

Waite, Stacey. *Teaching Queer: Radical Possibilities for Writing and Knowing*. U of Pittsburgh P, 2017. 206 pages.

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"There is no bodiless pedagogy."

—Stacey Waite, *Teaching Queer: Radical Possibilities for Writing and Knowing*

Stacey Waite's *Teaching Queer: Radical Possibilities for Writing and Knowing* is a story. In this way, it acts as a queered academic text; it not only interacts with the theoretical, but it seems to push back against the traditional scholarly text by offering bits and pieces of narrative based on Waite's life alongside facts about loons. For example, one story recounts the author's experiences with a human sexuality lesson in health class; in the chapter "Becoming the Loon," Waite offers the following after a paragraph about disrupting hierarchies and challenging dominant systems: "The loon is the only bird with solid bones as opposed to the hollow bones of other birds. This is what makes the loon a brilliant diver" (28). The book's use of discussions of theory and pedagogy in writing studies alongside these narratives makes it read more like a story, and Waite's own retellings of stories from her life work toward further emphasizing and establishing her argument in *Teaching Queer*: that our professional and scholarly selves cannot be separated from our bodies and our stories. In the introduction to her book, Waite claims,

I want to offer a particularly queer understanding of what narrative might mean to theory and, dialectically, what theory might mean to narrative. I most closely link my own understanding of the scholarly use of narrative to Nancy K. Miller's understanding in *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts*. She writes, "...By turning its authorial voice into spectacle, personal writing theorizes the stakes of its own performance...Personal writing opens an inquiry on the cost of writing—critical writing or Theory—and its effects." (15)

Waite's idea of queer pedagogy involves the personal and the narrative as "spectacle," or making public what is usually left private. In understanding, discussing, and interacting with one's selfhood and embodied subjectivities, a queer pedagogy can be enacted in the teaching of writing. Waite's book is a physical manifestation of what she discusses here: the book is interspersed

with stories about her life in which she often talks about growing up as a gender non-conforming person and how that has impacted her view of herself both inside and outside of the classroom. With an introduction and five chapters, *Teaching Queer* is a creative-critical web of theory, pedagogy, and story that works to show readers what queer pedagogy can look like and how it can be enacted in the composition classroom.

Much of Waite's introductory section focuses on a scenario from one of her composition courses in which the students have just read a segment from theorist Judith Butler's *Undoing Gender*. The students were confused by the passage they read, and Waite moves through several narratives that show how the students reacted to and interpreted the reading differently. In one scenario, she agrees with the students, noting how difficult theory is to read and understand. In another, she draws attention to a comment made by a student that the theory is "impenetrable" (12-13). In pointing out that Butler is a butch lesbian, and impenetrable is an interesting (and possibly humorous) word to use in reference to her work, the instructor grows uncomfortable. She questions: Is it appropriate to talk about sex in the classroom? Can instructors think/write/theorize about bodies? What about the bodies of students? In the final narrative, Waite asks the students to elaborate on their claim that Butler is "talking in circles" (14). The resulting conversation leads them to "draw" the essay on the board, something the class does with every reading from that point forward. Waite concludes by stating that, while each of the teaching narratives is problematic, she wants to know more about how teaching stories illuminates the possibilities of queer teaching (14). She goes on to say that queer pedagogy doesn't have a clear beginning or end, and that it resists linear formation and categorization (15). The possibilities are open and endless, as Butler notes when she claims, "Possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread" (qtd. in Waite 14). Chapter one, "Becoming the Loon: Queer Masculinities, Queer Pedagogies," is, as Waite describes it, a hybrid-genre chapter about queer bodies in classroom spaces and beyond. She discusses her own gender non-conforming body, noting that she has embraced a masculine identity since she was a child. Waite tells several "uncomfortable" stories, including one where a student came into class late and asked if "he" (meaning Waite) had already distributed the syllabus. There was discomfort in the room following the student's remark, a commentary on the fact that children are taught from a young age to categorize not only things, but people. Waite is cognizant of how her appearance goes against this "need" to categorize, possibly confusing students and even distracting them. She has the choice to ignore her perceived masculinity in the classroom, and Waite notes that many instructors have done so. After all, they are in classroom spaces; they are teachers in those spaces rather than men or women. However, to ignore

the disruption would be to ignore the body, and Waite claims that “there is no bodiless pedagogy” (23).

Toward the end of the chapter, Waite discusses an assignment where she asked her students to write about and address specific comments she had made in their past assignments (and in doing so, talk about how they felt about Waite challenging their ideas). While she was initially terrified to see the results, Waite discovered that the assignment turned out to be “one of the ways [she] was able to make the assumptions about desire, body, and intention more visible, a way to address the question of [her] gender, and of theirs, and how these genders and bodies shape the texts we read and the texts students write” (53). In acknowledging the “disruption” (her own queer masculinity), Waite was able to have an open discussion with her students about bodies and gender; what was private became public, and the students learned about how embodied subjectivities impact our writing. The title of this chapter is “Becoming the Loon” and Waite spends time in the chapter describing the loon, which is a beautiful, majestic, intelligent, independent, and resourceful bird. To me, “becoming the loon” is coming to terms with one’s identity and owning that identity; we can’t escape or ignore who we are, but we can embrace and learn from it.

