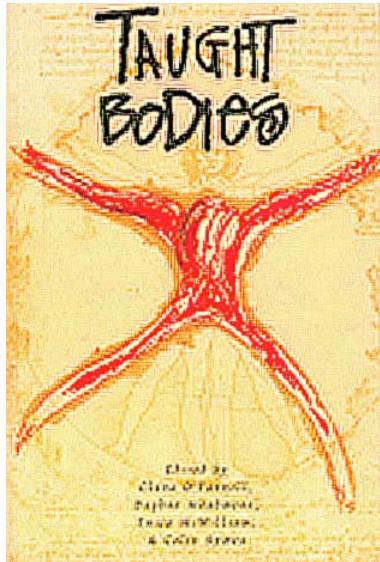


Taught Bodies

By C. O'Farrell, D. Meadmore, E.
McWilliam & C. Symes (Eds.) (2000)
New York: Lang

Teasing Prose: A Book Review



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Taught Bodies proves a quick and tantalizing read about the discursive and material body in a variety pedagogical contexts. Consisting of a collection of papers delivered at a 1997 Australian conference, "Pedagogy and the Body," *Taught Bodies* offers an interdisciplinary romp through the school and university classroom, the art gallery, the theatre, popular crime fiction, the cinema, and of course, the boudoir, exposing and exploring the body present and produced in these contexts. With fourteen chapters and an introduction all in slightly over 200 pages, it is a quick and breezy text intended to arouse our interest—draw our gaze—to the often overlooked and taken-for-granted

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fact that the body and pedagogy, “are inextricably entwined,” as stated in the introduction. On this level it works. After experiencing this text, readers may indeed begin to see bodies *in pedagogy* everywhere.

In my own case, after reading the text I was reminded about the body in teacher education: a space oddly enough not addressed in *Taught Bodies* but important nonetheless, wherein youthful, more often white and female student bodies train to be teacher bodies, and where, over greater time, graduate students bodies are turned in professorial bodies. Also I was suddenly made more aware of the statue of a male and female adult, naked but with fig leaves prominent, holding books aloft, that stands in the courtyard at the faculty of education where I teach. Among a host of other questions, the statues capture for me now the question of why and when teaching and taught bodies are rendered simultaneously visible and invisible; necessarily seen and not seen in relation to pedagogy, to literacy and to exalted texts, held, in this instance, away from and above the body.



The spirit of *Taught Bodies* and its common though not exclusive premise is captured best in Peter Cryle's short and lively chapter entitled "The Kama Sutra as Curriculum." In this chapter Cryle takes the position that, "the only body we can ever talk about, the only body we can think, is shaped and indeed disciplined by the language in which it is known and recognized. (p.18). Cryle goes on to critique Foucault's contention that the modern western world did not have an *ars erotica* (erotic knowledge explicitly taught). Cryle provides evidence of such western knowledge, and insists that, rather than romantic, spontaneous and untrainable, the body and its "pleasure and desire can be helpfully thought of as discursively organized, and ought to be understood as teachable and learnable, indeed regularly taught and learned" (p. 23). Though not explored in *Taught Bodies*, Cryle's theoretical stance implicitly gestures towards debates concerning the relation of the material body (body-as-flesh) to the discursive body (body-as-text) that have rendered feminist and postmodern theory(ies) so complex and interesting (cf. Butler, 1993; Conboy, 1997; Gallop, 1995, 1988; Grosz, 1994).

The teachable and more often teaching body produced in the other, less obviously erotic curricula consumes the rest of the text. In the opening chapter Helen Yeates offers a reading of the sleuthing body, in particular the aging, white male body and its search for knowledge produced in a number of television crimes series. More obviously pedagogical in context, Alison Jones writes an extensive chapter on the surveillance of the body in the teaching of handwriting; and Ray Mission and Wendy Morgan offer an interesting chapter on the bodily responses invoked and disciplined in the teaching of literary response. Caroline Hatcher provides an account of the attempts of corporate culture to train the bodies of managers to be, or appear to be "good listeners" to their employees.

