Rhetorical Identification Across Difference and Disability

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Abstract: This review essay places Stephanie Kerschbaum's *Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference* and Shannon Walters's *Rhetorical Touch: Disability, Identification, Haptics* in a conversation about how we can more productively identify with and across difference. While they have different theoretical approaches and applications, both Kerschbaum and Walters discuss identification, embracing rather than erasing difference, and the importance of eschewing stereotypes that are harmful to the multiple ways that we encounter and interact with disability and difference in the classroom and in our rhetorical histories and theories.

Kerschbaum, Stephanie L. *Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference.* Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2014. 185 pp.

Walters, Shannon. *Rhetorical Touch: Disability, Identification, Haptics.* Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2014. 257 pp.

As an instructor who teaches disability-themed composition courses and a researcher of disability and accessibility, I get a lot of questions like, "I have a student with [diagnosed disability]. What do I do?" My response is usually something like, "Have you asked them?" Or, when I discuss my mental illness, people lean in a little closer and whisper, "What do you have?" My response for that one, perhaps, is less kind.

Labeling and categorizing help us sort and process new information, which can be useful as we encounter ideas and experiences that are unlike our own. For example, when a student shares that she has a learning disability (LD), we might immediately recall relevant information: a medical definition, articles we've read about LD in the classroom, firsthand knowledge or experiences from a family member or friend. We use these categorizations to make sense of new information, but they can't tell us what LD means to and for this individual student. How students perceive themselves and their writing and how they engage with the class and others cannot be understood simply through a diagnostic label.

In higher education, disability diagnoses are vital for students and faculty to receive the institutional accommodations and support that they need. However, categories can be harmful when we treat them as static or when we assume that we know what to do with that information without context. As instructors, we want to be able to identify with our students. As researchers, we want to be able to identify with our disciplinary histories and theories and with the communities of people who participate in our research. But sometimes categories can hinder this identification.

Identification across difference is something that Stephanie Kerschbaum and Shannon Walters both address in their 2014 texts. In *Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference*, Kerschbaum weaves a theory of difference that is broader than (but inclusive of) disability. Her focus is predominantly on how retheorizing difference can take us beyond static categorizations of students and improve our classroom practices: how instructors identify with students and how students identify with each other. Walters focuses more specifically on disability in *Rhetorical Touch: Disability, Identification, Haptics.* She re-reads rhetorical theory and history through the lens of touch in order to develop a more inclusive theory of rhetorical identification. While they have different theoretical approaches and applications, both Kerschbaum and Walters discuss identification, embracing rather than erasing difference, and the importance of eschewing stereotypes that are harmful to the multiple ways that we encounter and interact with disability and difference in the classroom and in our rhetorical histories and theories. Instead of a chapter breakdown, I hope to illustrate the theoretical and pedagogical contributions of these texts by drawing

connections to the work of disability studies scholars and grounding these ideas in the space of my own disability-themed writing classroom.

Reframing Pedagogy

In the introduction to *Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference*, Kerschbaum notes that instructors often orient to difference one of two ways: "by taxonomizing difference and by performing categorical redefinition" (7). This is perhaps unavoidable when we rely on institutional accommodations that taxonomize different kinds of disabilities, but taxonomies and categories are often rooted in deficit-oriented labeling that positions students as in need of fixing. Even when we consider the multiple factors that constitute someone's identity, we still often focus on categorical identity—the disability diagnosis—rather than the performance of that identity. These attempts to fix (anchor) difference treat it as a stable identity category and as something that must be fixed (cured) in order to be understood. This treatment of identities as static is perhaps why Walters urges a shift in our focus away from identity and toward identification, which "emphasizes the multiple, flexible aspects and locations through which a person or group can identify with someone or something" (60).

