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“Where Did all the White Girls Come From?": Difference and Critical Empathy In and Out of the Service Learning Classroom

I TEACH SERVICE LEARNING COURSES at a branch campus of Michigan's flagship university system.¹ Located in Metropolitan Detroit, the campus serves a racially and ethnically diverse student body comprised of significant numbers of working-class and/or first-generation college-goers. The classroom itself often becomes a space where differences collide; for instance, a typical class includes first- and second-generation immigrants from the Middle East as well as white first-generation university attendees from the working-class, “downriver” suburbs of the deindustrialized Motor City. Service learning courses tend to add *additional* layers of difference, immersing students in community-based sites of learning, often within Detroit city limits where African-Americans comprise a majority.

Like many writing teachers in open-access environments, I appreciate how these encounters with difference provide occasions for writing, learning, and critical inquiry. As a field, writing studies has progressed beyond simplistic conceptions of multiculturalism thanks in part to critical/problem-posing pedagogy (Freire; hooks; Seitz; Shor; Tassoni and Thelin), theoretically sophisticated critiques of service learning (Bickford; Coogan; Cushman; Herzberg; Welch), and a journal like *Open Words* with its emphasis on race/class intersections and nuanced representations of teaching in open-access and diverse settings. Critical pedagogy has helpfully foregrounded the tension between student-centeredness and productive use of socio-political context in the classroom. The service learning literature has reminded us to attend to material conditions and pursue modes of public engagement that affect material change. And the journal you hold in your hands (or more likely have accessed on a screen) has resisted “lore” in favor of theoretically rich discussions of sites of difference like branch campuses.

This essay presumes that difference is both an ethical good and a subject worthy of ongoing investigation and considers how the concept of empathy intersects with difference in service learning courses especially. First, an explanation of some key terms. *Empathy* refers to the capac-

1. Many thanks to Lew Caccia, Amal Hassan, Kia Jane Richmond, John Tassoni, Bill Thelin, and the anonymous *Open Words* reviewers whose feedback helped me immensely as I worked on this essay.

ity to imagine the point-of-view or emotional state of another person. In its uncritical iterations, empathy can involve illogical or unethical leaps wherein empathic individuals fail to recognize the limits of their own understanding of the other person. Thus *uncritical empathy* is imagining another person's experience while failing to recognize that one's understanding is necessarily limited. *Critical empathy*, on the other hand, acknowledges that human understanding is partial and that material differences limit our capacity to imagine fully another person's experience and emotions. I argue that *critical empathy* is a useful teaching tool and a useful rhetorical device for moving forward the goals of teaching across difference—difference in the aforementioned classrooms and, in service learning classes specifically, difference outside of the classroom. Uncritical empathy seeks comfort and resolution and obscures difference (*I feel good about myself because I have walked a mile in your shoes*). Critical empathy imagines and contextualizes multiple perspectives across difference and accepts discomfort as part of the learning process.

I begin with a service learning anecdote to illustrate how difference and discomfort can and do circulate in pedagogical situations. A group of my students and I arrive at an inner-city Detroit foster home, a residential institution that serves mostly African-American young men. The students—mostly young women in their twenties with white, Middle-Eastern, and African-American racial/ethnic affiliations, the majority, though, being white—and their white male professor begin to exit the car. The students are enrolled in an upper-division, service-learning writing course that has partnered with the foster home and this is their first visit to the worksite. A young man exits the foster home's residence hall, sees us, and wonders aloud, "Where did all the white girls come from?"

The question is largely rhetorical, in that I don't think the young man expected an answer. Two of the "white girls" laugh. I wave at the young man, who nods in a friendly manner, and walks toward the facility's cafeteria. We walk in the opposite direction, toward a small administrative annex where staff members at the foster home lead what ends up being a very productive orientation session for us. The students appear to be unfazed by the comment and none of us bring up the encounter with foster home staff. I had done very little, too little perhaps, to prepare the class for our first visit to the foster home, in part because this was very early in the semester and in part because the purpose of our first visit was an orientation session, not a session that would involve (or so I thought) direct contact with clients. At the orientation session, we meet key staff members; learn about the facility's operations, history, and funding structure; review logistics; and discuss the semester's collaborative projects, which include rewriting a volunteer manual and generating content for the facility's website.

