Review of *Changing the Subject: A Theory of Rhetorical Empathy*

By Lisa Blankenship, 2019. Utah State University Press. [ISBN: 978-1-60732-909-1 / 978-1-60732-910-7. 170 pages.]

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A great deal of recent feminist rhetorical theory and pedagogical praxis is informed by the power of storytelling and the use of emotions as a form of persuasion. Similarly, Lisa Blankenship (2019) asks how we can understand "pathos—appeals to the personal in the form of stories and the (always political) emotions that can ensue—[as] one of the most powerful forms of persuasion and change" (p. 5) in her book *Changing the Subject: A Theory of Rhetorical Empathy. Changing the Subject* is interested in disrupting traditional understandings of Aristotelian rhetorical methods to assert that pathos operates as the most effective mode of persuasion and creating change—a position that has been perhaps best illustrated in the rise of misinformation and conspiracy thinking that appeals to the reader's emotions and knee-jerk reactions. To do this, Blankenship examines various case studies to build her theorization of rhetorical empathy as an embodied praxis. Blankenship situates her text within a divided political movement characterized by "tremendous polarization between right and left, black and white, rural and urban, us and them" (p. 4) to argue that rhetorical empathy and appeals to pathos offer a path toward understanding and listening across differences. She uses her own experiences coming out as a lesbian in a religious home to cement these claims about empathy, storytelling, and listening.

While she does not directly discuss WAC/WID theories, Blankenship's book discusses how to engage in rhetorical empathy within everyday contexts, which suggests the theory has a larger application and allows for a consideration of how rhetorical empathy informs pedagogical praxis. While the assignment she offers in the book was created with first-year writing in mind, the rationale behind the pedagogical practices Blankenship discusses applies across the disciplines by asking students to engage audience, genre, and personal experience to encourage connections across larger social, political, and historical issues. Additionally, the stress Blankenship places on building rhetorical and metacognitive awareness demonstrates how the pedagogical practices she offers can be useful when considering WAC/WID. Her pedagogical emphasis on reflection and writing as a way of knowing encourages students to consider how they have come to understand the knowledge they learn and their experiences while learning. Specifically, Blankenship asks students for a literacy narrative that considers the role of education in their life and how their identity has impacted their learning experiences and process. Then, Blankenship asks students to compose a reflective paper that considers how they bridged academic writing and personal experience in an essay about a social issue based on their literary narrative. This self-reflexive praxis pushes students to consider the process and experience behind how they come to know something and what role their experience

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plays in that knowing, again aligning with writing to learn theories interested in engaging students in reflective writing about the learning process.

Blankenship is pursuing larger social justice goals in her text, again suggesting the larger applicability of her theory. Specifically, she articulates her research agenda through questions like "how can a peace-based, supremely feminist, antiracist practice such as empathy have any impact in our culture?" and "from an educator's perspective, how do we teach writing and ethical rhetorical engagement in the midst of tremendous polarization?" (p. 15). With questions like these, Blankenship widens her audience from those interested in writing studies and rhetoric to those interested in pedagogy and feminist theories more broadly. This move is important because it speaks to the current political moment and the necessity of rhetorical practices like deep listening, storytelling, and interrogating stakeholders and ideological beliefs in countering growing rage and resentment that prevent speaking across differences.

In viewing rhetorical empathy as a practice of deep listening that is attentive to personal experience, Blankenship solidifies rhetorical empathy as a "hermeneutic and a heuristic, a way of thinking (and feeling) constituted by language and a way of using language" (p. 5). Most importantly, though, Blankenship characterizes rhetorical empathy as an embodied experience that requires an "immersion in an Other's experience through verbal and visual artistic expression" to reorient the subject in relation to the Other (p. 5). She contrasts the embodiment associated with empathy against pity and sympathy, terms that Blankenship argues are associated with "patronization, colonization, and a somewhat removed experience of an Other's plight" (p. 5). Instead, rhetorical empathy is an act of "feeling *with"* as opposed to "feeling *for"* (emphasis in original p. 6). This cultivation of active empathy that Blankenship outlines functions as an important pedagogical move and learning goal regardless of discipline and is one that WAC/WID theories should carefully consider. Especially in writing to learn theories that focus on process, actively engaging students in considering where identification with others factors into their learning process is important for pursuing ethical methods and methodologies.

