

Interrogating the “Deep Story”: Storytelling and Narratives in the Rhetoric Classroom



Sharon Yam

Abstract: This article posits that inviting students to interrogate and share their worldviews through personal narratives could promote mutual inquiry across difference. Detailing a series of assignments and activities developed from the model of invitational rhetoric, this article analyzes students' writing and reflections to demonstrate how mutual listening and inquiry function as an effective means to cultivate self-reflexivity and ethical relations with others who do not share the same positionality.

During Donald Trump's rapid rise to political power before the Presidential Election, sociologist Arlie Hochschild set out to answer why working-class whites in the Deep South appeared to be voting against their own material interests: had they been duped, or were there more complex sociocultural and affective reasons behind their political choices? What Hochschild found during her ethnographic study in Louisiana were not uninformed and bigoted individuals who shared no common ethical or material concerns with more liberal voters. Rather, Hochschild found that like her and the people in her social circle, her research subjects were often equally concerned about the welfare of their community and family, and about maintaining equality in society. However, while the two groups might share similar values, the deep stories that inform how they see the world are completely different. As Hochschild defines it, “A deep story is a *feels-as-if* story—it's the story feelings tell, in the language of symbols. It removes judgment. It removes fact” (135). In their deep story, working-class whites have been struggling to achieve the American dream for generations, but they have been unfairly taken advantage of by people of color and immigrants, who they see as cutting in line to receive the good life (Hochschild). The emotional power of the deep story trumps factual evidence, thus preventing this group from objectively evaluating their material interests during the election. Based on this finding, Hochschild suggests, if we were to cultivate coalition moments across difference, we ought to interrogate the deep stories communities and individuals subscribe to, rather than engaging in arguments and persuasion that undermine the fundamental worldview of others.

Hochschild's theory of the deep story is particularly relevant in a public sphere rife with ad hominem attacks and dehumanization on both ends of the political spectrum. It is important to interrogate the different deep stories we and others hold because, as Hochschild points out, a knowledge of these stories “permits those on both sides of the political spectrum to stand back and explore the subjective prism through which the party on the other side sees the world” (135). By mutually inquiring as to how their views are influenced by the deep stories they hold, individuals from different positionality are less likely to ridicule, dehumanize, and dismiss people whose worldviews are incongruent with theirs. Rather, they will be more inclined to reflect on the sociopolitical and affective causes of political beliefs, including their own. In this article, I make use of Hochschild's deep story theory to argue that writing and rhetoric teachers should create opportunities for students to engage with different deep stories and reconsider their relationships with those whose views and lived experiences differ from theirs.

Writing in the early-2010s before Trump's presidency, John Duffy has already alerted writing teachers to the prevalence of toxic rhetoric in public discourse that dehumanizes those with diverging worldviews and political opinions. Duffy argues that by teaching students how to ethically construct arguments and substantiate their claims, the writing classroom could promote the virtues of honesty, accountability, respectfulness, tolerance, and generosity. While I agree with Duffy on the importance of these virtues in promoting a more productive and generous civic life, in this article I shift the attention away from arguments and instead posit that personal narratives and acts of storytelling could accomplish the same function.

While a focus on argumentation dominates most conventional rhetoric textbooks, scholars have argued for the pedagogical and social value of mutual inquiry and non-persuasion (Baker et al.; Elbow; Gagarin). Specifically, they emphasize that while students are often taught to persuade, they are not given many opportunities in the classroom to develop an openness to the idea that their views and relationships with their interlocutors might change because of this engagement. Recent work has been done on the importance of mutual inquiry in a rhetorical education. Drawing from Wayne C. Boothe's legacy, composition scholars Marsha Lee Baker, Eric Dieter, and Zachary Dobbins suggest that mutual inquiry helps students understand how they could *be* persuaded which, as the authors argue, is an important "critical and civic capacity" that promotes sustainable and non-violent public communication (13). In addition, Susan Kirtley and Abby Knoblauch advocate for the pedagogical use of invitational rhetoric—a feminist model of rhetoric that emphasizes mutual respect and self-determination rather than persuasion—to promote collaboration in the classroom. While Kirtley discusses how graphic texts, specifically Lynda Barry's *What It Is*, serve as sound models of invitational rhetoric that motivate students to engage in alternative forms of rhetorical acts outside of argumentation, Knoblauch suggests that teachers could deploy invitational rhetoric when they encounter student resistance. Instead of attempting to actively change the students' mind, Knoblauch posits, writing teachers could inquire how the students' experiences motivate their resistance and engage in an open dialogue with the students that does not prioritize persuasion.

Along a similar vein, many writing scholars have examined how assigning non-persuasive genres such as personal narratives and autoethnography allow students to critically negotiate and articulate their positionality in the academy and in the public sphere (Hesford; Juzwik et al.; Schlib; Young). As Hesford argues, by integrating self-reflection into material, rhetorical, and cultural analysis, students could more productively pay attention to how seemingly personal feelings and experiences influence public rhetorical acts. Critical personal narrative as a genre, Schlib posits, also allows students to move beyond fixed identity categories to critically reexamine their relations with others who are more marginalized. Personal narratives, in other words, prompt students to critically consider their position within a public sphere comprised of others whose positionalities and opinions differ from theirs.

I connect studies on personal narrative with research on mutual inquiry because together they are productive in informing a pedagogy that allows students to interrogate how seemingly personal deep stories have immense public and political impacts, and how the mutual inquiry of such stories could help eradicate toxic and dehumanizing rhetoric across political difference and positionality. This article also extends existing research on deploying invitational rhetoric in the writing and rhetoric classroom. While previous work has examined the use of invitational rhetoric to productively negotiate student resistance in the classroom (Knoblauch) and has proposed alternative texts to the conventional persuasion-based textbooks (Kirtley), I posit that the principles of invitational rhetoric give students the language and context to collaboratively compose an ethical protocol used to engage with each other's deep stories and their effects on one's political opinions and relations with others.

