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Rhetorical Vulnerability

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Rhetorical Vulnerability

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Master's Thesis

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Sophia Brauner

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Abstract

Rhetorical vulnerability is a necessary, underlying condition for rhetoric. That is, in order for rhetoric to be meaningful or even possible, we must already be vulnerable to each other. This paper frames vulnerability as a rhetorical concept different from vulnerability as a way of being, a personality trait, and a modifier of actions and behaviors. I examine how vulnerability has shown up in rhetorical scholarship as approaches to rhetoric, in relation to desire, and as embodied and affective. I close by proposing a practice of embracing vulnerability which creates capacities to differently engage identification categories and to understand spaces not as fixed containers, but as open, moldable, and relational.

Keywords: Vulnerability, Rhetoric, Rhetorical, Rhetorical Theory, Rhetorical Vulnerability, Engagement, Relationality, Sexuality, Identity, Pedagogy

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Chapter 1: What is Rhetorical Vulnerability?

Rhetorical vulnerability is a necessary, underlying condition for rhetoric. That is, in order for rhetoric to be meaningful or even possible, we must already be vulnerable. Vulnerability, of course, is understood as a way of being, a personality trait, and a way we modify our actions and behaviors. We can make ourselves vulnerable or act vulnerably. I would like to put forward an understanding of *rhetorical* vulnerability that differs from vulnerability as it's commonly known because recognizing vulnerability as the condition for rhetoric allows for a change in how we relate to each other and the world around us. Put differently, rhetorical vulnerability quite literally makes a difference and, so, I understand it as a requirement for rhetoric. The idea or feeling of vulnerability is rarely related to rhetoric because rhetoric is an already loaded, often negative term associated with notions of manipulation, arguing, or even lying. News outlets warn us of divisive political rhetoric but when I say rhetoric, I'm naming a concept always and already connected to vulnerability because rhetoric describes the different ways in which a deeply relational persuasion happens among actors in the world.

Persuasion is part and parcel of the ways we encounter our worlds, whether it's persuading a jury that a person is innocent, convincing a friend to seek out therapy, or selecting the best possible way to write a cover letter for a job application. Persuasion doesn't only happen through language-centered encounters among human beings, it's also baked into the fabric of our world and our interactions with it. For example, John Mucklebauer uses Bruno Latour's example of speed bumps to demonstrate the persuasiveness of objects. A speed bump persuades drivers to slow down to avoid damaging their car (36). The speed bump itself doesn't 'argue' despite being placed deliberately and for a specific purpose. Yet, when the driver encounters the speed bump, they wouldn't argue with the construction workers or urban planners about the existence of the

speed bump. The speed bump itself is rhetorical! Even in the courtroom, during a conversation with a friend, and in job applications, persuasion doesn't exclusively happen through conscious linguistic encounters between humans. For example, a 2011 study found that factors such as hunger and low glucose levels can influence a judge's ruling (Danziger et. al.). Or, the cultural stigma surrounding mental health participates in conversations around therapy. In these instances, it becomes clear that it's impossible to attribute persuasion to one particular persuader. Instead, persuasion is what makes these situations, its participants, and encounters show up in the first place.

Even if persuasion cannot be pinpointed to an identified persuader, persuasion is still deeply relational. Consider the weather. The weather is so persuasive it influences our clothing choices, our activities, our moods, and even our access to food. Notably, the weather doesn't decide to persuade humans to dress a certain way; the weather doesn't need us to exist. In fact, grouping natural phenomena as "the weather" is a decisively human move. However, our practices do have influence on the weather, as the real threat of global warming demonstrates. Persuasion, therefore, doesn't happen in isolation; it is deeply relational and thus, a result of a necessary vulnerability. Aristotle's definition of rhetoric is useful here. He says: "Rhetoric is the capacity for finding the best available means of persuasion in any given situation (112)." Though I have stretched the idea of finding the best available means to persuade (which would require a persuader), his definition is useful because vulnerability is necessary to make the ways persuasion happens (the means) appear as available. To be vulnerable, to be persuadable, is not a choice, neither is it something to work towards, which is why vulnerability is a necessary condition for rhetoric to take place.

Vulnerability, however, isn't often associated with the study of rhetoric. In recent years, the term vulnerability has become a popular buzzword. With conversations around mental health being normalized and understandings and expectations of gendered behavior being challenged, vulnerability has begun (and continues) to shift from something to be avoided towards something to be welcomed as a source of strength and authenticity. In her widely circulated 2011 Ted Talk "The Power of Vulnerability," Brené Brown describes vulnerability as "the willingness to do something where there are no guarantees" (10:25) and as "to stop controlling and predicting" (11:13). She frames vulnerability both as an action and a state that humans can choose to enter. More precisely, vulnerability is something that generates shame and fear but also joy, creativity, belonging, and love. Her description of vulnerability points to an understanding more people seem to share. For example, I associate vulnerability with opening up about issues considered intimate and private. That kind of vulnerability generates a solidarity and connectivity among people who relate to, sympathize, or empathize with similar issues. In other words, vulnerability can start smaller and larger conversations about topics that hadn't been talked about to that extent before. Vulnerability, in this sense, also brings people closer together. If my partner makes himself vulnerable by sharing a painful childhood memory with me, my love for him grows and our bond is strengthened. Nonetheless, vulnerability is still seen as weakness in some contexts. Despite feminist efforts, like Brown's, to challenge harmful qualities that grow out of masculinity (and any gendered expectations for that matter), men (and women) continue to resist vulnerability in an effort to "man up." Vulnerability, then, is still assumed to be something that people can resist or even disregard.

Vulnerability, the way Brown frames it, is a privilege that not everyone can afford to access. False pain assessments caused by racially biased medical staff exemplifies this. A 2016

study found that those misassessments were rooted in assumed biological differences between Black and white people (Hoffman et. al.). Hence, Black people routinely receive lower doses of painkillers than white people. In terms of vulnerability this means that in medical situations (and others too!) Black people's vulnerability is disregarded. Because of racism (which is significantly persuasive), Black people's pain, and their declaring of such, isn't perceived as vulnerability. Brown's take on vulnerability as "the willingness to do something where there are no guarantees" showcases how much there can be at stake not just when people display vulnerability, but when others turn away from, or are even repelled by such vulnerability. Examining the broader context of this example is outside the scope of my thesis but what it allows me to demonstrate is that Brown's vulnerability is a tool that not everyone can act on. Rhetorical vulnerability, on the other hand, is always and already present; how we choose to engage our rhetorical vulnerability (which I'll show in Chapter 3) remains a question of privilege.

When I say that vulnerability has often been framed as an available mean for persuasion, I mean that it is a practice or mindset that people take on to change the tone and intensity of a relationship. The way I seek to frame vulnerability differs to a rather large degree. In order for these relationships to exist, participants need to first be vulnerable to one another because rhetoric cannot happen among isolated entities. Participants in a rhetorical situation are *always and already* in relation to one another because of rhetorical vulnerability. The hospital example from earlier shows the difference between rhetorical vulnerability and a Brown-like framework of vulnerability. The physical and emotional suffering of Black people in the medical system, is a result of an already present vulnerability: a rhetorical vulnerability that makes it possible to be hurt physically and emotionally. Brown, on the other hand, would frame the *response* to that

pain, that is, to admit to struggle and to act on it by seeking out care, as vulnerability. The reason that what gets called vulnerability in the hospital example is available in the first place is, actually, a prior and necessary vulnerability. Rhetorical vulnerability is not a choice, neither is it something to work towards because it's a necessary condition for rhetoric to take place.

In this thesis, then, I aim to shift a rather common understanding of persuasion as a defensive and argument-driven practice to one that originates in what I'm calling rhetorical vulnerability. In doing so, I follow Jacqueline Jones Royster's lead in considering a repositioning within the landscapes of rhetorical scholarship. In her article "Disciplinary Landscaping, or Contemporary Challenges in the History of Rhetoric," Royster argues that the landscapes frequented by Rhetoric scholars have been limited by the positionality of scholars within that landscape. She writes, "in order to make sense of what is before us, we select, focus, and fine-tune the view that we are perceiving or imagining, and we assign to those perceptions value and meaning" (148). Vulnerability demonstrates this selection process and the probability of reorientation because vulnerability has been, and still is occasionally, equated with weakness and lack of resilience. This idea of vulnerability has shifted to vulnerability as an expression of courage that leads to more intimate relationships. Royster helps me articulate another shift in the way we understand vulnerability by examining how vulnerability is rhetorical. In doing so, I'm not denying or even erasing other understandings of vulnerability; I'm merely considering a different landscape.

These reconsiderations are a feminist and anti-racist endeavor. Using the example of rhetorical scholarship, Royster outlines how the landscape of rhetorical scholarship has been built and maintained from a position of whiteness, elitism, and masculinity. This positionality has shaped who is considered a rhetorical subject worth studying. Importantly, Royster doesn't

equate whiteness, elitism, and masculinity with elite white men. While there are significant overlaps, given white elite men were, for a long time, the only ones privileged to receive higher education, Royster describes a way of practicing academic research built on structures of whiteness, elitism, and masculinity. A practice grounded in whiteness, elitism, and masculinity limits the sites of rhetorical inquiry and reproduces a methodology that "prescribe[s], dictate[s], or constrain[s] other viewpoints" (160). Because these practices are so ingrained in how I encounter scholarship, it takes work to first recognize them and then practice otherwise. I'm accustomed to prescribing, dictating, and constraining, so what I'm attempting in this thesis is to *describe* rhetorical vulnerability from a position (or landscape) that we might not have considered yet and embrace practices and ideas that don't strive for final, authoritative, and excluding ideas about rhetoric. Anchoring "our views of rhetorical terrain", writes Royster, "in counter discourses instead of always anchoring them in the discourses of power and prestige" creates a more expansive scope of rhetorical scholarship, but not for the sake of expansion, but for the sake of broadening of what's possible within rhetorical studies (160).

In this first chapter, I further describe rhetorical vulnerability and why it matters for rhetorical theory by situating my ideas in existing scholarship addressing vulnerability. Few scholars have taken up vulnerability as a rhetorical phenomenon which is why this chapter draws on the two articles that explicitly center vulnerability. Stormer and McGreavy's article "Thinking Ecologically About Rhetoric's Ontology: Capacity, Vulnerability, and Resilience" (2017) sets up vulnerability as a relational openness capacitating action against violence as "forceful relation" which disables relationally emergent action (11). Next, I take on Marback's "A Meditation on Vulnerability in Rhetoric" (2010) who proposes vulnerability be understood "as a characteristic that enlarges rhetorical thinking (1)".

In the second chapter, “Tracing Rhetorical Vulnerability in Rhetorical Scholarship,” I walk my understanding of rhetorical vulnerability through different rhetorical frameworks that don’t quite name vulnerability but in which rhetorical vulnerability is present. I examine the role of vulnerability in John Mucklebauer’s and Jenny Rice’s approaches to rhetoric. Then, I frame Jonathan Alexander’s understanding of desire, which he develops by merging elements from the queer and the material turn in writing studies, as a symptom of rhetorical vulnerability. Finally, I use Karma Chavez’s and Fernando Sanchez’s work to show the relationship between and impact of rhetorical vulnerability on the body.

In the final chapter, I introduce a practice with which I believe we can sustainably and responsibly engage our rhetorical vulnerability. Embracing vulnerability, as I’ve named this practice, acknowledges that vulnerability is a necessary condition for rhetoric and a crucial part of persuasion and, importantly, offers us a way to practice our vulnerability to create new ways of approaching our identities and relationships with the world. The term practice is commonly used to describe an activity designated to improve a skill, like playing an instrument, a sport, or speaking a language. As the counterpart of theory, practice is also used to describe how a theory supposedly unfolds in “real life.” I’m using “practice” to describe an ongoing activity (an embracing) that when practiced repeatedly, changes the way vulnerability is approached. Rhetorical scholar Casey Boyle writes that “*practice is the exercise of tendencies to activate greater capacities*” (5). As I outline in Chapter 2, rhetorical vulnerability tends to be practiced with resistance. If rhetorical vulnerability is practiced with an embrace, instead of resistance, over and over again, then new qualities of engaging vulnerability emerge. What these qualities are and how they function cannot be predicted but what is certain to me, is that they couldn’t emerge this way if rhetorical vulnerability would be practiced only through resistance or

acceptance. In proposing this practice of embracing vulnerability, I aim to prevent the instrumentalization and co-opting of vulnerability and work towards an understanding of rhetorical vulnerability that honors the entanglement of vulnerability and persuasion and the responsibility for each other that emerges from this approach.

