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Book Reviews

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BOOK REVIEWS

Looking for Solace

Irene Papoulis

Some readers of JAEPL will nod in agreement upon reading Mark McBeth's description of our "current daily world" as "[l]aden with linguistic, administrative, legislative, and physical violence." A sense of despair about that violence can seep into our teaching, making us question our practices and talk pessimistically with each other about our worries for our students' future.

Such talk can be productive to the extent that it offers us solidarity with our fellow teachers, and even more so when it reveals the fact that in spite of our gloom we still long for new possibilities. On some level we want to affirm the impulse that brought many of us to teaching in the first place: a desire to be engaged thinkers and active global citizens, encouraging our students to act on their various potentials and transform the world.

The books reviewed in this issue bring solace by offering us various versions of what Stacy Waite calls "radical possibilities." Their fresh insights about teaching can help us cultivate our sometimes-dormant capacities for change.

For example, the solace that Wendy Ryden finds in Adam Golub and Heather Richardson Hayton's edited volume, *Monsters in the Classroom: Essays on Teaching What Scares Us* is her discovery of an intriguing alternative to literature's traditional focus on heroes and heroines. As Ryden explains, the book encourages an engagement with the productive scariness of encounters with various sorts of "monsters." Such encounters make sense to our students and thus can provide useful lessons in "gender, race, and disability studies, to name a few of the areas that have productively mined analysis of the monstrous." In what Ryden calls their "unstable liminality," monsters teach us about ourselves as well as about the brutal forces around us, and they can productively "... prompt students to reflect on the impact of difference and normativity."

Stacey Waite's *Teaching Queer: Radical Possibilities for Writing and Knowledge* offers solace through other engagements with difference. As Mark McBeth writes, Waite resists the brutal forces that "flatten" queer approaches—"queer reading, queer research, queer textual critique, and queer brainstorming"—in the academy. By empathizing with students in an atmosphere that accepts their fears and their differences, teachers can "defy and redefine normative constructions," thereby resisting violence. Queer pedagogy allows students to gain agency both inside and outside the academy; it also encourages teachers to "unflatten" their practice and "become multi-dimensional again."

Mary Pigiacci also seeks ways to help students develop agency, and she finds inspiration in Michele Eodice, Anne Ellen Geller, and Neal Lerner's, *The Meaningful Writing Project: Learning, Teaching, and Writing in Higher Education*. The solace of that book comes from the authors' study, supported by extensive data, of what makes a meaningful writing assignment. The results support the value of the radical possibilities raised by the other two books under review: "meaningful" writing pedagogy requires that we engage

students' agency within a supportive community. The book offers practical examples of how to do so.

Teachers, of course, need engagement too, especially when we work within cultures fraught with various kinds of violence. These three books will help.

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Golub, Adam, and Heather Richardson Hayton, eds. *Monsters in the Classroom: Essays on Teaching What Scares Us*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2017. 264 pp.

**Wendy Ryden
Long Island University**

What first attracted me to *Monsters in the Classroom* was the double-entendre in the subtitle, "teaching what scares us." As a teacher who has long tread in the troubled pedagogical waters of taboo topics ranging in scope from the political to the personal, I was intrigued by a volume devoted to the idea of confronting what instructors fear. *Monsters in the Classroom* is not exactly what I expected in that regard—the "us" is far more universal in scope than I was envisioning—but it is a rewarding and timely read just the same.

The monsters in this book are very literal as we read about teaching accounts that capitalize on and deepen our understanding of the continuing human fascination with monsters, which includes related concepts such as horror, the gothic, the grotesque, the abject, the fantastic, and the sublime. Vampires and zombies proliferate in books, films, video games and other new media creations, making the topic an attractive one for the millennial population, but also one in need of contextualization and theorization in order to help students explore these creations as metaphors for human fears, anxieties, and desires. As editors Adam Golub and Heather Richardson Hayton remark in their introduction, "We are still inventing monsters—and still being scared by them—but at this moment in time, we seem to want to discover new and different ways to learn from monsters. Today the mind does not just need monsters—it also needs monster pedagogy" (10). This collection draws together essays that connect our enduring popular interest in monstrous creatures to a long-standing scholarly tradition that has culminated in the contemporary field known as monster studies. It is at this intersection that we find what the editors are calling "monster pedagogy," an attempt to theorize not just the significance of monsters as literary metaphors but to use the insights from gender, race, and disability studies, to name a few of the areas that have productively mined analysis of the monstrous, to prompt students to reflect on the impact of difference and normativity in the way humans construct and conduct themselves.