While Blankenship draws heavily on Krista Ratcliffe's conception of deep listening, she also explores subjects like psychology, cultural studies, literary theory, philosophy, cognitive science, and writing studies in her exploration of empathy as a rhetoric and praxis. Blankenship enters conversations about deep listening (Ratcliffe, 2005; Glenn, 2018; Lunsford, 1995), privilege and racism (Royster, 1996; Flower, 2003), pedagogy (Lindquist, 2004; Micciche, 2007), storytelling (Adler-Kassner, 2008; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Royster & Kirsch, 2012) and affect (Ahmed, 2013; Hoshchild, 2012) to better understand how we can analyze empathy and teach students to engage in an approach that is deeply ingrained "through habit and attempting to approach a rhetorical situation and an Other empathetically" (p. 9). Blankenship associates four characteristics with rhetorical empathy: "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" (p. 20). Importantly, engaging in reflection and self-critique builds metacognitive awareness—an important element of writing to learn theories.

Chapter one, "A Brief History of Empathy," is the longest in Blankenship's text. In the chapter, she weaves her way through theoretical arguments to situate rhetorical empathy apart from an Aristotelian model of rhetoric focused on argument and persuasion of others. While she deftly moves from theory to theory, the sheer multitude of theories and histories that Blankenship covers can be intimidating; thankfully, in true feminist fashion, she includes a theoretical map at the beginning of the chapter that traces each of the different strains of thought she follows. Blankenship pushes readers to move past "second-problematic thinking" defined by Enlightenment-era rationale to counter the Cartesian mind-body split and foster an embodied practice of rhetorical empathy. To do this, she draws on Classical Chinese and Arab-Islamic rhetorical traditions that focus on relationality

over persuasion; she eventually chooses to advocate for Rogerian rhetoric. Blankenship ends the chapter by articulating rhetorical empathy as a feminist rhetorical practice through her analysis of feminist rhetorical theories "that connect the personal and the political and that keep the body and intersectional power relations at the center of all critique" (p. 30). Blankenship's awareness and emphasis of the personal, political connection speaks to WAC/WID theories on the importance of centering the personal in the classroom through writing to learn theories.

Chapter two, "Threads of Feminist Rhetorical Practices: Storytelling and Empathy from Gilded Age Chicago to Facebook," focuses on two women activists to discuss social media, circulation, rhetorical empathy, and storytelling. The first woman that Blankenship focuses on is Jane Addams, a Progressive-era women's rights activist whose activism notably included working-class women. Blankenship is careful to outline how Addams comes to function as an example of rhetorical empathy to elucidate how rhetorical empathy operates as a praxis that becomes an "embodied identity" (p. 67). Addams' embodied empathetic rhetorical praxis oriented the way she engaged with working-class people; it formed her epistemological framework and belief system. Blankenship claims that Addams' empathetic rhetorical praxis in speeches stemmed from her experiences in working-class neighborhoods, elucidating Addams' belief that an empathetic rhetorical praxis must include personal narrative because "true social change [can] only be accomplished [if] people are moved in their emotions on a personal level to see the Other as equal within a democracy" (p. 66).

Joyce Fernandes, the second women's rights activist that Blankenship analyzes, also appeals to her audience using personal experience. Fernandes hosts a Facebook page where domestic workers contribute stories about their working conditions in response to Fernandes sharing her experiences as a domestic worker. Blankenship argues that "the presence of a discursive community writing their emotions and reactions to the stories and posts on 'Eu, Empregada Doméstica' creates a participatory, communal aspect that facilitates empathetic responses" (p. 81). Fernandes functions in the text to call attention to the liberatory function of social media and storytelling when engaging in rhetorical empathy and to draw larger, global connections about how the personal connects to the political. In this way, Fernandes can also be offered as a way of thinking about amplification and social media rhetorics in the classroom. Blankenship hopes to articulate how rhetorical empathy functions as an embodied rhetorical feminist praxis through these examples.

Moving from domestic work and working-class rhetorics to analyzing gay-rights activism, Blankenship's chapter three, "Rhetorical Empathy in the Gay-Rights/Religious Divide," analyzes a series of blog posts written by gay-rights activist Justin Lee entitled "Ask a Gay Christian." On the site, Lee responds to common, frequently asked questions about sexuality and religion. Blankenship focuses on how Lee employs rhetorical empathy to facilitate difficult conversations across differences with people who might otherwise not engage in these kinds of conversations about sexuality because of their religious beliefs. This chapter positions the power of identification and personal experience to articulate the larger necessity of storytelling and empathy as praxis. Blankenship argues that Lee's "rhetorical strategies suggest that attempting to understand the motives of an Other provides a degree of rhetorical agency and perspective" that allows Lee's audience to identify with the experiences that he illustrates (p. 94). In this way, for Lee's audience and for Blankenship, practicing rhetorical empathy pries open a space for the audience to identify with what they perceive to be as "Other," in this case, evangelical Christians and Justin Lee, a gay Christian.