What's Empathy Got to Do with It?

Empathy as a teaching goal (*I'm going to teach my students to have greater empathy for other people*) can lead to unreflective, bad teaching, particularly when well-intentioned teachers conflate empathy with charity or, perhaps worse, take the emphasis off student writing. In its worse

incarnations, empathy in service learning writing classrooms leads teachers to think their students can heroically save the less fortunate by understanding them and become better people by writing about them or for them. Uncritical empathy not only leads to bad teaching, it also opens practitioners of service learning and critical pedagogies to a host of criticisms. "Save the world on your own time" is Stanley Fish's widely circulated screed addressed toward teachers focused on the moral or empathic character of their students and the social problems that confront them. Fish argues that empathic awareness isn't a worthy learning outcome; his argument loses some of its force and credibility when *critical empathy* is framed as both an ethical good and a pragmatic, useful skill.

First of all, a good deal of compelling evidence in the fields of neuroscience and psychology suggests that college students in particular are becoming less empathic (cf. Konrath et al.'s meta-analysis of the research, which suggests a particularly sharp decline in the first decade of the new millennium); the findings of those studies frequently end up in the popular press, perhaps because they make good copy. Declining empathy and/or the media hype surrounding declining empathy represent kairotic moments, timely occasions to investigate how rhetorics of empathy circulate. Further, the concept of empathy fundamentally involves human interaction—how we imagine one another, how we communicate with one another, and the stances we take on issues of public importance. Empathy is a rhetorical performance inasmuch as we adopt a way to act interpersonally and use symbols like words, gestures, and rituals. Given empathy's connection to the concerns of rhetoric classrooms and writing classes focused on the public sphere, incorporating empathy into the curriculum in thoughtful, reflective ways makes a great deal of sense.

Indeed *empathy is a rhetoric in most every sense of the word*: a symbol system, a means of persuasion, a transaction, a set of tropes, a performance, and a way toward identification. When that young man posed his question about "white girls," he expressed an observation regarding the materiality of race, gender, and identity. At the foster home, he is surrounded by mostly young, African-American men; the presence of racially diverse women was notable to him. As a rhetorical utterance, we were his audience and he was in some ways asserting his presence, raising his voice. And as audience members, we were left to react and respond with utterances of our own: to laugh (as several of my students did), to nod (as I did), to speak about the possibly inappropriate nature of the comment with the staff (as none of us did until later), to respond factually ("we're from the University and we're working with the staff," as none of us did at all), among other possible responses. Which responses are empathic on our part?

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To "report" the young man may have gotten him into trouble. To respond critically or with any type of admonishment on our part may have alienated the young man, thereby decreasing our chances in the future of establishing a productive relationship with him. We had little time to consider our response, but just as his statement was a rhetorical utterance, so too was our reac-

tion or lack thereof. Comments my students later made suggest to me they were thinking at least somewhat empathically, certainly about not wanting the young man to get into trouble and, further, taking into account his youth when assessing the extent to which the comment was inappropriate and problematic. We thought our day's learning would consist solely of the knowledge and information shared by the staff in the foster home's annex; the comments outside taught us something as well—about the young man and his context, about ourselves and our contexts. Our responses were not perfect, or even necessarily positive, but they were moments of contact with difference, moments that in equal part suggested how we empathically exist with others in the context of a service learning encounter.

Empathy can be a useful framework in the service learning writing classroom—a topic of investigation, a teachable rhetorical device, a lens for reflective writing. Why? Because empathic awareness is a useful rhetorical skill with the particular ability to foster audience awareness and understanding across difference. These are ethical ends that challenge Fish's assertion about the irrelevance of the moral development of students. We ought to be concerned with student development vis-à-vis civic, ideological, and moral outlook. But beyond the ethical ends, teaching empathy as a rhetoric has utility. Responding, speaking, and acting empathically, to some, is an ethical imperative. For a class focused on rhetoric and communication in public arenas, empathic utterances and behavior also have practical value. I mentioned the value of establishing a relationship with the young man at the foster home; several collaborative student projects would involve significant interaction with the young clients; a poor relationship would adversely affect the quality of those writing projects. At every turn, though, we need to take care to problematize empathy and guard against the charity mentality. Critical reflection on the empathic interactions with difference can help contextually foreground *both* the practical utility and ethical dimensions—and this is a valuable step in moving away from empathy as “just” charity.