The book is divided into three sections, the first titled "Teaching Difference: The Monster Appears." The first essay in this cluster, by Asa Simon Mittman, "Teaching Monsters from Medieval to Modern: Embracing the Abnormal," shows us a course in which monstrous difference, far from absolute, becomes a way of "destabilizing" our social constructions of what is human (24). A good choice for a lead essay, it sets the tone and establishes concepts that will be foundational in nearly all the rest of the offerings.

Pamela Bedore, in “Gender, Sexuality and Rhetorical Vulnerabilities in Monster Literature and Pedagogy,” discusses monsters as a means to represent and explore subversive sexualities, ranging from the vampiric to the fantasy/science fiction renderings of Octavia Butler. Nancy Hightower’s “Creating Visual Rhetoric and the Monstrous” describes a fascinating rhetoric and pedagogy based on assemblage, in which students create photographic representations of the monstrous to explore personal and social issues. Jessica Elbert Decker extends monster pedagogy into the philosophy classroom to accomplish, among other things, a kind of metonymic displacement that allows mythological and other monsters to become a “safe space” in which to encounter difference (71).

In the next cluster, “Transforming Space: The Monster Roams,” we find co-editor Adam Golub’s contribution, “Locating Monsters: Space, Place and Monstrous Geographies,” in which the author uses the trope of the monstrous to explore location and dislocation in built environments and to argue that place and space matter when it comes to monsters and the geopolitical. Bernice M. Murphy, teaching American literature at Trinity College Dublin, writes of gothic landscapes and representations of the American wilderness as monstrous as well as contemporary explorations between “the individual and their physical environment in American horror and gothic texts” in the essay, “White Settlers and Wendigos: Teaching Monstrosity in American Gothic Narratives” (118). What Kyle William Bishop describes as a “horror-based experiential pedagogy” is elucidated in his essay “Meeting the Monstrous Through Experiential Study-Abroad Pedagogy” (130). One of the bold classroom practices offered in the volume, Bishop’s kinaesthetic approach unfolds the critical potential of the monstrous through “interactive, space-based” visits to actual sites referenced in gothic narratives (129). This section concludes with an essay by Phil Smith, “Using Zombies to teach Theater Students,” which describes an embodied ambulatory theory and practice involving students in “non-aggressive zombie performance” to enhance their improvisational abilities and experience (148).

The final section of the book is entitled, “Disrupting Systems: The Monster Attacks.” Joshua Paddington contributes an essay advocating the monstrous as a means to popularize and invigorate study of “religious history, practice, and culture” for students (161). In “Monsters in the Dark Forest of Japanese Grammar,” Charlotte Eubanks describes her approach to teaching the subtleties of language and culture through literature that relies broadly on conceptions of the monstrous. Brian Sweeney turns his attention to overly-prescriptive secondary-education curriculum steeped in outcomes-based close reading and puts forth an alternative, theme-based monster course in his essay, “High School Monsters: Designing Secondary English Courses.” Co-editor Heather Richardson Hayton concludes the volume with her selection, “The Monster Waiting Within: Unleashing Agon in the Community,” in which she troubles the notion of harmonious “safe space” with the concept of struggle so fundamental to classical Greek culture and rhetoric as she interrogates the unsettling outcomes of her experiential zombie simulations and pedagogy.

While theoretically rich, the essays also describe concrete classroom practices, and most of the contributors have helpfully included syllabi and other appendical material to assist educators interested in incorporating these ideas into their own courses. While some essays are more cutting edge and provocative than others, for teachers who have

found their curriculum stifled by periodicity or genre constraints, this volume may very well provide them with impetus to revamp moribund content or methodology with theme-based and experiential inspiration. Likewise, the book contains excellent suggestions for organizing writing and rhetoric courses. In addition to these benefits, the essays featured here—including a Foreword and Afterword by monster scholars W. Scott Poole and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, respectively—serve collectively as a primer for the interdisciplinary discourse of monster studies and so may be of interest to graduate students and other initiates as well as teachers and pedagogues aspiring to the monstrous with its attendant indeterminacies and myriad possibilities.