I argue that the writing and sharing of personal narratives among students, when paired with the terms of engagement outlined in Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin's essay on invitational rhetoric, could serve the following civic and ethical functions: 1) to prompt students to cultivate self-reflexivity through the articulation of their own deep story; 2) to encourage students to critically examine how their and others' beliefs are formed in relation to specific sociopolitical and cultural contexts; 3) to provide a sound rhetorical situation for students to engage in mutual inquiry with peers from different positionalities; and finally, 4) to offer room for marginalized students to tell their stories on their own terms, at a time when their narratives are often undermined or distorted in dominant public discourse. In the following sections, I will first elucidate the key principles of invitational rhetoric to illustrate how they serve as a set of guidelines that inform students how they could enact mutual inquiry as they share and explore each other's' deep stories. I will then describe a series of pedagogical activities and assignments that I designed based on such principles and analyze the texts my students produced to highlight the productiveness and limitations of such activities.

Invitational Rhetoric as Grounding Principles

In order to productively and ethically participate in public discourse across difference, students must first understand that political arguments and ideologies are intimately tied to one's positionality, lived experiences, and emotional responses to the world. A pedagogical model that considers rhetoric only as persuasion and emphasizes the use of argumentation devoid of emotions, material conditions, and lived experiences, therefore, is sorely inadequate in preparing students to engage in dialogues across difference, especially on polarizing and high-stake public topics.

Feminist scholars have repeatedly argued that we should take seriously emotions and personal experiences in relation to the way we form judgments, participate in public discourse, and engage with others who do not share the same positionality (e.g. Koziak; Lugones; Narayan). Hochschild's finding on deep stories highlights how one's self-

narrative and emotional perceptions of the world are more salient to public discourse than traditional argumentation theory has given them credit for. As Baker, Dieter, and Dobbins argue, “teaching students to observe *how*, instead of *what*, their classmates think” is essential to helping them develop the ethical capacity to relate to others not as enemies who must be proven wrong, but as equal interlocutors (17). The focus on the *how* encourages students to attune to the deep stories that inform one’s claims, and to the affective power that undergirds an argument. The attunement towards one’s deep story also requires students to never lose sight of the humanity of their interlocutors because while an argument could be depersonalized, a deep story is always saturated with feelings and experiences that are simultaneously personal, social, and public. By transcending the win-lose and right-wrong binaries to consider the contextual and emotional nuances that undergird each argument and belief, rhetoric-as-mutual-inquiry allows students to be in relations with others via collaboration rather than antagonism.

I draw on the principles of invitational rhetoric to promote the mutual inquiry of deep stories because it clearly articulates the guiding principles and terms of engagement necessary to promote “ethical exchanges in difficult situations” (Bone et al. 434). Defined by Foss and Griffin as “an invitation to understanding as a means to create a relationship rooted in equality, immanent value, and self-determination” (4), invitational rhetoric seeks to challenge the primacy of persuasion in traditional rhetorical theories. Challenging an antagonistic model of communication that pits interlocutors against each other, invitational rhetoric decenters persuasion, or the attempt to change someone’s mind. Rather, rhetors invite others to present their respective perspectives. As Foss and Griffin highlight, “the invitational rhetor does not judge or denigrate others’ perspectives but is open to and tries to appreciate and validate those perspectives, even if they differ dramatically from the rhetor’s own” (5). If the audience accepts the invitation, both parties must be open to the possibility that they may change their mind after the exchange—not because of persuasion, but because of a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the issue that arises from the dialogue (Foss and Griffin). By prompting interlocutors to engage with each other dialogically through their lived experiences, emotions, and rationales behind their specific worldviews, invitational rhetoric calls for rhetors to participate in the conversations in a fully embodied manner that reveals their humanity and vulnerability.

Because of the risk of vulnerability, invitational rhetoric and the practice of mutual inquiry hinge upon a trusting relationship between the interlocutors. This trust, however, is not easy to achieve both in and out of the classroom when structural power imbalance translates into interpersonal interactions, and when rhetoric is often taught as a battle of argumentation. Reflecting on coalition-building across difference, Uma Narayan posits that it is crucial to take interlocutors’ feelings and emotional reactions towards an issue or interaction more seriously. This is particularly important for interlocutors who are structurally marginalized as they possess epistemic privilege of their conditions —“a more immediate, subtle and critical knowledge about the nature of their oppression than people who are non-members of the oppressed group” (Narayan 35). When this knowledge and the emotions that accompany it are not properly acknowledged and incorporated into the dialogue, the exchange will inevitably reproduce the structural power imbalance and distrust, rather than promote dialogic understanding and mutual inquiry on a given issue.

The principles of invitational rhetoric, while not a universal solution, provide guidance on creating a discursive environment that promotes the sense of safety and mutual respect. At the heart of invitational rhetoric is the offering perspective: as Foss and Griffin explain, “in offering, rhetors tell what they currently know or understand; they present their vision of the world and show how it looks and works for them” (7). Rhetors offer their life-stories not as support for specific arguments, but to articulate their worldview—that is, the deep story that informs how they make sense of the world. Interlocutors ask questions and make remarks that seek to cultivate deeper understanding of each other’s perspectives and to offer different ways to approach and interpret the subject at hand, rather than undermining how the other person sees the world.

In addition to the offering perspective, invitational rhetoric asks that interlocutors interact in ways that create the conditions of “safety, value, and freedom” (Foss and Griffin 10). In order to satisfy these three external conditions, interlocutors must aim to share their perspective without any attempts to degrade, belittle, or humiliate others; this is akin to Krista Ratcliffe’s proposal that one should “stand under” worldviews and discourse that differ from their own and consciously acknowledge the fluidity of one’s viewpoints in relation to one’s positionality (28). Finally, to promote freedom and self-determination, interlocutors enacting invitational rhetoric must provide ample opportunities for others to develop different options and decide for themselves which ones they subscribe to. Rather than assuming that there is one dominant and unchanging agenda that the audience must move towards, invitational rhetoric prioritizes interlocutor’s freedom to choose from options that do not undermine their subjectivity. These three conditions, when produced by a specific protocol that holds interlocutors accountable to each other are effective in protecting marginalized rhetors from being diminished or denigrated for not subscribing to the dominant worldview.