Toward Definitions of Empathy, Uncritical Empathy, and Critical Empathy

Uncritical empathy often foregrounds comfort, good feelings, and individualism. The person feeling empathy (think of a student doing service learning, or even encountering difference through a print text) feels reassured due to his or her own actions and reactions. That individual feels comfortable, happy, and satisfied. Uncritical empathy does little to go beyond narrative. In “Pleasurable Pedagogies: *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and the Rhetoric of Empathy,” Kulbaga argues that “eliciting compassion through personal narratives obscures social, political and economic” context (510). Similarly, Suzane Keen, a scholar of theories of narrative, and folklorist Amy Shuman have offered challenging critiques of the pervasive assumption that exposure to other people's stories somehow translates into ethical perspectives. The work of theorists like Keen and Shuman remind us we can't assume that a print text for instance leads to the ethical transformation of our students. It is not enough to have an experience (via a print text or for that matter a service learning encounter) because such an interaction is too pat; we run the risk of falling into one of the traps of uncriti-

cal empathy: a sensation in students that makes them feel enlightened but may end up, as Kulbaga argues, erasing material context.

Critical empathy, on the other hand, seeks to contextualize, increase meta-awareness, and help all parties become not necessarily better people but better rhetors. Critical empathy allows for discomfort and emphasizes a larger context. It is a response, though not a corrective or panacea, to what theorist Peter Breggin calls the culture's "crippling preoccupation with oneself" (124), a preoccupation that signifies not only a problematic individualism but also a lack of meta-cognitive awareness of the self's relationship with other agents. Understanding others *begins* with this kind of self awareness and *continues* with open and honest engagements with experiences that do the important work of provoking discomfort and "conceptualizing identity formation as a process of becoming" (Ryan 687). The rhetoric classroom can offer a forum in which students engage with, critique, and contextualize texts and experiences and "become"—to borrow the useful terminology compositionist Cynthia Ryan recently introduced—rhetors capable of complicating simplistic conceptions of self-in-society and employing empathic awareness of the various agents involved in rhetorical situations.

A critical and contextual version of empathy offers rhetors the possibility of transcending a limited and limiting individualism. In the classroom, critical-contextual empathy begins to push beyond the limited pedagogical work that a decontextualized rhetorical analysis of a text, utterance, or event might accomplish. Instead of just unpacking atomized rhetorical features, consider the circulation and the implications of the phrase (a phrase like "where did all the white girls come from?") from multiple points-of-view. We can discuss feelings, but we also ought to think about the speaker, the listeners, the diction and syntax, the place, the material realities (as we understand them), etc. Critical empathy is about more than understanding the speaker. We need to understand, and then complicate that understanding. I would argue this need is especially great in open-access environments like my university, where encounters with difference are not abstractions but rather daily occurrences.

Unpacking "Where Did All the White Girls Come From?"

A rhetorical situation such as the moment when the young man at the foster home asked "Where did all the white girls come from?" presents an opportunity for various agents to listen analytically and perform empathy. The narrative floats among various agents and *potentially* facilitates questions about the implications of difference. The aforementioned service learning class can appropriate that story as a moment to voyeuristically stare at the foster home. I can appropriate the story in the context of my own academic writing. And/or, mindful of the problematic aspects of empathy, I can acknowledge the contexts (a conversation among students, back on campus in the classroom, in the pages of an academic journal, etc.) in which stories are re-told, re-circulated, and re-imagined.