Vulnerability and Violence

In their essay "Thinking Ecologically About Rhetoric's Ontology: Capacity, Vulnerability, and Resilience," Nathan Stormer and Bridie McGreavy argue that focusing on vulnerability instead of violence within an ecological framework of rhetoric helps us better understand how and why certain practices emerge from these ecologies. Because vulnerability, to Stormer and McGreavy, is a force that capacitates action they hope that attuning to vulnerability will lead to a better understanding of how ecologies function. Examining rhetoric ecologically means recognizing that participants in an ecology are not isolated, closed-off entities interacting with one another separately. An ecological approach centers the relations among participants and perceives them as open and affectable, or vulnerable, to one another. In other words, to be affectable is to always be open to other participants in an ecology. Stormer and McGreavy describe this as a "struggle in dependence, not between 'independents' (3)." Ecological entities are not set up against each other as isolated selves but as entangled with each other. Stormer and McGreavy explain this with their recurring example of clam farming: "Entities like clam seed and tide charts are not raw material waiting on human will to matter (13)." In an ecological framework, clam seeds and tide charts are not closed-off entities that only become meaningful when another closed-off entity (like farmers) decides to act *on* them. Instead, farmers, clam seeds, and tide charts, and many more participants influence and emerge the practice of clam

farming. According to Stormer and McGreavy, vulnerability, then, makes visible how these practices emerge within an ecology.

Stormer and McGreavy characterize vulnerability as a relational openness that enables action: "to think of rhetorical capacities as environmentally emergent is to think power arising from entwined vulnerabilities (15)". Any type of action or response to another entity would then only be recognizable by paying attention to what vulnerability makes possible. Stormer and McGreavy write: "If struggling with rather than against the world capacitates, then vulnerability conditions and limits rhetorical force (12)." Vulnerability serves two purposes here. Vulnerability creates rhetorical action, or "recast[s] notions of rhetorical potential" *and* regulates the "rhetorical force" of these interactions, which I read as the quality and intensity of persuasion (15). To Stormer and McGreavy, that reciprocal affectability of ecological participants makes action possible, emerges participants in a particular way, creates practices, and shapes ecologies. From this angle, vulnerability becomes a tool that entities can use to regulate the intensity of their actions, an understanding, which resembles a more commonly shared approach to vulnerability. In the clam farming example, a regulation of the persuasive quality still depends on the farmer deciding to acknowledge an ecological affectability. Even though Stormer and McGreavy don't explicitly name vulnerability as a tool, their framing of vulnerability as a regulator of rhetorical force may be utilized intentionally to increase the intensity of rhetorical (inter)action.

Stormer and McGreavy also posit a turn towards vulnerability as a methodological shift away from violence and toward vulnerability. To them, violence results from the assumption that entities are isolated from each other. Methodologically, violence draws attention to "an eruptive [rhetorical] moment" which "obscures the environment that conditions violence (11)." Attending

to violence means to concentrate on the forceful impacts of violence (that "eruptive moment"), not the relations that made violence a possible response in the first place. For example, to focus solely on the specific medical implications of inadequately evaluating a Black patient's pain would prioritize "an eruptive moment," whereas an analysis grounded in vulnerability would examine the conditions that made such a misjudgment possible in the first place. Focusing on vulnerability would make visible the ways entities are vulnerable to each other and trace how practices and ways of being emerge. What Stormer and McGreavy remain unclear about, is whether the shift to vulnerability and the recognition of entangled, not sovereign entities they propose would erase this kind of violence. The medical consequences a Black person suffers from the medical (mis)treatment is still a form of *real* violence, even if the analytical focus shifts to the systems, practices, and ideologies that enabled that violence. A drastic methodological shift from violence to vulnerability would disregard the impacts of violence.

Stormer and McGreavy aren't clear about whether they're proposing a methodological shift for rhetoricians to focus on vulnerability instead of the "eruptive moment" of violence (as outlined in the paragraph above), or if they're doing something different, namely positing that vulnerability can only be present in the absence of violence. It seems to me that they're not explicitly suggesting that violence needs to be overcome for vulnerability to unfold. Their shift, whether methodological or actual, seems to suggest that a turning away from violence is necessary to fully recognize the potential and force of vulnerability. Consequently, Stormer and McGreavy frame violence and vulnerability as opposing rhetorical phenomena.

In my framing of rhetorical vulnerability, violence isn't the opposite of vulnerability as is suggested in Stormer and McGreavy's article. I understand violence as a response to the fact that vulnerability is already present and therefore actually deeply entangled with violence. Let me

back up: If vulnerability is a condition for rhetoric and persuasion, no matter how somebody engages the world, that entity is already vulnerable to that world. Rhetorical vulnerability does not, as Stormer and McGreavy pose, emerge the ways participants are dependent on each other. Vulnerability is the reason for that dependence. Vulnerability still capacitates action, as Stormer and McGreavy articulate, but vulnerability isn't an analytical lens, neither is it a phenomenon opposite to violence. Stormer and McGreavy suggest so because their project is to approach rhetoric from a position of vulnerability, not violence. They are invested in finding out what becomes possible when vulnerability is centered in analyses of ecologies. Their framing of vulnerability as an analytical tool works towards my understanding of rhetorical vulnerability as generative. However, Stormer and McGreavy's use of vulnerability suggests that vulnerability can be regulated or modified to influence the force of rhetorical action. As a condition for rhetoric, rhetorical vulnerability can't be instrumentalized, rather it is an already present state that is acted on, sometimes with violence.

A violent response to rhetorical vulnerability is understandable given the grave responsibility and exposedness that emerges from this vulnerability. Recognizing that I'm always and already vulnerable to anything and anyone before I "decide" to engage with them is exposing me in scary and unpredictable ways. So, unlike Brown's notion of vulnerability, rhetorical vulnerability is that which a person can respond to only because it's already present. A turning away from vulnerability doesn't replace vulnerability with violence; both are still rhetorically present. While I describe the relationship between vulnerability and violence differently than Stormer and McGreavy, I agree that vulnerability, understood as an aspirational quality *or* as a generative rhetorical concept, is deeply connected to negatively connotated concepts such as violence. Rhetoric is often associated with manipulation and deception, which

is why it's unsurprising to me that these notions show up in conversations on vulnerability. Having considered Stormer and McGreavy's idea of violence, I now turn to another discussion of vulnerability that explores the relationship of vulnerability, manipulation, and deceit.

Vulnerability and Deceit

Richard Marback, a rhetorical scholar, reflects on how vulnerability is perceived in rhetorical encounters in "A Meditation on Vulnerability in Rhetoric" (2009). Picking up a common, Brown-like understanding of vulnerability, Marback posits vulnerability not as weakness but as "an attitude of care and concern (1)". He shows how, despite this understanding, vulnerability in rhetoric is recognized as an attitude to be skeptical of. He writes, "[t]o be vulnerable is to be exposed to forces beyond our control, forces that have the potential to disrupt who we are" (7). Marback demonstrates the exposure (and the fear of it) that comes with vulnerability, though he doesn't frame vulnerability as a condition for rhetoric, but an attitude we take up. In rhetorical terms, he focuses particularly on how that attitude means "experiencing oneself as vulnerable to deception" (2). Marback further observes that vulnerability is not only a state that can lead to deception but that it's a result of "errors or weakness" on behalf of an "underprepared, unguarded, or indifferent" rhetor.

The anxiety that vulnerability invokes for Marback is grounded in "believing ourselves self-sufficient" (2). Vulnerability attacks the assumed safety of a sovereign, closed-off self that can shield itself from influence because vulnerability exposes the openness and entanglement of entities to one another. Both Marback and Stormer and McGreavy see in vulnerability a rejection of self-sufficiency, or better, an exposing of the impossibility of self-sufficient selves. Even for Brown, letting go of control over the self is crucial to vulnerability. So, rhetorical vulnerability isn't a concept that functions through isolation and self-sufficiency. Marback notes that the

anxiety caused by vulnerability, and hence the lack of self-sufficiency, constrains openness which suggests that there *is* a way to avoid vulnerability. Despite framing vulnerability as a result of open and entangled actors, vulnerability is still perceived as something to be avoided by Marback.

Later, Marback tries to push vulnerability beyond a mere association with anxiety, weakness, and deception. Instead of examining the negative, self-threatening aspects of vulnerability, he works through the generative potential of vulnerability. For example, he describes empathy, forgiveness, and loyalty as dispositions and practices that require vulnerability: "The connectedness and contingency of such traits [...] demand greater vulnerability to others than required by the interdependence of rhetor and audience" (9). Here he frames vulnerability not as something that a rhetor (think: speaker) might abuse to deceive her audience but as a state needed to express empathy, forgiveness, and loyalty. In this instance, Marback gets close to my understanding of rhetorical vulnerability by positing vulnerability as a prerequisite of these traits. We differ in the possibility of having various degrees of vulnerability for different situations. As I note in my discussion of John Mucklebauer's approach to rhetoric in Chapter 2, the relationship between rhetors and audiences–terms Marback uses to describe formalized rhetorical contexts– is built on and emerges from rhetorical vulnerability, to the same extent it does when forgiving a cheating partner. Both scenarios emerge from rhetorical vulnerability even if the latter might make vulnerability feel more visible than, for example, in a courtroom. However, even in this formal setting, actors are exposed to vulnerability, especially those at the mercy of the setting in much the same way that Black people are at the mercy of medical racism in hospitals. I'm not suggesting that racism and a troubled romantic relationship

have the same intensities and impacts on the participants. Rather, I'm teasing out how Marback doesn't quite capture the constant, already present exposure to rhetorical vulnerability.

Marback, nonetheless, suspects vulnerability to be vital for rhetoric. He describes vulnerability as "necessary for successes of rhetoric" (10). He doesn't explicitly state what he counts as a rhetorical success, but I suspect he refers to traits like empathy, forgiveness, and loyalty. Nonetheless, Marback can't quite shake the fear of "being duped" (10) in his notes on vulnerability. If vulnerability can lead to successful rhetoric, a misuse of vulnerability can lead to failure, like being manipulated by someone. That fear, Marback insists, "need have little bearing on our willingness to open ourselves through our forgiveness or guilt or loyalty to the appeals of others" (10). Fear and suspicion towards vulnerability (and the possibility of deceit as a result), continue to show up in Marback's ideas. He explores the relational aspect of vulnerability in his discussion of empathy, forgiveness, and loyalty while still maintaining a sense of suspicion towards vulnerability in formalized settings (like a courtroom). For Marback, vulnerability remains a phenomenon to "make sense of," while not necessarily something to control, but certainly something to interact with and regulate. He admits that "words can never make us invulnerable," meaning vulnerability can hardly be overcome, but words (rhetoric) are a way of managing our vulnerability for Marback (12). I agree, to an extent. We are rhetorically vulnerable because vulnerability is a condition for rhetoric and persuasion. That doesn't mean that there isn't anything we can do with and about our rhetorical vulnerability. Rhetorical vulnerability is something we can embrace. Something that teaches us how to approach our relationships and how to understand ourselves. Something that, in understanding it better, helps us better approach difficult conversations, decision making and, more generally, how we move and show up in the world. To build such a practice, we need to first grapple with the implications

of vulnerability as the condition for rhetoric. To do so, I spend the next chapter examining how rhetorical vulnerability, implicitly and explicitly, shows up in rhetorical scholarship.

