

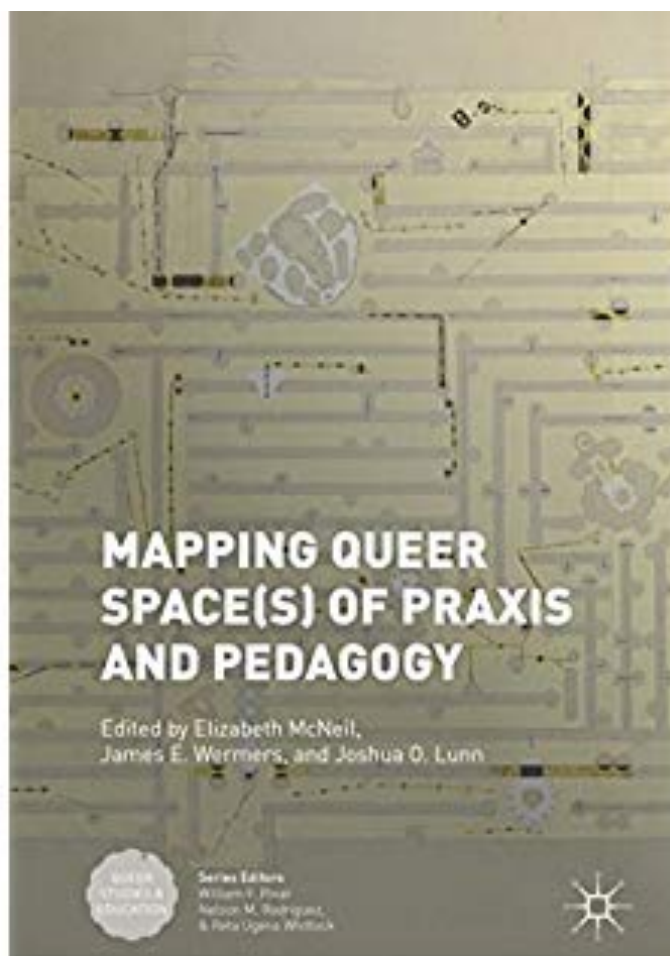
RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Review

Mapping Queer Space(s) of Praxis and Pedagogy

Reviewed by Jake Gogats



MAPPING QUEER SPACE(S) OF PRAXIS AND PEDAGOGY

1. As this is a review of an expressly queer book, I don't think its editors and contributing authors would object to a review that rejects a standard approach. Considering the occasion, I can't help but compare the rules of book reviews to gender norms—unspoken, widely acknowledged, ultimately questionable. If I were to teach a lesson on how to write a traditional book review, I might identify its two pillars: (1) summary and (2) judgment. Funnily enough, if I were to critique the typical book review, I would call it an exercise in summary judgment. However, upon reflection, we might say that reviews also point out the implications of, and questions raised by, the work at hand, however peripherally. In bringing the peripheral to the center of this review and heavily incorporating my own experience(s) of reading *Mapping Queer Space(s)*, I hope to show (rather than tell) my reader the effect this text has had on me and offer a taste of its variety and unorthodoxy. The list-format of this review is inspired by the text's final chapter "Animalqueer/Queeranimal: Scatterings" by Aneil Rallin, easily the most radical of the 18 chapters. I will return to it later.

2. For those who feel they do not understand what queer theory is and what it has to do with pedagogy, this volume's introduction is not a bad place to start. After a pithy overview of what queer theory is and some seminal articles in the field of queer pedagogy, the editors provide a lengthy summary of the book's contents. Usefully, the editors provide a thorough enough summary of each chapter for the reader to gain a pretty good sense of the breadth of what "queer" scholars do. Editors McNeil, Wermers, and Lunn have carefully selected writers whose interests and methodologies vary widely. Queer scholars are bound together not by discipline or really any concise "standard", which *Mapping Queer Space(s)* demonstrates by including chapters on topics ranging from gentrification and housing organizing to acknowledgment sections and academic networks; from prison pedagogy and narrative to cultural critique of wolf hunting. Thus, reading this introduction may help one, whether interested in further study within this volume or elsewhere, gauge their intrigue for the various missions and impulses that exist under the "queer" umbrella.