Invitational rhetoric, however, is not without its critics: while many find it unacceptable and unproductive that Foss and Griffin equate persuasion with violence (Dow; Pollock et al.), some criticize the authors for unrealistically advocating for invitational rhetoric in all contexts (Fulkerson); others, in addition, question whether invitational rhetoric

perpetuates respectability politics that further polices marginalized rhetors (Lozano-Reich and Cloud). I adapt the terms of engagement for invitational rhetoric despite such critiques for a few reasons. First, while I do not agree that persuasion is inherently violent, the turn away from antagonistic models of rhetoric is helpful in prompting students to inquire, instead of immediately critiquing and attacking, deep stories that differ from theirs. Second, as Jennifer Emerling Bone, Cindy Griffin, and T.M. Linda Scholz point out, in Foss and Griffin's 1995 article, they are careful to posit that invitational rhetoric is not the only appropriate form of engagement: certain rhetorical situations and contexts would call for a different rhetorical response. Likewise, I understand and present invitational rhetoric to students as an option rather than a panacea for all difficult exchanges. When understood only as an option rather than a mandate, invitational rhetoric does not preclude acts of resistance or disruption. As such, I see invitational rhetoric not as a mandate for marginalized rhetors to refrain from confrontation, but as an additional rhetorical tactic for them to engage with those in a dominant position.

Enacting Mutual Inquiry in the Classroom

In Fall 2017, I incorporated invitational rhetoric as part of the curriculum for my intermediate Argument and Rhetoric course with 20 students. For the first half of the semester, students learned about and enacted classical rhetorical theories—such as stasis theory, and the five canons of rhetoric—that characterize rhetoric primarily as a means of persuasion. Rhetoric, however, includes communicative acts that are not based on argumentation, and effective persuasion is not always the intended goal or outcome. After examining non-persuasive rhetorical acts such as constitutive rhetoric and performative deliberation (Charland; Lyon), in conjunction with research in psychology that demonstrates the effectiveness of storytelling over argumentation in fostering productive engagement across difference (Haidt; Mooney; Shermer and Shermer), I introduced the class to invitational rhetoric and assigned the following set of writings and activities to be completed over the span of five class periods:

1. Students were asked to write a critical personal narrative based on a public issue (or a few interrelated ones) that the student cares deeply about.^[1] The goal of this assignment is for students to critically evaluate the ways their identities and cultural, socioeconomic, political and geographical backgrounds influence their opinions and feelings on that topic. This assignment also asked students to discuss how larger sociopolitical and cultural forces have influenced the way they engage—or choose not to engage—in conversations with those who disagree with them on the issue.
2. Based on the narrative abstracts submitted by students, I put them into groups comprised of individuals from different positionalities who hold diverse opinions on the same or similar subject matter. Students were informed during the drafting process that their narratives would be read by their peers and me.
3. Students exchanged and read each other's narratives as a group. They then spent the rest of class time holding a conversation guided by the protocol we had developed collaboratively as a class based on invitational rhetoric.
4. After the dialogue, students wrote letters to their group members articulating what impact the conversation and their peers' personal narratives had on them: whether their views on the topic had changed or expanded, and whether this exchange had shifted their perception of those whose positionality and worldview differed, or in some cases directly contradicted, theirs.
5. During the next class period, students read letters that were addressed to them while remaining in groups. They then had another round of conversation with their group members to address and discuss any remaining issues.
6. At the end of the letter exchange, students responded to prompts that asked them to reflect on the following: how they felt about this assignment series; what they found to be the most illuminating and challenging about the process; how their perception of rhetoric and the usage of rhetoric has shifted; and what they perceived to be the advantages and limitations of invitational rhetoric.

This series of assignments and activities (see [Appendix](#)) were completed after students had discussed in detail Foss and Griffin's proposal, together with Baker et. al.'s "The Art of Being Persuaded: Wayne Booth's Mutual Inquiry and the Trust to Listen." Discussions surrounding these articles prompted students to first interrogate the theoretical model of invitational rhetoric and mutual inquiry. These articles asked students to examine the ideological assumptions and ethical implications behind seeing rhetoric as solely a persuasive tool; they also jumpstarted discussions about the privileging of reason over emotions, and the limitations of this binary view. Most importantly, the reading materials and discussions ensured that students had a strong understanding of the central principles and ideologies of invitational rhetoric and mutual inquiry, and could later draw on them to create a protocol to hold themselves and their peers accountable during the narrative exchange and dialogues.

Given the existing critiques of invitational rhetoric, during class discussions I asked students to use various thought experiments to consider the limitations of invitational rhetoric and situations in which interlocutors should resort to

argumentation or other forms of confrontation. For example, students considered encountering interlocutors who were antagonistic and unwilling to respectfully engage in the mutual inquiry of deep stories; students also discussed whether invitational rhetoric was viable when there is a substantial power difference between the interlocutors. Based on these discussions, the class agreed that rhetors had no responsibility to deploy invitational rhetoric when engaging with worldviews that dehumanize or purposefully undermine the value and wellbeing of others (e.g. neo-Nazism, white supremacy). This clause was added to the collective protocol to remind students the terms of engagement they must adhere to during the narrative exchange.

I incorporated writing instructions about the critical personal narrative assignment into our discussions of these readings as well. In particular, I presented the following rubrics to ensure that the narratives connect the personal to the public and the political so that the narratives would be generative for upcoming conversations that interrogate how one's worldview is constructed. The assignment asked student to consider the following:

- Connections between your personal communicative practice with larger social, economic, political, or cultural structures and influences;
- Analysis of concrete examples from your lived experience, drawing particularly on exchanges you have had with those who disagree with your stance;
- Connections between your personal experience and communicative practice with any course readings and discussions.