Chapter 2: Tracing Rhetorical Vulnerability in Rhetorical Scholarship

I'm not the only one who is exploring the relationship between vulnerability, persuasion, and rhetoric. Stormer, McGreavy, and Marback provide a useful foundation of vulnerability, though they don't explicitly describe vulnerability as the condition for rhetoric. Many thinkers in the field, however, are pointing to something akin to rhetorical vulnerability. To flesh out rhetorical vulnerability as the condition for rhetoric, I want to turn to such work. I grouped this work in three categories in which these scholars address, if implicitly, rhetorical vulnerability. John Muckelbauer and Jenny Rice consider vulnerability in their *approaches to rhetoric*. Jonathan Alexander's reframing of desire as reaching outward is a *symptom* of rhetorical vulnerability. I deliberately use the often negatively charged notion of symptom to emphasize the embodied, sometimes troublesome, and generative qualities of rhetorical vulnerability. Finally, Karma R. Chávez and Fernando Sánchez show how rhetorical vulnerability (differently) affects *bodies*. To demonstrate these three categories, I first walk Royster's article "Disciplinary Landscaping, or Contemporary Challenges in the History of Rhetoric" through these three categories. I examine how rhetorical vulnerability shows up in Royster's *approach to rhetoric*, which *symptoms* of rhetorical vulnerability are visible in her work, and how rhetorical vulnerability impacts *bodies*. Then, to display the range of rhetorical vulnerability, I consider particular aspects of Mucklebauer's, Rice's, Alexander's, Chávez's, and Sánchez's work that each speak to a different aspect of rhetorical vulnerability.

Royster approaches rhetoric as interpretive landscaping. Her approach to rhetoric entails making sense of the rhetorical landscapes that surround us based on our positionality within a landscape. Rhetorical vulnerability enables an engagement of scholars with(in) these landscapes:

> What we choose to showcase depends materially on where on the landscape we stand and what we have in mind. The imperative is to recognize that the process of showcasing space is an interpretive one, one that acknowledges a view and often re-scopes that view in light of aesthetic sensibilities–values, preferences, beliefs. We landscape. We select, focus, and develop, bringing more clearly and vibrantly into view particular features that we frame and foreground, while simultaneously disregarding or minimizing other features and dimensions that we might have selected, developed, and showcased instead. (148)

Here, Royster describes rhetoric as that which emerges from the particular relationship between rhetorical scholars and the landscape they're frequenting. This relationship is sustained by repetition of the familiar, which Royster portrays as re-scoping in the quote above. Meaning, being steeped in a particular landscape results in reproducing its "values, preferences, [and] beliefs," which in turn continuously reproduce the scholars interpreting a landscape. A feedback loop, as the one Royster describes, clearly limits what or who emerges as rhetorical. That is, a landscaping based on a specific set of values cannot account for other landscapes or even recognize otherness within familiar landscapes.

Importantly, the relationship between scholars and their landscape(s) isn't one-sided; what is being interpreted isn't directed solely by scholars. Instead, both parties, scholars and landscapes, reciprocate the relationship to an extent that blurs the distinction between them. Royster writes, "disciplinary practices have built up a high intolerance to the assigning of value and credibility to any site, focal point, theory, or practice other than those whose contours are already sanctioned historically within the circle of understanding" (150). The persuasive power of landscapes is visible here, to the extent that sites of inquiry that don't correspond to the well-

known aren't pursued or even recognized as possible pursuits for rhetorical scholarship. Royster, as I've noted in the introduction, speaks of a particular landscape–one that is governed by an elite, male, western positionality and practice. The fact that Royster doesn't necessarily speak of elite, male, and western as identity markers, but as *terms* that condition what counts as rhetoric, shows how landscapes and scholars influence each other. She's not describing a particular person but a practice that is informed by supposedly stable notions of elite, male, and western. Which landscapes are interpreted and how, then, doesn't necessarily depend on a person's identity markers, but on the practices–which are shaped by whiteness, masculinity, and western scholarship–that a disciplinary landscape allows for and accepts as valid.

Rhetorical vulnerability is at play in this reciprocal relationship between scholars and the rhetorical landscapes they interpret. Royster doesn't approach scholars as closed-off, self-sufficient actors that intentionally interpret their surrounding landscapes in isolation. Instead, scholars are persuaded into their positionality and participation within a landscape. Rhetorical vulnerability enables this persuasion: because scholars are *vulnerable* to their landscape, a landscape can emerge particular scholarly practices and participants. In Royster's example those are informed by elitism and masculinity.

Rhetorical vulnerability, in Royster's approach to rhetoric, has created such a dependent relationship of scholars and landscapes that, as a symptom of rhetorical vulnerability, these landscapes have drawn strict borders, its contours historically sanctioned, as she argues (150). Ironically, the force that made a relationship between scholars and landscapes possible, rhetorical vulnerability, has triggered a response in which an entire field of study has been limited to a particular landscape. In other words, Royster's description of rhetoric as landscaping is a result of rhetorical vulnerability which has now created limits as to how much vulnerability it allows

for. In terms of the second category, symptoms of rhetorical vulnerability, Royster draws attention to this avoidant response to rhetorical vulnerability. One of the contemporary challenges for rhetoric Royster names is that the terms on which the dominant rhetorical landscape functions have rarely been contested. Her essay does this work by proposing a shifting instead of a stable and finalized positionality within rhetorical landscapes. Royster wonders:

> [W]hat might be revealed if all of these terms were contestable: elite, male, western. What if I started a rhetorical interrogation with a consideration of more southern territories, with a focus on women, and with the possibility that eliteness may or may not hold its viability across variations in rhetorical performance? How, after all, might the concept of eliteness shift when the focus of interrogation or the site of interrogation shifts? (150)

Vital for that shift in interrogation sites are rhetorical bodies and which of them are granted the status of rhetoricians. Royster lists some that have been left out of rhetorical scholarship all of which respond to what she sets out to do: to contest elite, male, western terms of rhetoric.

As a concrete example, Royster presents Enheduanna, a Mesopotamian priestess, as a rhetorical subject. For now, I'm putting a pin in Royster's repositioning of the scope of rhetoric. I un-pin this shift when I discuss the third category, rhetorical vulnerability in relation to bodies. The reason I just spent some time outlining Royster's shift is that I want to examine why she has to propose this shift in the first place and why she has to work hard to convince readers that rhetorical subjects, such as Enheduanna, exist outside the established (elite, male, western) landscape.

Anyone who has traveled to a foreign country can speak to the interpretive challenges that come with treading on unfamiliar landscapes: linguistic misunderstandings, lack of cell

service, foreign cuisine, obscure public transportation systems, jet lag– the list goes on! Up against the joy of traveling (sightseeing, meeting new people, getting to know a new culture) stands the fear of the unknown, the vulnerability that a traveler is more drastically exposed to in a different environment. To share a rather trivial example, when I moved from Germany to the US I was appalled by the soft, squishy, sweetly, mass-produced, wrapped-in-plastic baked goods that supermarkets labeled as "bread." This bread didn't stand a chance against the freshly baked, rustic, savory bread I ate every morning in Germany. However, regularly buying artisan bread at farmers markets (which comes close to German bread) was out of my budget, so I grudgingly befriended American bread. On my recent visit to Germany I discovered how much I learnt to enjoy American bread. Eating German bread almost felt like a task, whereas American bread with yummy, melted butter feels like a gentle treat (you can't even really toast German bread!). The point I'm making here is that even though I initially had taken issue with American bread I came to enjoy it and view it not as a failed imitation of the bread I knew but simply as a different iteration. I now understand American bread not as what it's *not* in relation to German bread but what it *is* in this given context. In order to experience this shift, I had to embrace my vulnerability to change. I had to recognize that I was vulnerable to an unfamiliar variable, in this case something as silly as bread. But often the response to vulnerability is not a turning towards the unknown; it's, at best, a retreating from it, and at its worst, it's an attempt to master and control it.

Royster describes such an instance where the unknown, the unfamiliar, the other has not been embraced or turned towards and thus left out of rhetorical scholarship. Diane Davis, in *Inessential Solidarity* writes: "Certitude is purchased by retreating in the face of a fundamental aporia: faced with the inappropriately (approaching) other understanding swerves back around,

toward itself, toward what it already knows and is already programmed to assimilate (80)." The swerving back to familiar hermeneutic tools Davis alludes to is a response to the rhetorical vulnerability one is (already) exposed to when being confronted with the unfamiliar, the un-figurable. The response, in Royster's case, is an exclusion of the unfamiliar and an even more intense interrogation of that which already appears as known, a response to the looming threat that the unknown might shatter this knowledge. The symptom of rhetorical vulnerability that shows up in Royster's work is the adversarial response to more explicitly experiencing one's vulnerability to different approaches to rhetoric. To be a bit reductive, encountering other landscapes, besides the ones based on elite, male, and western terms, exposes a vulnerability, both for scholars within the landscape and for the landscape itself. Consequently, if our work as rhetorical scholars only happens within set limits (taken for granted landscapes), most possibilities for invention and change are crushed by our reluctance to embrace vulnerability.

To reiterate, rhetorical vulnerability, in Royster's shift in landscaping, exposes scholars to difference which they respond to by retreating from that difference and toward the familiar. So, the last category that seems to come out of rhetorical scholarship describes rhetorical vulnerability experienced not only by an exposedness *to* difference, but an exposedness *because of* difference. This category examines the embodied impacts of rhetorical vulnerability. In Royster, the bodies most exposed to their vulnerability are those that don't correspond to an elite, male, and western identity. Royster draws attention to these bodies to demonstrate the positionality shift she's proposing. Enheduanna serves as her example for rhetorical subjects outside the center of rhetorical consideration. Other scholars have made "a case for Enheduanna as the first author in all of world literature known to be a historical figure and identified by name in the actual literary artifact" (153). Taking Enheduanna as a starting point for rhetorical

investigation would certainly shift the emergence of rhetorical landscapes, creating possibilities for reinventing the field. Royster also describes how other subjects not considered rhetoricians under the current terms of rhetorical scholarship establish themselves as rhetorical subjects nonetheless. Referencing her own research on rhetorical participation of African American women, Royster writes:

> From Martha Stewart in 1831 through the contemporary era, this group of women have used their language resources to construct public identities, to define and solve socio-political problems, to exert influence on social and political forces, and to garner respect and consideration as agents of change. (157)

Royster offers an example of marginalized people creating "public identities" to participate in public discourses and be "agents of change" within and beyond them. Crucially, these identities are created and invented not in direct opposition to the center (elite, male, western), but by an embrace of rhetorical vulnerability. African American women, says Royster, were required to create their own terms "to define and solve socio-political problems" because of their marginalized position within rhetorical inquiry and subjecthood. These terms were not achieved in direct resistance to elite, male, and western but by practicing otherwise. Despite "their participation as unsanctioned participants in public spaces," these women "have managed, nevertheless, to draw audiences and to achieve effects" (158). The African American women in Royster's work have leaned into their rhetorical vulnerability and created new ways of engaging with the discourses that mattered to them. I don't mean to suggest that invention is only possible from beyond the limit of what is currently figured as the center. Rather, those who are involuntarily at the margins are more exposed to their rhetorical vulnerability *because of* their difference, so that embracing vulnerability and thus inventing new practices and ways of being

becomes more probable. As opposed to those who reside at the center of what is considered rhetorical action, these women, still practicing within the conditions of the center, cannot turn away from their rhetorical vulnerability.

To sum up, rhetorical vulnerability shows up as a condition for a relationship between scholars and their landscapes. To avoid a disruption in their landscape, scholars retreat from vulnerability that exposes them to other landscapes and lastly, those participants at the margins of the dominant landscape are exposed to rhetorical vulnerability more drastically because of their difference.

Rhetorical Vulnerability as Approaches to Rhetoric

In his chapter "Implicit Paradigms of Rhetoric," John Mucklebauer approaches rhetoric through the lens of Heliotropism. "To my mind," Mucklebauer writes, "the implicit paradigmatic image of rhetorical studies today should be the event of heliotropism, or the movement of plants toward the sun" (39). Mucklebauer uses the movement of a plant turning towards the sun to showcase how rhetoric, or more precisely, "persuasion actually happens in the world" (40). His focus on the movement, the turning of a plant towards the sun is different from a more common understanding of persuasion. The sun doesn't lay out solid arguments to persuade the plant to turn and the plant doesn't deliberate on the arguments the sun provides and then decides to assent. Of course an argumentative sun seems silly but if applied to a conversation in which a teacher is trying to persuade students to enjoy a particular book, we often think of persuasion in that way. The teacher might refer to the importance of the novel within literary history or talk about her personal connections to the novel. She is persuading her students with arguments and her institutional power (her being the teacher) to read and enjoy the text, hence accepting her argument. Mucklebauer posits that "plants turning toward the sun and audiences accepting an

argument might well involve the same kind of action/motion" (40). What Mucklebauer is describing here is a persuasion without intent, a persuasion that doesn't negotiate between two options (turning or not turning, accepting an argument or not accepting an argument, enjoying a text or not). Instead, persuasion is *movement*. A turning of actors towards each other. Mucklebauer's heliotropic approach to rhetoric doesn't involve a persuader, rather, persuasion is a force that conditions the turning movement.