3. Self-identified queer writers, including those in *Mapping Queer Space(s)*, like to defy summary and categorization, to reject norms, to experiment with many forms of knowledge production. As such, it can be jarring for a newcomer to grab a hold onto any sort of "center" or coherence. This impulse is often anathema to the very mission of queer academics to keep "queer" from being or becoming a concept that can be easily essentialized. Again, our experiences of gender provide a useful analogy. "Queerness," like gender, never was or is one coherent

thing. This does not mean queerness isn't a meaningful concept, merely that it is inherently unstable. Moreover, it appears to be unique in that it seems to bring with it a sort of self-awareness, a recognition of its own volatility. Just as I taught my students in a sociology course to see gender as a normative assortment of associated characteristics and traits, I direct the reader of *Mapping Queer Space(s)* not to read each chapter with a pre-determined sense of what is and is not queer. Instead, attune yourself to each chapter's explicit and implicit understanding of the word. Also attune yourself to your own disposition towards such understandings of queerness. I offer both these pieces of advice because to believe yourself a queer thinker (scholar, teacher, writer, etc.), you do have to have *some* sense of what you want the word to mean, however diffuse and ever-changing. In an effort to introduce my reader to this process of self-identification and discovery (again, the parallels to gender and LGBT experiences should be noted), I offer in the following passages many of my own experiences of what I found "queer" to mean in some of the text's chapters as potential models for your own explorations.

4. One trend in queer studies, and therefore in this book, is the exercise of "finding queerness." This generally includes identifying an object, subject, or experience that is not typically associated with gender or sexuality and arguing that it is, in fact, queer. This exercise often equates queerness to things like Otherness, liminality, marginality, anti-normativity, etc. It is often difficult to see exactly why "queer" is essential to such analysis, and yet I would hesitate to call writers in this tradition disingenuous. Rather, it appears that there is something about the word "queer" that inspires people to conduct such research; a generous reading might simply think of such writers as being upfront about their influences.

5. Chapters such as "Safety in Numbers: On the Queerness of Quantification" and "Queering the First-Year Composition Student (and Teacher): A Democratizing Endeavor" generally fit into this category. The latter, the most relevant chapter to this issue, puts forth a vision of capitalized Queerness to be found in every corner, looming in every crack. Essentially, "Queer" is Other, as the authors write, "I have argued elsewhere that all students I have encountered are Queer: at my urban, commuter, public university, many of my students baffle me with their odd literacy strategies... With all their odd habits, unconventional educational contexts, and quirky strategies, I do not see how they could be Queerer" (58-59). Fittingly, the authors prompt students to find Queerness in themselves. Students respond: "Everybody exhibits some level of 'Queerness.' This... has little to do with sexuality [and more to do with the fact] that college is a space where identities shift..." (65). The authors of this chapter write that they merely wish to "flirt with the idea that all students in the first-year writing class are Queer" (60). I don't mind flirting with this idea either, but I fear a long-term relationship would prove strained rather quickly. I feel towards the act of using the word "queer" to mean the complex, liminal, and Other similarly to how I feel towards

my first “relationship”—I’m glad it happened; I’m glad it ended quickly. If everything is Queer, nothing is queer, and queer is nothing. Using “queer” and “Other” nearly interchangeably seems awkward as systemic divisions and hierarchies persist and harden among queer people. Perhaps, though, I am being overly generous to myself. Perhaps the “finding queerness” method is actually a relationship I am stuck in, something I want to leave but find myself returning to time and time again, as I have done earlier in this review. Upon reflection, this makes sense. There are some lessons I learned in my first relationship I have no intention to forget.

6 ■ Another pattern found in this volume and the field more generally is the act of “queering.” Instead of finding latent queerness in the object of study, queer-as-verb requires an intervention in reality. For example, I could claim that my above indecision over my relationship with the “finding queerness” tradition works to queer my book review by rejecting academia’s obsession with certainty and authority. I could also say it’s just bad writing.

7 ■ The act of queering can take place within a piece of scholarship, such as in the chapter “Animalqueer,” which I mentioned earlier. Both its format, a poetic list of “scatterings,” and its objects of inquiry, non-human animals and queerness, are marginalized in academia. The chapter rebelliously includes lengthy quotes, sharp questions, occasional first person. The piece, if it can be called that, certainly lives up to its title—it is scattered. It is a microcosm of the volume in the sense that it defies summary. What’s more, it eschews transition and central argument. Unable to turn off my “search for argument” function, I put forth this chapter as a model of coherent, decentralized writing, a rejection of the decidedly un-scattered form of writing we teach the young writer to painstakingly practice. Where I teach, the paragraph-writing-acronym-of-choice is TELCon: Topic, Evidence, Link, Conclusion. I can’t remember the acronym from my own education, only how conscious I was of how difficult it is to break out of such rigidity. The idea that explanation (the Link) should always follow evidence, usually a quote, is a convincing one. How are you supposed to explain something your reader hasn’t read? And why would you even want to?

8 ■ Many types of utility, another concept I perhaps should not impose upon such a radical piece, can be found in Rallin’s formatting. Efficiently, Rallin need not grasp desperately at new ways of making similar types of transitions. Concisely, he poses (in)complete thoughts without needing to “flesh them out,” such as those found in list-item #6: “How does the ‘othering’ of nonhuman animals, the constitution of nonhuman animals as animals, limit our imaginaries? And how do our particular co-constitutions of humans and nonhumans matter for who lives and dies in this world, and how?” (323). Honestly, Rallin does not present himself as an authority, but rather a rebel. Coherently, his scatterings are related to each other.

