An abiding issue in composition studies is that of disciplinary self-identification. What constitutes our primary goals and methods of inquiry? What kind of institutional capital do we possess? How and where should we distribute it? What kind of research is suitable to our academic domain? How can our scholarship nourish our teaching? How can our teaching speak to our scholarly concerns? These are questions woven throughout the chapters of this remarkable book, one whose publication would be significant at any moment but is especially welcome at this juncture, when the pressure to answer such questions is particularly intense. Surveying the contours of our professional problematic, it engages us in a highly reflexive reading of our disciplinary project, encouraging us to formulate answers for ourselves.

In *Writing/Teaching: Essays Toward a Rhetoric of Pedagogy*, Paul Kameen examines some of the prevailing tensions and oppositions in our professional world: research/teaching, personal/scholarly, reading/writing, literature/composition. He calls into question their traditional configuration so as to create new alignments and stimulate new habits of mind. Because he puts his interrogative aims into play as much through formal experimentation as through direct statement, the structure of the book is important to consider. It is divided into two parts. The first, “Race, Gender, and (Teaching a) Class,” is apparently “personal” in approach; the second, “In Dialogue with Plato,” is apparently “scholarly.” One of the surprises of this book, however, is how gracefully it dismantles such longstanding, seemingly rigid taxonomies.

The impetus for the “personal” chapters is Kameen’s experience co-teaching a graduate seminar at the University of Pittsburgh, Race and Gender in Twentieth Century Poetry, with poet and colleague Toi Dellacorte. While laying out their goals and strategies, Dellacorte and Kameen decided that if the course were to be more than “heavily endorsed departmental window dressing,” every participant would need “to bring to the table and put at stake [his or her] unique personal attitudes and histories in relation to matters of race and gender.” Aware that his own knowledge of these issues as a white middle-aged male was more abstract than experiential, aware that “the ideological intensity” concerning issues of race and gender tended to “vaporize them almost beyond the range of
comprehension, let alone concern," he proposed that his major pedagogi­
cal contribution to the course assume the form of written essays that he
would distribute in class each week (his commitment to this venture is
impressive and unwavering) and that, when the situation called for it, he
would read aloud. These essays, which he calls “ideological autobiogra­
pies,” are in his words neither “therapeutic” nor “confessional” but
pedagogical, making possible a certain kind of classroom work and
modeling for others what a particular teacher learned as he “grounded his
political positions in the texture of personal history.” Through his writerly
acts, Kameen found it possible “to transgress the unwritten conventions
of written discourse” as he had constructed it for himself, making visible
a part of his identity “not so much repressed, as precluded.”

These essays constitute only one level, however, of the personal
writing presented in part one of this book. There are two others. All course
participants, including Dellacorte and eighteen MFA students (interest­
ingly, the only two doctoral students enrolled in the course dropped out
almost immediately), were also expected to share their personal reactions,
difficulties, and histories—not in so formal a manner as Kameen, but
nonetheless in weekly “read alouds” or through distributed poems,
memoirs, and commentaries. Kameen presents in his book approximately
twenty percent of the shared written material under the rubric “Other
Voices” (I wish he had done more with these interesting texts; he includes
them but keeps a respectful distance). A third layer of reflection and
interlocution is provided in a series of postscripts that Kameen composed
approximately one year after the course ended. In these personal writings,
he reframes earlier perceptions, explores the implications of course
discussions and themes, and examines assigned literary works in theoreti­
cal terms.

Clearly, Kameen’s understanding of “the personal” is highly com­
plex, representing an amalgam of different kinds of texts written by
different people at different times (including the past and present Kameen).
It is less a genre with distinct parameters than a discourse that fuses
autobiographical, political, and theoretical materials; records the changes
Kameen underwent in his intellectual life and moral development; and
demonstrates how even the most familiar kinds of writing can be trans­
formed when composed from the position of teacher. This rendering of the
personal is also more sophisticated than any found in composition studies
in recent memory (or in literary studies for that matter). Sprightly evading
the dangers that most personal writing falls prey to—a tendency toward
solipsism, imperviousness to critique, and therapeutic self-indulgence—
Kameen makes visible the personal essay's discursive subtexts, theoretical subtensions, and unstated ideological interests.

In part one, Kameen explores the scholarly dimensions of personal writing. In part two, he reverses the process in the form of four essays that he had been working on before he taught the race and gender course, essays that scrutinize Plato's dialogues in light of their "teacherly" potential. Describing himself as both a general and a professional reader (his erudition is obvious and well-grounded), he locates within the dialogues a rarely imagined Plato: a teacher as interested as Kameen is in "certain kinds of problems related to teaching and learning." Kameen uses these dialogues—and his construction of Plato as co-teacher—as an opportunity to pose and work through questions "so basic to the pedagogical enterprise that we simply do not keep them clearly enough, or consistently enough, in our own view, often allowing them to be answered already for us, tacitly, by the disciplinary and institutional systems within which we must function." What drives the pedagogical relationship? What effect does teaching have and on whom? What do we want students to know, to be able to do, to think? How can we make it possible for students to define their own "project"? (The term project has special resonance for Kameen; he defines it as "a kind of rough statement of what you are here in a committed way to do—through your reading and writing—for your own good reasons and why.") What counts as knowledge in the classroom? What is the role of memory and recollection in learning? What is "the good" to which teaching should tend? What is "the true"?