This movement can't be pinpointed to one instance since it's happening all the time. In other words, Mucklebauer's persuasion as movement doesn't point to a specific moment in which an argument is accepted by an audience because the movement towards all sorts of arguments is happening all the time and is never final. It's important to note that turning away doesn't correspond to rejecting an argument, nor does turning toward means accepting an argument. The correspondence Mucklebauer notes between persuasion and the movement of a plant towards the sun is that there *is* movement which requires a relationship, not a persuasive fight between two separate parties. Movement, then, doesn't involve a persuader with an argument ready in mind, instead movement is relational and ongoing. Even if a plant moves slowly, invisible to the human eye, it is constantly moving. This constant movement is crucial for rhetorical vulnerability because similar to this movement, actors never cease being vulnerable to persuasion and other actors. To use Stormer and McGreavy's language of "struggling with" versus "struggling against," Mucklebauer's turning describes a struggling with–actors encountering arguments entangled with each other, instead of a more common understanding of persuasion in which convincing an actor of something requires actors struggling against one another. So, turning allows for actors to be open and move towards each other. Persuasion as

absolute convincing, on the other hand, implies that engaging with others (which we're doing all the time) involves fighting for a particular argument and not allowing for uncertainty.

Looking more closely at Mucklebauer's approach to rhetoric reveals that it clearly involves relationality rather than closed-off actors arguing against one another. Mucklebauer's persuasion as movement doesn't happen in isolation; actors, human or otherwise, are always entangled with one another. In the case of the plant and the sun, the plant depends on the sun for survival. Considering the plant and sun as isolated, unaffectable actors, would, in Mucklebauer's approach to rhetoric, nullify persuasion, and hence invention, or alternative possibilities for engaging with the world. A plant, after all, moves in tandem with the sun. Therefore, the plant is constantly vulnerable to the sun and that vulnerability translates to audiences and arguments. Here's how: Encountering an argument, whether it comes from a colleague or a speedbump, requires rhetorical vulnerability. For example, as a teacher I'm vulnerable to my students' engagement with the class materials, even though I, as the teacher, am supposedly "in charge" of selecting course readings and planning lessons. I move with and toward my students by attuning to their responses to the class leading to unexpected shifts and inventive moments that couldn't have been planned. Teaching approached from closed-off entities looks different in most educational settings where students and teachers are positioned as actors struggling against one another. A struggle against doesn't allow for any kind of interruption and invention because it builds on teachers being the sole holders and distributors of knowledge which students are required to take in, no questions asked. Any form of invention and interruption of the stability of the teacher is nearly impossible in such a closed-off relationship. The teacher, personally and institutionally, works against her exposure to rhetorical vulnerability.

In this classroom example, persuasion, and thus rhetorical vulnerability, are still present, despite efforts to ward them off. In fact, persuasion occurs so strongly that students and teachers don't break their assigned roles of receiving and delivering knowledge. Similarly, a plant's access to the sun can be obstructed, but the plant continues to move. Some days I forget to pull up the blinds in my living room, minimizing my plant's exposure to the sun. My plant still turns. Other days, I forget to water my plant which I only notice when its leaves start to wilt, but I still find that the plant moves, if with struggle and less energy. Both for the plant and for teachers and students, persuasion still happens, but other forces such as environmental factors, a forgetful plant owner, or institutional practices, lead to a turning away from vulnerability. An environment that aims to limit rhetorical vulnerability, then, doesn't allow for a persuasive turning, a struggling with, and frames persuasion in terms of control and mastery. So, centering rhetorical vulnerability in our approach to rhetoric can assist us in challenging dispositions of control and mastery in the classroom and beyond.

Persuasion as movement also avoids fully understanding an argument or another actor which correlates with rhetorical vulnerability as constant exposure to interruptions by the other. In short, Mucklebauer's approach to rhetoric as Heliotropism requires rhetorical vulnerability to make a persuasive turning happen and to sustain the relationship between moving actors. When Mucklebauer turns to Heliotropism to "take seriously how persuasion actually happens in the world," he's helping me see that plants are vulnerable to the sun, just like audiences are vulnerable to an argument, no matter how closed-off and sufficient they believe themselves to be, or, to stick with Mucklebauer's plant analogy, no matter how often the blinds are pulled down and no matter how often a clumsy grad students forgets to water her plants.

Jenny Rice seemingly helps us account for this concept of persuasion as turning/movement. Though she doesn't explicitly build on Mucklebauer's Heliotropism, her work provides a rhetorical practice that considers the impacts of rhetorical vulnerability and persuasion on actors within an ecology. Rice approaches rhetorical ecologies similar to Stormer and McGreavy as participatory networks of relations. Rice has earlier described ecologies as an extension of rhetorical situations, which, as a framework, can only account for limited speakers, audiences, and texts. Turning away from situations and toward ecologies, Rice (then writing as Edbauer) says, "we begin to see that public rhetorics do not only exist in the elements of their situations, but also in the radius of their neighboring events" (20). An ecological approach to rhetoric, therefore, accounts not just for a single event but for multiple events, actors, and environments that participate in an ecology. "By shifting the ground and field in this manner," Rice writes, "we add the dimension of movement back into our discussions of rhetoric" (20). The movement, here, accounts for how different events, actors, and environments interact with each other instead of viewing each of them as separate rhetorical situations, and, in extension, as fixed, closed-off entities.

Then, in her article "How Can an Ecosystem Have a Voice," Rice offers a methodology for rhetorical scholars to practice ecological research. Rice notes that larger discourses– ecologies– are often explained by zooming out as far as possible, to grasp all the context and histories shaping the ecology. For example, Donald Trump voters are often analyzed on a removed structural level: Why people vote for candidates like Trump is explained by interrogating "social media postings, racist discourse, real and imagined experiences of unemployment, viral fears of terrorism, mediated images of a woman seeking power, and on and on" (436). What gets left out of these (important) analyses are Trump voters themselves. The

approach Rice suggests is to zoom in, instead of out, to get close to what Tarde and Latour call "individual variations" (434). These variations object to a more general approach to an ecology which often zooms out of an ecology to make larger statements about employment or social media discourses, instead of getting close. Variations show up as such because they don't (fully) fit the generalized snapshot of an ecology. Attending to these variations is crucial in two regards. First, they enable a different, more nuanced description of an ecology grounded in the variations who impact an ecology. Second, these variations are often ignored on purpose to consolidate what, for example, a typical Trump voter looks like. While abstraction is necessary to some degree, ignoring variations for the sake of simplicity, is a form of rhetorical violence because that dismissal of variations shows a lack of accountability and a moving away from rhetorical vulnerability.

Rice attends to an individual variation that exposes her to her own vulnerability. In talking to her Trump-voting father, she notices that his life experiences and encounters that influenced his voting behavior went beyond the demographic markers typically associated with Trump voters. Of course, she's already deeply entangled with her father, leading her to a stronger exposure to her vulnerability. I've had similar experiences: talking to my dad about trans people's rights, when one of my siblings is genderqueer, exposes me more strongly to my vulnerability, than talking to a coworker or a stranger on the internet. Nonetheless, Rice and I need not (only) argue with our dads to be exposed to our vulnerability. When Rice encountered video testimonies from followers of the reptilian agenda, she was compelled to push against her "own predilection to hear a single, aggregated voice in this conspiracy ecology" (435). Beyond that, allowing herself to get close to the variations within an ecology, Rice writes: "I am 'at risk' in the affectability of voices, facial expressions, my own body's distance from my laptop screen,

my own history of depression, and other forces" (436). Rice explicitly encounters her vulnerability to her object(or)s of study, not by allowing herself to be vulnerable, but by acknowledging the ways in which she is already vulnerable when doing ecological research. By getting close to an ecology, she's implicated differently and recognizes that a distant objectivity is impossible in ecological analyses.

Rice's approach generates intimacy between rhetoricians and the ecologies they study, emphasizing the relational aspect of rhetorical vulnerability. Building on Stormer and McGreavy, Rice notes that "vulnerability also means that we have no immunity to influence" (435) which she underlines by reflecting on how, after her conversations with her father she found herself "differently vulnerable" (436). So, rhetorical vulnerability isn't only necessary for rhetoric, and therefore ecologies, to emerge in the first place, rhetorical vulnerability is also involved in the encounters between actors within an ecology.

Rhetorical Vulnerability is not a distant and objective phenomenon, but expresses an entanglement with and a responsibility for an ecology. Likewise, Rice's approach to ecologies requires a closeness that makes our rhetorical vulnerability apparent. With closeness toward individual variations and their relations within an ecology our responsibility and entanglement with that ecology grows. Importantly, Rice doesn't set rhetoricians up to be heroes giving voice to the voiceless, as Latour has described the work of rhetoricians, instead rhetoricians are "on the lookout for ways to create new capacities for engagement" (437). Embracing rhetorical vulnerability by centering individual variations makes this kind of invention possible. These new capacities show how ecologies such as discussions of Trump voters aren't only grounded in larger abstract narratives of conservative politics.

With her proposition to get as close as possible, Rice is taking to task a common understanding of objectivity as stepping away and examining an ecology from all possible angles. To aim for objective, removed, or zoomed-out analyses of ecologies ultimately works towards stabilizing an ecology, or, to find a finalizing reason why people vote for Trump. As I've said, rhetorical vulnerability doesn't reach for concrete, stable entities, which a generalized capturing of an ecology would do. To reframe objectivity, Rice states "[e]cologically minded objectivity does not isolate any particular object, therefore, but instead traces out the relations within which objects *object*" (433). Rice doesn't examine her father's experiences in isolation. Instead, her methodology requires us to look at how these variations emerge in the first place and how they interact with the ecology at hand. Rice challenges a rhetoric of assent to put forward an ecological rhetoric that involves movement, the turning of actors within an ecology and of rhetoricians toward variations–both constantly exposed to their rhetorical vulnerability.

Both Rice's and Mucklebauer's approaches to rhetoric avoid fully understanding, grasping, and finalizing: Rice in her approach to ecological research and Mucklebauer in his framework of persuasion as constant and relational movement. This acceptance (and embrace) of never reaching a full (objective) understanding of an other is a crucial component of rhetorical vulnerability. If the world and its participants were stable and completely figurable, there would be no need for vulnerability, for a constant refiguring, turning, zooming in. So, what Rice and Mucklebauer are challenging, in different ways, is a reduction of "the Other … to a masterable concept," as Diane Davis puts it (63). To generalize Trump voters is attempting to master this group of people in order to figure out (depending on who's doing the research) how to combat them as a homogenous group, "effacing [their] alterity while preserving enough of [them] for my

use" (63). Thus, building a masterable concept doesn't allow a tracing of how Trump voters participate in (Rice) and move (Mucklebauer) an ecology.

Symptoms of Rhetorical Vulnerability

Attempting to figure the other is a response to experiencing rhetorical vulnerability, which conjures feelings of discomfort, insecurity, and instability. Despite the attempts to master/resist rhetorical vulnerability, it remains present. Davis writes:

> Neither 'total annihilation' nor murder by figuration delivers me from my exposedness to radical alterity, from my vulnerability, affectability, susceptibility to an absolutely inappropriable exteriority–nor, therefore, does it deliver me from my obligation, my responsibility to respond, which precede and makes possible any idea of freedom. (64)

The other (or in Rice's approach, an ecology) cannot be categorized, labeled, and stored away neatly in trying to eliminate any vulnerability. Instead, we have to get close to the other, embracing our vulnerability and the symptoms vulnerability brings with it. So far, I've described symptoms like discomfort, insecurity, and instability that are brought on by experiencing one's rhetorical vulnerability. For example, Royster's landscaping approach shows scholarly discourse tightening the boundaries of who and what belongs to a particular scholarly space as an adversarial response to being exposed to vulnerability. Another symptom of rhetorical vulnerability, with perhaps more positive connotations, is desire.