Reading this volume is helping me rethink my world literature and mythology courses, which I have found to be quite scary in recent years, when I see my students struggle to commit to the reading agendas that such courses require. Teaching literature to students resistant to reading most definitely scares me as my aging self struggles to keep pace with millennial needs and sensibilities. But *Monsters in the Classroom* has made me think that instead of the heroes, I might try focusing on the monsters to break the logjam of reluctance. Monsters may be scary but also more interesting, after all—especially when we see something of ourselves in them looking back at us.

Monsters, real and imaginary, as this volume points out, both afflict and comfort us. They are at once revolutionary and reactionary in their unstable liminality that challenges and provokes even as it threatens to reify and coalesce. The abject monster, as it turns out, is as much a distillation as disintegration of our deepest humanity, for better or worse, and has much to tell us about ourselves. We would be wise to find ways to listen.

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Waite, Stacey. *Teaching Queer: Radical Possibilities for Writing and Knowledge*. Pittsburgh, PA: U of PA Press, 2017. 208 pp.

Mark McBeth

John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY

In *Teaching Queer: Radical Possibilities for Writing and Knowledge*, Stacey Waite revisits the question that a handful of scholars in composition/rhetoric have addressed: What value and purpose does Queer theory have to the field of writing studies and the pedagogies that we bring to the composition classroom? In the larger context of cultural studies and literary studies, the “doing” of queer theory has been hashed and rehashed by a long list of intellectuals that I need to abbreviate here (see Lauren Berlant; David L. Eng; J. Halberstam; Heather Love; Eve Sedgwick; Michael Warner). These multi-/cross-disciplinary scholars have revisited and revitalized queer theory and queer critical interventions as they pertain to a range of fields and topics. When focusing on the discipline of composition and rhetoric, authors such as Jacqueline Rhodes, Karen Kopelson, and Jonathan Alexander have published frequently on the topic. Their important critical work gets extensive air-play in the bibliographic notations of all queer scholarship in the

composition/rhetoric dialogue.

In Waite's bibliography—with the exception of the book-length projects of Malinowitz and Gonçalves—references to composition/rhetoric scholarship get few scholarly hits. Quantitatively, out of the 140 bibliographical references only 14 entries cite the works specifically written by comp/rhet scholars; ten of those by our esteemed comp/rhet top billers mentioned above. Yet, I have to question that when our burgeoning queer scholars in the field read that queer theory remains “impossible,” “irreconcilable,” and “flattening” to the aims of composition and rhetoric, the possibilities for queer intellectual work get narrowed and maybe in some cases, squelched.¹

The positive news is that Stacey Waite has unflattened the conversation, and in her thoughtful book she reconciles the possibilities of queer theory, queer reading, and queer teaching to fulfill her sub-titles' promise of “Radical Possibilities for Writing and Knowing.” In this lushly written volume, she never ignores “the confines of the institution that disciplines both [the teacher] and [their] students,” but this author's critiques spin these academic laments with a queer optimism that balances with equal measure the restrictions of a hetero/gender normative educational forum with the pedagogical liberation of queer energies and creativity (36). This book critically reflects upon the motives of teachers as they choose their complex pedagogical approaches and negotiate their contested positions within Academia but, as Waite admits, “I suspect all teachers are trying to survive, asking students to try on new ways of thinking so that we might live in a more layered world—one ringing more loudly with possibilities for writing, for knowing, and for becoming” (35).

In these terms, queer theory and its pedagogical initiatives still provide the language-based tactics to defy and redefine normative constructions, to rethink either/or presumptions, and to use writing classroom as venues of “becoming.” Waite addresses and provides interrelated theoretical and practical teaching methods to engage students in this queer way of learning regardless of their orientations, identities, or ideologies: “Students, like everyone, have visions of the world, have visions of themselves inside it. And when they come into contact with texts/bodies/ideas that do not fit that vision, there can be great risk for them; they can lose vision, can lose some version of themselves they hold dear, can experience great loss” (46)

If every teacher envisioned the risky positions of students as Waite has done in this passage, the compassion and mutual respect that might result in the teacher/student relationship might potentially counter some of the mundane aggression that gluts our airwaves. In a current daily world laden with linguistic, administrative, legislative, and physical violence, this book's critical self-reflections and affirmations illustrate how queer theory can continue to work to make our students more sensitive to the power of words and what they can *do*—or more appropriately, *ought to do*—in our everyday existence as we communicate with other human beings inside or outside of the university's walls.

