

## Book Review

# Waite, S. (2017). *Teaching queer: Radical possibilities for writing and knowing*. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh.

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I started reading “Teaching Queer: Radical Possibilities for Writing and Knowing” on an unusually warm day in April, peacefully sitting outside on my blanket under a tree. Now covered in tree sap, the book sticks to my desk, requiring a firm but gentle nudge to remove it. The sap also obscures the back of the book from view, offering only a partial summary to the curious. Inspired by all of this, in this review I allow myself to be guided by sap and partial readings. My aim is to make you sufficiently curious enough to pick up a copy and enjoy *Teaching Queer* as I have.

Waite’s (2017) book is thoughtful and meditative, patiently encouraging readers to reflect on their teaching, writing, and reading practices in a different way. We are nudged to consider the multifaceted positions we take in bodies that are intersecting and always shifting. We are invited to “explode into language” (p. 3) what is taken for granted in the academy (and beyond), as well as how we inhabit and sometimes exceed our bodies—whether as teachers, researchers, or scholars (Chapter One). Waite fiercely and eloquently interrogates personal and institutional notions of writing, doing, and being, as well as failures to meet these norms. We also court failure each time we set out “to teach” writing (Chapter Two), whether one is queering the teaching of writing or not. It is, as Waite writes, “impossible to engage in acts of teaching or acts of writing without coming up against notions of failure” (p. 56). But Waite asks us to dig in to failure, beyond the moments “we mourn what could have been” (p. 57)—beyond what might be currently understood as failures in the teaching of writing, such as writing failures, assessment failures, failures to transfer learning—to seeing “failure” as light posts on a pathway illuminating the “logics of success” so that we are better able to dismantle them (p. 57).

Drawing on metaphors, student essays, classroom assignments, course outlines, and institutional mandates as analytical entry points in Chapter Three, Waite opens up spaces of “impossibility” (p.

192) to consider “deviant mark[s],” “excess[es],” and “bodily expression[s]” that exist “outside a normative construction of the body” (p. 24). One aim in doing so is to create queerer thinkers, readers, and writers—partly because “if oppression is really going to change, it’s our civic duty to think in queerer ways, to come up with queer kinds of knowledge-making so that we might know truths that are non-normative, and contradictory and strange” (p. 187). In this vein, Chapter Four considers what it means to queer literacy/ies and how one can move away from dualistic constructions, using Waite’s Tai Chi practice as a site of “interpretative possibility” (p. 25). Waite describes Tai Chi as the embodied process and practice of becoming, in our movement and in the world, like water. This fluidity brings with it an invitation to become more curious about how we inhabit fluid bodies and spaces, as well as how we can explicitly encourage literacy/ies practices that overlap and blur.

Waite concludes in Chapter Five by offering three threads that underpin the book and are crucial to queer composition: narration, naming, and scavenging. Of the three, I see myself reflected most in the latter—scavenging. Here, Waite draws on authors such as Halberstam to offer a “scavenger methodology,” chosen over other approaches (such as assemblage) not only for the agency it requires, but for its implication of bringing together disparate scraps (of ideas, objects, theories), embodying and making space for contradictions in one’s writing and approach to writing. To apply the scavenger methodology, Waite asks students to reflect on and respond to a two-part question: “If you were on a scavenger hunt for certain categories of things to bring into this essay, what kinds of things would they be? What would you tell yourself to go find?” (p. 183).

While *Teaching Queer* inquires into the places where queer theory, writing, and pedagogy meet—as well as the practices they inspire—it digs deeper and gets at questions about education, ontology, identity, and (un)becoming(s), as well as physicality, location, theology and ecology (p. 29). This text asks us to wonder more and liberally; to ask questions of ourselves such as how we might bring “questions of being to questions of pedagogy more broadly” (p. 30); and to consider pedagogies that disrupt, destabilize, and sustain identities. Waite points at the way our teaching practice might nurture space for all sorts of “coming out(s)” while at the same time, carefully prods at the ways in which our boundaries or “parameters” might do violence to students and “the violence their [students] resistance might do to me” (p. 37).

There are many opportunities for borrowing some of Waite’s classroom activities for use in teaching, writing, and reading practices—with students or in our own practice. It would be impossible to share them all, but three catch my attention at this time.