These guidelines required students to approach their own opinions, lived experiences, and feelings as objects of analysis. In fact, many students remarked that the narrative assignment alone had prompted them to reconsider their worldview because the rubric asked that they articulate the rationales behind beliefs that were so ingrained that they had never questioned them before. One student writes in her reflection, "Just by writing [my personal narrative], I discovered a lot of beliefs I have that were getting kind of mixed up in my brain and now I know how I feel about the topic I wrote about and why I truly chose to become a vegetarian in the first place." More remarkably, a white student from the South who initially intended to write about why she supported the public display of Confederate statues changed her mind during the drafting process. Because the assignment asked her to situate her opinions within the larger sociopolitical, historical, cultural contexts, she began to think more deeply about the racism she witnessed growing up in Georgia. Analyzing those memories prompted the student to engage with the topic differently: rather than seeing her belief as fixed and more valid than others', she revisited arguments mounted by each side and found herself agreeing more with the removal of such statues.

While these students' reflections suggest that assigning a critical personal narrative alone could help promote critical articulation and engagement with opinions that are otherwise left unexamined, the effectiveness of this assignment nevertheless hinges upon the subsequent activities: knowing that their narratives would be read and discussed among peers whose positionality and stance differ from theirs, students were more motivated to scrutinize their ideologies and to articulate as clearly as possible the deep stories that undergirded their particular beliefs. With the principles and values of invitational rhetoric in the foreground, students were also deeply aware that these narratives were not meant to change minds, but to promote acts of mutual inquiry and dialogue about their interlocutors' deep stories, namely, how specific lived experiences and positionalities informed ideologies and political views.

Before I put students into groups to exchange their narratives and to hold the first round of conversation, the class engaged in a range of activities that helped ensure an environment of safety and respect. Since the enactment of invitational rhetoric renders interlocutors—particularly those who are structurally marginalized and have traditionally bore the burden of explanation—extremely vulnerable, it is crucial to first address in class how structural power imbalances and differential positionalities could impact engagement across difference. In "Working together across Difference," Uma Narayan describes six ways in which interlocutors from the dominant group could undermine their marginalized counterparts. Collaboratively, students examined each of these cases and came up with a set of guidelines and protocol for the upcoming dialogue, detailing how they would—and would want their peers to—behave to ensure a respectful, ethical, and generative exchange. Despite the protocol and careful preparation beforehand, engaging in invitational rhetoric necessarily entails risks—the risk of encountering an interlocutor who fails to reciprocate the openness, or a partner who either intentionally or unintentionally undermines one's life world. To ensure the emotional safety of students, particularly students from a marginalized positionality, I repeatedly made clear that students did not have to write about a topic that they did not feel comfortable sharing and discussing with others. Students, in other words, had control over how much risk they were willing to undertake.

An Analysis of How Students Deploy Invitational Rhetoric

At the end of the series, I collected from each group compiled personal narratives, letters, and reflections. Because I

was circulating around the classroom while the two rounds of conversations took place, I was not privy to any complete sets of exchanges within the groups. Nevertheless, the letters and final reflections have allowed me to reconstruct parts of the discussions and evaluate the productiveness and effects of these exchanges. My analysis below is driven by the following questions: How do students deploy principles of invitational rhetoric in writing and in conversation with each other? What rhetorical decisions do students make when they are explicitly asked not to persuade? What are the impacts of this series of activities in promoting self-reflexivity and the mutual inquiry of deep stories across difference? In this section, I focus on the data I collected from two groups of students to highlight both the advantageous learning outcomes and limitations. These data demonstrate that this assignment series is effective in prompting students to critically reflect on the sociopolitical and cultural roots of their worldviews, and to reexamine the relations they have with others and the way they communicate with those whose ideologies or positionality differ from theirs.

Ed, Tom, Salu, and Lee

Ed, Tom, and Salu were assigned to the same group because they engaged with policies on the ethical status of the fetus in relation to women's right to their bodies: while Ed advocated for stem cell research, Tom and Salu were respectively pro-life and pro-choice supporters. Lee joined the group after her assigned partner missed class that day due to illness. Reflecting on her experience as a trans woman, Lee's narrative addresses her stance on the bathroom bill. While Lee's topic did not fit in seamlessly with the others', the group congealed through their overlapping reflections on gender and biopolitics.

Because Tom and Salu disagreed most explicitly with each other's ideology on abortion, they engaged each other immediately during the first round of conversation. As a white male who grew up in a religious and conservative household, Tom explains in his narrative that his view against abortion comes both from the teachings from his church on the immorality of the act, and from his parents who both "abhor the practice of abortion, especially so when they know their tax dollars are helping fund various aspects of Planned Parenthood." Tom's views, in other words, are influenced simultaneously by religious, moral, and economic discourse. While Tom does not waver from his anti-abortion stance throughout the narrative, he does repeatedly consider its limitations based on his positionality. For instance, after explaining why he believes that the opinions of men on abortion should be taken as seriously as those of women, Tom engages with Narayan's framework of epistemic privilege to critique his own limited worldview: "To borrow from Uma Narayan, I am the ultimate 'outsider' on this subject—I have zero 'epistemic privilege of what it is like to know that one day you may have to go into labor...the reality is that I have also never been a father. I must concede that I have never gone through a traumatic pregnancy either."

