

## Book Review—*Teaching Queer: Radical Possibilities for Writing and Knowing*, by Stacey Waite

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Since the mid-1990s, scholars of queer pedagogy have tended to focus on LGBTQ subjects, topics, and texts. Early work examined and confronted the intricacies of coming out in the classroom; homophobia and heteronormativity in teachers, students, and institutions; and “how to manage potentially uncomfortable discussions about sex, sexuality, and queerness” (Alexander and Wallace 310). More recently, the field has shifted from a focus on the inclusivity of LGBTQ identities to a focus on identity’s production and dissolution, drawing on queer theory to denaturalize notions of stable, cohesive identity and to investigate how normativity produces and polices teachers and students. In tandem with queer pedagogy’s challenge to identity and normativity, queer compositionists have suggested that composition *as such* is destabilized by queerness; as Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes argue, queerness may “challenge the very subject of composition, of what it means to compose, of what it means to *be composed*” (182). Stacey Waite’s new book, *Teaching Queer*, emerges in the intersection of queer pedagogy and composition, taking up the implications of Alexander and Rhodes’ assertion for the teaching of writing. If queerness challenges norms of both gender identity and writing, what might it mean to teach composition queer?

For Waite, inquiry into this question must begin and end with the body, the body that lives, writes, teaches, and learns—and writes, teaches, and learns to live. *Teaching Queer*’s title positions “teaching” as both a *verb* (the iterative, reflexive interrogation of norms that structure writing and gender) and as an *adjective* (a description of Waite herself, a queer who teaches) (10). This reciprocal relation between queer pedagogy and embodied queerness is integral to Waite’s method. As she explains, “I do not believe the story of my scholarship is separate from the story of my life or the body I live” (15). Consequently, each chapter is structured as a network of fragments, flowing between personal narrative about growing up queer, theories of gender and composition, and analysis of the verbal and written work of students. Frequently and without warning, readers learn about the diving habits of loons, the role of muscles in motion, and the way a dolphin whistles. The result is an exceedingly readable and compelling argument for teaching writing with an emphasis on contradiction, movement, and the relations among bodies and texts.

The body is the focus of the first core chapter, as Waite invites teachers to “confront the fear, defensiveness, and erasure that constitute what it means to *be* a teaching body” (23). This chapter presents one of the book’s greatest gifts—and risks: the profound vulnerability Waite encounters and probes when she enters the classroom and asks her students to write. For Waite, writing itself is about self-revision, self-question, even self-annihilation, and she performs this vulnerability in her writing as much as she asks it of her students. Waite admits the fears that many teachers have and won’t acknowledge; she admits, for example, that she teaches about queerness in order to survive, in order to make this world livable for her androgynous body. She suggests that we teachers are all trying to

survive, that we ask students to read and think in certain ways so that they might help to make the world more open to the kind of people we are. But admitting to “selfishness” does not prevent Waite from questioning her own responses as students react to the queer texts she assigns and the body from which she teaches. In an illustrative passage, she writes:

And the truth is, as I read this student’s writing, I understood the various ways he might be terrorized by me (by my course, by this book I had chosen for him to read); I also understood the ways I, too, felt terrorized by him—he’s *not going to feel bad for them*. It’s the “them” that’s terrifying. It’s seeing myself as this student’s “them.” (39)

Here and throughout the book, Waite exhibits deep empathy for her students and herself with consonant awareness of her, and their, power to harm and unsettle.

Using student writing and class discussion transcripts as primary sources, Waite treats students as writers and as *theorists*, as collaborators in the process of generating knowledge about gender and writing. For instance, when a student named Johnnie writes in a reflection that the class has overturned his sense of certainty and made his “thinking fee[l] all watery,” Waite takes up his liquid imagery to forward an “alternative epistemology, a way of thinking and writing” where acts of literacy become fluid and supple (9). Indeed, Johnnie’s generation of theory becomes the inspiration for a chapter entitled “Becoming Liquid,” in which Waite investigates how we might teach interpretative acts that dissolve the sturdiest of convictions to create room for new possibilities.

While the book is a work in queer composition pedagogy, it has much to offer literacy and composition teachers of any stripe. For instance, in the chapter “Courting Failure,” Waite builds on Jack Halberstam’s concept of the “queer art of failure.” Extending Halberstam’s assertion that queer failures can productively disrupt dominant norms, Waite argues that failure can upset norms of writing. Examples from the classroom invigorate this contention as Waite and her students debate how the language we use to workshop writing often fails us, how words like “thesis” and “flow” constrain what can be said in and about writing. In the wake of these words’ limitations, Waite’s students generate new language for naming the shape and movement writing can make. In a similar class discussion in the chapter “Queer (Re)Visions of Composition,” Waite’s students escape the constraints of language entirely, drawing diagrams of the ways different pieces of writing oscillate, amble, loop, and roil. Teachers need not identify as queer nor situate themselves in queer composition studies to become inspired by Waite’s inventive and reflective approach to classroom activities and writing assignments.

Perhaps because Waite’s focus is on embodied experience, how queerness challenges norms of identity and writing—and how “teaching queer” can break through to new ground, new language, and new possibilities for living—she does not emphasize that her approach may have roots in a curricular tradition. Readers familiar with the first-year writing program at the University of Pittsburgh (where both Waite and I were trained) may find some of her values as familiar as they are compelling, particularly the productive potential of uncertainty and contradiction, the interrogation of experience, and the centrality of student writing as texts in the classroom. These values are embedded in the program’s goals for the first-year seminar and in *Ways of Reading*, an influential composition reader long edited by Pittsburgh professors David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky

and now co-edited by Waite. Yet forwarding and reinvigorating these values does not make Waite's book any less innovative; if anything, it provokes yet another productive contradiction: the notion of a queer tradition, the notion that a composition program might resist composure. One of Waite's many contributions is to demonstrate the stakes and risks of such a pedagogy for living.

In each chapter, Waite performs the method she advocates: she connects her reading of student writing and speech with her lived experience in her queer body; she questions and probes that initial reading to find the layers, contradictions, and failures that lie beneath it; she applies the same iterative, empathetic, yet critical lens to students whose own readings in their writing are informed by embodied experience. In this way, the book is very much about literacy *in* composition, about writing as reading as writing. As Waite puts it, "I take the work of composition to be the work of fluid, nuanced, embodied, and conscious readings and interpretations" (127). Her queer approach calls attention to the literacy practices embedded and naturalized within and outside schooling: to how some ways of reading make some ways of being livable and legible, and how others participate in their erasure. Waite's goal in teaching queer is to teach literacy that opens up possibilities for living, that makes what was fixed "liquid" so that we might all become more capable of movement.

## Works Cited

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