Desire is mostly understood as a need or want based on a lack that grows out of a specific identity or situation. For example, a heterosexual woman is expected to desire a heterosexual marriage or a college student is expected to desire joining the workforce after graduation. Desire based on a lack (a woman without a husband) already precedes the required response to fill that lack. In other words, there is little room for subjects to (re)invent their desires or recognize

desires outside of expectations because what fulfills a desire is already implicated in the origin of desire.

Growing up in a heteropatriarchal society, I thought, consciously and subconsciously, that to be complete, I needed to fall in love with a man. There was a gap I needed to fill and that gap constructed my desire to fill it in a particular way (with a man). When I realized I was bisexual I thought I had overcome this lack-based desire. I felt I had freed myself from heteronormativity. However, I found that bisexuality is, if less dominant, still an identity that prescribes and limits my desire. Jonathan Alexander, in his article "Materiality, Queerness, and a Theory of Desire for Writing Studies," seeks to shift desire from a notion of individual lack to "an openness, an orientation toward others and the world that embraces entanglements and potentiality" (27). He describes desire as an openness toward others but, crucially, he never demands that openness to be filled with something concrete. Desire, to Alexander, is a reaching outward that is deeply entangled with the world around us. So, what Alexander offers is an "opening up beyond identity" in terms of desire (23). In that sense, desire doesn't only originate and reside within an identification category (e.g., heterosexual woman), but can also "mark different and renewed possibilities [...] and reorientation to other subjects and objects, to other ways of being and relating" (29). To embrace desire as openness toward an entangled world instead of a prewritten path creates new possibilities for engaging with the world. Rhetorical vulnerability is a necessary condition for desire to show up as openness which is why desire, as described by Alexander, is a symptom of rhetorical vulnerability.

Just as we don't often embrace the fact that we operate on rhetorical vulnerability, we tend to avoid and ignore desires that don't match our expectations because predicting desire by categorizing it, feels safe and controllable. However, categorizing desire through identification

categories, such as heterosexuality or bisexuality, constraints those who desire and the openness that desire offers. In these cases, what a person desires is prewritten, to an extent that desires outside this script aren't recognized as such. In other words, desire is perceived as consequential: I'm bisexual, consequently, I desire certain bodies. However, this linearity falls apart when I examine how queer desires have shown up in my life prior to my coming out. When I believed I was straight, I'd still experience queer desires but not recognize them as such which shows how persuasive heteronormativity and the accompanying script for desire is, which Adrienne Rich has labeled "compulsory heterosexuality" (632).

Prescribed desire isn't just something closeted queer people experience. Anyone who is assigned or identifies with a particular label may experience desires that don't match their label(s). Willie James Jennings describes a phenomenon similar to prescribed desire as "forced affection" in his book *After Whiteness*. To Jennings, affection is a cornerstone of academic design, meaning that what students come to value and appreciate is influenced by the way an academic program is structured, which classes are offered, and which books are assigned. In my first-year writing classes, for example, students often unravel writing-related affections they've gathered in high school. They've learned to privilege a specific kind of writing over others, which is challenged when I bring differently designed affections to the classroom by asking students to write for a podcast. Just recently, one of my students noted that English teachers criticized her writing for sounding too conversational. Writing for the podcast, she realized that writing conversationally doesn't equal less sophisticated writing.

The monitoring of language use and style is one way affection is forced and shows how affections run deeper than course readings and assignments. Jennings writes about the experiences of Black students within universities built on "a white aesthetic regime" that cause

them to feel disrespected, discriminated against, and disregarded as scholars (63). Despite Jennings' efforts, himself a Black man, to create an environment where Black students thrive and are celebrated as scholars, these students still feel the presence of an affection directed towards and grounded in whiteness. This type of affection is forced upon students because to belong to this institution means to share its affections, barely leaving any room for students to develop their own affections and embrace their desires.

Jennings concludes that "affections cannot be formed on top of affections that have been forced," implying that universities as institutions must grapple with their affections rooted in whiteness in order for new affections and desires to emerge (63). Recognizing that desires become forced when they're limited by labels such as race or sexuality, requires a prior recognition of rhetorical vulnerability as the condition for desire. In other words, if desire is a symptom of vulnerability, then forced affection is a form of resistance against vulnerability.

Forced affection, or co-opted desire, works against rhetorical vulnerability in powerful ways. As Royster points out, scholars put a lot of energy into defining and limiting what kind of research their field gravitates towards, resulting in near complete elimination of any insecurity regarding the field's affiliations. However, Davis reminds us in the quote above that affectability and vulnerability cannot be eliminated. Therefore, to stick with Royster, we must first challenge and shift the scholarly landscapes' affection before being able to build and sustain new affections. Put differently, in order to embrace desire and allow unforced affections, we must recognize that designing and categorizing desire is an adversarial response to rhetorical vulnerability. If we approach rhetorical vulnerability differently, desires can emerge in alternative and non-violent ways.

Forced affection often results from strict, prescribed identification categories. Alexander's desire, on the other hand, resembles a reaching out and beyond identification categories. Attuning to how our desires reach outside identification categories, doesn't mean that we have to ignore, deny, or overcome our identification categories. Instead, paying attention to desire surfaces the artificial and forced boundaries categories draw and the impact these boundaries have on desire. Forced affection is a form of rhetorical violence because it attempts to close up the potentiality rhetorical vulnerability offers. When desire, as a symptom of rhetorical vulnerability, is left open and framed as not solely originating from the subject and social constructs, it redirects our attention toward "a potentiality for imagining – and possibly being with each other and the world – differently" (30). Concretely, this means that we wouldn't limit desire(s) to the paths that seem to be laid out for us based on our identities. We would cling less to ideas, categories, and practices that seem natural because of how persuasive they are by inviting desire as a reaching out to the world. We would start asking questions like: How could we approach sexuality differently? How can we design classrooms that don't force affection? What could a university not built on whiteness look like?

One way in which we can ponder these questions and practice desire, as Alexander is describing, is writing. For Alexander, writing is a re-figurative practice, one that constantly mediates "many different kinds of 'others'" (19). Writing has the potential to continuously reshape identification categories or any other ways of being that we try to fixate with labels. Following his colleague Jacqueline Rhodes, Alexander notes that through writing, we may reach outside "a fixity in identity" (19) therefore allowing for a constant re-figuration of desire. I demonstrated how rapidly desire gets co-opted or turns into forced affection, which is why desire, as "an opening onto potentiality," needs constant "attention, care and cultivation" (30).

To cultivate desire, we need to embrace rhetorical vulnerability and recognize that both desire and vulnerability are ongoing forces that move from fixed identification categories to constant undoing, that are both characterized by an openness toward the other(s), and that have the potential to change our ways of being in the world.

Rhetorical Vulnerability as Affective and Embodied

I have written at length about the many responses to rhetorical vulnerability we exhibit, desire being one of these responses, or symptoms, that has the potential to generate alternative ways of relating to and engaging with other people and ideas. Nonetheless, the most noticeable response to vulnerability seems to remain violence. Violence, as in resistance, exercised in order to withstand the feelings of exposedness and instability that vulnerability bears. Desire acknowledges that these feelings are valid and indeed scary, but desire also encourages us to embrace them by viewing them as assets for re-inventing the spaces we move in and the people we interact with. That said, I don't want to ignore the unease that rhetorical vulnerability engenders because this troubling illuminates that vulnerability generates an affective and embodied response.

Royster lays out how disciplinary landscapes have formed in order to combat those responses with more boundary work that clearly determines who and what is included in a specific disciplinary landscape. This boundary work is so persuasive that those participating in it, almost automatically, feel (and fear) the affective impacts of rhetorical vulnerability. Rice gives a similar example of scholars using discourse analysis to capture and explain Trump voters, often by retreating to habitual mechanisms of understanding. When we approach our research the way Rice suggests, we break out of our habits and become "differently vulnerable" to our scholarship (436). Scholars work against vulnerability with logic and reason, yet fail to accept that the way

we experience vulnerability is embodied and affective, often in contradiction to thoughts and convictions. I argue that all the rhetorical approaches to vulnerability I've engaged so far acknowledge this type of response even though not all explicitly mention the body. So, how do bodies show up in relation to rhetorical vulnerability in existing scholarship? How are bodies impacted by a rejection of rhetorical vulnerability? To ponder these questions, I turn to Karma Chávez's article "The Body: An Abstract and Actual Rhetorical Concept" (2018) and Fernando Sánchez's work on "Queering Spaces" (2022). Both Chávez and Sánchez speak to the impacts rejecting rhetorical vulnerability has on bodies and discuss why marginalized communities are affected stronger by this rejection than other groups.

In her article, Karma Chávez traces how the body has been approached in rhetorical scholarship so far: as argument, as a "site of rhetorical invention," as evidence, in judgment, as trope, as metaphor, and as shaped by matter in new materialist writing (243). Despite these many avenues through which bodies have been explored in rhetorical scholarship, most of this work, she argues, has been implicit. Rhetoricians, until the 1970s predominantly white, able-bodied men, posed as bodiless vessels for knowledge and paid "no sustained attention … to how *those actual bodies* mattered" in their writing (244). Royster, whose article on disciplinary landscaping was published in 2003, worked to make explicit, or actual, the impact of these bodies on the field. Nonetheless, there still seems to be an abstract idealized, yet invisible body, in which rhetorical scholarship is grounded. Chávez writes:

> Feminist rhetorical critics address the question of the body by demonstrating how bodily difference matters in rhetoric for practitioners and scholars alike. These feminist scholars begin to reveal that the abstract body on which rhetorical studies is based is, in reality, an actual body, that of particular white men. (244)

Chávez sets up a binary of abstract and actual bodies. By abstract bodies, she means those bodies that are normalized to such a great extent they have become invisible, remaining supposedly free from commentary, questioning, and, crucially, rhetorical vulnerability. The abstract body so powerful in rhetorical studies (and beyond) is white, male, cis-gendered, and able-bodied. This body has been so abstracted it doesn't seem to be embodied at all, which of course would make it seem as if it was immune against rhetorical vulnerability. Bodies that don't match these identity markers, appear as actual because they stand out against a made-invisible, yet forceful abstraction: "The white male body haunts rhetorical practice and criticism. But only due to its presumed absence do the actual bodies of different others become significant to rhetorical invention and study (244)."

To demonstrate the scrutiny which actual bodies are exposed to, Chávez examines how Black civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer is perceived in rhetorical analysis. When Hamer spoke in front of the Democratic National Convention Credentials Committee, the comments her speech received didn't focus on her textual arguments. Instead, her physical attributes and clothing choices were discussed at length, turning them into arguments themselves. The issue with this (racist and sexist) obsession over her body isn't only that her textual arguments were disregarded, but also the fact that her body became "central to inquiry" in the first place (247). Chávez remarks that "[p]ortrayals of physically able, white male orators' attire, skin, attractiveness, and sweat rarely adorn pages of rhetorical scholarship" (247). In saying so, she reminds us that while normalized bodies seem invisible, they become a painfully visible standard for bodies that don't match these norms.

The solution to unequal investigation of bodies as rhetorical isn't to create new abstract ideas of bodies that are all marked differently which would continue resisting rhetorical

vulnerability. As Sánchez shows, an ethical abstraction of varying intersecting identities is impossible. Instead, Chávez asks rhetoricians to recognize that perpetuating an implied abstracted body (cis, white, able-bodied, male) is a way of oppressing those who diverge from the invisibilized abstract body because that abstraction assumes both a removal from the body and a universal identification with it. In that sense, bodies that are actualized, like Hamer's, are especially vulnerable to the scrutiny of others. Like Royster observes, the boundaries of male, western, and elite scholarship are invisible because they've been so prominent–so much so that they surface only when Otherness is present. The move away from vulnerability that I demonstrate in the context of Royster's disciplinary landscaping, also crops up in Chávez's depiction of abstract and actual bodies. Those bodies outside the seemingly abstract body against which they're measured, are exposed more drastically to vulnerability. Abstracting bodies works as a shield against vulnerability but, again, this isn't something to strive towards:

> "The point is that we cannot nor should we try to reduce actual bodies to abstract conceptualization of 'the body' because that at once reductive and totalizing move, like all such moves, enforces and animates systemic oppressions (Chávez 248)."