Chapter two, “Courting Failure,” critiques notions of failure and challenges readers to question what has traditionally been thought of as failure vs. success. Referring to Jack Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure*, Waite writes, “Halberstam suggests that where there is ‘failure,’ we might look to the system that set the scene for the failure in the first place. And that perhaps that failure is a radical critique (whether it knows it or not) of the very system that produced it as failure” (58). Here, Waite uses Halberstam to question failure. What is defined as failure in our modern culture is the result of heteropatriarchal ideologies which propagate racism, sexism, classism, etc., and thinking critically about how these ideologies have established the “correct” way of writing can give students the opportunity to question traditional academic writing and how it has failed them. Waite writes that there is already language in place that students are told must be mastered in order to write and speak academically, but it is possible to queer the way writing is taught and approached in academia by dismantling those traditional expectations. Considering story, personal narrative, and the body are ways to approach writing that pushes back against the pedagogy that has typically dominated writing classrooms. Waite claims that this queered pedagogy may be uncomfortable and even seem inappropriate at times (like appreciating and following up on a socially-awkward comment made by a student), but it creates opportunities and possibilities that would not be available otherwise.

In chapter three, which is called “Alternative Orientations,” Waite points out how queer pedagogy seems almost impossible in educational settings, especially at the university level. While she writes about the ways she attempts to queer her courses, college teaching often “seems antithetical to queer approaches” (87). Waite focuses on a first-year writing course she taught, bringing into question how queer theory can help instructors better teach such courses. She discusses many of the materials she used in that course, including an assignment prompt that was given after having the students read essays about race. The assignment asked them how they could take a “queer position” toward the texts they had read, pushing students to think about how they relate to them in “unusual, maybe uncomfortable” ways (105). Thinking this way calls for students to reorient and shift the way they think, read, and write and to understand the ways that bodies and identity impact the way they do those things. After all, as Waite says, “Every writing class is about identity: the identities of the students, the teacher, the dynamics between the various expressions of those identities in writing and in the classroom. To say otherwise would be to fool ourselves into thinking that our pedagogies, our teaching choices, were about something other than ourselves” (95).

Chapter four, “Becoming Liquid: Queer Interpretations,” presents more assignment prompts and discusses student responses, noting the places where strategies for reading, writing, and teaching can be queered. Waite draws attention to one student draft where the student talks about gender. The student wrote that no one had ever asked her whether she wanted to be a girl or even if she liked being a girl; she had always just accepted her gender. Waite points out that this is an opportunity to queer our thinking and to instead think critically about what it means to be labeled with a gender, to accept that gender, and to enact a socially accepted outward appearance of that gender. Waite quotes Amanda Cardo when she writes that there is room to “move beyond what is actual and present into a realm of possibility” (qtd. in Waite 131). Ultimately, chapter four argues for “practices that approach the world as a liquid (something fluid, mutable, difficult to pin down)” rather than something solid and stable (133). A queered pedagogy helps students to realize the enormity of the possibilities available to them to think, read, and write in new ways.

In the final chapter, “Queer (Re)Visions of Composition,” Waite notes the ever-shifting nature of queerness, comparing it to a slippery sheet of ice. What is on the ice can never be still or stable, but is always sliding, moving, and shifting. Waite recalls a conversation she had with her students in a past course where they were talking about the structure of a “well-written” essay. The students proceeded to draw different diagrams on the board indicating what they had been taught in the past; five-boxes, a funnel with a wide top and

a skinny end, and a funnel with a wide top and a wide end. However, another student drew a diagram of an essay they read for class, and that diagram was a series of interconnected swirling lines. While each of the diagrams was different, the students were able to see how each of them were alike and provided some level of organization and connectedness. The swirling lines represented how writing can be queer and how not every piece of writing needs to be structured in the same way. As Waite points out again and again, queer pedagogy opens up possibilities for writers to write and think and read in ways they haven't done previously. Waite refers to queer writing as a kind of "scavenger methodology," one that involves a writer who hunts for an assemblage of materials in an effort to "question the accepted knowledge about writing and about themselves" (182).

Waite's *Teaching Queer* is a book for writing instructors. Not only will it help instructors to see the ways they can help their students think and compose outside of prescribed norms, but it will give them the opportunity to examine and reflect on their own composing and teaching processes. In weaving together theory, student work, and autoethnography, Waite has created a text that is an enactment of the argument she poses, which is that the personal and the body are inseparable from the way we teach and write. In including her stories, readers can see the ways that Waite's life experiences have impacted her as a professional, scholar, and teacher and how our own stories, interactions, and experiences shape who we are in those roles. In addition, as the text itself acts as a transgenre composition, it is representative of the kind of queering that Waite advocates. The book consists of a number of different approaches and materials, which is a display of the "scavenger methodology" Waite discusses in chapter five.

Teaching Queer would serve as a valuable pedagogical tool for any teacher at any point in their career, but could be a vital tool for writing instructors starting out in their careers. Waite's book shows that there is more than one way to compose effectively, and that queering can involve blurring the boundaries of genre (while *Teaching Queer* is "scholarly," it also includes elements of creative nonfiction). Further, she discusses the ways that writing and pedagogy are interwoven with the personal and our own embodied subjectivities, so to teach writing is to talk about, think about, read about, and write about identity and the body. In her introduction, Waite writes, "Rather than positioning queerness as connected only to queer texts or queer teachers/students, I offer writing and teaching as already queer practices, and I contend that if we honor the overlaps between queer theory and composition, we encounter complex and evolving possibilities for teaching writing" (6). In this way, the book offers tools and discussions for teachers to (re)envision their teaching

practices in the writing classroom and make room for the innumerable possibilities that exist for them and their students.

About the Author

Kristin LaFollette is a PhD candidate in Rhetoric & Writing at Bowling Green State University where she recently completed a graduate certificate in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. Her interests include queer and feminist theories, transgenre and multimodal composing, and creative writing.