Blankenship's last chapter before the epilogue, "Beyond 'Common Ground': Rhetorical Empathy in Composition Pedagogies," attends to composition and the first-year writing classroom. Building on her earlier assertions about storytelling and fostering rhetorical empathy, Blankenship argues for the importance of storytelling and personal experience in student writing. She situates the importance of this chapter in the following articulation: "the tropes and speech acts that result from

pedagogies based on rhetorical empathy include stories that resist stereotypes, and narratives that are based on the personal as a way of knowing...rhetorical empathy invokes change as (and because) it disarms" (p. 109). Blankenship argues that rhetorical empathy as praxis is a way of seeing and understanding. She provides an assignment that demonstrates how instructors can encourage students to draw connections between the topics they engage in their assignment and their personal experiences. Blankenship asks students to consider their beliefs and opinions around education and literacy before using their personal experience to make a larger argument about the two. Her assignment offers concrete, material ways to engage personal experience in the classroom by focusing on helping students build an ecological view of their audience and what their audience would find credible. Through this ecological view, students maintain a better understanding of the ideological beliefs and perspectives their audience may hold to more effectively persuade or assert their claim. Moreover, students are given the opportunity to better understand the content they learn during class when they consider how it applies to their personal experiences.

While there might be some resistance in various disciplines to the idea of drawing on personal experience in the classroom space, the importance of engaging and fostering an understanding of audience and narrative when engaging in research and with research participants should be taught to students as important research and rhetorical principles. Especially given the saturation of pseudo-science and disinformation, it is now more important than ever that researchers consider how they are engaging with their audience and conveying research ethically. The ecological view that Blankenship maintains in her text speaks directly to writing to learn theories that emphasize writing reflection and rhetorical awareness to help students understand their relationship to the information they are learning in the classroom. Writing to learn theories and pedagogical practices provide and create space for students to engage with narrative and rhetorical empathy through personal free writes, reflective writing, and low stake assignments that grant students the opportunity to explore their rhetorical choices and examine their understanding of the material and information in connection with their own beliefs and experiences. Moreover, writing to learn emphasizes that writing is highly situational and localized, a view that aligns with Blankenship's ideas on storytelling and identification as ways to foster rhetorical empathy. Instructors across the disciplines can utilize writing to learn theories and rhetorical empathy to guide students to utilize personal experience and narrative to better understand their connection to the information and material they are learning, creating space for students to identify and engage with information in new and productive ways. In this way, rhetorical empathy is effective in helping instructors to think about how they can impart ethical research and rhetorical practices to students while guiding students to consider direct application of the course content in their lives.

In the epilogue, Blankenship argues that rhetorical empathy should "leav[e] the door open for future engagement and gradual shifts rather than immediate change" (p. 123). She also points to an understanding of the limitations of rhetorical empathy, arguing that "rhetorical empathy isn't always the best choice. It's one strategy among many other forms of rhetorical engagement. In certain situations, anger or rhetorical refusal are better responses" (p. 125). Blankenship maintains that empathy can only go so far in protesting injustice and oppression. Instead, she posits rhetorical empathy as a way of seeing and understanding, a way of engaging with others that facilitates and fosters deep listening and, in turn, change. However, she notes that change can be slow; in this way, rhetorical empathy is framed as a form of futuristic world-making.

While I enjoyed reading Blankenship's theorization of rhetorical empathy, there were a few moments where I questioned her choice of specific examples, as well as the lack of recognition for how listening and performances of empathy fall disproportionately on people of color; Blankenship could have done more work to diversify her sites of analysis. For instance, while she analyzes Joyce Fernandes and argues that the field needs to move beyond Western rhetorics, Blankenship upholds Fernandes

as a representation of a "significant shift within intersectional, transnational women's rhetorical practices" (p. 81). This shift signifies the move from women in privileged positions speaking for migrant women and women of color to women of color and migrant women speaking for themselves. This is an articulation that does not recognize the vast history of women of color activism, like Black Settlement Houses that came into existence alongside Addams' Hull House. Moreover, Blankenship falls short in further interrogating Jane Addams' positionality, politics, and feminism within the Settlement House movement. While Addams advocated for working-class people, she still spoke for working-class people rather than with or alongside working-class people, a point Blankenship neglects to contend with. While Blankenship's rhetorical empathy offers a lot in terms of speaking across differences, it fails to deeply interrogate the examples it utilizes to shape a rhetorical empathy praxis.

All in all, Blankenship's text is relevant across a range of disciplines and pedagogical theories. Rhetorical empathy offers a way to help students understand the ideological beliefs that impact and shape belief systems to better contextualize the current political divide. Moreover, through stressing the importance of personal experience and storytelling, Blankenship draws from feminist theories and rhetorical practices to facilitate change.

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