1. The opportunities for fresh perspectives of published queer scholarship become increasingly limited since our journals' editors have a shallow pool of expert reviewers who will read, review, and potentially accept new queer scholarship into our collective readership. Hence, the flattening affect of queer identities and perspectives.

The power of this endeavor in queer pedagogical methods is that it offers grounded means of introducing these divergent approaches into actual classroom praxis. This author's carefully crafted prose explicates applicable teaching processes to do queer reading, queer research, queer textual critique, and queer brainstorming. If contentions between expressivism, social-construction, and all the other isms and "turns" of our field have left you dizzy, the classroom descriptions in this book offer sound advice that expands the possibilities of student/instructor interactions and the power-plays that inevitably surface in classroom dynamics. Waite's hybrid discourse—mixing metaphor, personal narrative, theoretical underpinnings, and thick description of classroom scenarios—leads the reader through an enriched experience that one realizes isn't merely informed by the likes of a normative teaching practicum. This nuanced teacher has experienced conundrums in the classroom, struggled with the internal polemics of teaching decisions, grappled with institutional politics as they relate to teaching and writing, and meticulously inscribed that analytic-plus-intuitive-plus-laboriously-earned knowledge into a compact yet robust volume. As a Queer, I felt unflattened. As a Queer reader, I felt satisfied. As a Queer teacher, I wanted to become multi-dimensional again.

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Eodice, Michele, Anne Ellen Geller, and Neal Lerner. *The Meaningful Writing Project: Learning, Teaching, and Writing in Higher Education*. Boulder, CO: Utah State UP, 2016. 170 pp.

**Mary Pigliacelli
Long Island University**

Need some good news? Michelle Eodice, Anne Ellen Geller, and Neal Lerner have got a healthy dose to share. Many undergraduate students are finding meaning in their academic writing, and that meaning connects deeply both to their work as students and to their lives as socially connected individuals in the world. This is particularly good news for those of us who seek to create meaningful writing experiences for our own students. And it is a welcome response to the more dominant current and historic narratives that describe students in higher education as disengaged and "academically adrift" (Arum and Roska).

As a director of a writing center and an adjunct instructor in a First-Year Writing program, I spend a lot of time thinking about what makes writing meaningful to students—as well as what fails to do so. Like many of us, I hope to transform students' thinking about their literacy and to create for and with them opportunities for writing that they are excited to engage in. While we all have some good ideas about what might make a writing project meaningful for students, creating situations in which students can engage deeply in their writing can sometimes feel like an elusive goal. Why does a particular assignment engage some students but not others? Why do students find some assignments more engaging than others? *The Meaningful Writing Project: Learning, Teaching, and Writing in Higher Education* begins to identify the components of these magical situations so that we can make the stars align more often, and it does so based on very persuasive data.

The authors focused their research on three main questions:

- What are the qualities of meaningful writing experiences as reported by seniors at three different types of institutions?
- What might students' perceptions of their meaningful writing experiences reveal about students' learning?
- What might faculty who offer the opportunities for students to gain meaningful writing experiences conclude about the teaching of writing in and across disciplines? (4)

To answer these questions, the authors surveyed students, interviewed a selection of student respondents, surveyed faculty who had been named by students in their questionnaires, and interviewed selected faculty. To assure readers that their research is replicable, aggregable, and data-driven, the authors provide a detailed account of their methodology, including a helpful chapter of infographics. Importantly, their voices as researchers and writing center/WAC professionals are woven throughout their text, along with those of students and faculty.

While the authors acknowledge that the return rate of 7.4 percent from their student survey is too low to allow for generalizing to a larger population, the data from 707 open-ended survey responses provided a rich trove of information from which they very usefully draw. They used an “emic” approach to analyze their data, allowing student responses to set the framework for their analysis, rather than imposing one based on researchers' assumptions. Developing codes for this “messy” data was a challenge, and the researchers worked collaboratively over a year to develop, standardize, and apply codes, resulting in a strong, consistent analysis. They also enlisted and trained undergraduate researchers to interview both students and faculty. The stories from these survey responses and interviews are at the heart of the book, and the authors invite all of us to share our stories, as well, at meaningfulwritingproject.net.