Kerschbaum argues that we must position difference as a rhetorical performance, which "resituates the problem away from *learning about*, and thus needing to know students, toward *learning with*, and thus always coming-to-know students" (57). This highlights the importance of finding ways to identify with students in ways that are interactive and don't simply impose what we know (or think we know) on a situation because we can never fully understand difference. Indeed, Kerschbaum argues that "teachers should not aim to *know* their students as much as willingly participate with them in processes of coming-to-know one another in the writing classroom" (59). The risk of relying on categorical identification is that instructors will make assumptions about their students—not out of malice, of course, but because identity categories can only give us so much information. Indeed, when we assume that we know our students, we overlook the distinct separatedness between us and overidentify (61). Overidentification occurs when we assume we know a person or situation just from a categorical identity: when instructors assume they know their students, when nondisabled people assume they know the experiences of disabled people, when disabled people assume they know the experiences of someone else with a disability who has widely variant experiences.

One of my favorite texts to assign in first-year writing is Allie Brosh's two-part webcomic on depression ([Adventures in Depression](#) and [Depression Part Two](#)). Brosh's texts use humor, images, and vivid metaphors in an attempt to facilitate the identification process—to get nondisabled readers to realize, "Oh! That's what depression is like for my [mom, brother, best friend, student, colleague]." There's a danger here, though, because if we read her experience as just the diagnostic label—depression—instead of her personal and complicated experience with depression, we risk overidentification.

Brosh's webcomics resonate with many of my students, but there are always some who compare a brief but significant period of depression to living with chronic depression. For example, a few students will claim to now fully understand depression, even though Brosh's is just one account. Or, sometimes students who identify with depression will say that they can't identify with Brosh because her account of depression doesn't have a root cause and theirs does. These texts present a great opportunity to discuss the diversity within depression: to share the similarities in experiences (shared feelings) but mark the differences (what triggers it and how we all work with and through it differently).

Kerschbaum offers marking difference as a theoretical lens through which we can more productively facilitate identification. She writes, "When marking difference, speakers and audiences alike display and respond to markers of difference, those rhetorical cues that signal the presence of difference between two or more participants" (7). By marking the differences of their experiences with depression instead of trying to find the commonalities ("We were both sad"), students can come to a more genuine space of understanding by acknowledging and legitimizing the differences across their experiences.

Like identification, marking difference is rhetorical "because it emphasizes the relationship between speaker/writer and audience as well as the situated nature of all communicative activity" (67). Marking difference doesn't dismiss identity categories but instead privileges the differences within and fluidity of those categories. Indeed, Kerschbaum argues that "paying attention to markers of difference does not mean ignoring category identifications; it means acknowledging the way categories help us negotiate situations while holding those category identifications open for new interpretation and understanding" (92). Acknowledging and respecting the ways in which people categorize and identify themselves is important. However, when we make assumptions or decisions based only on these categorical identities rather than how they're enacted in different rhetorical situations, we prevent identification.

An example is the disability-specific approach in our disciplinary scholarship: texts that focus on a specific disability such as autism or deafness, list key characteristics, and then recommend prescribed pedagogical actions based on those characteristics. This may be a useful starting point for instructors who are unfamiliar with a specific disability; however, when we rely on medical symptoms and treatments, we fix our students into a diagnose-and-accommodate model of instruction that flattens their individual experiences and needs. Marking differences, rather than labeling and categorizing, allows us to mesh what we already know about a particular disability with the interactional element of how a student rhetorically identifies (or doesn't identify) with it. Paying attention to markers of difference helps us move beyond making generalizations about our students' needs and experiences and can (with a lot of practice!) help us engage more productively with difference in the classroom.

Rhetorical Identification: Theory Meets Practice

While Kerschbaum theorizes difference in a way that resonates with identification, Walters explicitly uses Burke's theory of rhetorical identification as a lens to discuss touch. Rhetorical identification illustrates the complexities of identifying between nondisabled and disabled bodies and across the vast identities that constitute the disabled community itself. In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Kenneth Burke theorizes identification as the process by which two different people identify with each other because their interests and experiences are similar—or, at least, they presume them to be. Consubstantiality emerges from this identification, joining the individuals in this shared experience but maintaining a distinct separatedness.

