

**Judges' Commentary on "Fighting a Winning Battle
Enemy: Those Assumptions in which we are Drenched."**

by

Emilia Wentworth

**"Fighting a Winning Battle" won first prize
in the University of Pittsburgh's
2009/10 Composition Program Writing Contest**

For a Seminar in Composition focusing on gender studies, the final revision project challenged students to bring all of their semester's learning about writing to bear on drawing two or more course texts together in an essay that "pursue[s] an intriguing line of thought or inquiry" while also representing the complexity of both those selected texts and the students' own thinking. And in "Fighting a Winning Battle," we see the work of an intellectually energetic composer who doesn't shrink from this potentially daunting task; indeed, Emilia Wentworth seems to relish its challenges. We see a writer not only fully engaged in investigating complex ideas but also able to advance her thinking with remarkable clarity.

A virtue contributing to Wentworth's impressive blend of complexity and clarity is patience. Her reading of Adrienne Rich's essay "When We Dead Awaken," for example, is nuanced and never rushed. For her, a salient feature of that 1971 text is Rich's inability to, finally, overcome the assumption "that men and women exist as the only two genders, exclusively from one another." A more hasty writer might have left it at that and moved on to a discussion of *Gender Outlaw*, Kate Bornstein's more recent and seemingly more fluid conception of gender. But Wentworth doesn't leave Rich stranded in her historical moment; she develops a conversation between the ideas of Rich, Bornstein, and herself. In that conversation, we see Wentworth turn Rich's binary representations this way and that, until she comes to an understanding of how male and female roles not only constrain us, but also, perhaps, provide a measure of safety.

Wentworth's patient exploration of complicated ideas demonstrates a respect for her readers. Part of this respect is a recognition that ideas don't exist on some exclusive plane of their own: they impact lives. Imagining readers'

uncertainty at one juncture about exactly what she is advocating, she stresses, “I do want to make clear that just because we have come to believe a certain thing or behave a certain way through the forces of socialization does not always mean that we should change our thoughts or behaviors.” Kate Bornstein’s calls for a “genderless society” might sound appealing in relation to the restrictive male and female “energies” that Rich discusses. Yet Wentworth anticipates the befuddlement of many readers as they try to picture such a society. Our job, she maintains, is not to entirely rid ourselves of all “socially constructed ways of seeing” gender (which as she notes, would be “impossible,” anyway) but to “weed through them and thereby understand the roots of our own thinking.” The “winning battle” the essay confidently envisions is the power of educated thinking to promote “refusal of the destructiveness of a *gender*-dominated society.” And throughout “Fighting a Winning Battle,” Emilia Wentworth’s sustained critical energies amply manifest her own commitment to reaching out in pursuit of increased understanding through intensified efforts “to listen when someone has something to say, questions to ask, windows of consciousness to open,” to engage with such ideas, and to make notable contributions of her own.

To read the full text of Emilia Wentworth’s essay, [click here](#)