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Changing the Subject: A Theory of RhetoricalEmpathy

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Changing the Subject: A Theory of Rhetorical Empathy

Lisa Blankenship

Utah State University Press, 2019, pp. 159

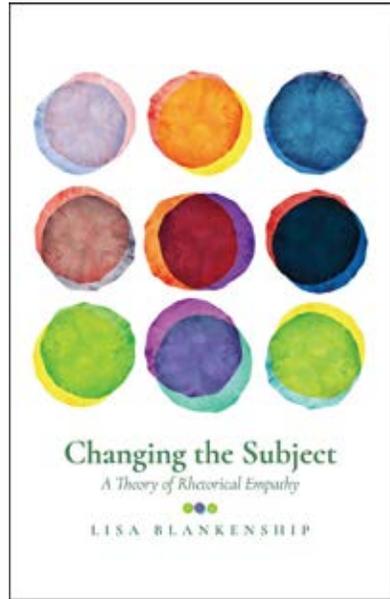
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In *Changing the Subject: A Theory of Rhetorical Empathy*, Lisa Blankenship poses a new theory for interacting ethically with other human beings by underscoring the role pathos and empathy hold in understanding differences. She explains how rhetorical empathy helps us connect with one another. Blankenship, citing Krista Ratcliffe's *Rhetorical Listening*, continues the important movement in rhetoric and composition toward storytelling and listening as a means of understanding. She emphasizes the current polarization happening in the United States as her exigence for writing.

The basis for this project is the notion that “pathos . . . is one of the most powerful forms of persuasion and change” (5). As Blankenship writes, “[m]y purpose is to frame pathos in new ways and make a case for rhetorical empathy as a means of ethical rhetorical engagement” (5).

In her introduction, Blankenship defines the book's key terms, namely pathos, empathy, and rhetorical empathy. She defines empathy as “an epistemology, a way of knowing and understanding, a complex combination of intention and emotion” (7). Blankenship's reason for using the term empathy is explained by her discussion of how pity is often used in contexts of colonization and other cultural movements in which the self is disconnected from the struggles of others (5). She defines pathos as “appeals to the personal in the form of stories and the (always political) emotions that can ensue” (7). Rhetorical empathy, for Blankenship, encompasses how rhetoric, empathy, and pathos intermingle to form a cohesive whole. She characterizes rhetorical empathy as “coming alongside or feeling with the experiences of an Other rather than feeling for or displacing an Other, which is usually associated with pity or sympathy” (7–8). Building from Ratcliffe's foundational work, Blankenship strives to alter the “the focus of rhetoric from (only) changing an audience to changing oneself (as well) and extending rhetorical listening in new directions by accounting for the role of the personal and the emotions in rhetorical exchange” (18). After foregrounding these pivotal terms, she recounts the origin story of this book on rhetorical empathy



by telling her coming-out story during the 1980s and 1990s, which was further complicated by her beliefs as a conservative Christian. She explains how this experience helped her to understand how to both seek justice for queer people and also not hold disdain for those with more conservative political views. Blankenship's experience left her wondering how religious queer people and their allies traverse the anti-gay discourse present in faith communities (14).

In the first chapter, "A Brief History of Empathy," Blankenship underscores the discrepancies between empathy, pity, and sympathy historically. Discussing the stark contrast of the same Greek word, *eleos*, present between translations of Aristotle's *On Rhetoric* and the Bible, Blankenship outlines the Ancient Greeks' fundamental misunderstanding of the word. *Eleos* is translated as pity in most translations of Aristotle's work but as "compassion" in nearly all translations of the Bible. Aristotle viewed pity as an emotion that was socially situated and given only to people whom society deemed did not deserve suffering. *Eleos* conversely appears within the original Greek New Testament twenty-seven times and is mainly translated as compassion or mercy. Blankenship recognizes how Western thought has been shaped by Aristotelian ideas and calls for a rethinking of what empathy looks like in practice. We are good at having empathy for those we deem not worthy of suffering; however, we need to do a better job of considering everyone unworthy of suffering, regardless of their identities. This discussion relates to the gay-rights rhetoric happening today, as many conservatives believe LGBTQ people suffer as a consequence of their lifestyle and thus do not have to have compassion for the suffering they experience (38–41). Blankenship further challenges notions of Aristotelian rhetorical theory by drawing on classical Chinese and Arab-Islamic traditions, suggesting that other ways of thinking about rhetoric exist beyond classical Greek epistemology. Chinese epistemology values the use of emotion and empathy and refers to them as "chi," or power and energy. Chinese rhetorics also have a concept called *bian*, which is "a process for connecting and transcending apparent differences and polarized positions" (Blankenship 33–34). Drawing from these traditions, Blankenship offers potential alternatives of viewing rhetoric simply as a means for persuasion.

She next explores how rhetorical engagement works in the context of feminist rhetoric. In the second chapter, "Threads of Feminist Rhetorical Practices," Blankenship gives a history of feminist rhetorical practices and cites the work of activists Jane Addams and Joyce Fernandes. She evaluates the methods they used to bring change to society and finds they focused on people's lived stories. She observes their methods exemplify the four strategies Blankenship has outlined to measure 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," and "addressing difference, power, and embodiment" (63).