Why is that response necessary? To Chávez, it's about power. For Royster, it's about establishing boundaries around (scholarly) identities. To Rice, it's about simplification of complex sociopolitical phenomena. The abstraction of bodies, all bodies, is harmful and unethical, not just for those bodies who undergo (or work towards) abstraction, but also for those that don't fit the abstracted ideal. Abstraction captures, confines, and excludes as Royster, Rice, and Chávez's work indicates. Desire, for example, cannot grow out of abstraction. Heteronormativity is such an abstraction that assumes a romantic relationship between a cis-man and cis-woman to be normative and unquestioned. Abstracting bodies and experiences (desire) is

a response to rhetorical vulnerability. So while it may seem that abstraction lessens the impact of rhetorical vulnerability, vulnerability, as I'm framing it, can't be put on hold through abstraction. On top of these reasons, the urgent drive to abstract normative bodies and scrutinize others, to me, is testimony of the affective impacts of rhetorical vulnerability. Royster, Chávez, Rice, and even Marback demonstrate the urge to suppress rhetorical vulnerability with boundary work, bodiless work, and objective work. Each of these thinkers show, as I've teased out, that rhetorical vulnerability, despite efforts to combat it, remains present. Thus, rhetorical vulnerability generates an affective, embodied response that cannot be nullified through bodiless thought and reason.

Of course, abstraction, to a degree, is necessary for us to meaningfully engage with one another. Without some abstraction and schematizing, it would be difficult to navigate the world. Nonetheless, the assumption that spaces, relationships, identities, or desires can be successfully designed and (re-)invented solely based on abstraction is flawed. Sánchez demonstrates this in his article "Queering Spaces," where he takes to task the notion of safe spaces for queer people. Many college campuses have built spaces specifically for queer students. Western Washington University offers "Pride Housing" and the LGBTQ+ resource center recently opened their new LGBTQ+ lounge on campus. I often notice restaurants and coffee shops with rainbow stickers plastered on their door, communicating to potential customers that their space is safe for queer people. It seems that by carving out spaces for queer people, universities, perhaps more so than restaurants, recognize that their institutions aren't per se safe for queer people and thus need a space where safety is achieved to better serve queer students. That begs the question: What does it mean for a space to be safe for queer people?

For Sánchez, queer safe spaces are an illusion. In fact, he challenges not just the notion of safety but also the idea of a *queer* space. What makes a space queer? Who decides whether a space is queer or not? Does it have to do with the people frequenting a space? Or the kind of events that are put up in a space? What a place sells? Or the kinds of politics that a place represents? Who does the term *queer* include? Either way, a place that labels itself as queer already assumes the kind of queer people that will inhabit the space. Imagine a chair (an example Sánchez borrows from Sara Ahmed), specifically a tablet-arm desk (an example I borrow from a former student) that haunts so many classrooms from middle school to college. These desks are built for students, but that doesn't mean they can be inhabited by all students. One of my former students researched these desks and the people that use them. Interviewing a variety of students, she found that these desks were a source of anxiety and shame for fat students that led to lower class engagement. Not only do these desks presume a certain physicality, but they also shape ideas about what a classroom is supposed to look like. They are obstructive for group work but work perfectly well for silently listening to a lecture and taking notes (not on a larger laptop though because it won't fit the tiny desk!). This simple example shows that the way spaces (or chairs) are designed determines which bodies find themselves welcomed, comfortable, and safe and which activities become possible in them. Places, designed with a specific group in mind (e.g., students or queer people, or both!), are built on and reproduce an abstract notion of who this group comprises. For the tablet-arm desk it's thin, able-bodied students and designated queer spaces, as Sánchez notes, "predominantly [serve] the needs of white bodies" (156).

To designate a space as safe or welcoming for a particular group of people already assumes the identities and needs of the people inhabiting the space. If the occupants don't fit the abstract, yet actual body, as Chávez would remind us, the space is no longer safe and welcoming.

A Black trans person might not feel as safe if the space doesn't acknowledge intersecting forms of depression or a neurodivergent queer person might not be able to participate in the events a queer center hosts. Sánchez advocates for a collaboration between queer and disability studies that would force us "to confront that certain bodies cannot necessarily be *made* to fit within certain spaces" (157-8). What Sánchez is implicitly pointing towards here is that rhetorical vulnerability needs to be a feature of the ways spaces are built, maintained, and revised, rather than a bug that needs to be overcome or fixed.

I'm not against creating spaces where people can gather to build community and share experiences. I'm glad that my campus has a Multicultural Center for BIPOC students and a lounge for queer students. As a bisexual woman, I know how valuable these queer spaces can be, but I want to acknowledge that these spaces aren't safe just because they group together people that otherwise feel unsafe based on a specific identity marker. I'm reminded, once more, of Royster, who doesn't ask non-white, non-male, and non-western scholars to only set up their own landscapes. She urges all scholars to consider their positionality within a landscape shiftable. In other words, Royster doesn't propose women-only, or Black-only disciplinary landscapes. Instead, she challenges the idea that what scholars know best (namely, their own landscapes built on abstracted identities), doesn't represent the only knowledge worth knowing. So, in relation to spaces, the imperative isn't to create spaces grounded in abstract identities, but to find ways to navigate multiple ontological and epistemological frameworks that don't ignore identification categories but also don't solely rely on them in their design. Sánchez notes that there is no simple yes or no answer to whether a space is safe for queer people (or any other marginalized identities) and suggests moving away from "enclaves of 'safe spaces' because individuals … will always have complex identities that will make it difficult to find the right fit"

(160). Those complex identities cannot be abstracted and when they are, the abstraction doesn't do justice to the complexity of intersecting identities.

Categorizing (Rice, Alexander), abstracting (Chávez, Sánchez), and boundary drawing (Royster, Mucklebauer, Sánchez) are all practices that aim to resist and downplay the effects of rhetorical vulnerability. However, if rhetorical vulnerability is the condition for rhetoric and persuasion, it cannot be resisted or downplayed. How, then, do we engage our rhetorical vulnerability in ways that don't lead to restrictive identification categories, the abstraction of bodies, and the creation of exclusive spaces?

Chapter 3: Introducing a Practice of Embracing Vulnerability

Embracing Vulnerability: More than acceptance, instrumentalization, or a skill

A rather obvious answer to the question I posed at the end of Chapter 2 might be that, instead of resisting and downplaying rhetorical vulnerability, we must accept that rhetorical vulnerability conditions the way we engage with others and the world around us, and that we're always and already vulnerable no matter how strong our efforts to overcome vulnerability. I've shown that much of rhetorical scholarship points towards a *resisting* of rhetorical vulnerability which is why *accepting* rhetorical vulnerability and all that it entails seems like the solution to the problems that resisting vulnerability surfaces. However, the practice I want to propose is that we engage rhetorical vulnerability by embracing it. A practice of embracing vulnerability recognizes vulnerability as a condition for rhetoric *and* provides a different way of engagement with the world. Unlike merely accepting vulnerability, the practice of embracing vulnerability involves motion and relationality, it requires different intensities, and it demands more action than a passive acceptance.

While it does create an awareness of rhetorical vulnerability, only accepting vulnerability is a passive move that doesn't transform the way we relate to each other and the world around us. To accept vulnerability might acknowledge the problematic aspects of abstraction, categorization, and differentiation that result from a resistance toward vulnerability, but does very little to challenge these aspects. For example, when a university like Western accepts that queerphobia exists because of a hierarchical differentiation of sexuality and gender identity, such institutions often respond with the creation of spaces labeled as queer and safe. Creating a so-called safe space for queer students (or any other minoritized group) recognizes and accepts that these students aren't generally safe in the campus community, but the causes of their lack of

safety aren't challenged. Instead, these students are isolated based on their difference in spaces which don't contribute to a sustainable feeling of safety across campus. Acceptance, in this example, is one-sided. The affected students are given a space for safety but the people and institutional practices that contribute to queerphobia and heteronormativity are rarely involved and challenged in these processes. Acceptance creates practices and changes that reproduce a resistance toward vulnerability and negates the ecological connectedness of participants because it approaches vulnerability from isolated entities (here: WWU administrators, queer students, and non-queer students). Therefore, acceptance of vulnerability doesn't embrace vulnerability as an inherent condition, rather it's a useful, but not sufficient step, toward embracing vulnerability.

Embracing vulnerability is also not a tool or an instrument designed to achieve a specific, desired effect. Much like breathing, vulnerability isn't instrumental. It's a fundamental aspect of living. To instrumentalize rhetorical vulnerability strategically ignores, even abuses, how fundamental it is to our being. Brené Brown has framed vulnerability as instrumental by describing it as "the birthplace of joy, of creativity, of belonging, of love" as well as "the core of shame and fear and our struggle for worthiness" (12:46). To her, wielding vulnerability is a choice we make to evoke certain emotional states, though Brown does note that these effects aren't guaranteed. She describes one aspect of vulnerability as "the willingness to do something where there are no guarantees" (10:25). Nonetheless, the action ("to do something") requires the *use* of vulnerability as a tool. Instrumentalizing vulnerability, then, implies that vulnerability can be accessed as a tool whenever a person seeks it out. Vulnerability, as I frame it, isn't available whenever it may serve a specific purpose; it's an underlying condition of our rhetorical being. Instrumentalizing vulnerability in a Brown-like framework would be used to impact relationships by creating certain emotional responses. If vulnerability as the condition for rhetoric, and

therefore relations between people, spaces, ideas, and practices, is instrumentalized, Marback's worry of vulnerability being exploited to deceive audiences would be actualized.

Because embracing vulnerability isn't an instrumentalization of vulnerability, the practice I'm proposing isn't a skill that can be perfected through training. Vulnerability, however, is often approached as a skill. Again, a Brown-like understanding of vulnerability entails that, if practiced regularly, vulnerability makes a person stronger, more authentic, and honest. The more we train ourselves to be vulnerable, the easier it'll be to share our feelings or to let go of control. To be clear, Brown's work on vulnerability is useful and I'm not arguing against her understanding of vulnerability. I find her call for more vulnerability honorable. I am pointing out that rhetorical vulnerability isn't something we can get better at.

In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks describes vulnerability, while not directly naming it, as a skill to be practiced in the classroom to create a culture of excitement for students and teachers. hooks strives for learning experiences that are full of joy, connection, and pleasure but notes that achieving this particular classroom community comes with challenges and requires skills:

> Not only did it [this classroom culture of excitement] require movement beyond accepted boundaries, but excitement could not be generated without a full recognition of the fact that there could never be an absolute set agenda governing teaching… Students had to be seen in their particularity as individuals … and interacted with according to their needs. (7)

What hooks points to here are key elements of rhetorical vulnerability. hooks speaks against rigid agendas governing teaching and the categorization of student types which are both abstract structures that resist rhetorical vulnerability. She also emphasizes the interaction among students

highlighting the relational aspect of rhetorical vulnerability. So, hooks needs rhetorical vulnerability for her desired classroom community. How she gets there is not by embracing rhetorical vulnerability but by turning it into a skill that can be improved. To hooks, a classroom community that embraces vulnerability is created with students and teachers' willingness (there's Brown again) to do so: "As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence (8)."

Whether hooks' classes manage to create this desired classroom culture depends on practicing vulnerability as a skill: "Excitement is generated through collective effort," hooks writes (8). She tells stories of classes that create a classroom filled with excitement and other classes in which half the students are asleep which seems to suggest that vulnerability can be embraced with or without success. What hooks is describing, however, isn't an embracing of vulnerability. While she recognizes (or accepts!) what our rhetorical vulnerability looks like (our connectedness with others, our incompatibility with abstract structures and identification categories), she works from a concrete goal of creating an already imagined or specified classroom environment.

Embracing vulnerability rather than accepting it or using, frustratingly, doesn't lead to predetermined outcomes, even seemingly noble outcomes like hooks'. Embracing vulnerability isn't a guarantee for more harmony and satisfaction, although both can emerge from embracing vulnerability. hooks describes vulnerability as a skill that can be practiced to achieve a preset goal. Interestingly, a central aspect of Brown's vulnerability is to "stop controlling and predicting" (11:13) which is, despite our different approaches to vulnerability, one aspect in

which our thinking overlaps. Rhetorical vulnerability resists any form of codification; embracing it doesn't provide a secure path to success or a more honest and authentic version of a person.