Walters argues that the process of identification is explicitly tactile and defines touch as "a potential for identification among bodies of diverse abilities that takes place in physical, proximal, and/or emotional contact" (3). Like Kerschbaum, Walters doesn't position identification as a process that eliminates or minimizes differences but that "operates in the potentials of difference" (3). Rhetorical touch is a *partial* or *incomplete* process of identification, which highlights the still separatedness of identities and bodies within the process. Though necessary, the division between two bodies sometimes hinders understanding. Walters writes, "In the context of disability, troubled identifications arise from unequal power relations between disabled and nondisabled people, a history in which disabled people have been ignored and discriminated against, and unexamined stereotypes about the disability experience" (57). Indeed, the process of identification across difference is fraught.

Teaching a class about disability or explaining the value of learning about disability to someone who isn't familiar with it often highlights the complexities of identification. Often, students don't feel like they can identify with disabled experiences unless they have a disability themselves or know someone who does. When nondisabled students try to identify with disability, they often identify with stereotypes rather than lived experiences. I try to find texts that I know will challenge students. Another favorite is an episode ([Escape](#)) of the TV series *This American Life* that explores the life of Mike Phillips, a 27-year-old man with spinal muscular atrophy. What I love about this episode is that it disrupts many assumptions about the daily life of someone with a severe physical disability. As he ages, Mike experiences more difficulties with mobility and communicating, but he also lives his life in ways that students can identify with: he hangs out at coffee shops, gets piercings and tattoos, has sexual relationships, and fights with his mom. Like the Brosh texts, the episode creates space to break down the assumptions we have about disability and mark the differences across our shared experiences.

Part of moving forward in this process is acknowledging the stereotypes that circulate about disability and difference and that we often reinscribe in our scholarship and in our classrooms. The question, then, is how can we create more meaningful identifications that highlight significant differences without stereotyping, stigmatizing, or erasing them all together?

Reframing Rhetorical Theory

Throughout *Rhetorical Touch*, Walters argues that touch is rhetorical and "integral to the history, theory, practice, and pedagogy of rhetoric" (3). I want to focus here on her reframing of the rhetorical appeals as an attempt to highlight important bodily differences that have been erased in our disciplinary theories. Retheorizing the rhetorical appeals is an attempt to make rhetoric more inclusive to different bodyminds, and Walters offers a discussion of the often-stereotypical ways in which we categorize disability and limit the potentiality of disabled rhetors, which has useful implications for how we teach rhetoric. This re-reading also builds on the work of disability scholars in our field, which I connect to here.

Walters begins with *logos*—the appeal that we most often associate with Aristotelian rhetoric and the ability to identify with someone's argument. She addresses the stereotype that psychiatrically and mentally disabled rhetors

are unable to formulate logical appeals, which resonates with larger critiques of the conflation of mental disability with rhetorical disability (Prendergast). Margaret Price has argued that mentally disabled individuals who are denied rhetorical ability are also denied the opportunity to express themselves and be heard (26-27). Disclosing a mental disability is perceived as surrendering rationality and thus rhetorical potentiality. Katie Rose Guest Pryal explains that these disclosures are highly tenuous in higher education where we are "often still devoted to the mythos of the good man speaking well, the professor as bastion of reason, the *cogito ergo sum*." Against this larger backdrop, Walters advocates for a reframing of *logos* to felt *logos*—a distinction that moves "beyond traditional understandings of logic, reason, or rationality, forming identifications based on mutual ways of feeling and experiencing relationships and the world" (87).

Next, she problematizes *ethos*, arguing that "traditional approaches to *ethos* are problematic, in part because of stereotypes about autism that may affect audience reception and inhibit identification, but also because of the pervasive neurotypical foundations of *ethos* in rhetorical theory" (112). Neurotypical behaviors such as eye contact and smiling are often identified as ways to establish goodwill and trust. Reframing *ethos*, then, supports Melanie Yergeau's call to to legitimize autistic ways of communicating and being (Heilker and Yergeau), which is an opportunity to reflect not only on our theories but also on our pedagogies—specifically, how we can encourage the non-normative ways that students can position themselves as credible. By reframing *ethos* as *mētis*, "or cunning and embodied intelligence" (54), Walters argues for more inclusive and embodied models of building character. This echoes Jay Dolmage's discussion of *mētis* as a rhetorical concept that diverges from forward-moving, linear notions of logic and makes room for divergent and embodied ways of thinking and making meaning.

