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Rhetoric, Ethos, and Unease: Re-negotiation of the "Normal" in the Classroom and on the Quad

Introduction

IN THE LAST 15 YEARS, DISABILITY HAS GAINED A MORE VISIBLE foothold within the academy and in public spaces. According to the Center on Human Policy, U.S. colleges and universities currently offer nineteen disability studies minors, one major, and fifteen advanced programs in disability studies. In addition to an increase in academic programming, more students with disabilities are attending college. In 2007, 15.5 percent of people ages 18 to 34 living with disabilities, or 720,879 people, were enrolled in colleges in the U.S. In contrast, 25.1 percent of people without disabilities, or 15,849,237 people, were enrolled (Annual). The number of undergraduates who identified as having a disability increased from 7.4 percent in 2000 to 11.3 percent in 2004 (National).

Despite certain gains in the academic province, a fierce debate still ensues over who should be allowed access to college, and, once in college what ways of being are acceptable. Anxieties about the challenges that students with disabilities might pose to the academy's traditional instructional methods have at times led to bizarre outcomes. One particularly salient example is the mythical narrative of "Somnolent Samantha," a story that achieved wide circulation after its first telling by Jon Westling, Provost and eventually President of Boston University, in 1995 (Beilke). Westling's account featured a student named Samantha, who disclosed after class that she had a learning disability in the area of auditory processing. In Westling's story, Samantha went on to demand copies of notes from lectures, a seat at the front of the class, extra time on assignments, and a separate room to take exams. Also, because she fell asleep without warning in class, she would need to be filled in on what was missed ("Fictitious"). Later, Westling admitted that the story was fictitious but maintained that "Somnolent Samantha" exemplified the unreasonable expectations universities were being held to and the challenges administrators faced in responding to their mandate to accommodate disability. Morton Silverman makes Westling's point more directly: "College is not for everyone," he alleges.

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The tension between the increased visibility of disability in public life and the persistent claim that "college is not for everyone" illustrates the historically complicated relationship between disability and public life. In *Staring: How We Look,* Rosemarie Garland-Thomson gives us an intimate look at the lived experiences of disabled bodies in public. Garland-Thomson points out that, although the "extraordinary body" is being seen in public in ways it has not been seen before (20), this new visibility does not go unpunished. She notes that, even today,

> Disability is a visual cue for lower expectations and discomfort for those who identify as nondisabled. Discomfort comes in part from the social illegibility of the disabled body. The social rituals in which we accord one another recognition depend on an accurate reading of bodily and gestural cues. Unpredictable or indecipherable cues create anxiety. It is not disability that itself creates unease, but rather people's inability to read such cues disrupts the expected routine nature of social relations. (38)

While Garland-Thomson discusses how "stareable sights" demand that we use narrative to reconcile the initial disruption back into some semblance of order, these uncomfortable interactions have posed particular challenges on college campuses and in college classrooms, where discomfort has often blurred the lines among disability, difference, and danger. The difficulty of distinguishing between disability and danger, between difference and incompetence, has deep roots in rhetorical history that are worthy of further examination.

In this article, we wish to explore these roots in order to consider the vexed relationship that exists between rhetorical ethos and embodiment. We wish to look closely at the "common unease" (Garland-Thomson) or "aesthetic nervousness" (Quayson) that disability and embodied variation evoke in classrooms and more broadly on college campuses. We argue that divergent embodiments can constitute a site for rhetorical invention that reimagines ethos and authority as circulating through diverse types of bodies and mental states. Such inventive strategies can be devised through exploring possible intersections between the fields of rhetoric and disability studies and developing pedagogical strategies that help students confront their "aesthetic nervousness" in order to imagine a different way of encountering disability.

This endeavor calls for a change in the status quo. Garland-Thomson notes that rethinking the status quo requires that we evaluate the expectations we have of certain kinds of bodies occupying certain kinds of spaces (6). We are also interested in the generative aspects of embodied difference and the productive potential of discomfort that leads us to recognize each other in new ways and urges us to reformulate ways of seeing and knowing (Garland-Thomson 15). People with disabilities face challenges due to a long history that con-

nects particular types of embodiment to particular types of character; however, a consideration of the social and rhetorical construction of ethos across centuries of history can also promote a new vision of how embodied ethos can be recast and reimagined in the face of difference.