Firstly, Waite wonders about ways to invite students to “resist and question the conventional ways of talking about writing [and how these] had failed them” as well as the ways in which “that failure might illuminate what is wrong with a system that tells us we can, once and for all, talk about writing in the ‘right’ way, the way that will enable writing to be containable, teachable, repeatable” (p. 61). In addition to peer review and debriefing afterwards, Waite leads the class in identifying the various labels, directions, and formulas that they have received over their writing careers (pp. 60-65). Then, putting these aside, Waite facilitates the class in coming up with new metaphors and names for thinking about their writing (they chose words like “heart”, “lungs” and “body”). After this, the class is asked to revise their work in light of the lesson, and readers are able to see the changes in students’ drafts. This can be adapted for our own writing practices and classrooms. What metaphors do we use to describe our writing? Are there any shapes that can be drawn to represent a challenge, sentence, writing style, paper, and so on? (I can’t help but refer interested readers to the special issue in our journal on “Play, Visual Strategies and Innovative Approaches to Graduate Student Writing Development.” In particular, Jones and Williams (2018) and Abegglen, Burns, and Sinfield (2018)).

Secondly, Waite shares many narrative memoirs throughout the text, but on pages 11 to 14, we are shown examples of different ways one can position the same narrative, and how texts can occupy multiple positionalities. This approach can be adapted to work at multiple levels (sentences, paragraphs, sections, etc.). Choose a level to work with and play with the different ways you can position the text. I appreciate Waite’s inclusion of Sara Ahmed’s work on orientation (pp. 92-93) and find it useful. We might think of orientations as habits of mind and body, as “how we reside in space” (Ahmed, quoted on p. 92), and or as what we are turned towards. What orientation is our work taking up, and what new angle can be revealed if we toggle this orientation?

Finally, I appreciate that “queering is a particular kind of interference, an interference that calls attention to the reader and, in a way, to the text as well, as movements, as kinds of becoming” (p. 108). Because there is an attention paid to the places where meanings collide, collapse, and implode, uncertainty and discomfort will inevitably arise at some point. I wonder, how can we work with this uncertainty and discomfort, and encourage students to do the same? Waite suggests assigning a “difficulty paper” (pp. 109-111)—a short (one page) reflection on any difficulty a text has brought forward. Authors may reflect on questions like “what is difficult about this text?” or, “what don’t we know about (the topic)?”, “how do we feel about (the topic)?”, and “what’s unthinkable (about the topic)?”

Rather than finite and closed, *Teaching Queer: Radical Possibilities for Writing and Knowing* is generative, exciting, practical, and imaginative. I am left with several questions or fascinations that refuse to go away, and I would like to provoke CJDSW/R's readership to play with them, generously layering a response that considers the multiple and varying positions that we take up as writing scholars in Canada (geographically, institutionally and otherwise). They are:

- There are multiple meanings of composure, each "imbued with normativity" (p. 6). What do we lose when we compose ourselves and what do we gain? What is reduced, maintained, forged, preformed, swapped, tied, tidied, swept, and otherwise rendered coherent? Coherent to whom? And is this audience the one we want to preform for?
- How are we restrained by our writing, and are these restraints pleasurable? Workable? Have we consented to them? If not, are these binds violent? Do they violate us? Are we violated by our writing? Do we use our writing to violate others? Again, is this violation desirable? Pleasurable? Consensual? When are we forced into a relationship with our composition? When do we force a relationship? Who benefits? When is the writing "worth the risk" (Miller, quoted on p. 15)?

I will close by saying that Waite's playful questioning of what it means to be a good queer and teacher reminds me of how I feel (as a doctoral student) I *should* write. This often goes something like: (1) Write brilliant things that are also "appropriate... unerotic, eunuch" (p. 19), (2) Write things that are on the cutting edge but don't stray too far forward, (3) (Do not) Write in ways that defy the oft-implicit but rarely discussed (unmarked, normalised) conventions, and (4) Do not write "non-normative and category-resistant forms of writing that move between the critical and the creative, the theoretical and the practice, the rhetorical and the poetic, the queer and the often invisible normative functions of classrooms" or the academy more broadly (p. 6). Thankfully *Teaching Queer* has sown positive seeds, strong determination, and some renewed aspiration to mindfully push back a little in my writing practice. Solidarity and gratitude.

It was in that room I learned that the weird stuff I wrote counted for something, that writing did save Wilbur [Charlotte's Web], even if it can't save all of us. We can, at least, still teach like it could. (p. 191)

## References

- Abegglen, S., Burns, T., & Sinfield, S. (2018). Drawing as a way of knowing: Visual practices as the route to becoming academic. *Canadian Journal for Studies in Discourse and Writing/Rédactologie*, 28, 173-187. <https://doi.org/10.31468/cjsdwr.600>
- Jones, Z., & Williams, N. (2018). "I am done with toys!" — The benefits, joys and risks of creativity and innovation in graduate writing support. *Canadian Journal for Studies in Discourse and Writing/Rédactologie*, 28, 149-172. <https://doi.org/10.31468/cjsdwr.602>
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