Attempting to make sense of his strong opinions against abortion despite these limitations, in his narrative Tom recounts a memory in which his mother made it extremely clear that teen and unwanted pregnancy must be prevented at all cost in order to avoid the penultimate immoral act: abortion. In addition to his gender, Tom is also reflective about how his whiteness influences and limits his view on abortion: growing up in a middle-class, predominately white neighborhood, Tom was taught that abortion was an irresponsible act only poor, black youths would commit. While Tom now understands that as a racist and unsound argument, the fear he has associated with abortion nevertheless continues to linger. At the end of the narrative, he recounts that he often avoids having any discussions related to abortion with his female friends, fearing that they would be offended by him and being too self-conscious about his own limitations. Tom then expresses the hope that invitational rhetoric would allow him to begin engaging more actively in conversations about the topic.

As an Indian American woman who grew up in a white conservative neighborhood, Salu has had a very different set of experiences and ideological stance than Tom. Growing up in a Sikh household, Salu was taught by her parents that she must question everything and arrive at her own answer. Salu's view in support of abortion is formed both by research she has conducted on secular pro-life arguments and on her experience being excluded in her predominately white high school as the "angry brown woman." Her own experience of marginalization resonates with the history of colonialism and white patriarchy, which she learned about since a young age; Salu writes that because of such knowledge, her deep story has always been filled with skepticism and resentment towards the way the authority polices marginalized bodies. Because engaging in direct arguments with her peers had in the past resulted in further marginalization, Salu reflects that she has been practicing invitational rhetoric unknowingly since her senior year of high school. Unlike Tom, in other words, Salu has ample experience discussing abortion with people who hold different opinions. However, like Tom, Salu believes that her worldview on the topic would likely remain unchanged. What enabled them to nevertheless have a productive conversation in the end was a mutual willingness to engage with each other's experiences and opinions when persuasion was off the table.

Salu and Tom's letters to each other and their final reflections highlight the effectiveness of this activity in promoting open engagement across difference. After the first round of conversation, Salu and Tom wrote letters to each other.

In his letter, Tom opens by thanking Salu for her receptiveness and engagement, and admits that the conversation he had with Salu was the longest he had ever had with someone who is pro-abortion. Tom then spends the next two pages engaging with the reasoning and ideologies Salu has discussed in her personal narrative and during their first conversation. Tom does so in a way that encourages Salu to clarify and more explicitly articulate the grounding of her opinion. For example, while discussing the legality of abortion, Salu made an analogy between abortion with facelift surgery: for her, the two procedures share the same moral value because neither harms any third parties. In his letter, Tom wonders if the likening the two procedures is a false equivalence because he believes that when left alone, the fetus would grow into a human form, while the face would not turn into a new life if left without the surgery. While Tom appears to be engaging in an argumentative act in his letter by identifying logical fallacies in Salu's judgment, he continues to acknowledge his intention and desire for mutual inquiry over persuasion. Many of his critiques are phrased as open-ended questions, and he explicitly explains that the questions are not meant "to be interrogative, but rather investigative." Because of the trust they had established during the first conversation, Salu did not approach Tom's letter with skepticism.

In her letter to Tom, Salu reciprocates his gratefulness for the exchange and highlights that her discussion with Tom has reminded her that "certain beliefs, like being pro-life, is not necessarily something that is always rooted in hard-lined rationality." Because she often forgot that worldviews and moral values are emotional, conversations she had had with those who are pro-life often turned into hostile, unproductive debates. Echoing Tom's appreciation of the exchange, Salu writes that, "I forget that I am hypocritical when I say that being pro-life is inherently wrong, because obtaining an abortion is a personal and hard decision. Your narrative made me remember that your belief, then, is a personal and hard decision." Instead of further questioning Tom's belief, Salu is very reflective in her letter about how, despite the fact that she maintains her existing view on abortion, her view on those who are pro-life has shifted: "From this exchange, I definitely internalized the notion that I should not judge someone solely based on their opinion on abortion. I do this literally all of the time, and our conversation actually made me reverse this mentality." Salu then recounts how after her discussion with Tom, she was able to finally have a conversation with her Christian roommate about religion and abortion without turning the dialogue into a fight like before. The highly structured and scaffolded classroom activities, in other words, are transportable to other contexts. The emphasis on mutual inquiry and reciprocal exchange, in other words, is more conducive to productive civil discourse outside of class than the conventional focus on persuasion.

While abortion is not the focus of their narratives, the other two students in the group, Ed and Lee, also identified as pro-choice. Their letters to Tom further demonstrate the way invitational rhetoric allows students to examine the rationale behind their own political stance and helps undo the fear of difference that often prevents mutual inquiry of different worldviews. In his letter to Tom, Ed establishes that Tom's discussion of his religious upbringing initially triggered his fear but Tom's narrative ultimately helps him better articulate his own reasoning and understand how others arrive at worldviews different from his. Ed further writes that, "Your piece has provoked me to question my own beliefs and ultimately strengthen them...Up to this point, I have never really explored in depth the influences that support and shape the specific views of those opposite to mine...As I see how your experiences have influenced you, I now understand my own opinions better." Ed's reflection highlights that effective rhetorical education need not focus only on persuasion. In fact, when we decenter persuasion, students are free to engage in collaborative inquiry across difference that prompts them to examine the ideologies and deep stories that undergird their respective worldviews. Such self-reflexivity is crucial in any deliberative process as it demonstrates the rhetor's acute understanding that people do not "reason together in a logos-centric vacuum" and it is unethical to assume that one's worldview is inherently more correct than someone else's (Baker et. al. 21).

To fulfill the pedagogical goal of preparing students to engage in civil discourse across difference, both self-reflexivity and the ability to listen empathetically and critically are necessary. The principles of invitational rhetoric are helpful in cultivating students' willingness to listen without immediately mounting counterarguments. The exchange between Lee and Ed on the transgender bathroom bill highlights how the practice of listening as part of mutual inquiry help develop students' capacity to critically consider subject matters that challenge the social norms they adhere to.

