

for communication in her book *Changing the Subject: A Theory of Rhetorical Empathy*. Blankenship states that rhetorical empathy is a mode of communication with four intentions:

- > Yielding to an Other by sharing and listening to personal stories
- > Considering motives behind speech acts and actions
- > Engaging in reflection and self-critique
- > Addressing difference, power, and embodiment (20)

Blankenship analyzes examples of rhetorical empathy through historic and contemporary approaches advocating for improvements in the working conditions of domestic employees, online communication between evangelical Christians and a gay rights advocate, and composition pedagogies. The book is steeped in rhetorical traditions that move us beyond the notion of the Aristotelian framework of persuasion and into more thoughtful methods of discourse, drawing on feminist traditions of communicating across difference as well as leveraging concepts from disciplines such as psychology and sociology. The questions driving the book are these:

How can a peace-based, supremely feminist, antiracist practice such as empathy have any impact on our culture? From an educator's perspective, how do we teach writing and ethical rhetorical engagement in the midst of tremendous polarization?" (15)

Thick with insights and application, this book presents a mode of communication with application in civic, academic, professional, and personal life.

Blankenship advances the concept

Changing the Subject: A Theory of Rhetorical Empathy

by Lisa Blankenship. Utah State UP, 2019. 170 pp.

Lisa Blankenship explores a framework

of rhetorical empathy as an ethical approach to rhetorical engagement, noting that rhetorical empathy is “both a topos and a trope, a choice and habit of mind that invents and invites discourse informed by deep listening and its resulting emotion, characterized by narratives based on personal experience. Rhetorical empathy is both a hermeneutic and a heuristic, a way of thinking (and feeling) constituted by language and a way of using language” (5). The practice of rhetorical empathy is one that shifts from the rhetorical goal of *changing* an Other to the goal of *understanding* an Other, thus “changing the subject.” The subject in rhetorical empathy is the Other, and changing the focus of discourse reaches diverse audiences as writers imagine an Other’s motives, views, stories, and circumstances while also situating them within larger systems of discourse and power. Rhetorical empathy creates a pathway through difficult discourse by asking writers and speakers for vulnerability first: understanding instead of advancing.

In chapter 1, Blankenship explores the concept of empathy through a variety of rhetorical traditions, “tracing where and how a concept has circulated and to what consequences” (28). Exploring how classical Greek rhetoric continues to inform our contemporary communication and the divides that result, Blankenship contrasts that approach with Classical Chinese and Arab-Islamic traditions grounded in peacemaking, multiple perspectives, and prioritizing relationships over persuading Others to accept some truth. Traditional Western approaches in rhetoric that start with arguments and definitions are inher-

ently hierarchical and power focused; rhetorical empathy shifts the vantage point to a “power-with” framework, reminiscent of Mary Parker Follett’s “Communities of Power.” In Western approaches, the rhetor takes a position of power over the audience, attempting to change them; rhetorical empathy calls for an openness to rhetors’ *being changed* by first seeking understanding and “feeling *with* the experiences of an Other rather than feeling *for* or displacing an Other” (6).

Chapters 2 and 3 set rhetorical empathy in motion through an analysis of rhetoric around Jane Addams’s activism during the Gilded Age in Chicago, Joyce Fernandes’s contemporary activism around domestic worker conditions in Brazil, and gay rights activist Justin Lee’s online interactions with religious conservatives. Both chapters illuminate how rhetorical empathy resulted in effective change in perspective that leveraged personal experience, positionality, and shared notions in the spirit of vulnerability and understanding as a means of building connection across difference. Such a change in perspective grants opportunities for change: Blankenship notes that Addams’ public rhetoric around advocating for reform was changed by her attempt to create mutual understanding and connections between diverse groups: “In this process she realized that the greatest good came from gaining the perspective of the Other and that within that learning process, change occurs, both in persuading the Other to accept a new perspective and within the rhetor in listening to the perspective of the Other” (68). In contemporary times, Fernandes’s use of social media to share the stories

of domestic workers in Brazil focuses on the personal as placed within the systemic, including the larger, racist culture in which both domestic employees and their employers live, changing the subject of the discourse from a simple “us/them” narrative to a more inclusive, emotional argument that “offers an affective appeal, consciously or not, to other women who employ domestic workers,” arguably the audience with the most power to create change. Choosing to focus on the systemic instead of framing employers as simply bad people demonstrates *understanding* and the idea of *power with*, as all parties within the system of domestic labor live under the pressures of the same larger discourse.

In communicating with evangelical Christians as a gay man inviting discourse on a post titled “Ask a Gay Christian” hosted on Rachel Held Evans’s website, Justin Lee engages the audience from the position of a “former, well-meaning, antigay Christian” and extends first his empathy and understanding. He assumes the best of his audience, treating them as “real people with stories and motivations of their own rather than responding with patronization and anger or relying on logical arguments to refute stereotypes and ignorance” (101). His approach demonstrates how to create connection and understanding between audiences with different views by opening up space for understanding, nuance, and appreciation for individuals as part of a spectrum who are subject to larger discourses. Lee’s example highlights another important aspect of rhetorical empathy: it is a process “based on reflection and mutual exchange rather than

a monologue intended to persuade a monolithic, stereotyped audience” (99).

Chapter 4 is of considerable use to composition instructors teaching in our current era. Our traditional approaches to teaching college writing leave little space for personal ways of knowing, vulnerability, and emotion, but arguably these are the very forces that influence perspective most. Blankenship traces the development of current approaches in the composition classroom, noting that the rhetoric-as-argument approach privileges the attempt to change an Other, not understand an Other, resulting in writing that focuses on an argument and its “logos-based evidence void of the personal in the form of narrative and experience. The personal in the form of stories and emotion is devalued at best and actively denigrated at worst” (107). One alternative is an approach that combines the personal with the public, as illustrated in Blankenship’s course assignment that combines the literacy narrative with research project intended to help writers explore their own educational backgrounds as a starting point for advancing an argument for some change to education or access to education. Importantly, Blankenship notes the role of rhetorical empathy in helping faculty see students as whole people “with stories and motivations behind their responses in class” (115). Such a focus informs decision-making across all domains of teaching, from course policies to reading selections to assignment design and delivery. Blankenship shares that “I try to remember what it was like for me the first time I opened a new software application and felt overwhelmed at the possibilities and frustrated because I didn’t even know

how to begin. It's easy for us to forget what it is like to be in the position of our students and important to try to remember, even if our experiences will never be exactly the same as theirs" (116).

Rhetorical empathy has implications beyond the world of rhetoric and composition and can serve as an effective method of communicating across difference in any setting. Applications in the classroom, personal life, and civic discourse are clear. Through a willingness to enter a vulnerable space, to truly

listen for understanding and not for the sake of identifying weaknesses in opposing arguments, and to commit to "being with" instead of "power over," writers and speakers in any setting can engage empathy and understanding to find pathways through difficult discourse. Rhetorical empathy provides an opportunity to "become vulnerable enough to consider our own motives, our blind spots, and our prejudice" (11) as a means to engage across difference.

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