In these chapters it is the physical, that is, material body that is engaged. However in a later chapter Daphne Meadmore, addresses both the textual and physical body, in describing how student and teachers bodies are positioned in space and time by way of the "Scholarship Examination" that organized Australian schooling from 1873-1962. In the chapter "Is there anybody there? Particular bodies in lecturing spaces" Barbara Brook examines how the professor's body, as an invisible but embodied presence, is read by audiences in university lecture halls. She demonstrates how gendered and other differences are both suppressed but then resist suppression in the performance and reading of the lecturer. Focused on representation, Clare O'Farrell offers a fascinating description and analysis of the cinematic image of the intellectual. The image proves far more complex than expected. O'Farrell ends her chapter and the book with the lines: "The chapter is far too short to do anything

more than suggest a few lines of inquiry," (p. 208) which may indeed be a fair description of much of the text.

Moreover, as interesting as the collection is, the question of significance hovers over many of the chapters and perhaps clouds the book as a whole. While we may be convinced that the body is indeed present in pedagogical encounters, certainly more than we ever imagined, or more to the point, than we would dare admit, the question of why this might be significant, why the teaching/learning body appears and disappears, and how we might better understand this, seems to slip away in efforts to simply reveal the body. There is much to be said about where the denial of the taught and teaching body emanates and the implications both in the denial and in the acknowledgement of the intimacies of body and pedagogy. Psychoanalytic theory, largely missing from the text, might have offered more about the nature and implications of such difficult or dangerous knowledge (Britzman, 1996). But psychoanalytic theory is not held in high esteem evidently by Erica McWilliam, one of the editors of the text and the general editor of the series in which the text was published.¹

This is not to suggest that *Taught Bodies* was anti-theoretical or facile. There were chapters that offered substantive discussion. For example, Susie O'Brien's chapter, "the Lecherous professor: An explosive thriller about naked lust perverted justice and obsession beyond control" despite the salacious title, offered a careful and insightful account of the discourse that unpinned the infamous case of Professor Sydney Orr. Orr was dismissed in the 1950s following allegations he was involved a consensual sexual affair with one of his students. O'Brien analyzes the 'lecherous professor' discourse evident in this case, and its rendering of male professor deviance and female student innocence, and suggests that this discourse continues in contemporary sexual harassment policy.

Drawing on work of Jane Gallop and Valerie Walkerdine, Bronwen Levy also speaks of seduction and power in teacher-student relations in her chapter "Pedagogy: incomplete, unrequited." Levy offers a thoughtful examination of two common but highly problematic pedagogical models available for women academics: the mother and the seductress. She longs for, like perhaps many of us, a new model, but in the meantime suggests that "the best outcome seems be at least partially unrequited 'love' on both sides" (p. 89).

Erica McWilliam in her chapter "Stuck in the missionary position? Pedagogy and desire in new times" argues that teachers are required to love students in new and precise ways that "eschew voluptuousness, serendipity and excess in the service of the sort of smooth, seamless pedagogical relations that produce predictable learning outcomes" (p.27). She contends that the teachers and more to the point teachers bodies are dismissed or ignored in this demand, but hints that Eros will perversely reappear in the precision and discipline necessary to implement what is

required. Denise Kirkpartick and Stephen Thorpe offer a theoretically rich examination of the teacher represented in Australian 1997 university teaching awards. In opposition to McWilliam, Kirkpatrick and Thorpe find that good teaching was exemplified by dazzling displays in which teachers' powerful and confident bodies were best seen to produce spectacle for reluctant or resistant student. Student bodies were absented in this discourse: their learning viewed only as reception, teaching only as transmission.