His experiences of learning about suicide among queer youth span many list-items and parallel his thoughts on the phenomenon of beached whales: “... could it be that not only are we are [sic] killing the whales, but that the whales, like the Buddhist monks who immolate themselves, are killing themselves in radical political protest, as witness? Could we read their collective dyings over a span of centuries as the whales fighting back, acting up?” (326). Rallin thus answers his earlier questions concerning the othering of nonhuman animals with *further* questions. Our understandings of the human/nonhuman are tied to our understanding of the political/apolitical. Both divides are a matter of interpretation rather than objective truth.

9 ■ This and the preceding chapter titled “The Bestiary of Friends” were my first serious introduction to the field of animal studies. Now, I always wonder: How do we imagine animals? And how are they, in spite of that?

10a ■ Queering can also take place outside of the written word, as is explored in the chapter “Queering the Campus Gender Landscape Through Visual Arts Praxis.” The chapter reproduces “queer images”, paintings of nude transgender subjects and discusses the authors’ attempts to bring queerness to their Catholic university through biennial exhibits sponsored by the Women and Gender Studies Department. One such attempt stood out to me: “A number of factors would seem to undermine the biennials’ ability to genuinely queer the gender landscape of UDM... the artistic focus of the shows risks creating a form of aesthetic containment of the works and ideas within them. We experienced this type of containment when we attempted to publicize our 2012 biennial on campus using Steven Sherrill’s painting, *What I Did Last Summer*, as the background of our publicity poster. The woman’s exposed breast, while deemed acceptable within the context of an art exhibit, was considered an inappropriate image to display on posting walls in the university at large” (94).

10b ■ Tasked with teaching a unit on gender for a high school sociology course, I naturally turned to feminist perspectives on pornography in an effort to both spark interest and find an opportunity to talk about something so embedded into many experiences of adolescence. Alien visitors attempting to understand humans living in the US by subjecting themselves to our K-12 curricula, a misguided approach if there ever was one, would be oblivious to the fact that a majority of US children will have seen porn before they turn 18. My sanitized, academic, roundabout approach to talking about pornography was an attempt to find a way in, to weaponize the acceptability of feminism and academic writing to make the unacceptable acceptable. It didn’t work—my supervising teacher told me that he did not want parents to complain. I backed down instantly—I didn’t want, god forbid, to appear *passionate* about teaching about porn.

Was this effort “queer”? Did I fail to queer? Am I less queer for it?

11. Part of what can be great about reading works in the field of queer studies, I think, is to “feel seen.” To feel represented, understood, or important. Not to just *agree* with an argument, but to identify with experiences of rejection and anti-normativity. It transforms “my” struggle into “our” struggle; it affirms.

12. That this review is appearing in an issue about radical writing pedagogies merits comment. *Mapping Queer Space(s)*’s variety of writing styles, formats, and goals validates the calls for a more diversified approach to writing instruction we hear from many educators and scholars. Like all such practical, buzzword-deprived suggestions directed towards US education, these calls don’t seem to have reached most teachers and curriculum designers, at least not convincingly. Yet so many of us seem to go on agreeing that good writing instruction is *essential* in our current political climate to foster critical thinking skills and produce publicly engaged citizens who can effectively exercise their civil rights in order to strengthen democracy and invigorate our public sphere with rigorously informed debate and, oh yeah, to prepare students for college. Teaching students to queer their writing and themselves, if such a thing is possible, would likely involve cutting through all the buzzword-ery and instead conducting inquiry into the self and the status quo. Queer writers and this book do not produce simple answers to society’s problems the way civic-engagement discourses do. The latter’s philosophy is steeped in more-and-better-is-better thinking—*more* and *better* critical thinking will save you and ultimately us all. More and better debate, more and better speech—more and better college. It’s quite optimistic. Queer theory might suggest that better is not always better, or that better might just be different. And more? More is often a mistake.

13. All this being said, it would be disingenuous to use this book as evidence that being able to write in nontraditional formats about nontraditional topics is a “useful” skill. Then again, it may even be disingenuous to claim that *critical thinking* at-large is a useful skill for students subject to an economic system bent on offering us the most boring, uncritical jobs imaginable. Few people are profiting off their critical, queer approach to academic writing. I hope to be honest with my students that most of what I teach them in the realm of “social studies” and “history” will probably never make them a cent. I willingly take on the responsibility to convince them that the skills and topics I bring to the classroom have a purpose outside of profiteering.

14. How might re-views be re-imagined? Can reviews be queered, a site for queer rebellion? What is the purpose of my small rebellion, or do we even need to intrude upon book reviews and shake them down for their purpose? Perhaps the act of identifying argument, of finding purpose, is a small act of violence upon a text—one that can certainly be found to have a purpose of its own... and so on...



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