Classical Theories of Ethos

The concept of ethos has had a vexed relationship with the rhetor's physical presence from early stages of western rhetoric's history. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato describes the pursuit of true rhetoric as a process that is essentially disembodied, as individuals first "must know the truth" and then adapt their presentation of the knowledge they possess to the needs of particular souls, "offering to the complex soul elaborate and harmonious discourses, and simple talks to the simple soul" (167). While Aristotle shares Plato's sense that ethos derives from the rhetor's ability "to understand human character and goodness in their various forms," (Rhetoric I, ii, 1356a), he also believes that the rhetor's credibility with the audience is constructed through the delivery of the speech, which suggests an embodied *ethos*.

The link between ethos and delivery is more fully articulated by Roman rhetoricians, whose well-known interest in rhetoric's capacity to build individual character and promote civic virtue must be examined alongside a cultural emphasis on physiognomy and a consistent emphasis on the canon of delivery. In his study of Roman gesture, Anthony Corbeill examines how gesture and physical movement correlate to a fixed system of meanings and considers how these fixed meanings are modified across cultures and time. Corbeill concludes that movement was standardized in Ancient Rome in order to disallow access for the non-elites to public life, but when standardized gesture and appearance were modified, dissimulation occurred that could change the ways bodies were read (107-8).

The earliest extant Roman treatise on rhetoric, the *Rhetorica ad herennium,* provides extensive guidelines for delivery that emphasize the physical control Corbeill examines. Rhetors must methodically match their bodily actions to the content of the message, the emotions they seek to demonstrate, and the responses they hope to inspire in their audiences. Cicero, too, describes rhetoric as both a mental and physical activity, noting that "in an orator we must demand the subtlety of the logician, the thoughts of the philosopher, a diction almost poetic, a lawyer's memory, a tragedian's voice, and the bearing almost of the consummate actor" (*De oratore* I, xxviii). He consistently links ethos, style, and physical bearing; the qualities of an orator listed in *De oratore* include "a mild tone, a countenance expressive of modesty, gentle language, and the faculty of seeming to be dealing reluctantly and under compulsion with something you are really anxious to prove" (II, xliii). Cicero's insistence that delivery is the most important canon reflects his view that successful rhetoric depends upon

careful attention to the relationship among content, style, and physical performance; for this reason, it is essential that the rhetor cultivate a "natural state of looks, expression, and voice" (*De oratore* I, xxviii).

When placed alongside the belief that rhetoric both demands and supports the development of civic virtue, Cicero's assumption that rhetoric is an embodied art points toward the possibility that the cultivation of physical comportment has ethical implications. For Cicero, rhetoric that appropriately brings speakers and audiences together in order to pursue a shared vision has external manifestations: "The propriety to which I refer shows itself also in every deed, in every word, even in every movement and attitude of the body. And in outward, visible propriety there are three elements—beauty, tact, and taste. . . . In these three elements is included also our concern for the good opinion of those with whom and amongst whom we live" (*De officiis* 126). Although he emphasizes moral character and social sensitivity as internal qualities that are cultivated through language, he consistently returns to the notion that these qualities are to some extent visibly evident to observers. Such an observation can hold negative repercussions, as Cicero maintains that "we, if we wish to be keen and careful observers of moral faults, shall often draw important conclusions from trifles. We observe others and from a glance of the eyes, from a contracting or relaxing of the brows . . . and the like, we shall easily judge which of our actions is proper, and which is out of accord with duty and Nature" (*De officiis* 146). In Cicero's view, this ability to pass judgment based on language and appearance should be seen as a positive feature of human interactions: "Because that very quality which we term moral goodness and propriety is pleasing to us by and of itself and touches all our hearts both by its inward essence and its outward aspect and shines forth with most luster through those virtues named above, we are, therefore, compelled by Nature herself to love those in whom we believe those virtues to reside" (*De officiis* 32). Cicero's assessment that "moral goodness and propriety" possess an "outward aspect" that reflects and reinforces the individual's "inward essence," and the underlying assumption that the shared pursuit of this "inward essence" and "outward aspect" naturally promote social stability, exemplifies the strong historical foundation that undergirds more recent conversations concerning the relationship between *ethos* and the body.