In his chapter, Colin Symes described various displays of the body in a major art exhibit held at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. In particular Symes examined the educational component of the exhibit aimed at children and adolescents and suggested that the lack of controversy generated by the materials may indicate that the naked body, more visible now than at any other time in history, has been largely demystified and "so longer holds the prurient interest that it held even a generation ago" (p. 115). According to Symes, notions of childhood innocence with regard to the body may well be changing. While this may be an accurate assessment, it may also be possible that local context and population have made a difference in response rather than some larger change in the discourse of childhood.

Christopher Beckey's offered a very detailed account of rejection of the gross body, or the wicked the body, that occurs in various approaches to the teaching of acting. In a delightfully disruptive call, Beckey suggests that theatre training should explore and celebrate the "wicked body" and its corporeal difference "in an attempt to increase the bodily potentials, the powers and capacities, of its performers, as well as their understanding of the body as a site for contestations of social meaning." (p. 77).

But for all of this rich and interesting work, *Taught Bodies* is really a bit of a tease intended to encourage further reading and thought, as opposed to more substantive discussion or theoretical debate and so it is perhaps unfair to ask for more than the book was intended to provide. But then even within its own parameters, and while acknowledging that one works with whatever the conference participants provide, there were a number of obvious topics that might have moved and deepened the scholarship further. Although *Taught Bodies* was not intended to be comprehensive, a chapter on the virtual body or the cyborg body, as well the homosexual and transgendered body would made an important contribution considering how these bodies have become so controversial in pedagogical contexts and how much attention these particular topics and issues and the ensuing theory are receiving in the research literature. In addition there was no discussion in this text of the bodies present and absent at the conference itself; nor, about what academic conferences do to bodies, all bodies, including those of women and minorities. There are important political issues in relation to the acceptable and abjected bodies

in academe, including at conferences on the body, which deserve to be addressed.

Moreover there is something a bit odd in all of this academic discourse (my review included) on and about the body. Without attention to the bodies performing 'academic discourse, or more particularly, the 'academic conference', the focus remains exclusively on the studied body—the 'autopsied body' as Helen Yeates named it. In this I am reminded of a story a European cultural studies conference where the windows had to be closed because the scholarly talk of the body, pedagogy and culture could not be heard over the sounds of frolicking young bodies engaged in all the physical and aesthetic pleasures offered by a secluded beach that lay just beyond and below the university classrooms where the conference was being held. It is amusing if a little disconcerting about what this story, true or not, says about our grim little profession, even when it is talking in lively ways about the studied/researched body in pedagogy. What are we to make of this divide between the studied, autopsied body and the bodies that study such bodies inside academe, and alive and beach-frolicking body outside of academe?

Taught Bodies was a delightful, and thought-provoking text. For those beginning to research, it offers an assessable place to begin, and certainly the taught and teaching body is worth exploring further. To end, I offer an old joke, about a teacher/prostitute that Erica McWilliam used in Sharon Todd's (1997) book: *Learning Desire: Perspectives on Pedagogy, Culture and the Unsaid*. McWilliam (1997) writes:

There is an old joke about teaching that tries hard to be off-color. It concerns a brothel in which teachers are the most successful prostitutes. When a potential client listens in at the keyhole to discover the secret of their allure, he hears a very no-nonsense instruction: "I don't care how often we have to do this. You're going to stay here until you get it right!" (p. 217).

I do not believe we will ever 'get it right,' but I do think that there is much to learn in our efforts to reconnect pedagogy to the body, and *Taught Bodies* teases us to, if nothing else, stay with it.

Notes

McWilliam writes "I refuse psychoanalytic pedagogical modes as *the* alternative, given that such model tend to conflate the social relationship of teacher-to-student with that of analyst and analysand. Instead I work toward the reconfiguration of a radical model of pedagogical instruction that invites and anticipates those *uncertainties* and *irregularities* that are necessary to any dramatic

enactment of social transformation and yet remain the Unsaid of radical pedagogical discourse" [emphasis in the original] in Sharon Todd's 1997 text, *Learning Desire*, p. 217.

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