To situate his discussion in concrete terms, Kameen once again refers to a specific pedagogical occasion: a seminar on pedagogy that he regularly teaches at the University of Pittsburgh. The inclusion of this second teaching scene provides him with one way to "personalize" his discussion of Plato, but another and even more powerful approach is his examination of the personal commitments that motivate his own research and by extension the entire scholarly endeavor. As he puts it, "[This is] a fundamental reality of the scholarly enterprise: We participate in an odd symbiotic relationship with the figures from the past upon whom we call to animate our/their arguments. While we help them in some respects to extend their influence into new settings, while their usefulness to us will inevitably be constrained by the ways in which they have been culturally received, they are, ultimately, what we are willing and able to make of them within the framework of the motives and interests we bring to the task. In short, they become part of a project that is, in the final analysis,
quite 'personal.'” Just as the scholarly is implicated in the personal, so is the personal implicated in the scholarly.

In this book, Kameen employs a deconstructive reading practice, which is clear in his attempt not merely to reverse hierarchical distinctions but to expose their conceptual latitude and reciprocity. He openly acknowledges the poststructuralist background of his project, and he even believes that such an orientation is inevitable. In recent years, he claims, poststructuralism has achieved within the academy the status of “that which goes without saying,” making itself felt even in cultural studies (which he considers a doxa already in its death throes). Yet, while he uses deconstruction, he is clearly ambivalent about it, claiming to have lost his faith when it lost its oppositional force. Nevertheless, it’s difficult not to sense within this book a spirit of reclamation, although subdued, a desire to reestablish for deconstruction the political agenda that it lost through domestication and the substitution of limp clichés for direct engagement with difficult primary works.

In “disturbing” various binary oppositions, Kameen also examines how one reaffirms the other, thereby strengthening even further the edifice of professional common sense. For example, what I’ve identified as one of the book’s principal binaries—personal/scholarly—is more accurately considered to be an emanation of a larger and more troubling opposition: teaching/research. For Kameen, this is the heart of the matter, the major target, the worm in the apple. To destabilize this binary, he asks, “On the basis of what terms is this polarity being maintained and enforced?” Having established one of those terms to be “knowledge,” he goes on to explain how the university has positioned research as temporally and conceptually prior to teaching. This move effectively accords to teaching a secondary and derivative role: the classroom thus is viewed as the arena where already generated knowledge is dispensed. The privileging of research over teaching has been enforced, Kameen explains, through “an extraordinarily (for us) naive notion of textuality,” one that “seems to presume that research is textual and teaching is not.” In challenging these claims, Kameen argues for the textuality of the classroom and its status as a site “eligible for, even demanding of, our most careful, sophisticated, complex, critical scrutiny.” He enjoins us to find “discursive systems for sharing our ‘work’ on teaching.” He predicts that “such a shift in our angle of vision would open up a new arena for critical scrutiny and potential publication, as well as foster a more self-conscious reference to classroom-specific issues in our other modes of research.” Through Kameen’s sharp and impassioned gaze, the classroom is trans-
formed into an arena for the production of what he calls “consequential” knowledge, knowledge that “can and should have standing in the profession.”

To return to the issue that initiated this discussion, disciplinary self-identification, let me say that the textualizing of teaching, as Kameen defines it, is an endeavor that composition, perhaps more than any other field, is in an excellent position both to sponsor and to undertake. Such a project would correct the impression that it lacks content. It would provide writing teachers with the inspiration to formulate new research methodologies instead of importing those found in other disciplines. It would lead to a more sophisticated and elevated examination of the big teaching/research questions: what do we want students to know, to do, to become? It would relieve composition of its depleting and time-consuming struggle with literature, a struggle that has wasted too many intellectual and emotional resources. While I should mention that although Kameen doesn’t refer to this struggle directly (he commendably rises above the fray; nor does he apologize for his literary interests), it certainly has “presence,” even if only through its “absence,” in the margins of his text.

Kameen identifies himself as a compositionist, but he is also a poet and literary critic. His career, like that of others (including myself), began with a PhD in literature. He is able to swerve around the composition/literature (literature/composition) danger zone in part by replacing territorial concerns (what is what, what belongs where, who owns what) with considerations of textuality, interpretive practice, and the interconnectedness of reading and writing. Finally, it all adds up to this: by putting teaching first, by shouldering the project of a theorized pedagogy (which, if we choose to adopt this proposal, will mean once again shaking hands with theory), composition studies can exploit its institutional location, its “between-ness,” and harvest the benefits and pleasures of a common project.

If we take seriously the project of Writing/Teaching: Essays Toward a Rhetoric of Pedagogy—and I strongly recommend that we do—we will raise the level and tone of our disciplinary self-descriptions. We will establish for composition studies a powerful presence within the academy as the discipline that values teaching most and that investigates and models what theorized work in teaching looks like, what it can achieve. As a deeply moving and highly original consideration of the personal, disciplinary, and institutional complexities surrounding pedagogical representation, Paul Kameen’s book establishes a powerful example.