

Changing the Subject: A Theory of Rhetorical Empathy, by Lisa Blankenship. Utah State UP, 2019. 160 pp.

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Chasms of difference between political, ideological, and cultural groups seem only to widen with each passing year. And yet we want to connect across these differences, particularly when they separate us from loved ones. Lisa Blankenship offers rhetorical empathy as way to do this hard, necessary work in her timely monograph, *Changing the Subject: A Theory of Rhetorical Empathy*. Building on Krista Ratcliffe's rhetorical listening, Blankenship contributes an ethical, deliberative theory and praxis of rhetoric with rhetorical empathy. As applicable to the contentious holiday dinner table as the composition classroom, rhetorical empathy has the capacity to influence composition theory and practice as thoroughly as rhetorical listening has. Blankenship's argument for combining personal narratives with argumentation in writing instruction also stands to influence composition pedagogy at all levels with significant implications for civic life.

As she explains in, "Introduction: Changing the Subject," Blankenship was motivated by a desire to connect across difference as a queer white woman from a conservative Christian family who experienced rejection when, as an adult, she came out. Blankenship developed rhetorical empathy as "both a topos and a trope, a choice and habit of mind that invents and invites discourse informed by deep listening and its resulting emotion" (5). Unlike the agonistic Aristotelian rhetoric still dominant in US culture and higher education, rhetorical empathy "shift[s] the focus of rhetoric from (only) changing an audience to changing oneself (as well)" (18). Rhetorical empathy involves heeding emotion, listening to personal stories, and becoming vulnerable enough to change oneself as part of an ethical rhetorical engagement. "At its core," Blankenship writes, rhetorical empathy is "a deliberative praxis that offers ways of being-with-others" (28), even when—especially when—those others make "our blood boil" (10).

Crucially, rhetorical empathy is sensitive to privilege and power. Those of us with privilege and power who are committed to justice must embrace vulnerability and examine our biases and limited perspectives. This work is not optional. For people who do not have much power or privilege, rhetorical empathy "can help [...] sustain efforts to fight the status quo and to maintain perspective [...] in the midst of polarization and, in some cases, deep and traumatic injustice" (11). Rhetorical empathy's flexible applicability ensures that people can use it strategically, if they choose to, depending on their relative status in any discursive exchange.

Blankenship develops the concept of rhetorical empathy in chapter one, “A Brief History of Empathy,” with ten paths of thought about empathy in Western and non-Western traditions. Though the chapter is lengthy and wide-ranging, Blankenship’s deft writing articulates complex, intersecting ideas such that Chinese *bian* and Arab-Islamic *sulh* mutually inform Aristotelian pity and the parable of the Good Samaritan. After reviewing challenges to Aristotle’s rhetoric-as-persuasion by Kenneth Burke and Carl Rogers, Blankenship traces empathy in recent rhetorical theories and feminist rhetorical praxis to show how these elements overlap with thirty years of scholarship by feminist rhetorical theorists-practitioners. This tapestry of intersecting ideas illustrates rhetorical empathy’s conceptual richness and cross-cultural resonances and provides each reader with paths they might explore further.

In chapter two, “Threads of Feminist Rhetorical Practices: Storytelling and Empathy from Gilded Age Chicago to Facebook,” Blankenship analyzes rhetorical empathy in Jane Addams’s 19th century speeches in the US and Joyce Fernandes’ 21st century Facebook posts in Brazil, both of which advocate for the rights of women of color who perform domestic work. Both Addams and Fernandes use rhetorical strategies central to feminist rhetorics that are associated with rhetorical empathy. They are: “[y]ielding to an Other by sharing and listening to personal stories, [c]onsidering motives behind speech acts and actions, [e]ngaging in reflection and self-critique, [and] [a]ddressing difference, power, and embodiment” (63). Addams’ and Fernandes’ rhetorical strategies reveal rhetorical empathy in action as both women attempted to connect people across ethnic and socioeconomic lines. Addams, a wealthy white woman, gave up her privilege to work alongside poor immigrant families in Chicago’s Hull House and shared their stories in a speech on women’s labor rights at an exhibition attended by those women’s employers. A century later, Fernandes, a dark-skinned Black woman and the daughter of a domestic worker who also performed that work before she went to college to become a teacher, started a Facebook account that featured stories of Black women who worked in the homes of lighter-skinned women where they faced ridicule and abuse. Fernandes used these stories and her persona as a popular rapper in Brazil to persuade privileged women to see domestic workers as full humans deserving of dignity and rights. Though separated by time, space, and digital technologies, Addams and Fernandes use the same empathy-evoking rhetorical strategies to persuade those in power to change themselves.

