
Reviewed by Bonnie Kathryn Smith, Belmont University

In their introduction to Available Means: An Anthology of Women's Rhetoric(s), Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald note that their decision to title their collection with Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric as the “discovery of the available means of persuasion” reflects their aim of “locating women squarely within rhetoric but also acknowledging that their presence demands that rhetoric be reconceived” (xvii). Ritchie and Ronald fittingly assert that by reclaiming Aristotle’s definition, their ground-breaking anthology can and will illuminate ways women have discovered both to “connect with” and “depart from” traditional methods of persuasion, and they ask their audience to consider the notion of availability within future readings of women’s writing. For me, Aristotle’s concept of availability has always invoked images of cooking: as a long-time experimenter in the kitchen, I rarely set out to prepare a dish equipped with all the so-called “necessary” or “traditional” ingredients I need right in front of me. So, I have learned to depend upon questions like, “What’s fresh?” or “What’s in the pantry?” or “What might fit in my favorite iron skillet?” for answers to the culinary brainteasers I design for myself. As such, my “available means” often result in assemblages that sometimes delight and usually instruct. Though she unfortunately rejects incorporating Aristotle into any of her pedagogical plans, Katharine Haake seems also to be an “available means” devotee. Like Ritchie and Ronald, Haake aims to reconceive a writing education by departing from methods she deems traditional, connecting with a broad audience of student writers and counting on available means.

Haake’s What Our Speech Disrupts: Feminism and Creative Writing Studies often delights with advice, examples, and anecdotes from the author’s broad classroom experiences and the obvious, outright freedom and joy she gets from (and seems to give to) her students. At the same time, the book operates stylistically and argumentatively as a gathering of available means. What Our Speech Disrupts is a sometimes hastily assembled casserole of Haake’s own memoirs, pedagogical positions, sample teaching exercises, and sample student writing. The result is precisely what Haake intends: a gathering of student and teacher voices. Sometimes Haake is the teacher; sometimes, she is the remembering student; sometimes the voices are cacophonous; sometimes her voice tiptoes alongside student writing in the form of a textbox or different font. An example of this stylistic gathering of available means comes in the chapter “You Bricoleur, You” as Haake notes how she learned from Wendy Bishop to have students write self-assessments to their own fiction and reprints several of the students’ reflections. Alex, a student fiction writer assessing and reflecting on his story “Villamisera,” interestingly notes:
Another thing that since I wrote that story I had been reading a lot of Italo Calvino. And I don't know if I'm a goddamn thief or what, but the story I wrote in one night about the swimming hole (even though many of the ideas were old from other unwritten stories) sounded a lot to me like an Italo Calvino story. (137)

Haake’s teacher voice reassures Alex’s anxiety of influence in a textbox-formatted response with “Nope, just conversational. (You sounded like Calvino from the very beginning anyway—before you ever knew his work.)” (137). So, as in this example, What Our Speech Disrupts’ stylistic gathering of available means requires readers to position themselves squarely within an enacted feminist pedagogy. In the above example, scholar-teacher-writer Haake learned assessment strategies from scholar-teacher-writer Bishop and sought to enact theory into practice while responding with available means to the situation at hand—student-writer Alex’s worry that he had stolen from Calvino. Such memorable, instructive stylistic enactments of available means occur throughout the book. Argumentatively, the gathering of available means seems less clear, and Haake gets around this lack of clarity by stating early on that clarity is not one of her aspirations anyway. In “Red Shoes: An Introduction,” Haake claims that, in keeping with a feminist mission of polyvocal heterogeneity, What Our Speech Disrupts should not be regarded as a “seamless argument,” “a single voice,” or “a set of answers”; rather, she wants us to see her book as an attempt to integrate “several strands of English studies, especially critical theory and composition studies, with creative writing, which for too long has been aligned exclusively with literature and art” (9). Quite ambitiously, Haake takes on this goal by “showing” us what she thinks such integration looks like in her own classroom instead of “telling” us why and how to do it. At times, we have what Haake calls “atlases”—syllabi—from courses she has taught, say, “English 652: Creative Writing Studies” or “English 408: Advanced Narrative Writing” (225-234), but as members of the profession she is speaking to, we do not have nearly enough access to the broader institutional implications of her teaching strategies, Haake’s enactment of available means. Though “show, don’t tell” is the shopworn suggestion creative writing workshop participants who aren’t sure what to say about a classmate’s short story often fall back on, falling back on “show, don’t tell” seems ultimately less helpful if an attempted integration of “several strands of English studies” really is Haake’s aim. We can see what the atlases or syllabi look like, and we can see how they might provide fresh roadmaps to the classes we ourselves will teach, but we cannot see clearly enough how Haake intends for us to use them in the broader contexts of our various institutional settings.

Although readers do see through multiple examples how, like an innovative chef, an obviously gifted teacher like Haake pulls from this and that—from theory, fiction, poetry, autobiography, memory, pedagogy, spirituality, disappointment, strategy, and so on—to guide her students and help “cook” their thoughts and talents, any book advocating a new model of writing education is obliged to go further. In particular, a book promising, as Haake’s does, to advocate a new model of writing
education within specific fields of English studies should address hard and specific questions about institutional pressures, curriculum, employment, the undergraduate major, and graduate work. (Can’t a feminist strategist ask and propose scrupulous answers to such political, theoretical, and logistical problems? I have to believe so.) If we are to draw from available means not only in the classroom but in the profession as we think critically about ways strands of English studies can speak to one another—and I am persuaded that we are—then we should have access to more than reprints of well-wrought syllabi, excerpts of student writing accompanied by teacher responses, and autobiographical reminiscences of how graduate work shaped a talented writer and teacher like Haake.

What Our Speech Disrupts is full of tantalizing and provocative ingredients, but I cannot help but rejoin that we have to do something with the ingredients in order to make them into something new. Bricolage certainly jars and stirs the imagination, but is bricolage enough for reform? Haake’s moxy and innovation as a writer, scholar, and teacher is thoroughly evidenced by the way What Our Speech Disrupts places us imaginatively in one of her classrooms; her argument to bring feminism and creative writing to the forefront of a reimagined English studies deserves to be articulated beyond bricolage so that her important ideas can be brought out and deliberated by those of us who are eager to sit down at the table.

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WORKS CITED


Reviewed by Rebecca L. Jackson, Texas State University

Recently, one of my colleagues expressed irritation with our textbook committee’s decision to scrap the handbook we’d used for years in favor of an altogether different text: new publisher, new authors, new approach. It is this last feature—the approach—that my colleague found particularly troubling. “What’s with all the visual stuff?” she asked. “Designing pages, using visual images, creating websites—are we supposed to be teaching students how to write? What happened to just writing essays?”

I suspect my colleague’s complaints are shared by others in our department—literature, creative writing, and rhetoric/composition faculty alike—and for very similar reasons. The new handbook challenges what the editors of Questioning Authority, Linda Adler-Kassner and Susanmarie Harrington, call