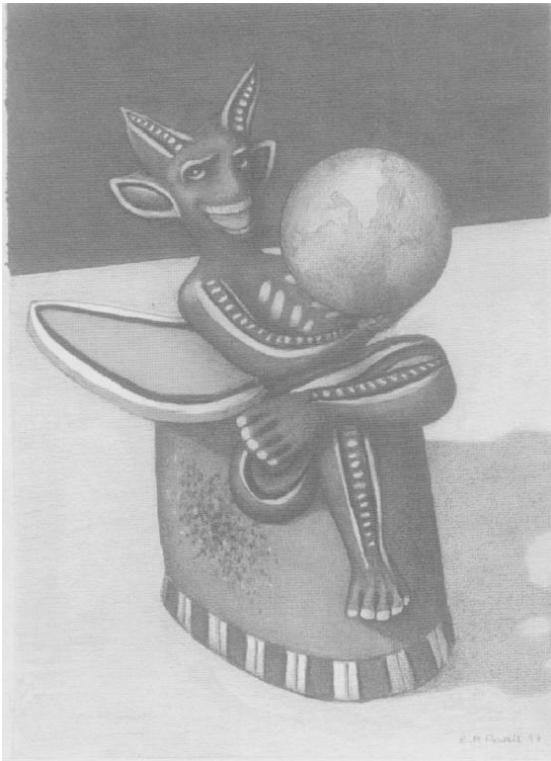


FIGURE 6. FROM RT #62

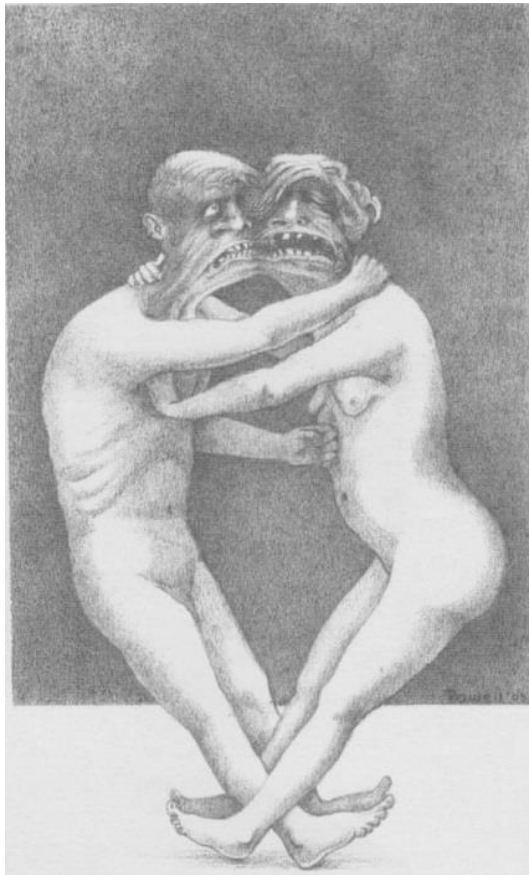


FIGURE 7. FROM RT #67



FIGURE 8. FROM RT #59



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