Chapter three, “Rhetorical Empathy in the Gay-Rights/Religious Divide,” foregrounds rhetorical exchanges among evangelical Christians and gay-rights activist Justin Lee, also an evangelical Christian. In this chapter, rhetorical empathy accounts for the emotional aspects of empathy in bridging divides between progressives and fundamentalists, who can be changed when an

abstract Other becomes a concrete Other through storytelling. Blankenship chose this issue because it remains a controversial matter of civil rights most staunchly opposed by evangelical Christians even though a majority of LGBTQ people self-identify as Christian, and because our students often come from one or more of these backgrounds. Blankenship analyzes the features of rhetorical empathy in a blog post called “Ask a Gay Christian” and the rhetorical exchange between Lee (its author) and evangelical Christians in the comments. Lee strategically leverages his antigay, Southern Baptist background to rehearse a devout line of thinking shared by his audience and promote identification with him. When he makes himself vulnerable by sharing painful experiences of rejection, Lee invites his audience to feel that pain alongside him. Disarmed by his vulnerability and identifying with his Christian background, his audience became open to changing their beliefs about gay rights and Christianity. Lee’s practice of rhetorical empathy opened space for his interlocutors to become vulnerable to change and growth.

In chapter four, “Beyond ‘Common Ground’: Rhetorical Empathy in Composition Pedagogies,” Blankenship turns to the composition classroom in her locale of Baruch College at The City University of New York. Rhetorical empathy contributes to composition studies by 1) resituating the role of personal writing in composition, and 2) reconsidering typical approaches to teaching argument and persuasion. Drawing on a range of recent composition scholarship, Blankenship reiterates that students find writing projects meaningful when those projects connect to their personal lives, and students are more persuaded by personal stories than logical arguments detached from the body, though this agonistic Aristotelian approach still prevails in popular writing textbooks. Hence, Blankenship advocates for teaching narrative argument, a combination of the personal and the political that connects students’ stories to communities. Such a move requires teachers to value the personal as a valid epistemology and form of evidence in research-based academic writing.

I admit to bringing skepticism of personal narratives to *Changing the Subject*, but Blankenship’s argument and my students’ responses to it changed my perspective. Not only is her students’ writing more interesting when they build new knowledge with personal stories, Blankenship notes, but this blending of narrative and argument also attunes her to the realities of her students’ lived experiences and affects every aspect of her pedagogy (115). Blankenship continually puts herself in her students’ position as novice or near-novice academic writers composing multimodal arguments and, when she can, she does assignments along with them. As a result, she relates to her students differently, more fruitfully.

When my students read *Changing the Subject* in a senior seminar, they said they wanted to re-read this academic book (a first for them) because, when they

returned home, practicing rhetorical empathy would help them find their way to their loved ones across profound differences. They hungered for an effective, ethical response to polarized politics, and Blankenship named what they knew but lacked vocabulary to express. Rhetorical empathy resonated with their daily struggles to communicate across differences, and they expressed interest in Blankenship's narrative argument as a more engaging and meaningful form of academic writing. Their experience suggests that teachers are not the only ones who will find *Changing the Subject* illuminating in dark times.

Like any theory or praxis, rhetorical empathy has its limitations and Blankenship discusses them in the epilogue ("Epilogue: A Theory of Rhetorical Empathy"). Rhetorical empathy is but one strategy among many, and sometimes anger, refusal, silence, or disruption is a more fitting choice. If it is not done sincerely, rhetorical empathy can seem artificial, and sometimes people "literally cannot afford to be vulnerable" (122). Change within a person happens over time, too. Most significantly, rhetorical empathy needs an audience open to listening to others, and some people refuse to take this stance. But rhetorical empathy can be effective when other strategies are not, and as such, it has profound implications for composition.

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