Contemporary Theories of Ethos

More recent theories of ethos continue to maintain the link between embodiment and presumptions of character, and many of them build on, revise, and/or diverge from classical views of ethos that emphasize the way a speaker's physical presence conforms to pedagogical and societal prescriptions. Rather than assuming that ethos evolves out of the action or presence of the speaker, contemporary theories of ethos attend to how people negotiate and

agree upon values collaboratively. In this sense, ethos is thought to be socially constructed; all knowledge, including the way someone is perceived as credible, authoritative, or believable is situated. Ethos is constructed within the social, physical, and cultural locations of individuals and communities, and ethos forms through interrelationships and interactions among people rather than through a solo performance where meaning and value is constructed only in terms of the behavior of the performer. Michael Halloran writes about this type of ethos as a "habitual gathering place" (60). Ethos, then is a location, a place, where people gather together and deliberate communally over values. Similarly, Michael Hyde depicts ethos as a meeting-place full of potentiality where "the self, communal existence, discourse, Being, and perhaps, God" come together (xiv). For Hyde, ethos embodies the ways we are with each other and the ways we interact with each other in the everyday.

Like Halloran's "gathering place" and Hyde's "Being," Nedra Reynolds theorizes ethos as location or space that includes cities, communities, and bodies. Reynolds points to "location" in the context of corporeal feminism, and her notion that bodies are a site of knowledge-making invites attention to the varying forms that embodied ethos might take. In this sense, ethos is more than moral character, habit, virtue, and custom; ethos becomes "a complex set of characteristics constructed by a group, sanctioned by that group, and more readily recognizable to others who belong or who share similar values or experiences. The classical notion of ethos, therefore, as well as its contemporary usage, refers to the social context surrounding the solitary rhetor" (327). Ethos is a collaborative social construction, "a negotiated space where authority is established within and between communities" (334). Margaret Zulick agrees that ethos is an act of "symbolic imagination" or, as she puts it, "a subjective act of invention" (20).

Yet the imaginative formation of ethos can become a negative enterprise for those whose bodies place them beyond the reach of the social norms that surround them. Wilson and Lewiecki-Wilson argue that the disabled body has a particular ethos imbued with defect, a position that constitutes a type of "civil death" (4). The historic links among physical presence, rhetorical ethos, and moral character are evident as people with disabilities are imagined to be incapable, weak, and inefficient, presumptions that may or may not be attributable to embodied differences. Wilson and Lewiecki-Wilson ask us to rethink our ordinary habits in the attempt to "read" difference as something other than lack or deficit. Jay Dolmage embarks on a similar project as he recasts the Greek God Hephaestus's disability as ability and rhetorical achievement. Hephaestus' out-turned ("deformed") feet allow him to be cunning and rhetorically savvy. Dolmage's work is especially important for the way it reconstructs embodied difference as having positive signification..

In keeping with these calls to develop a more expansive notion of credibility, we are

proposing a re-conception of non-normative behavior, presence, and deportment in real-life encounters in the classroom and on the college campus. We argue that this re-conception can occur when we invent new visions of what counts as credible and authoritative. The question, then, that we continue to explore in the next section is how we as teachers of English and campus community members can begin to read difference by attending to rhetorical invention. We are not arguing that we need to reinvent our system of ethics but rather that we need to be more cautious in the way we fix meaning to embodied difference; we need to invent new ways of seeing in which embodied difference and disability can be included in rhetorical achievement. We also need to find creative ways of devising classrooms that can serve as sites in which students participate in this inventive process.