While writing respectively about stem cell research and the bathroom bill, Ed and Lee's topics do not cohere with one another's the way Tom and Salu's do; the four nevertheless still benefitted from engaging in an equal, open, and reciprocal exchange with one another. Reflecting on her experience transitioning and the anxiety she frequently experiences in public bathrooms, Lee discusses in her narrative that she often avoids having any discussions related to the topic and would "try desperately to ignore [her] personal stake in the issue almost completely," for fear that such exchanges would influence how people view her as a person. In a marginalized non-normative body that has been repeatedly demeaned in dominant public discourse, Lee takes on a huge risk every time she discusses her lived experiences with cis people: she may, as Narayan points out, experience disparaging and condescending remarks from outsiders and feel that her personhood is being undermined. This risk exists in the classroom space despite the extensive scaffolding that prepares students to engage in invitational rhetoric and mutual inquiry.

Students may not always be able to critically examine and set aside their emotional reactions towards non-normative bodies and gender. By sharing her experience and deep story, Lee was rendering herself vulnerable.

Lee's narrative resonates a lot with Ed, a white, cis, straight male. While Ed and Lee's topics and respective positionality differ from each other's, they were able to utilize invitational rhetoric to advance not only their understanding of each topic, but also the way they conceptualize civil discourse. In his letter to Lee, Ed writes:

I never really understood what being transgender is. I had not known anyone who has experienced the same thing that you have experienced. I had almost no knowledge about the topic of transgenderism. To be honest, I had no real interest learning about transgenderism as it made me uncomfortable to talk about. Your narrative is the first real personal piece I have read that talks about being transgender.

Referencing Lee's discussion on her difficult experience coming out to her family, Ed explains why Lee's narrative has had such a profound impact on him:

My whole life revolves around my family and my friends, who I consider an extension of my family. I have never really put much thought into how a transgender person can feel uncomfortable in a setting with their family. This reality resonates with me on a very personal level. I cannot imagine not feeling comfortable or accepted among my own family.

While here Ed engages with empathy in a way that centers his own feelings, Lee's narrative is so deeply contextualized that Ed never assumes he could completely stand in Lee's shoes. As rhetoric scholars have previously argued, while personal narratives often promote an empathetic response, they could risk subsuming difference if the audience believes that they identify perfectly well with the marginalized narrator (Lynch; Rothfelder and Thornton). By asking students to highlight in their narrative how their lived experience is related to and is influenced by larger sociopolitical and cultural forces, the resulting papers are more conducive to the examination of respective deep stories—stories that bridge the personal and affective with the public and political. Addressing the debate on public bathrooms, Ed first acknowledges Lee's anxiety whenever she has to enter a public restroom before attempting to reconcile his discomfort with non-normative bodies with the value of inclusion:

For me, I honestly think that I would be uncomfortable if a trans person were to walk into the men's restroom while I was in there. Not because I am against transgenderism or that person's beliefs; I would feel this way because it is something that is new to me and hard to understand at times. Ultimately, I think that transgender people should be able to use the bathroom that corresponds to the gender that they most comfortable as...Your narrative is a very powerful piece. Reading about your personal experiences allows me to be more comfortable and understanding when it comes to the acceptance of trans people.

Ed's letter highlights how public anxiety surrounding non-normative bodies often forestalls civil discourse and coalition between marginalized and dominant communities. If we seek to cultivate student's civic capacity to productively and ethically engage with difference, it is crucial to give them the opportunity to practice self-inquiry, to interrogate why they feel fearful or uncomfortable about certain topics, and how the opinions they form affect others. Ed's letter makes clear that he continues to grapple with his discomfort. Lee's narrative and her conversation with Ed, in other words, have not changed his view entirely, but they nevertheless prompt Ed to see the public and personal stakes in this issue and to confront his emotional biases.

The students' final reflections further highlight the productiveness of invitational rhetoric in fostering dialogic engagement across difference. The emphasis on mutual inquiry renders the exchange an ongoing process, rather than a contained battle in which one side wins and the other loses. As Tom writes about his experience with the series of exchange:

After reading Salu's narrative and getting to talk to her one-on-one, I had time to go home and think about the encounter. The next day, the encounter was still on my mind. The next time we had class, I was much more prepared and excited to carry on the conversation that was started the class period prior. And I guess this is the ultimate draw to invitational rhetoric: it does not emotionally drain or fatigue the interlocutors with conflict.

Comparing this activity with the traditional debate we have had earlier in the semester, Tom reflects:

I remember after the debate, even though I enjoyed the process, I was spent. I was glad it was over with and I didn't have to reintroduce the conflict in the next class. With invitational rhetoric, I felt that the conversation was able to ruminate between the two of us, and the next time we were even more prepared to constructively talk about our experiences.

Tom's reflection illustrates how invitational rhetoric is conducive to more sustainable and ongoing conversations across difference, as interlocutors no longer feel the burden to win the battle or risk having their self-worth and worldview undermined. This series of activities, in other words, promotes ongoing mutual inquiry by reframing the relationship between interlocutors from competitors to collaborators.

In addition, by decentering logos-centric arguments, invitational rhetoric also prompts students to see their interlocutors as fellow humans with unique backstories that deserve consideration and respect, rather than as proxies of ideologies that offend them. Salu's reflection highlights how this shift in perspective has prompted sustainable changes in the way she sees and engages with others:

This activity changed my view on people in general. I am guilty of attributing someone's views on one topic to aspects about their character. I then attempt to judge people based on that one view, even if I only spoke to them once... This is not a healthy practice, nor is it productive. This activity changed the way I engage with people, and I think I've become a more empathetic person.

As Salu explains in her narrative, as a queer woman of color, she tends to form judgments of others quickly in order to protect herself from microaggressive and sometimes outright aggressive acts of racism and sexism. While unfortunate, such defensiveness is often crucial for the survival of marginalized people. By participating in an exchange guided by the principles of invitational rhetoric, Salu understands that given the appropriate context, she could suspend her defensiveness and learn to inquire about how and why her dominant peers see the world in a way that does not instantly dismiss their view.