Lastly, embracing vulnerability isn't the opposite of resisting rhetorical vulnerability. Admittedly, I occasionally set embracing and resisting up as opposing practices. While embracing functions as the opposite of resistance by creating different effects, framing a practice of embracing solely as the opposite of resistance cuts short the challenges and intricacies that embracing vulnerability entails. Embracing vulnerability doesn't guarantee the opposite outcome that a resistance toward vulnerability would generate.

The practice of embracing acknowledges that we might never fully shake a resistant response to rhetorical vulnerability simply because our vulnerability exposes us in ways that make resistance seem like a reasonable and safe response. This is why, for example, it's tricky to argue against identity-informed safe spaces. They're necessary and purposeful, but they ultimately showcase a resistant response to vulnerability. Embracing vulnerability is a different kind of response to vulnerability. Opposed to accepting or instrumentalizing vulnerability, it can't be turned into a set of rules that need to be followed to achieve a predetermined outcome. This difference ensures that embracing vulnerability isn't profitable or likely to be co-opted into something like forced affection and instead is an unending practice that functions without predetermined goals.

So, How Does Embracing Vulnerability Function?

So, if embracing vulnerability is not a skill; if it's not accepting, instrumentalizing, or the counterpart of resistance, then what does it need to be in order to generate new ways for us to identify, relate, and organize with others? What would a practice that recognizes that persuasion always involves rhetorical vulnerability need to look like? What becomes probable when we

design a practice that acknowledges that to be vulnerable isn't a choice we make but rather *how* we are? What if, instead of another reactionary response, we could build a disposition, a way of being, toward our vulnerability? These questions cannot be answered conclusively because part of embracing vulnerability is to reconcile with the inability to ever land and rest in certainty. Practicing an embrace of vulnerability honors our rhetorical vulnerability in a way that makes abstraction, categorization, and resistance more unlikely and provides a sustainable, non-violent disposition toward vulnerability.

When I say embracing vulnerability, I'm imagining an embrace, a metaphorical (or not) hug between two (or more) actors. These actors don't all have to be exclusively human since ideas, circumstances, events, and places can be embraced too. Such an embrace leaves a trace on both parties, a feeling of warmth or, possibly, discomfort, but a connection grows out of both scenarios. How an embrace makes actors feel often depends on the relationship between them which is why embraces come with different intensities. Acceptance, on the other hand, is either/or: I either accept something or I don't, whereas embraces can carry different connotations and intensities depending on who and what is engaging. Embracing is regulated based on the relationship between the actors who engage in the embrace. And, critically, an embrace has the potential to alter, to leave an imprint on a relationship, so the practice of embracing can open up new probabilities that emerge from differing relationships.

Whenever I hear the word "embrace" being used in conversations, it often describes something akin to accepting. Phrases like "embrace the chaos" or "embrace discomfort" seem synonymous with accepting whatever is going on. The physical and embodied nature of the word doesn't seem to come across in these instances. I intentionally chose the term "embrace" to underline the embodied impact of rhetorical vulnerability. Earlier, I noted how rhetorical

vulnerability can't be reasoned away because of its affective weight. That's why I advocate for a practice of embracing vulnerability because it considers the embodied elements of the encounters with rhetorical vulnerability.

What I also find meaningful about "embracing" is that it entails recognizing and acting on the presence of rhetorical vulnerability by welcoming it. Embracing vulnerability is recognizing that certain relations and events occur out of our control and that resisting or denying these circumstances doesn't lead to sustainable and just solutions. At the same time, embracing vulnerability is more than just being okay with uncomfortable situations. Embracing vulnerability doesn't provide a single solution to those situations. Maybe, it doesn't provide solutions at all. Rather, it opens up different ways of approaching situations, people, and practices that often require us to linger in discomfort.

With embracing vulnerability, I'm not promising a safe way out of discomfort, more like a way *through* discomfort. If embracing vulnerability guarantees certain solutions, it might be co-opted into a profitable practice which would just turn into another way of resisting vulnerability by creating a structure that promises stability. I don't mean to suggest that stability needs to be fully avoided. In fact, I empathize with and share the longing for stability in relationships and my identity. However, stability often grows into stagnation and remains beneficial only to those who determine what stability looks like. Royster's description of exclusive disciplinary landscapes exemplifies this stagnation. Rhetoric, she notes, has stabilized, and therefore limited, what its scholarship may look like, hindering the participation of those ideas, scholars, and subjects outside the limits (and even those within!). To undo and re-invent the ways we practice scholarship requires a kind of struggle for which we need a practice.

Embracing vulnerability helps us to struggle with, to negotiate over and over again, and to resist landing on an absolute.

Rhetorical vulnerability is deeply relational. It describes a condition that is at play each time persuasion happens. To be persuaded, that is to be in relationship with the world, is to be vulnerable. Thus, *embracing* rhetorical vulnerability is a practice that doesn't involve isolated entities. Embracing, literally, involves a relational turning as described by Mucklebauer. An embrace necessitates the recognition of an other, whether that other is a person, a practice, affect, a place, an institution, a structure. Since vulnerability is inherently relational, we need to recognize our relationality with the world in order to embrace vulnerability. That embrace, then, is only a secondary turning toward the other(s). We're always already "struggling with" one another, not against, as Stormer and McGreavy would say (12). Our capability of accepting vulnerability shows that we are in relation with the world around us, a world that we position ourselves to and act with by embracing vulnerability.

Embracing vulnerability opens up possibilities, creates capacities to ecologically embrace desire, to differently engage identification categories, and to understand spaces not as fixed containers, but as open, moldable, and relational.

Outside the Box: (Bi-)Sexuality and Embracing Vulnerability

Identification categories resist this entangled relationality. Different markers for sexuality, for example, are positioned in opposition, instead of in relation, to one another. When I declare that "I'm bisexual," I simultaneously declare that "I'm not heterosexual." Bisexuality, and all other identities that fall under the umbrella category "queer," are set up in resistance against heterosexuality. Bisexuality and heterosexuality are approached as two closed-off categories that are set up against each other every time I identify my sexuality as one rather than

the other. By identifying as bisexual, I enter an already formed category that persuades me to be and desire in a particular way. While the definition of bisexuality continues to be challenged within the queer community, bisexuality, like other queer sexualities, remains a category in direct resistance to heterosexuality. So, one area in which I want to practice embracing vulnerability is these identification categories. With the help of Chávez and Sánchez, I showed how rhetorically violent identification categories can be. They're based on abstraction and negation, capturing a variety of unique personal experiences in one seemingly stabilized category. I'm not proposing to get rid of identification categories–they're necessary common denominators. I think that embracing vulnerability can help us articulate and approach them in a way that honors desire in Alexander's sense and doesn't capture our lived identities.

Sexual identification categories set up *against* others don't match lived experiences. Instead, they force people into closed-off, already formed identification categories. Elise Dixon, in her article, "The Queer Potential of Bisexual Rhetoric," articulates the artificial boundaries sexuality markers draw across human experiences. Dixon, herself a bisexual woman married to a heterosexual man, recounts questions many bisexuals, myself included, have asked themselves: Is my relationship queer despite it being straight-passing? Is my opposite-sex spouse or partner implicated in my queerness? Am I still queer/bisexual when I'm with a straight person (245)? Confused bisexuals (like me) won't find answers to these questions in Dixon's article. Dixon suggests that answering these questions isn't productive. Instead, she proposes a bisexual rhetoric to help us recognize that in relation to one another, identification categories start falling apart. My bisexuality is called into question in my relationship with a straight man, but what I question isn't my bisexuality, but rather the functionality of identification categories altogether. Identities and desires emerge with and because of other people which is how embracing

vulnerability challenges the fixation of identities through categories. In other words, embracing vulnerability draws attention to how relationships, and not solely identification categories, shape sexuality and accentuates the instability of categories themselves. Ultimately, the struggle to identify isn't a struggle of heterosexuality against queerness (or bisexuality), but an embrace between people that always exceeds the artificial boundaries of sexual identification categories.

To reiterate, I'm not against identification categories, nor do I want to downplay the life-threatening and life-ending impacts of discrimination against the LGBTQIA+ community as well as queer-feminist efforts against such discrimination. I still gladly identify as bisexual but embracing vulnerability has taught me that my identity doesn't have to start with that identification. Bisexuality is, to return to Aristotle, the best available means I have for persuasion in this context. It's the available category already offered to me that gets closest to my lived experiences. Still, embracing vulnerability shows me that categories don't account for our rhetorical vulnerability. For example, as a bisexual person in a relationship with a straight man, I often hesitate to inhabit designated queer spaces because of how straight-passing my relationship is. Or, I overcompensate for my queerness with my clothes or rainbow water-bottle-stickers, so nobody dares to misidentify me as straight. Embracing vulnerability has helped me challenge these thoughts. It has shown me that my effort to be perceived as bisexual is me chasing a perfect version of an externally constructed category that doesn't hold space for my unique relationships and experiences with sexual identity.

Such an embracing of vulnerability takes place on a small, interpersonal level. It challenges that identification categories are pitted against one another and requires people to identify with a finality that doesn't reflect the flexibility of identity and desire. How can this localized work of embracing vulnerability show up on larger structural levels, such as a college

campus? In her book *Emergent Strategy* (2017), adrienne maree brown suggests that "*what we practice at the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system*" (53). She recounts personal experiences with political organizing efforts that exposed the lack of democratic fluency among organizers:

> [At] a local level we–Americans–don't know how to do democracy. We don't know how to make decisions together, how to create generative compromises, how to advance policies that center justice. … It was and is devastatingly clear to me that until we have some sense of how to live our solutions locally, we won't be successful at implementing a just governance system regionally, nationally, or globally. (52)

Embracing vulnerability on a local level, that is, in our relationships, at work, with family members, and the places we inhabit, radiates outwards and upwards. Instead of forcing embracing vulnerability on larger institutional levels, we must first integrate this practice into our own lives. I demonstrated what this might look like for our sexual identity but embracing vulnerability isn't limited to this domain. Recall Casey Boyle's note on practices: "*practice is the exercise of tendencies to activate greater capacities*" (5). Embracing vulnerability on any local level can spark these "greater capacities," which, admittedly, is a rather vague phrase. This ambiguity fits rhetorical vulnerability, though, because vulnerability doesn't operate on strict rules and specific expectations. Nonetheless, I think it's worth imagining what practicing embracing vulnerability in terms of sexuality could look like on a larger level.

Just like the category bisexuality, embracing vulnerability could challenge the notion of queer itself which is important because *queer* is the starting point for so many efforts against queerphobia. The term *queer* actually gets close to embracing vulnerability in terms of sexuality. *Queer* is not only an umbrella term for all gender and sexual identities outside of cis- and

heteronormativity. In queer theory, *queer* signifies an identity, a practice, and a disposition that resists a singular definition and anything that is perceived as natural or normal. Yet *queer,* a concept designed to challenge the notion of defining and essentializing identities, is often in danger of performing that which it's designed to challenge, and it's happening within the queer community. In a 200-level writing and research course, "Queer Visual Texts," my class analyzed Sam Smith's outfits in their new music video "I'm not here to make friends." Sam's outfits were bright, glittery, campy, sexy, and gender non-conforming. We theorized that these outfits were intended to celebrate Sam's sexuality, to display their gender identity, and to critique essentialized ideas of masculinity. Following this fashion-based analysis, some students started talking more generally about how queer people dress. They had observed that "queer people just think more about what they wear" or that "queer people's clothing choices usually stand out more." More than straight people, my students left unsaid, but it was implied. Getting more concrete, they noted that fashion offers a way to "communicate to others that we're queer." The 17 students in my class who are openly queer want to ensure they're not identified as straight, especially if they'd been read that way, to an extent by themselves, for most of their lives. They're resisting rhetorical vulnerability by using categories to help them make sense of queerness rather than embracing relationships as that which offers ways of being queer. So, one of my students said, matter-of-factly and getting a lot of nods from her peers: "Queer people put effort in their clothes. They don't just wear skinny jeans and a crop top." (My outfit of choice for that day was, of course, jeans and a crop top, but I'm choosing to embrace vulnerability, through gritted teeth, and remind myself not to aspire to a constructed identification category.) *Queer*'s reputation as a radical concept that defies definition was, in this example, being filled with values, expectations, and rules from within the community. So, it seems that embracing

vulnerability needs to be practiced within the community to recognize the ways in which it repeats essentializing mechanisms it initially set out to resist. Without taking away the cultural contributions, historical milestones, and policies queer activists have fought for, the queer community needs to embrace that we're not in relationship with a category, but rather with others, human or otherwise.