The Urgency Surrounding This Call

Based on reports in *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* it has become evident that in the last ten years the broader campus culture (the quad, the dorm, the classroom) has not yet addressed what Ato Quayson calls "aesthetic nervousness" that arises out of frequent reactions to variation in behavior, habit, and appearance. At times, real people remain at odds with suggested (even legal) norms, and this can lead to exclusion from participation in campus life. The dialectical tension between "normal" and "abnormal" behavior becomes a prime site for rhetorical invention and the rethinking of ethos. In the following section we first wish to demonstrate the urgency for our argument by pointing to the real, material consequences that arise from a restrictive vision of ethos and then offering examples of ways that these material consequences can be positively affected through specific pedagogical initiatives that integrate disability studies perspectives into the classroom. We believe that changing how people think about disability can challenge longstanding assumptions that connect difference with danger.

These assumptions are evident in the common practice of enforced medical withdrawals on campus. We believe that these forced withdrawals often result from an automatic correlation of unusual bodily presentation with unacceptable ethics and that it is important to spend more time considering the assumptions that undergird these correlations. In the last five years there has been a wave of enforced medical leaves on campuses where students have been seen as a "threat to themselves or others," "troubled," "disruptive," or too "eccentric" for college. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* has documented this wave of routine dismissals and the development and expansion of mandatory-leave policies. The wide variation in behaviors that are seen to call for such a step suggests that, although medical withdrawals may sometimes be the result of a legitimate interest in the welfare of students and the campus community, they often may be the result of an unthinking assumption that physical

imperfection constitutes a flawed ethos that is inevitably detrimental to the community. In *The Chronicle*, Dawn Prince-Hughes reports that medical withdrawals have been assigned to students who "rock back and forth vigorously," yell at a professor, suffer violent flashbacks during class, "ask a professor in a very loud voice the same question seven times in a row," appear to be suicidal, or are seen as incapable of getting out of bed by themselves in the event of an emergency due to the fact that they are quadriplegic. Such instances make it apparent that colleges are now being forced to attend to divergent ways of being, ways that are not considered "normal" or acceptable (Prince-Hughes; Farrell; Hoover; Redden; "Disability May"), and that the responses of colleges at times reflects the desire to establish order at the expense of students whose physical appearance and/or comportment creates discomfort among other students, faculty, and administrators.

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While students' dismissals ostensibly serve the important purpose of maintaining the safety of the community, the broad scope of such measures creates a clash between the institution's right to protect students and faculty and the student's right to non-discrimination. Although college administrators argue that mandatory-leave policies allow "troubled" students to seek the help they need to correct their behavior, Eric Hoover notes that "[c]ritics, including legal experts and psychiatric counselors, describe the policies as dangerous and inhumane" ("Dismissed"). A social model of disability, one foundation for the field of disability studies, helps to clarify the discord between these perspectives. Fundamental to the social model of disability is the claim that change needs to occur in society's organization and relations rather than in the person who has the disability. The emergence of such a strategic structural change opens the path to a new rhetorical ethos that is constituted for the purpose of opening the community to everyone, making possible the varied achievements that are sometimes denied not for the community's well-being, but in response to the desire for a "norm" that can assuage the "aesthetic nervousness" caused by difference.

While we are not attempting at present to alter campus policy, we do seek to alter how we conceive of campus community members who express a divergent physical presence when that manifestation goes against prescribed norms. Campus policies that attempt to address the needs of students reveal that such inventive activity is essential in order to

provide all students with educational access. We need to rethink our ordinary habits and teach our students to do the same so that we can all begin to read difference differently. This re-conceptualization can begin very tangibly with the integration of a disability studies perspective into the humanities classroom. Our pedagogical suggestions that follow evolved out of the urgent need to affect the way people perceive difference and "danger" so that it might make sense to notice the nuances in such terms and imagine a different way of conceiving of rhetorical ethos. While reconceiving of difference also needs to take place in terms of the broader campus climate, the work can begin in the classroom. Towards this purpose, we give a few suggestions for ways to encourage the reinvention of ethos within English Studies curricula. We can best instill an expanded sense of ethos that does not correlate morality or credibility to bodily presence by showing how people with divergent embodiments have succeeded rhetorically. We will contextualize this objective within pedagogical activities and practices that could be incorporated in undergraduate courses in composition and English Studies.