Previously skeptical of invitational rhetoric, Ed similarly reflects that this series of exchanges has prompted him to think otherwise:

At first, I used to think invitational rhetoric was bullshit. I saw it as a way to manipulate people, by using stories (true or false) to gain an advantage over someone and their beliefs. Now, I see that it is not that. Invitational rhetoric is an open invitation into the emotional aspect of someone's life. I see that this kind of rhetoric allows for more genuine conversations. We are no longer attacking a belief; we are stepping in someone else's shoes.

Salu and Ed's reflections illuminate the rhetorical impact of tracing how individuals develop specific worldviews due to their experiences and positionality within intersecting sociopolitical and cultural contexts. By asking students to take into account how emotions and lived experiences inform opinions on public issues, this series of activities allows students to see civil discourse as an embodied practice in which opinions, emotions, and experiences are all intimately connected.

Aaliyah and Megan

While Ed, Salu, and Tom's example demonstrates the effectiveness of this activity in prompting students to reexamine their deep story and their relations with others across power differentials, it does not completely address whether marginalized students are benefitting from it as much as their dominant counterparts. In her personal narrative, Aaliyah, an Afro-Latinx student, describes her childhood experience with racism and how police brutality had led to the death of one of her friends. She then explains how such encounters form the basis of her deep story, prompting her to fervently support Black Lives Matter (BLM), despite the critiques the movement has received from across the political spectrum

Aaliyah's two white peers, both focusing on race in their respective paper, found her narrative illuminating. Megan, a white student who previously opposed the demolition of public Confederate statues, writes in her letter that Aaliyah's essay has made a strong and lasting impact on the way she understands racism and BLM. Megan notes that prior to reading Aaliyah's narrative and conversing with her, she had never considered the everyday trauma and oppression Black people experience. She had previously thought that BLM only concerned the rare instances of police brutality, rather than the systematic problem of anti-black racism. Megan ends her letter by reiterating her gratitude for Aaliyah, and by positing the political significance of Aaliyah's narrative:

You have made me want to read more into this topic, and you have really proved how Black Lives Matter shouldn't be as controversial as it is... I feel as though if more people were honestly educated on that then there could really be a difference made. You gave me a new insight and better understanding over a topic that I had previously not known much about, other than what I have heard and seen from news stories.

For Megan, the exchange with Aaliyah allowed her to see racial politics through a different prism—a prism that is often discredited by dominant mainstream media. This activity, in other words, expanded Megan's worldview and prompted her to more critically examine public discourse on racial justice and social movements.

Aaliyah, on the other hand, did not receive the same intellectual benefit. She writes in her reflection that she did not find this series of activities particularly generative for her own thinking. Because Aaliyah did not elaborate on that further, I could only speculate that unlike their white peers whose deep story is rarely challenged in dominant discourse and practices, black students are socialized to be attuned to the worldviews of white people—sometimes failing to do so could be fatal (Lebron). This distinction applies not only to students of color, but to students who occupy structurally marginalized positions who before this activity are already knowledgeable about the deep stories of their dominant peers.

Marginalized students, however, could still benefit from this exchange. Salu's reflection in the previous section demonstrates that the collaborative and respectful atmosphere of these mutual inquiries open up the possibility for marginalized students to engage in open dialogues with their more dominant peers without feeling the immediate need to defend themselves. While such defensiveness is often necessary for non-normative subjects to protect themselves from different forms of violence and oppression in their everyday life, it is both physically and emotionally taxing (Zhang). Making room for marginalized students to share their lived experiences in a relatively safe environment not only offers temporary reprieve, but it also gives them an alternative experience of engaging with interlocutors across power difference.

In addition, turning their experiences into stories shared with others could be an empowering experience for marginalized students. As anthropologist Michael Jackson points out, "A story enables us to fuse the world within and the world without. In this way we gain some purchase over events that confounded us, humbled us, and left us helpless. In telling a story we renew our faith that the world is within our grasp" (240). Articulating their deep story, in other words, allows marginalized students to regain control of how they want to make sense of their reality and present it to others. Their narratives constitute what Aja Martinez calls "counterstories," stories that "expose, analyze, and challenge stock stories of racial privilege and can help to strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance" (38). In other words, rather than promoting respectability politics, activities guided by invitational rhetoric help make room for alternative worldviews and discourses by allowing marginalized students to share their counterstories with their more dominant peers, prompting a more critical examination of the existing power hierarchy.

Indeed, the exchange with her white peers was not completely unproductive for Aaliyah. While she notes in her reflection that she did not gain any new social knowledge, she was profoundly moved by Megan's reaction to her narrative. After repeatedly commending Megan for her openness and willingness to reexamine her own view, Aaliyah notes, "if I can get through one person then that is enough for me."

Conclusion

The current political and discursive climate has rendered productive and generous civil dialogues across difference pressing and crucial. Building upon Hochschild's emphasis on deep stories, I have argued that as writing and rhetoric teachers, we ought to help students foster self-reflexivity and reciprocal, open, and critical engagements with different worldviews. By foregrounding mutual inquiry and the affective and social importance of one's deep story and lived experiences, a rhetorical education based on invitational rhetoric could prompt students from dominant positionalities to reexamine how their worldviews are formed, and how such views impact others relationally, politically, and emotionally. For marginalized students, the activity outlined in this article provides the opportunity for them to engage in conversations about high-stakes public issues without being constantly undermined; it also makes room for them to articulate their deep story against the grain to critique dominant discourses that erase their experiences. While mutual inquiry grounded in invitational rhetoric is not a panacea, it turns the classroom into an experimental place of collaboration where we can engage in conversations and relationships that simultaneously take into account our respective feelings, lived experiences, and the structural forces that contribute to them.