Embracing vulnerability may seem like it's mostly practiced in interpersonal, small-scale exchanges, but that doesn't mean that discrimination based on identification categories should be ignored. I hope, but cannot say with complete certainty, that if practiced on the small-scale, embracing vulnerability decreases the significance of identification categories across larger-level institutions. So, how could college campuses work against gender and sexuality-based discrimination by embracing vulnerability? A common response to queerphobia is the creation of safe spaces which, as shown, resist rhetorical vulnerability. Additionally, the safety of queer-only spaces is an illusion because racism, ableism, sexism, and even internal discrimination still frequent these spaces.

Embracing vulnerability that acknowledges identity-based discrimination would analyze how students and systems are in relation to one another: Which institutional practices discriminate? How do students negotiate queerphobia? How do queer students encounter institutional practices, their peers, class content, staff and faculty members? Embracing vulnerability draws attention to how students (queer or not) are entangled with queerphobia and how this relationship could be transformed (or disrupted). Sánchez suggests that we center "how groups of people–queer identifying or not–have made their way to dwell in certain spaces" (161). To Sánchez, the relational aspect between people and universities is more generative than carving out spaces for particular groups. Sánchez's suggestion prompts me to reflect on how I

contribute to queerphobia as a teacher and student. How do the institutions I privilege from reproduce discrimination? Which discriminating practices can I disrupt? How can I foreground relationships, not categories? Instead of leaving anti-queerphobic efforts solely to the LGBTQ+ resource center (and queer people themselves), posing these questions makes the safety of queer people a campus-wide responsibility, and expands the practice of embracing vulnerability.

Embracing Vulnerability in the Classroom with Accountability and Responsibility

The composition classroom has been a meaningful space for me in which practices "activate greater capacities" (Boyle 5). Similar to sexuality, conventional classrooms rely on a clear distinction between two labels: student and teacher. These categories are set up against one another, each assigned institutionally predetermined roles and expectations. Following Alexander's call for an "opening up *beyond* identity," (23) I wonder what embracing vulnerability could look like in a classroom. In my first-year writing classes, I ask my students what makes our classroom a classroom. We collect *material* aspects like whiteboard, projector, chairs, markers, notebooks, *activities* like hand-raising, learning, teaching, asking questions, note-taking, group work, *institutional* factors like schedules, syllabus, grades, the campus environment, students' past experiences, and *people* like students and teachers. Interestingly, all classes in which I've posed this question didn't list students and teachers until the end of our discussion although we agreed that without students and teachers, the other aspects (material, activities, institutional factors) wouldn't make a classroom. We would be fine without a whiteboard, we could meet off-campus and in our free time, and would still be able to create a classroom atmosphere. Instead of students and teachers, my students foregrounded the practices that comprise a classroom: "Learning and teaching can happen anywhere," one of my students declared. My students were embracing vulnerability by detaching practices like teaching and

learning from assigned, closed-off roles like teacher and student. My students helped me see the classroom, as Thomas Rickert puts it, "less as a body of rules, a set of codifiable classroom strategies, than a willingness to give recognition to unorthodox, unexpected, or troublesome work" (314, qtd. in Alexander 23). When we radically foreground teaching and learning as practices anyone in the classroom can take on and embrace this sometimes "troublesome work", we move away from a classroom that's governed by institutionally assigned roles and open it up to shared participation.

A quick disclaimer: I don't wish to erase the structural distinction between teacher and student. Both roles bear specific responsibilities that shouldn't be ignored. As a teacher, I have to adhere to course regulations, I uphold certain boundaries in relation to students, and I'm responsible for my students differently than when I'm a student. Instead of ignoring the institutional responsibilities of teachers, I suggest we continuously question the perceived epistemological superiority of teachers, not just on paper or when we want to seem progressive in front of students and colleagues, but in the "troublesome" moments.

As teachers, we can embrace rhetorical vulnerability by letting go of the institutionally granted control. We need to acknowledge that we're not the singular holders of knowledge in the classroom and design our classes on the premise that knowledge in the classroom is distributed. We need to welcome students' participation in the way a classroom takes shape. We need to embrace unexpected detours, let go of rigid lesson plans, and trust that teaching and learning are practices that reach beyond identification categories of teacher and students. These practices, of course, need to be balanced. If teachers are the ones that *give* students a sense of agency in the class's design, that agency depends on a hierarchical relationship. Agency that has been granted by institutional power doesn't actually empower students. The reason why I center teachers in

embracing vulnerability here is because we as teachers can be responsible for modeling an embrace of vulnerability. We need to model the distribution of knowledge and the diversity of knowledge and knowledge-making in the classroom.

For example, in my writing classes I deemphasize Standard English grammar and spelling from the first day of the quarter, but my students still tend to "correct" each other's grammar in workshops because they're practiced in associating English class with strict grammar rules. For students to let go of years of grammar-first writing instruction, requires an amount of mutual trust that we as teachers can't expect from our students, no matter how radical and innovative we believe our classroom practices to be. In "Your Contract Grading Ain't It," Sherri Craig expresses her frustration with the careless implementation of non-traditional grading practices: "These same students who would be bringing 12 plus years of traditional writing assessment practices and would be held to similar standards throughout our university, were to suddenly embrace a new set of grading practices comfortably (146)." We can't expect students to immediately trust teachers who implement non-traditional teaching methods. Structure still matters. Embracing vulnerability needs to be practiced responsibly. I've been in classes where teachers encouraged student-led discussions and remained silent for the majority of the class. While this practice seems to promote students' participation and ideas, these discussions tend to foreground white and male students who are accustomed to speaking up and being heard, whereas marginalized students, who might not possess this socially-sanctioned confidence, don't get their voices heard. That doesn't mean that we need to give up on disentangling learning and teaching from the roles of students and teacher, it simply means we need to do it with accountability and responsibility.

For example, in our writing classes, me and (most of) my graduate student colleagues challenge the notion of a "proper" way of writing. Many scholars and activists have pointed out that enforcing Standard English benefits white, middle- and upper-class students (Baker-Bell, Hudley and Mallinson). Privileging one particular English erases linguistic diversity and stigmatizes dialects and Englishes that divert from "White Mainstream English" (Baker-Bell 2). In 1972, the Conference on College Composition and Communication passed their "Students' Rights to Their Own Language" resolution which has since been reaffirmed twice:

> We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language -- the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language. (CCCC)

This resolution asks teachers to honor linguistic diversity and to recognize that no dialect is inherently more sophisticated. Teachers are responsible for creating a classroom environment in which students' rights to their own language are upheld (not given *to* them!). In August 2022, I attended a support retreat for writing instructors that was open to anyone teaching writing-heavy classes. One participant aired her grievances about first-year writing classes. I remember her comment as something like this: "I have to teach my students *everything* about writing…What do they even learn in English 101?" Though I haven't heard such snarky

criticism of English 101 since, she's not alone with her frustration. Some of my fellow graduate students wonder whether deemphasizing White Mainstream English in our classrooms is actually doing students a disservice. These graduate students claim that first-year writing classes need to prepare students for writing in college and for their future careers. They want to prevent students from encountering writing instructors' frustration as the one I quoted above. Although coming from a different angle, Craig's critique of irresponsibly implementing non-traditional classroom policies adds that students who experience linguistic marginalization might not trust their teachers that they truly have the "right to their own patterns and varieties of language." In *wordslut: a feminist guide to taking back the english language*, sociolinguist Amanda Montell recounts how she explained to a stranger that *y'all* isn't a sign of poor grammar after the woman had called Montell out for her use of the word. Montell, an advocate of linguistic diversity, only found out later that the woman's parents immigrated to the US and routinely scolded her for not adhering to White Mainstream English. Although Montell intended to promote linguistic diversity, she did not consider that disregarding White Mainstream English, and so embracing vulnerability, is a privilege not everyone can act on. All these reasons, nonetheless, shouldn't stop writing teachers from implementing the "Students' Rights to Their Own Language" resolution in their classrooms. The question is how this resolution can be practiced with accountability and responsibility.

Similarly to challenging sexual identification categories, embracing vulnerability in terms of linguistic diversity doesn't translate into ignoring the impacts of structural discrimination. Following Craig, teachers need to be mindful of students' varying levels of comfort and trust as well as their linguistic and educational conditioning. However, I disagree with my fellow graduate students' justifications for centering White Mainstream English in their writing

instruction. The institutions we're supposedly preparing our students for (which, by the way, is a giant task for a 10-week class!), aren't built for those students that encounter linguistic discrimination. Anyone who doesn't embody white, self-sufficient masculinity (Jennings 6) will face discrimination no matter their proficiency in White Mainstream English. Instead of equipping our students with tools to survive in institutions that don't protect or welcome them in the first place, let writing classrooms be a place where students use *their* voice(s) and practice resistance (and if students ask for help with Standard English, they can still receive it!). As Sánchez writes, instead of fitting people into pre-constructed spaces, our focus needs to shift on how they "have made their way to dwell in certain spaces" and on how our students transform them. We're not setting our students up for failure by deemphasizing White Mainstream English because the institutions that prioritize White Mainstream English, and with that a "white, self-sufficient, masculinity," have already failed them. We need to recognize that embracing "Students' Rights to Their Own Language" can transform the institutions that necessitated such a resolution in the first place. To take first steps, teachers might ask: What can students learn about the way they use language in different contexts? Why are certain varieties privileged over others? What kinds of linguistic activism can emerge from English 101?

In the classroom, embracing vulnerability challenges the notion that teachers are the ones that teach and students the ones that learn. Embracing vulnerability means holding ourselves accountable for non-traditional teaching practices and implementing them responsibly.

Conclusion

As I was wrapping up my thesis during one of our weekend writing sessions, my colleague and friend Chris approached me with a question that put my whole thesis to a test: "Sophia, after working on vulnerability for almost a year, have you found ways to be more okay with your vulnerability? And if so, can you tell me how you did it?"

Like I so often do, I listed three points in my head that I needed to get across. But I kept those to myself. Instead, Chris and I had a heartfelt conversation about vulnerability, resistance, risks, masculinity, teaching English 101, heartbreak, romantic relationships, and arguments. Our conversation was the embodiment of embracing vulnerability and I'm grateful it happened, and not *only* because it gave me a good ending for my thesis.

The reason I grappled so intensely with this idea of rhetorical vulnerability is because I wanted to find a better way to have difficult one-on-one conversations. I wanted to avoid getting into fights with my partner in conversations about racism and feminism. I wasn't satisfied with gag-inducing clichés like "agree to disagree," or worse "at least we're having a conversation," after heated antagonistic debates about life or death matters.

So, how do all my writing sessions in the library, our weekend thesis meet-ups, my committee meetings, my chats with friends and my partner translate to these one-on-one conversations? Chris helped when he wondered with me: "How can we carry embracing vulnerability into our relationships?" (Carry is a lovely word because it's so gentle, yet impactful, and not a forceful one-size-fits-all application of theory.)

Our conversation, as they almost always do, turned to teaching. Chris and I agreed that in the classroom we are our best selves. We listen intentionally to every student. We want to really *hear* what our students are saying (even those that listen to Joe Rogan's podcast in their free time

or who occasionally text during class). All that matters to us is that these students show up. In Chris's words, "In the classroom, we're powerfully vulnerable."

Eventually, I tell Chris about the ways I've learned to embrace vulnerability in the classroom and with my sexual identity. In the classroom, I ask that we foreground our practices (teaching and learning) and deemphasize their strict allocation with teacher and student roles. When describing our identity, I ask that we embrace desire and relationality instead of letting our identity be governed by categories. So, how *can* we learn to be more okay with our vulnerability? Rather than starting with the question, 'Who are you?' let's ask, curious as it may sound, 'Who are your practices? Your Relationships?'

For Chris and me, the classroom is a space in which we embrace vulnerability seemingly without much forethought. From the classroom, I learn every day how to responsibly and fiercely engage my rhetorical vulnerability. I'm convinced that we all have people, relationships, habits, or spaces in which embracing vulnerability *feels* simple (although it rarely is just that). There will always be places where we still resist rhetorical vulnerability. May we learn to carry our embraces to all of them.

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