We need to respond pedagogically to rhetorical situations that foreground difference and

provide opportunities for teachers to engage in problem-posing about empathic responses. Most of the students in my class were young women in their 20s from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds including Arab-American, African-American, and Euro-American. The residents of the foster home were mostly African-American, teen-aged young men. The racial diversity of the class helped to mitigate partially the racial dimension inherent in many campus-community, service learning relationships. Happily, we didn't *completely* fit into the too-common scenario of white volunteers marching into an African-American community. But race was still a major factor and a part of why the exchange was uncomfortable.

In teaching scenarios that raise issues of difference and lend themselves to empathic response, academic projects that contextualize empathy and difference help. In the scenario at the foster home, for instance, one of the African-American students in the class—in addition to organizing an impressive town-hall meeting in which representatives from Michigan's Department of Human Services met with service providers to discuss better public-private collaboration—did an independent research project on the role race plays in responding to Detroit's foster care crisis. She shared her research with the class and kept us mindful of one particular issue of difference. She did some of the work of contextualizing race and identity. The discourse of empathy in the classroom was able to transcend a superficial or touchy-feely level. We searched for greater—albeit “as if”—understanding.

The ability to meet some of the residents of the agency where members of the class worked coupled with this young woman's research to provide an opportunity for critical, contextualized empathy. For instance, students confronted (through both experiences at the foster home as well as open, sometimes uncomfortable conversations in the safe space of the classroom) how age and gender informed their relationship with the young men. One Saturday morning we joined a group of the students to do some gardening (the foster home participates in a local urban gardening initiative, and urban gardening was the subject of another student's independent research project). Several of the young men boasted that the night before they had gotten drunk. This was yet another powerful rhetorical situation because my students had to consider the ethical and empathic dimensions of how they responded. Should they react disapprovingly? Should they report the students to the foster home staff? Should they laugh? The situation was also powerful because of the complex ways that identity informed the conversation. Reflecting on the experience the following week in class, students thought empathically about the experience and wondered the extent to which the young men were showing off, trying to impress “college girls.” Students also speculated on the social class dimensions, wondering if popular conceptions of “college kids” influenced their boasts and whether they were rehearsing what they imagined to be what most college students do during their weekends. The classroom discussion was lively, and I did my best to allow—even encourage—exploration of identity markers and issues of difference. We all were imagining multiple points-of-view; considering how those points-of-view are gendered, raced, and classed; and thinking about what various rhetorical utterances and response might signify. That's an exercise in

(critical) empathy as well as an exercise in rhetorical awareness.

But “Where did all the white girls come from?” was the moment that was most complicated in terms of the empathic potential. This was a loaded moment, one begging for empathic analysis and reflection, another awkward and complex instance in which difference became explicit. As the teacher, my own affective response was conflicted. On one hand, I worried about the degree to which the mostly female students might feel threatened or objectified by the comment. On the other hand, I worried about how to broach that concern without perpetuating a racist impression of the adolescent African-American young man who had made the statement. Reflecting on how to discuss this moment in the classroom cried out for a complex set of empathic considerations. How might the women in the class perceive this comment? How might the African-American women in the class perceive any implication on my part that the African-American young men at the foster home present a threat to them? How might our discussion in the classroom impact how the students interact with the foster kids?

Making the issues of difference an explicit part of the conversation was crucial. So was my owning up to my own hesitations. Setting that kind of honest tone helped students become willing to speak openly. The young women in the class *reported* (I hope they were being honest) that they did not feel objectified or threatened by the comment; however, the opportunity to engage with difference honestly and openly was no less valuable. One young woman in the class who happened to be a somewhat introverted, Arab-American Muslim who wears a traditional hijab (head covering) made the comment “Nobody’s ever called me a white girl before” during our discussion. Yet another complex rhetorical utterance. On one level, the comment was meant as a humorous, self-referential identification, a reference to her own ability to *pass*. A woman whose skin color and head scarf mark both her ethnic and religious difference having some fun with a comment that ironically constructed her as *not* an Other. She was essentially saying, *Do I really look like a white girl?* On another level, the student’s words commented on the messy nature of identity and empathy, reminding the class that race, quite literally, is not a black and white matter and that empathy necessarily requires that we situate our own gray areas, our own biases, our own intersectional identities as raced, gendered, classed members of the culture (and members of a classroom community). The intellectual work (for instance, the independent research projects that further provided us an understanding of race and the foster care situation in the region) of contextualizing our experiences at the foster home were important, but during our class discussions, what came up over and over again were our “feelings.” There was no escaping the affective dimension, no matter how much I attempted to focus discussions on rhetorical dimensions and strategies and the critical context of our service learning work. And perhaps those affective dimensions were just as important.