[Appendix: Assignment Prompts \(PDF\)](#)

Notes

1. While this assignment is akin to an autoethnography, I refrain from calling it as such for pedagogical and theoretical reasons. Since many students in class had not encountered autoethnography before, I did not want to present a new concept that might eclipse the key rhetorical concepts (invitational rhetoric and rhetoric as mutual inquiry) crucial to this series. Theoretically, I do not want to be reductive about autoethnography as a research method and genre as it encompasses much more than this brief prompt could cover. ([Return to text.](#))

Works Cited

- Baker, Marsha Lee, et al. "The Art of Being Persuaded: Wayne Booth's Mutual Inquiry and the Trust to Listen." *Composition Studies*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2014, pp. 13-34.
- Bone, Jennifer Emerling, et al. "Beyond Traditional Conceptualizations of Rhetoric: Invitational Rhetoric and a Move Toward Civility." *Western Journal of Communication*, vol. 72, no. 4, 2008, pp. 434-62.
- Charland, Maurice. "Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the People Québécois." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 73, no. 2, 1987, pp. 133-50.
- Dow, Bonnie J. "Feminism, Difference(s), and Rhetorical Studies." *Communication Studies*, vol. 46, no. 1-2, 1995, pp. 106-17.
- Duffy, John. "Virtuous Arguments." *Insider Higher Ed*. 16 Mar, 2012, <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2012/03/16/essay-value-first-year-writing-courses>. Accessed 1 Oct, 2018.
- Elbow, Peter. *Writing without Teachers*. 2nd edition, Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Foss, Sonja K., and Cindy L. Griffin. "Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal for an Invitational Rhetoric." *Communication Monographs*, vol. 62, no. 1, 1995, pp. 2-18.
- Fulkerson, Richard. "Transcending Our Conception of Argument in Light of Feminist Critiques." *Argumentation and Advocacy*, vol. 32, no. 4, 1996, pp. 199-217.
- Gagarin, Michael. "Did the Sophists Aim to Persuade?" *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2001, pp. 275-91.
- Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. Reprint edition, Vintage, 2013.
- Hesford, Wendy S. *Framing Identities*. University of Minnesota Press, 1998.
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell. *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. The New Press, 2016.
- Jackson, Michael. *The Politics of Storytelling: Variations on a Theme by Hannah Arendt*. 2nd edition, Museum Tusulanum Press, 2014.
- Juzwik, Mary, et al. "Re-Thinking Personal Narrative in the Pedagogy of Writing Teacher Preparation." *Teaching/Writing: The Journal of Writing Teacher Education*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2014, pp. 27-35.
- Kirtley, Susan. "Considering the Alternative in Composition Pedagogy: Teaching Invitational Rhetoric with Lynda Barry's *What It Is*." *Women's Studies in Communication*, vol. 37, 2014, pp. 339-359.
- Knoblauch, Abby. "Disrupting Disruption: Invitational Pedagogy and Issues of Authority in the College Writing Classroom." *Disrupting Pedagogies and Teaching the Knowledge Society: Countering Conservative Norms with Creative Approaches*. Julie Falkner, ed. Hershey, PA, IGI Global Publishers, 2012, pp122-35.
- Koziak, Barbara. *Retrieving Political Emotion: "Thumos," Aristotle, and Gender*. Penn State University Press, 2000.
- Lebron, Chris. "Opinion | What We Are Teaching Black Children." *The New York Times*, 22 Jun 2017. *NYTimes.com*,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/22/opinion/charleena-lyles-philando-castile.html>. Accessed 1 Oct, 2018.

- Lozano-Reich, Nina M., and Dana L. Cloud. "The Uncivil Tongue: Invitational Rhetoric and the Problem of Inequality." *Western Journal of Communication*, vol. 73, no. 2, 2009, pp. 220-26.
- Lugones, María. "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception." *Hypatia*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1987, pp. 3-19.
- Lynch, Dennis A. "Rhetorics of Proximity: Empathy in Temple Grandin and Cornel West." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 1, 1998, pp. 5-23.
- Lyon, Arabella. *Deliberative Acts: Democracy, Rhetoric, and Rights*. Penn State University Press, 2013.
- Martinez, Aja Y. "A Plea for Critical Race Theory Counterstory: Stock Story versus Counterstory Dialogues Concerning Alejandra's 'Fit' in the Academy." *Composition Studies*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2014, pp. 33-55.
- Mooney, Chris. "The Science of Why We Don't Believe Science." *Mother Jones*, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2011/04/denial-science-chris-mooney/>. Accessed 26 Nov. 2017.
- Narayan, Uma. "Working Together across Difference: Some Considerations on Emotions and Political Practice." *Hypatia*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1988, pp. 31-47.
- Pollock, Mark A., et al. "Navigating between Scylla and Charybdis: Continuing the Dialogue on Communication and Social Justice." *Communication Studies*, vol. 47, no. 1-2, Mar. 1996, pp. 142-51.
- Ratcliffe, Krista. *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2006.
- Rothfelder, Katy, and Davi Johnson Thornton. "Man Interrupted: Mental Illness Narrative as a Rhetoric of Proximity." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, vol. 47, no. 4, 2017, pp. 359-82.
- Schlib, search. *Between the Lines: Relating Composition Theory and Literary Theory*. Heinemann, 1996.
- Shermer, Michael. "How to Convince Someone When Facts Fail." *Scientific American*, 1 Jan, 2017, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-to-convince-someone-when-facts-fail/>. Accessed 26 Nov. 2017.
- Young, Morris. *Minor Re/Visions: Asian American Literacy Narratives as a Rhetoric of Citizenship*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2004.
- Zhang, Sarah. "The Physical Damage Racism Inflicts on Your Brain and Body." *WIRED*, 16 Jul, 2016, <https://www.wired.com/2016/07/physical-damage-racism-inflicts-brain-body/>. Accessed 24 Mar. 2018.

"Storytelling and Narratives in the Rhetoric Classroom" from *Composition Forum* 40 (Fall 2018)

© Copyright 2018 Sharon Yam.

Licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).



Return to [Composition Forum 40 table of contents](#).