

Episode 92: J. Logan Smilges

Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue, a podcast about teachers talking writing. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

In this episode, I talk with J. Logan Smilges about access, anti-ableism, justice and agency, transfeminist rhetorics, queer studies, and disability.

J. Logan Smilges is an Assistant Professor of Language, Culture, and Gender Studies at Texas Woman's University. Led by commitments to transfeminism and disability justice, their scholarship and teaching lie at the nexus of Disability Studies, Trans Studies, Queer Studies, and Rhetorical Studies. Their first book, *Queer Silence: On Disability and Rhetorical Absence*, is in press with the University of Minnesota Press, and their other writing can be found or is forthcoming in *Disability Studies Quarterly*, *College Composition and Communication*, *Rhetoric Review*, and elsewhere. Currently, Smilges serves as the co-chair for the Disability Studies Standing Group at the Conference on College Composition and Communication.

Logan, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: Let's start by talking about access-oriented pedagogy. I know this is a rather large first question, but how do you define access? And how does this definition and framework inform your overall approach to teaching writing?

JLS: Thank you so much. I really appreciate the thoughtful questions and the space to talk through these issues, which I think a lot of people are becoming more interested in and more excited about which in turn excites me. I honestly think that asking to define access is a really important question. 1) Because a lot of folks just don't think about access at all, and 2) I think a lot of folks misunderstand access. Often in an academic setting, access is reduced to accommodation. The idea is we have a student who is unable to do the things that their peers are doing or is unable to do them at the speed that their peers are doing them, and so we need to accommodate by giving extra time, or by having someone to take notes or whatever it is.

But access at least as I understand it, and I am very much informed by the work of disability justice activists who are primarily disabled people of color and queer and trans disabled people who define access from a collective sense that is deeply liberatory. So for me, access is not about realigning disabled people with non-disabled people, but rather is about really re-envisioning the expectations that we have for anyone to do anything at any pace. So in the classroom then, I'm really smitten with a notion of access that puts pressure on the expectations we have for students to learn particular concepts within or by a deadline and to produce certain amounts of work that somehow testify to that knowledge. I'm always looking for ways of reimagining what learning can be in ways that honor the very unique, and particular capacities and needs of all of our students.

SW: I think disability studies and a disability justice work and approach to teaching often focuses on anti-ableism. So what are some anti-ableist practices that help you center access through teaching? What does it look like to do this work as a teacher?

JLS: The valuable thing about anti-ableism as even a word is that it brings to mind other forms of anti-discrimination, anti-racism, anti-sexism. What all of these kind of frameworks have in common is that they approach discrimination not just as something that people consciously do but also as something that often unconsciously just informs the way that we live our lives, because we're benefiting from systems that are designed to benefit us. And so, as it pertains to anti-ableism, I think it's really important that teachers of writing realize that they don't have to be explicitly or intentionally ableist in order to be complicit in an ableist world and in ableist curriculum or kind of education system.

I think that there is an assumption perhaps among a lot of writing instructors that there is such a thing as "good writing" and that there is such a thing as "bad writing." I know that there are folks from lots of different minority or culturally engaged perspectives who critique this division between "good" and "bad" but what I think disability studies and anti-ableism brings that's unique is a critique of the very skill of writing, that kind of translation of thoughts to words on a page as a skill that requires certain capacities and abilities that not everyone shares, and that just because not everyone shares them doesn't necessarily mean that they're not learning or not able to communicate their learning in other ways.

I think it becomes practical, but from a theoretical perspective it falls on writing instructors to reimagine what writing is and how we expect students to communicate how they're feeling or what they think about particular topics. I recognize that a responsibility or such a call such as reimagine what writing is, is a lot to ask especially for those instructors who are working within institutional contexts that have lots of requirements for how their curriculum is meant to be conveyed or offered to students. I think that's doubly so for instructors who are graduate students or contingent and want to make sure that they're doing things the way the institution wants them to or be at risk of losing their jobs.

So in a lot of ways, I think about anti-ableism as both a responsibility that writing instructors have for their students, but also as something that writing instructors can turn back at the institutions that they work for themselves. Because anti-ableism is also something that can benefit writing, that can offer protection in institutional contexts that would allow instructors more freedom to offer the curriculum the way they want to.

SW: Logan, I feel like the words "justice," and "power," and "agency" come to mind as possible themes. Those are probably more definitions that we could unpack. I also know that your teaching and research interests are in gender, queer, and trans rhetorics. Maybe you could share how writing teachers can consider these theories and what they mean for teaching first year writing in particular?

JLS: Absolutely. I think that to answer the first part of your question, the definitional questions about justice and agency, I'm rather taken with queer antisocial perspectives and afro-pessimistic perspective that would say justice doesn't really exist so long as we are occupying the world that we are right now. That it's actually really, really difficult to imagine a world that is "just" when we have no precedent for justice. I think along similar lines, it's very difficult for me to think about agency as anything that can be offered justly or that can be distributed equitably. But rather that both justice and agency are stratified, are contingent and deeply exclusionary in the

sense that in order to offer a sense of justice or agency to some, it requires the dispossession and disavow of most others.

I think in the context of a first-year writing classroom, I believe that one of the greatest gifts of writing is the capacity to imagine other worlds. Worlds that are perhaps residually informed by but nevertheless, starkly depart from the world that we know. I see the first-year writing classroom as really an opportunity to introduce students to that liberatory approach to writing. I spend a lot of time in my own classes talking less about...well I shouldn't say "less about" because it might get me in trouble, but equally about "how" to write as I do "why" we write.