In Chapters Two through Four, the authors present the key ideas that emerged from their analysis: agency, engagement, and learning for transfer. They situate each term within a current conversation, then explain how the idea was evident in their data, supporting their analyses with case studies and quotations. In Chapter Five, the authors add faculty voices. Chapter Six considers implications of the research and provides suggestions for practical ways readers can apply what has been learned to their own classrooms and writing programs. Integral to all their findings is the idea of the social aspect of writing—that meaningful writing happens because of interactions among people, ideas, and opportunities.

In Chapter Two: “Agency and the Meaningful Writing Project,” the authors define agency as “a result of social interactions among instructors, peers, and subject matter, all taking place within a matrix of identity and subject formation, and cognitive and social development, and infused with power and authority” (34). While an essential aspect of agency is that one's actions are one's own, the authors note that students who experienced a meaningful writing project did so by finding freedom to pursue their own interests within a structure that was crafted and supported by others, including instructors, peers, course content, and topic. For many students, agency was also connected to a projection of their future selves and an ability to do or be in the future. This discussion of agency also included an in-depth look at the students who filled out their entire questionnaire to report that they had had no meaningful writing experiences in their

undergraduate careers and who identified a lack of agency as a main reason for this. It was clear that these students sorely missed the opportunity to have a meaningful experience with writing.

In Chapter Three, the authors focus on the second framework: engagement. They acknowledge that while engagement is something students need to bring to a project, meaningful writing projects also served to invite and support engagement, particularly social engagement. The three primary ways they saw engagement socially enacted was “with instructors and peers, with learners’ future selves, and with nonhuman entities, such as course content and writing processes” (56). As in all chapters, student voices are included, and it is these quotations that are the richest source of information and inspiration in the book. In fact, the authors pause near the end of this chapter to note: “Truthfully, we were excited to read these accounts. Even as (very) veteran writing teachers, we do not always have opportunities to hear how students conceive of their writing projects and the ways writing goes beyond a mere ‘skill’ and becomes instead a means to engage with material and with others” (67). As a reader, I found these student voices similarly inspiring.

The authors seek to add to the conversation about transfer in Chapter Four, moving the discussion from “teaching for transfer” to “learning for transfer.” Key to this difference are the understandings students expressed about how they connected their pasts and futures through their meaningful writing projects: “What we often heard students describing were the ways the meaningful writing project represented a link to the past via a resonant personal connection and a bridge to the future via the applicability or relevance of the projects” (82). In the projects they describe, students were able to tap into experiences and interests and bring them to bear in a new writing situation in ways that they valued, that helped them to feel accomplished, and that allowed them to view both their present and future selves as capable and creative. Based on these results, the authors argue for a more expansive view of transfer, one that includes “the wide range of resources, experiences, passions, and simply, human experience students bring that offer hope for learning for transfer” (107). In summary, they write: “These projects seem to us be holistic—not merely about content or genre or process but also about mind and body, heart and head—and to act as a kind of mirror in which students can see their pasts and futures, enabling them to map those on to their writing projects to make meaning” (107). This chapter is a particularly hopeful moment in a very hopeful work, something we might want to reach for in those dark days of a semester when it seems like no one, including ourselves, is excited by the work at hand.

In Chapter Five, we turn from student perspectives to faculty voices, and again find several in-depth case-studies. The variety of disciplines and writing projects included here makes it clear that meaningful writing can happen in many different contexts and in many different ways. Despite this diversity, however, the authors note that three elements were often evident in the design of meaningful writing projects: encouraging students to reflect on their writing processes, creating challenging and complex assignments, and inviting students to immerse themselves in the processes and projects.

The authors acknowledge that that they cannot offer a prescription for making a writing assignment meaningful to students; no such concrete, one-size-fits-all plan emerged from their research because the “social and rhetorical practices assignments

represent resist codified ‘rules’” (129). They do, however, identify key elements of meaningful writing projects, and they present those, along with some insightful and helpful suggestions in their final chapter. In fact, as I read through the book, I jotted notes for assignment revisions, reflective writing prompts, and other ways I could begin implementing new strategies to make writing more meaningful for my own students.

I will conclude, as the authors do, with the voice of a student who beautifully sums up the potential power of a meaningful writing project in a student’s life: “This project is meaningful to me because it gave me insight into who I am as a person and why I am the way I am. As a college student, you seldom get the time to stop and think about where you have been, where you are, or where you are going. This assignment gave me the opportunity to do so” (140).

This book gives us all the chance to do the same.



Work Cited

Arum, Richard, and Josipa Roksa. *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*. U of Chicago Press, 2011.