Affect, Empathy, and the Service Learning Experience

Compositionist Susan McLeod calls on teachers of writing to transcend reliance on *other*

people's stories as a method of empathy promotion (emphasis mine). In *Notes on the Heart*, McLeod says that "having students participate in activities designed to get them into the shoes of the 'other' for a time will help develop empathy and promote more open beliefs" (82). By way of evidence, McLeod also points to data on cognition and makes a compelling case that empathic pedagogies that facilitate cognitive dissonance seem to have the most potential. Opening our students to discomfort and disruption or, in McLeod's terms "dissonance," has potential value. I think about my Arab-American student's comment about being called a "white girl" as a moment of the kind

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of cognitive dissonance to which McLeod refers. Her comment moved beyond the superficial mode of pleasurable affect that Kulbaga critiques. This young woman wasn't just feeling better by identifying with the young man and his narrative, she was inserting herself into the narrative and putting her own identity in conversation with his. There was a messy version of cognitive dissonance at play: she was at once the "other" (as an Arab-American) and the "white girl" (the representative of University culture). She had power (the cultural capital of her own sense of humor,

the privilege associated with higher education) but also a lack of power (as the potential target of a sexist comment).

This young woman used the foster home narrative's *potential* to reflect on identity and power. Empathy is potential, in the same way that affect is potential. Empathy can become something larger—for example: consciousness, awareness, action—and move toward *critical empathy* if coupled with honest and open inquiry into social context, movement beyond just "feelings" for another person, and acknowledgment of one's distance from the actual experience. Empathy can become an ethical, affective stance instead of the co-optation of a story or a sentimental/unproductive way one feels in the presence of an Other. In *Ugly Feelings*, Ngai reminds us how affect and emotion differ from one another: "The affect/emotion split originated in psychoanalysis for the practical purpose of distinguishing third-person from first-person representations of feelings with 'affect' designating feelings described from an observer's (analyst's) perspective, and 'emotion' designating feelings that 'belong' to the speaker" (24). Critical empathy can aim for an other-centered point-of-view that is reflective of affect's origin in the world of psychoanalysis.

Affect refers to a bodily sensation we have concerning the world around us, a pre-cognitive and pre-conscious relationship with any phenomenon. Our bodily selves encounter phenomenon constantly: experiences, texts, artifacts, individuals. Before we think, speak, write, or react, we encounter. Affect refers to this initial encounter and as such exists independent of rational thought, independent of any utterance on our part. Initially we feel the phenomenon, and this is why we of-

ten link affect with emotions or pathos. However, affect encompasses what theorist Brian Massumi calls a “capacity” or “potential.” Affect is a sensation that our bodies experience that *can* lead to a variety of visceral responses but does not always or necessarily result in catharsis nor any of the discourses traditionally associated with pathos. Massumi writes, “Emotion is qualified intensity... affect is unqualified” (28). Nor does an initial, bodily contact with a phenomenon necessarily result in any type of action. That is why Massumi emphasizes potential when he talks about affect-as-sensation. In Massumi’s conception, we may or may not act. We may or may not speak. But we experience a sensation. Affect informs and influences our rhetoric. No matter how logocentric we may be (or strive to be), no matter how purposeful we are, our language use flows from our bodies. Where there are bodies that feel—that experience the sensation Massumi describes—there is affect.