A New Vision of Ethos

Typically, students attest to two supposed facts of their engagements with disability: they do not judge people by appearances, and they are at ease with divergent embodiment. Yet when we point out to them that they sneered at us on the day we wore Chuck Taylor Converse High-tops with a two-piece suit to class or when they admit that they have never seen anyone with no legs play football successfully, they finally acknowledge that perhaps at times they do correlate appearance with ethos. Many students, with the exception of those who have family members or friends who identify as disabled, rarely even think of disability; it is often perceived as invisible even though it is really everywhere. That disability is in fact everywhere and nowhere simultaneously is the paradox that presides over this pedagogical work. The tactic to best attend to perceived invisibility of disability is to introduce students to many variations in bodily presentation (in face-to-face encounters and in digital environments) so they can become accustomed to multiple corporealities.

This demonstration of difference leads to the possible understanding of difference as a human norm. By looking at difference so unapologetically, students can begin to move beyond feelings of shock or dismay that often occur as part of the initial staring encounter between able-bodied people and people with visible disabilities. To counter negative significations of disability that are ingrained in history and literature (one example might be how President Roosevelt hid the fact that he relied upon a wheelchair for mobility—the examples are endless), embodied difference should become visible in a way that provides a complex, positive signification rather than an overly-simplistic troped representation.

Zosha's classroom practices:

Garland-Thomson's seminal disability studies essay helps with the task of complicating images of embodied difference. In "The Politics of Staring: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography," Garland-Thomson argues that, generally speaking, visual representations of disability have not accurately depicted the lives of "real" people but rather have constructed tropes that oversimplify, medicalize, and pathologize disability (203-4). After looking closely at Garland-Thomson's argument and in order to deepen our understanding of her tropes of the exotic, the realistic, the wondrous, and the ordinary, I have students look at the delivery, performance, style, and content of two contemporary public speakers who are disabled, Nick Vujicic and David Roche, in order to move beyond the initial staring encounter that is often filled with the disgust and fear that students experience but find hard to acknowledge. Vujicic is a preacher and motivational speaker whose aim is to inspire universal hope through narrativizing his story of living with no arms and no legs. Students typically work through the pity trope to arrive at a reading of Vujicic that is more nuanced: he exploits his "wondrousness" in order to demonstrate how joy and pain are common (ordinary) to everyone. Roche is a professional speaker and performer who strategically places himself on display, as Vujicic does, so that his audience can stare openly at his facial disfigurement. Roche also forces people to try to see physical embodiment as a way to see beyond it. We discuss how both Roche and Vujicic start from a place where they assume dissonance; their audience, it is presumed, will judge them based on how they look. Following this initial dissonance within the staring encounter, both men then adamantly use their rhetoric to create a sense of identification of shared values. Both bring their audiences to the point of "being" with them; they strategically and intentionally construct a new gathering place where values can be remade together. Both performers strategically deploy humor to widen the comfort zone and the "being with."

After reading and discussing a manageable bit of theory on ethos (passages taken from classical and contemporary writers mentioned above), we continue with inquiries that include: How is the ethos of these speakers developed? What is the relationship between credibility and physical performance? How is their ethos collaboratively constructed by themselves and by their audience? How might different audiences perceive their rhetoric? How do they redefine “beauty, tact, and taste”? After reflecting and writing on these inquiries, we watch videos of both speakers, paying close attention to ways the men develop credibility and authority through and around their bodies as well as the ways we as the audience may or may not correlate physicality with rhetorical achievement. The work we do aims to reformulate ethos as a collaborative project where the speaker's presentation is not considered the sole determiner but rather where we recognize that Garland-Thomson's

tropes are enacted mechanistically as we stare. In order then to expand notions of ethos, we need to show students how we can promote this shared vision that reorients notions of beauty, tact, taste, and rhetorical success to include everyone.

In one semester, I was able to go even further to interrupt staring encounters. I had been fortunate enough to arrange for Roche, author of *The Church of 80% Sincerity,* a testimonial that urges the reader to face disfigurement head on, to give a public talk on campus, and I also invited him to meet my students. David graciously came to my class and spent an hour discussing life as he sees it; from this experience with David, the students' sustained research essays on aspects of the social construction of disability were given a kind of power that they never would have had without his visit. Students revised their notions of what constitutes ethos through engaging with the construction and (re)construction of it head on. All of this learning is meant to translate to the way we interact with each other in the everyday. Ethos then becomes a gathering place where we can collaboratively (re)construct shared values.