Lastly, Walters discusses *pathos*, which is arguably the most stereotyped rhetorical appeal because people often link disability with pity and sympathy. Walters argues that visible disabilities often elicit emotional reactions from audiences that aren't what the rhetor intended (143). Physical and visible disabilities often elicit emotional responses such as pity, wonder, and inspiration—visual rhetorics of disability that Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has discussed at length. Walters reframes *pathos* through a discussion of *kairos* and how identification can be facilitated by "bring[ing] diverse bodies together in time and space" (152). Because touch is so highly affective, she argues that *kairos* as a rhetorical practice allows disabled rhetors to manipulate space and time to forge identifications.

Thinking carefully about how our disciplinary theories include and exclude particular bodies is important both for continued scholarship in the field and for how we teach and assess rhetorical persuasion. Incorporating and encouraging students to create texts with a range of genres legitimizes the many different ways that arguments can take shape (*logos*). Encouraging students to include multiple perspectives—and particularly in my class, the perspective of those who identify as disabled—demonstrates credibility (*ethos*). And the power of personal narrative is a great example of using emotional appeals not to elicit pity or sympathy but to identify with readers (*pathos*). Ensuring that our theories and pedagogies are inclusive is necessary for how we interact with students and how students of varying experiences and abilities identify with texts and each other in meaningful ways.

Embracing—Not Erasing—Difference

A lot of my writing and teaching focuses on universal design, multimodality, and the idea that we need to make our pedagogical and theoretical spaces as accessible to as many bodies as possible—both disabled and nondisabled. Often, theories of universal design and multimodality are met with a similar concern: the expectation of meeting everyone's needs through different modes, media, and practices is simply too much. Within preexisting constraints of a semester or conference or scholarship, being conscientious and inclusive of differences is difficult, which is what makes these two texts so useful. Learning how to identify across differences is necessary, although not without its challenges.

Both Walters and Kerschbaum acknowledge the challenges of identifying across differences. Walters warns of erasing experiences in the process of identification between disabled and nondisabled groups:

> There are significant material differences between living as a disabled person and living as a nondisabled person, and there are also important experiential differences in living as a person with a physical disability and living as a person with a cognitive or psychological disability; these differences are important to value because the experiences of all disabled people are crucial repositories of meaning-making. (201)

In the classroom, this may manifest when a student shares a personal experience and someone else tries to identify with a dissimilar experience or when we make assumptions about students based on our own experiences. In our scholarship, this may manifest when we apply stereotypes about categorical identities rather than engaging

with people's material realities and lived experiences. Throughout *Rhetorical Touch*, Walters draws attention to the rhetorical potentials of touch "as a sense that equalizes; yet it is crucial to be mindful of its differences" (202). It's vital to draw connections yet respect the separatedness of our identities—to embrace and mark difference without erasing it.

Kerschbaum acknowledges that marking difference can be difficult because sometimes our actions are unconscious (rather than purposeful identity performances) and because identities become less flexible over time (117). Even if we approach new situations and people with openness, once we sustain interactions with them, we form particular understandings and associations. This occurs in an interaction as simple as peer review groups where, halfway through the semester, students become familiar with each other and may default to particular behaviors in those interactions. Of course, a more significant obstacle is that students—and even we—may be unwilling to reflect critically on our assumptions about difference.

These challenges don't minimize the importance of marking difference, however, and Kerschbaum encourages us to develop "practices of answerable engagement" (118). As instructors of first-year composition and directors of writing centers in particular, we interact with very diverse student populations. While it is impossible to know what every single student needs—and as Kerschbaum notes, difference is not fully knowable—it's possible (and not very time consuming) to have explicit conversations with students about their needs. Particularly in a writing class where disability is the focus, it is easy for me to have class conversations about learning needs and styles and to check in with informal evaluations and reflections of what is and is not working in class. We are responsible for listening to and engaging with others—face-to-face and in writing, in our pedagogy and in our theory. Kerschbaum and Walters encourage us not to simply accommodate disability and difference but to recognize them as sources of rich rhetorical potential. Bringing disability into our classrooms and scholarship presents an opportunity to identify —rather that stigmatize or stereotype—across difference.

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