Blankenship continues to expand her theory of rhetorical empathy by demonstrating how the arts of listening and storytelling function when relating to an "Other." In the third chapter, "Rhetorical Empathy in the Gay-Rights Religious Divide," she discusses how rhetorical empathy intersects in conversations around gay rights and conservative Christianity. Blankenship showcases an exchange Justin Lee, a well-

known Christian gay-rights activist, has on Rachel Held Evans' blog about identifying as both a gay man and a Christian. Referencing Crowley in *Toward a Civil Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism*, Blankenship discusses how people will be more likely to change their position on gay rights when they have a close loved one who is LGBTQ. Lee uses personal narrative and a positive view of his audience to move the conversation forward, striving for listening and understanding, rather than immediate agreement. Blankenship points out that Lee's view of his audience as people on a spectrum worth engaging in dialogue goes beyond Crowley's notion, which tends to be more Manichean when she refers to her audience members as either progressives or fundamentalists. Blankenship emphasizes that Lee's rhetorical methods demonstrate, contrary to Crowley's belief, that fundamentalists are willing to listen and engage with people with whom they do not agree (100).

Blankenship traces rhetorical empathy through the genre of personal arguments to explore how narrative arguments function in student writing. In chapter four, "Beyond 'Common Ground': Rhetorical Empathy in Composition Pedagogies," she explains that rhetorical empathy is valid both within "personal writing" and "argumentative writing" (104). Expanding on this notion, she describes how the Aristotelian model has structured argumentative and persuasive writing and created a divide between narrative and rhetoric. Citing Eli Goldblatt, she writes that students are actually more persuaded by story than they are by logical appeals. Blankenship explains that rhetorical empathy is different from the classical rhetorical tradition, which emphasizes winning against an opponent rather than trying to relate and connect with them. Rhetorical empathy asks writers to listen to the lived narratives of other human beings and to evaluate ourselves and our positions through dialogue-driven interaction and conversation (48).

Blankenship concludes her discussion of rhetorical empathy by discussing the constraints it poses and considering how rhetorical empathy is constrained by power differences; those who have less power are less likely to engage in rhetorical empathy because it involves a level of vulnerability they may not be willing to take on, considering they are already so marginalized. She also writes that rhetorical empathy can be manufactured and inauthentic, as it is impossible to know whether someone is sincerely engaging with the concept of rhetorical empathy. Because we cannot necessarily know someone's true motivations, determining whether someone is engaging in rhetorical empathy to truly attempt to understand other people—or just get what they want—is difficult. Lastly, Blankenship points out the biggest issue with rhetorical empathy, especially in our political climate, is people's actual willingness to listen. A person has to be willing to listen for rhetorical empathy to be effective.

As Blankenship has already noted herself, the degree to which the theory of rhetorical empathy will be effective is unknown. People must be willing to listen first before they can engage in rhetorical empathy. Blankenship provides a narrow view of evangelical communities in her introduction when she states that they value converting others above all else and are closed-minded and uninterested in being open to others. While this was clearly Blankenship's personal experience, it would be helpful for Blankenship to further clarify that not all evangelical Christians hold the goal of

conversation above all (14–15). It is admirable, however, that Blankenship is trying to bring all her diverse religious, political, and social audiences along with her toward the end of the argument.

While special care must be taken with regard to how other people are represented within her work, Blankenship's hedging created ambiguity that undercut her argument. For example, when she writes, "[t]here is an element of the Christian right with deeply vested interests in maintaining the status quo in terms of patriarchal power structures," it is helpful she uses the term "an element" so that all Christians are not generalized (Blankenship 123). However, this makes what she intends to communicate ambiguous because the reader does not know which specific—and potentially misogynistic—Christian right groups she is talking about and how their investment in patriarchy has real-world implications for women's rights. Additionally, she states that "there is a deeply entrenched segment of our society whose views on racial and ethnic difference are difficult if not impossible to change" (Blankenship 123). While it is notable that she uses "some" and "an element" in these cases to avoid generalities, it would be helpful if Blankenship could give some demographic details here so that readers are not left jousting at windmills.

Overall, Blankenship's book does an exemplary job of suggesting a new and effective way of rhetorically, empathetically, and ethically engaging with other human beings. Her expert foregrounding of the important terms and concepts, which are fundamental to her argument, makes her work more accessible for general readers and new graduate students. Her work is also straightforward enough to be an approachable resource for the public stakeholders and community members. Blankenship artfully constructs people as having beliefs that are on a spectrum, rather than on one side or the other. This eliminates the tendency to stereotype groups of people. The author's use of her own personal narrative adds to her ethos and the fact that she dwells within both the Christian community and LGBTQ community gives her authority to speak on this subject. Further, her citations of others—from Jane Addams to Justin Lee—who have performed rhetorical empathy effectively help to concretize what rhetorical empathy is and how it can be successful in real-life contexts. Blankenship's ability to describe the weaknesses of her own theory of rhetorical empathy add a level of humility and depth to the work as well.

The premise of this book, which is that we need to cultivate empathy in our rhetorical engagement with others, is timely given our culture's growing political polarization. Blankenship gives readers much to consider regarding rhetorical engagement and encourages readers to bridge partisan gaps through respectful and mutual discourse. Rhetorical empathy is especially important for community writing practitioners who aim to engage with community members ethically while simultaneously endeavoring to build unity, reciprocity, and empathy to address local problems.