Empathy starts with stories and emotions that our bodies feel. As we attempt to foster an empathy that is *critical*, it’s helpful to think of empathy in the classroom with the “as if” element that Richmond and Teich emphasize. Stay mindful, Newcomb suggests, of the “space between people” (118). Drawing on Hannah Arendt, Newcomb argues that ethical action is more likely if “compassion” does not serve as the only basis for identification. Mindful of Newcomb’s suggestion, contextualized—triangulated, even—and reflective and honest (blunt and agonistic, even) understanding of another person or of another person’s story may have greater affective potential. To contextualize might mean doing independent research and further inquiry that situates both the story/experience/individual as well as one’s own story/experience/self. In the triangulation, difference becomes a part of the equation. *This is how we are similar. This is how we are different.* Fleckenstein argues that during empathic episodes, thinking and feeling become recursive and complementary forms of cognition, forming a “network” that is “the heart of social activism” (705). She writes, “It (empathy) recognizes difference in the midst of identification and it motivates other-centered social action” (714). What better reason do we need to experiment with pedagogies of empathy?

As I’ve argued throughout, discomfort is one of the most valuable affective manifestations of critical empathy, though likely not the only manifestation. My Arab-American student illustrates that humor is another expression of critical engagement with others, including others who are marked, for example, by racial difference. As with many instances of critical humor, this student spoke something often considered taboo, something that perhaps other individuals are thinking but too fearful to say or something that perhaps highlights an absurdity. Consider an iconic moment in the classic Mel Brooks film *Blazing Saddles*, a moment characterized by syntax similar to what we heard on our first visit to the foster home. The African-American sheriff played by Cleavon Little lures several members of the Ku Klux Klan to a remote location so he can steal their robes to use as a disguise. To get the Klan members to chase him, Sheriff Bart taunts them by yelling, “Where ‘da white women at?” The dialogue draws its humor from the absurd, taboo, outrageous nature of the sentiment that African-American men represent threats to white women and the idea that

a violent group of extremists like the Klan can be characterized as playing a wacky, screwball cat-and-mouse game with persons of color. It's an offensive moment, except that the absurdity and humor end up *disempowering* the Klan. What does this moment of gross-out humor have to do with service learning and empathy? The Mel Brooks film uses humor to strip racism of some of its power, similarly to how my Arab-American student used humor to strip a potential moment of objectification of some of *its* power. Both the film's speech act and the young teen at the foster home's utterance (somewhat similar utterances, at that) create complicated sensations in audience members—sensations that provoke, discomfort, inspire emotion, and have the potential to do something more depending on how we engage with them.

But beyond the discomfort and humor as affective manifestations of empathy, it's the "something more" that most interests me about sensational moments. Some audience members remain offended by a film like *Blazing Saddles* and for reasons that are legitimate, prudish, or perhaps both. The film insults our sense of decorum (and we're not even talking about the scene of campfire flatulence) and perhaps our liberal sensibilities. But what *starts* with an initial, affective sensation like offense, disgust, or shock, can transform into reflection and/or action. Acknowledging and even highlighting difference can lead to empathy. That scene in *Blazing Saddles* can remain nothing but potential, but with reflection and thought can serve as a critique of racism's absurdity or perhaps even inspire a more empathic mindset. Likewise, service learning opportunities—which so frequently involve our students confronting difference and experiencing emotionally loaded moments—have empathic and active *potential*. What do we as teachers of rhetoric working in sites of *difference* do with the potential?

Teaching Critical Empathy

A small but spirited body of scholarship within writing studies has engaged with empathy and its pedagogical possibilities. Caccia has helpfully developed curriculum ideas involving empirical research projects that engage writing students with subcultures for whom mainstream society sometimes lacks empathy. Richmond has suggested that for our students, empathy can "minimize power relationships," but that we ought to foster a realistic sense of the impossibility of fully understanding another perspective (40). Empathy always needs to maintain an "as if" element as opposed to feigning a direct, one-to-one correspondence (Richmond 43; Teich 146). In the interests of using empathy as a rhetorical tool for disrupting homogenizing imperatives in the culture, I would echo the importance of Richmond's call for teachers to differentiate empathy from total immersion into another's perspective and put a slightly different spin on empathy's effect on power relationships. Empathy, as a rhetorical stance, does not have to "minimize" power relations; when contextualized and critiqued, empathy can potentially *reveal* power relations, showing to us the implications of our identity markers and offering an opportunity to analyze how much cultural capital, power, and ethos members and non-members possess in various contexts and while interacting with various audiences. Our classroom discussions in the weeks after our initial visit to the foster home did not

devolve into simplistic articulations of our feelings about the statement or the young man's perspective. We didn't presume to know his story or his experiences. But we did seek to attempt a closer understanding. We listened to the young man and tried to unpack his words, their meaning, and their circulation.