Lois's classroom practices:

Like Zosha, I have sought to engage my students in critically interrogating their assumptions about embodiment and ethos. In an upper-division course focused on the complicated connections between rhetoric and ethics, I encouraged students to consider the role of physical appearance and ability in the construction of ethos. After studying and discussing texts that explicate theoretical connections among rhetoric, ethos, and embodiment, my class watched several clips that featured speakers with physical disabilities. The students were able to identify immediately the cinematic techniques that emphasized Franklin D. Roosevelt's strength and concealed his use of a wheelchair as he arrived at his inauguration and delivered the inaugural address, and they were willing to challenge what they saw as an unfair assumption that the President's dependence on a wheelchair somehow interfered with his credibility. Their assessment of the inaugural address of David Paterson, the blind governor of New York, attended to features of the content of his address that in their view illustrated the problems that had plagued his time in office, which seemed to them to be unrelated to his disability. However, they also took note of Paterson's jokes about his blindness, and we engaged with their assumptions about how those jokes might reflect his attitude toward his disability.

The conversation became more uncomfortable after the class had viewed a clip from David Roche reading from *The Church of 80% Sincerity*. The students' responses to Roche's reading were for the most part quite negative. In the beginning, they struggled to articulate their objections to Roche in terms of the content of the text; several students maintained that Roche was too pessimistic, that his recognition that he sometimes had trouble liking himself portrayed a negative message that people don't need or want to hear. Others defended Roche,

acknowledging that he was honestly representing the experience of dealing with physical disfigurement and pointing out that he seemed to come to a true acceptance of his situation that was in fact quite hopeful. During the lively discussion that ensued, the students explored the possibility that their desire for an unequivocally positive message from Roche was based in their own discomfort with his disability. Finally, one student stated, "I don't know—I just found it creepy." Another contrasted Roche's approach with what one might expect to find in a "normal person," which led her classmate to interject, "But what is normal?"

I cannot claim that this class session concluded in a profoundly successful moment in which all of the students committed themselves to challenging problematic cultural beliefs about ethos and embodiment. However, I am convinced that important things happened during that conversation. First of all, my students had the opportunity to examine critically some of the assumed connections among physical ability, intellectual aptitude, and ethical propensities that they had to some extent unconsciously accepted. This examination led them to ask questions about the underlying values that limit public access for those whose appearance and abilities fall outside what have come to be defined as acceptable social boundaries. In the process, they confronted their own discomfort with physical difference, and they heard in response to that confrontation the question, "But what is normal?" It is my hope that as they continue to encounter physical differences on our campus and beyond, they will remember the discussion and their own encounters with "aesthetic nervousness," moving beyond the uncritical sense of difference as “creepy” in order to ask themselves the question, "But what is normal?"

Conclusion

As teachers of English, we need to recognize our long heritage in normative narratives that surround embodiment and ethos in our classrooms. The maintenance of these norms in the classroom contributes to the maintenance of these norms outside the classroom. We charge that we haven’t been trained adequately in how to accommodate students; we hold classes in spaces that may not be accessible to students who use wheelchairs; we formulate shared values in appearance, habit, and behavior. As both teachers and members of college communities, we have the opportunity to challenge ourselves to a new vision of the type of access we can offer to all of the students who enter our classrooms.

We should also challenge ourselves to create spaces where our students can discover new ways of imagining the public realm that we are preparing them to enter. Of course, it is part of our job to teach our students how to negotiate the expectations that they will find in the public and professional spheres; however, we also need to offer and authorize counternarratives that challenge oppressive social structures and reveal the successes that are pos-

sible in the midst of contests about values, authority, and ethos. We need to teach our students, and learn ourselves, how to read variation rather than penalize it. There is much work to be done before notions of ethos in the academy and public life fully accommodate the presence of disability firmly and unapologetically rooted in civic and academic spaces. In the meantime, we can take significant steps toward that goal by helping our students expand notions not only of what ethos is but also who can gain it and how.

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