I try to give students as many exigencies as I can for what writing might offer. That way when they leave at the end of the semester they're not only prepared to write for specific purposes that I think are increasingly linked to capitalism, but also see writing as a way out of these demands, as a way out of the many expectations that befall them both as they continue on through school and certainly after school as they enter the workforce. And that's not considering the students who are already in the workforce while they're studying.

SW: Can you talk about the shift from how to write to why we write, and what students learn or take away from that slight change in perspective or understanding of what writing is and what writing does?

JLS: I think that a lot of students come to realize very quickly that they've been doing a lot more writing than they knew in a lot more ways and for a lot longer than they realize. I think also students learn to be much better listeners because they are confronted by forms of meaning making that are different from their own. They're confronted by the differential context in which meaning making occurs that are new to them. I spend a good chunk of time at the beginning of each semester talking about what both empathy and accountability look like in a writing classroom. What it means both to listen superficially to difference and to understand how we are similar and then different from those around us.

But then also what we can do or what we should do with differences as we begin to recognize them, especially given that differences are very rarely horizontal differences but almost always come along with power differentials that make some students' differences more or less valuable than others. At least that's how students are accustomed to viewing them. So yes, that shift from how to write to why we write comes along with just all lot of ethical baggage that I think is really important for students to unpack. It takes the vocabulary and it takes a number of frameworks that shifts students perspective.

SW: You teach a grad level seminar on transfeminist rhetorics. Maybe you could share your aims, intentions, goals, maybe topics and even conversations you hope to cultivate in that classroom space, and possibly even readings, assignments, and materials that you use.

JLS: As I tell my students on the first day that I teach this class, it's kind of a lie because there is no such thing as transfeminist rhetorics in the field of rhetorical studies. As a disciplinary object, it does not exist. There is absolutely work being done in trans rhetoric. There was a fabulous special issue of *Peitho* about a year ago, edited by GPat Patterson and K.J. Rawson that claims

itself to be the first of its kind in rhetorical studies. But as for transfeminist rhetoric it really doesn't exist. So my intention with the class is to first orient students to feminist rhetorics which is established and does exist from a trans perspective.

And then second, I want to offer students what I take to be perhaps the most valuable move that any rhetorical scholar can make: To stop looking at rhetorical studies as a thing that needs to be maintained and rather think about rhetoric as a tool that can do other things elsewhere. Most of the semester is spent taking rhetoric as a methodology or a set of methods and turning them toward all of the ways that trans people, and we focus primarily on how trans women are living, and thriving, and communicating, and surviving, and resisting and doing all of the things that make lives full and worthwhile. So that by the end of the semester, students are not only left with a kind of disciplinary knowledge, kind of state of the field, but also a much greater appreciation for what's being done rhetorically that never gets to be considered rhetorical in the first place.

I would recommend, *Transgender History* by Susan Stryker. It's considered a pretty classic work now in the field of trans studies that offers not necessarily a history of transgender people, but rather kind of a much more focused, and recent history of transgender activism and trans organizing as it occurred under the label transgender, which is really a rather late 19th-20th century invention. That's a great resource. Also I would recommend a more recent book that has become very famous recently by Jules Gill-Peterson that's called *Histories of the Transgender Child*. It is a fantastic piece that moves across history, sociology, lots of archival work, as well as trans studies and trans of color critique. That's really looking at how the figure of the trans child was both imagined in the mid-20th century and continues to inform how a lot of the discourse around both trans adults and medicalization of trans children continues to play out in the public sphere. So those two books I think are really, really great places to start.

*SW: Logan, you have a book coming out next year called *Queer Silence: On Disability and Rhetorical Absence*. I was hoping that maybe you could talk more about this work and your motivations for this work, and what you hope writing teachers and readers gather from it about queer theory, disability studies, and rhetoric.*

*JLS: Of course, I should talk about *Queer Silence*. I would love to talk about my book. I'm really excited about this. I think as most people's first books tend to be, it's a really personal project that emerged really out of a series of experiences I had as a child and young adult that have really shaped the way I moved through the world. The book broadly addresses the role of silence in this terrain of queer politics, and then it more specifically dials in on the relationship between disability in this field of queer studies.*

The way that I make that zooming movement from silence and queer politics to disability and queer studies is that I make the case that there was something of a conceptual collapse between silence and disability that occurred in the mid-20th century as a result of a lot of gay and lesbian activists fears that their performance of silence surrounding their medicalization or the pathologization of homosexuality would contribute to them being read as disabled and thus dismissed and disenfranchised. So there is a lot of evidence of activists and then more broadly community efforts to at once disavow silence as a mode of being in the world for queer people, and by extension disavow disability as a legitimate queer way of being in the world.

I show that these twin or entangled disavows that occurred mid-20th century ultimately led to the emergence of queer as that social and political category that we know it today. A variation of nonnormativity that could be reclaimed and that could be politicized at the expense of this other section or realm of nonnormativity disability that cannot be reclaimed, that cannot be politicized, that remain object in a variety of ways.

What I hope for all of the readers, whether they be teachers, teacher-scholars or lay readers, is both an appreciation for the many ways that people are trying to survive. Sometimes the ways that people try to survive isn't as clean or necessarily as righteous as we want or expected to be. Sometimes survival looks like lying, or complicity, or secrecy, or laziness. Maybe sometimes it is these things. But regardless we all need to survive. We're all trying to get by, to feel better and to look hot while doing it. So I think there's a level of generosity that I'm hoping this book can inspire and call for. And then second, I think that the book also really asks members of the LGBTQIA community as well as scholars within the field of queer studies to really begin thinking about anti-ableism more critically, to think about how they themselves have been complicit in the disenfranchisement of disabled people, not only historically, but even today.

SW: Thanks, Logan. And thank you Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.