Another pedagogical dimension of empathy as a rhetorical tool for understanding difference is simultaneously listening to students and encouraging students to listen to others. In the literature on empathy and the teaching of writing, scholars call on Carl Rogers' version of critical listening (McLeod 115-116; Teich 145-146). Teich, for instance, draws on Rogerian psychology to remind us of the value of "analytical listening," referring to both the method of restating another's position to be sure one understands that position and the stance of openness to change one's perspective (145-147). This, Teich argues, is a crucial component of empathy. Moving in a different direction, Lindquist makes a compelling argument that teachers ought to "perform empathy" (201, *emphasis mine*), for instance, by feigning a naïve stance as students articulate their own positionalities. Lindquist describes this version of pedagogical empathy as "strategic positioning for the purposes of learning how to best serve others" (199). These examples illustrate the role that empathy already plays in our pedagogy, as well as the need for a pedagogical theory that opens up wider possibilities for the teaching of critical empathy. I felt anxious during those post-mortem discussions of the foster home, worried in particular that the young women in the class felt objectified, but, in retrospect, I think my own deference to what *students* had to say (opening up the floor during class for any and all thoughts on the incident) was its own kind of performance of empathy, per Lindquist's empathic pedagogy. I don't think I was faking objectivity or naivete as much as putting my own affective responses aside to listen to others. We listened to the young man. I listened to students.

Critical empathy as a pedagogy does not automatically mean a sentimental, colonial, or otherwise ethically problematic stance. Nor does it necessarily mean critical consciousness-raising. Empathy creates an as-if, metaphorical relationship among agents that *can* remind us of material differences and can be a route to contextualized, reflective (though never first-hand or direct) knowledge (see especially Nussbaum [2001] for a useful discussion of reflection and ethical action). Shuman writes, "Empathy is one kind of obligation, sometimes creating a possibility for understanding across differences, sometimes involving sentimentality, sometimes romanticizing tragedy as inspiration, but in any case compromising the relationship between tellers and listeners" (20). The compromise is what matters, or perhaps the *acknowledgement* of compromise is what matters. Making the compromise explicit in service learning classrooms especially (where real human interaction is part of the curriculum) is what provides a learning opportunity for students and teachers alike.

In writing and rhetoric courses that profess to prepare students for effective engagement with rhetorical situations in and out of the academy, we try to teach students to employ rhetorical awareness as they negotiate and intervene in these situations. While the academy's notions of

critical thinking as a learning outcome² often foreground consideration of diverse perspectives, less attention is paid specifically to empathy as a learning outcome or empathic perspective as a useful rhetorical device. Empathy and empathic perspective go beyond mere consideration or refutation of a *different* point-of-view. In its fullest conception, empathy represents an affective, intellectual, and critical engagement with a different point of view and an awareness of difference as both material reality and social construct.

A pedagogy of critical empathy gives students an ethical and practical advantage while negotiating situations that involve difference—an argument with racist family members, a business meeting in which acquaintances from various cultures have convened, a writing assignment that asks students to synthesize competing approaches to a problem unique to their academic discipline. Many rhetorical situations involving difference cause discomfort or anxiety, perhaps because the stakes are high, perhaps because the subject matter is taboo, perhaps both. Regardless, critical empathy is a worthy—essential, even—teaching subject for rhetoricians.

Conclusion

Empathy is a rhetoric that can promote critical understanding across difference. Not only difference in terms of familiar identity categories like race and class, but difference across a broader array of categories. To say that empathy is a rhetoric means that empathy is a discursive engagement with the world, encompassing both affective and rational ways of making sense of one's place in the public sphere. Employing empathy as a rhetoric involves using a potentially savvy and productive tool for negotiating the polyglot contexts our students negotiate. Popular conceptions paint the concept of empathy as merely a charitable feeling, an emotional or even goody-goody response to some stimulus. This type of charitable or sympathetic sentiment is often how empathy rears its head, particularly uncritical versions of empathic feeling. What is problematic, of course, is that the feeling doesn't necessarily lead anywhere productive. Our students may actually feel a closer affinity to an ethic of charity than to an ethic of action (Bickford and Reynolds; Morton). Uncritical empathy allows agents (including students) to continue fetishizing feelings and charitable inclinations.

Further, uncritical, under-developed empathy can lead to unproductive and equally problematic responses like the rehearsal of homogenizing and/or self-centered clichés. The person who gives the homeless a dollar and thinks s/he empathizes with their plight may make sense of his/her affective state with the rhetoric of homogeneity: *I feel for that poor person because underneath it all we are really all the same*. Recent scholarship in rhetoric and composition has theorized how such superficially empathic responses ultimately make the privileged rhetor feel better by avoiding the agonistic and disruptive implications of material reality (DeGenaro), commodifying compassion (Kulbaga), or feeling more personally enlightened and aware (Swienicki). Uncritical empathy is

2. See for instance Washington State University's Critical Thinking Rubric, which includes the following outcome: "Integrates issue using OTHER (disciplinary) perspectives and positions."

troubling precisely because the person who feels empathy becomes and remains the focal point.

Classroom strategies can help students couple empathic *feelings* with intellectual and analytic tools—tools that can not only be part of students' psychosocial and ethical development but also—closer to the concerns of our own field—fit in their rhetorical toolboxes. In other words, the affective dimension of our empathy can serve as a starting point for contextualized, critical, socially aware reflection and action, especially with regard to issues of difference. Empathic engagement with the world is ethical but also savvy, helping rhetors bear in mind issues of audience and, by extension, issues of difference. Empathic individuals can better negotiate the increasingly diverse spaces students occupy in our national context and our globalized world.

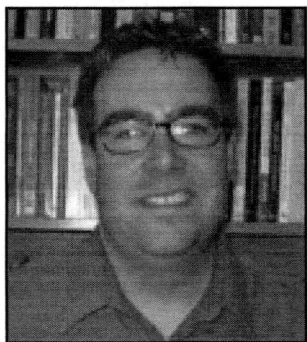
Providing writing students an opportunity to develop their empathic awareness answers calls to teach rhetoric as an engagement with the public sphere. Extending Peter Breggin's admonition of the damaging effects of antipathetic mindsets, I maintain that failure to foster empathy among writing students potentially weakens the quality of public discourse. Rhetorical utterances focused solely on the self become utterances that reject the potential that rhetoric has to build identifications and community. A crucial dimension of empathic awareness that builds a more vibrant public sphere is a critical awareness across difference and an as-if understanding of others that attempts to analyze, contextualize, and continually reflect on the implications of difference. Our pedagogical work maintains its humanistic objectives but also foregrounds democratic and social justice ends and pragmatic skills.

Specifically, teaching for empathy tries to help students become more compassionate and understanding when they encounter rhetorical situations like the "Where did all the white girls come from?" query. At the same time, students develop a practical rhetorical proficiency. Knowing what motivates others helps students understand potential audience members. Instilling students with the desire to ask critical questions about empathy helps students place rhetorical situations in a broader context and move beyond an ethic of charity into an ethic of action. Acknowledging that difference is already part of our open-access students' material lives, placing them in new contexts (think: service learning experiences) where difference is also part of the landscape, and contextualizing critically their experiences are strategies for fostering empathy. I don't mean to imply there are one size fits all approaches, and I shy away from a bulleted list of Monday-morning prescriptions; rather, I hope readers will forward other pedagogies consistent with your learning objectives and institutional dynamics. And I hope the vibrant scholarly conversations about affective dimensions of public and classroom discourses will make more and more room for critical examinations of empathy. In particular, more research needs to be done on the effectiveness of empathic classroom strategies—particularly in service learning classes. I look forward to the future conversations about this important matter.

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