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"Should You Encounter": The Social Conditions of Empathy

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Abstract: In this essay, I analyze a series of first-person homeless accounts and reader responses in the *Las Vegas Sun* newspaper in order to highlight the social conditions that support or inhibit empathy. I review the rhetorical study of empathy and incorporate work from social psychology and moral philosophy to identify and examine the conditions of assessing victimhood and recognizing self-other overlap. I find the irony of empathy to be that the very social forces that would necessitate an expansion of empathy also inhibit it through increasing social division and the reluctance of readers to recognize their own vulnerabilities in the position of others. I contend throughout that a focus on empathy as an individual experience overlooks the social production of empathy, which is more appropriately considered from a rhetorical perspective.

Keywords: empathy, identification, homelessness, Las Vegas

Late in the summer of 2010, freelance writer Rodger Jacobs was running out of time and options. He had moved from Los Angeles to Las Vegas to care for his ailing mother, who had since died. He and his girlfriend, Lela Michael, were about to be evicted from their rented home. He did not know where they would go or how they would manage. To express his frustration, Jacobs wrote a letter to the editors of the *Las Vegas Sun* newspaper. The editors replied by contracting Jacobs to write a first-person series of articles titled "The New Homeless: My Story." At that time Las Vegas, once among the nation's greatest growing economies, was the national leader in foreclosures and unemployment. A year earlier, the *Las Vegas Sun* had won a Pulitzer Prize for Public Service reporting, so a series focusing upon the plight of the new and nearly homeless corresponded well with its mission. An editor's note to open the series explains part of the intent, relating Jacobs's situation to readers by stating, "the Great Recession has created the new

homeless, people with good work histories who are victims of unemployment and foreclosures. We won't necessarily find them sleeping on a downtown sidewalk. We asked Rodger Jacobs to tell his story, in his own words." The contrast of "new" and supposedly "old" homeless is troubling and speaks to the social issues involved in who is considered a victim worthy of empathy and who is granted space to tell their stories. Still, the series effectively highlights the economic uncertainties facing much of the population and amplifies the voice of one of those affected. As the series developed in three parts over four months, Jacobs chronicled his experiences as he and Michael walked the fine social and economic lines dividing those who have homes from those who do not.

The *Las Vegas Sun* series is notable for how it highlights the social conditions upon which empathy is determined and contested. These are evident in the nearly seven hundred and fifty reader comments the articles attracted, including responses by Jacobs, Michael, and the series editor. Each article is accompanied by a documentary video. The first article in the series is titled simply "I Am Frightened" (Jacobs, Aug. 2010). It serves to introduce Jacobs and to explain how he came to be on the verge of homelessness. The second, published a month later, is titled "Hostile Toward Homelessness" and updates Jacobs's situation as he and Michael were now living in a Budget Suites of America extended-stay hotel (Jacobs, Sept. 2010). Much of the second article is concerned with reader reactions to the first. That trend continues with the third article, titled "Homelessness and the Indignity of Hurtful Speech," in which Jacobs responds to his critical readers and tells of his plans to move back to Los Angeles, saying goodbye to a community that he feels has turned its back on him (Jacobs, Dec. 2010). Jacobs began writing the series to describe his difficult situation, but as it progresses he becomes increasingly concerned with hurtful reader responses and how people in the community understand one another.

In this essay I analyze Jacobs's series to highlight the social conditions that help determine empathy. Empathy often is presented as something somebody has, as though it were located inside an individual's head. I demonstrate instead how empathy is a social phenomenon, created through the social conditions that inform our interactions and the ways we understand and respond to one another. These social conditions are evident in my analysis of the *Las Vegas Sun* series, especially those conditions related to the assessment of suffering and responsibility and our places in

relation to others in a community. (Full disclosure: I worked at the *Las Vegas Sun* prior to the series being published.) I read the series with attention to how Jacobs is positioned socially, in how he is read and how he writes. Since empathy is unevenly distributed, some members of a community are granted greater access to empathy than others.

Understanding Empathy as a Social Phenomenon

My analysis follows the social logics and values enacted in what Daniel Gross describes as a "*contoured world of emotional investments*, where some people have significantly more liabilities than others" (Gross, 2007, 3, emphasis in original). I view my inquiry as continuing a rhetorical approach that understands emotions as socially and historically constituted. A rhetorical perspective makes clearer the contingencies of empathy and, through that approach, allows for a critique of the ways and conditions upon which empathy is determined.

I begin with a review of the rhetorical study of empathy and how I, like Gross, understand empathy as a socially determined rhetorical phenomenon. I then consider two key social conditions of empathy: assessment of victim status and responsibility; and recognition of the self-other overlap that acknowledges the significance one person holds for another as members of a community with shared vulnerabilities.

Victim status, communal membership, and shared vulnerabilities all depend on social values and positions. Evident in the series and my analysis are competing ideologies and discourses that work to support or inhibit empathy. I conclude by surveying wider media responses to Jacobs's series and the dismay of writers who read the series as indicating a breakdown in community relations during times of economic distress. I identify an irony of empathy as the tendency of the very factors that necessitate greater empathy to be those that undercut the social conditions for it. My argument is that empathy is not simply an individual psychological event but socially determined and rhetorically mediated, meaning that empathy is a product of the social situation at least as much as of individual psyches. This is not to say that empathy does not vary by individual or that individuals do not experience empathy in how they feel and think about one another. They do. Instead, I argue that the social conditions of empathy are too often overlooked in an emphasis on empathy as an individual phenomenon or as occurring between two individuals without taking larger social conditions into

consideration. I attempt to account for those here. Empathy is not simply a question of neuroanatomy. It is as much a question of social conditions and who is determined worthy of it and who is not. In times of increasing economic distress, widening social inequality, and fraying community relations, empathy itself is imperiled, as is clear in Jacobs's series. A rhetorical understanding of empathy helps us shift attention from individual readers and writers to the social conditions that support or inhibit it.

Empathy: A Literature Review

Rhetorical Studies

Empathy has long been a rhetorical concern. As Dennis Lynch notes, "Empathy used to be at the center, at the heart, of rhetorical studies" (Lynch, 1998, 5). Empathy is traditionally aligned with emotional appeals and identification. Conceptions of empathy became increasingly suspect in rhetorical and cultural studies due to association with moral universalism and the liabilities of empathic overreach. Recent interest in mirror neurons, moral judgments, community cohesion among differences, and affect and the body have reinvigorated studies of empathy. In much of this literature, empathy is evoked as a discrete personal event. However, as Ann Jurecic reminds us, "Affects such as empathy—as well as love, shame, disgust, terror, and happiness—are more than personal" (Jurecic, 2011, 11). Empathy is more than personal: This understanding of empathy is in line with the work of theorists such as Gross and Sara Ahmed, who have pushed for a rhetorical understanding of emotions as not merely personal or neurological phenomena but as occurring in socio-historical spaces. Following philosopher Amy Coplan, accordingly, I understand empathy as a simultaneously cognitive and affective event that allows us to attempt to understand "what it is like to be another person" (Coplan, 2011, 6). But whereas Coplan emphasizes the constitutive psychological processes of empathy—affective matching, other-oriented perspective-taking, and self-other differentiation—I emphasize the conditions that work to determine empathy as a social and rhetorical phenomenon.

A cognitive as well as affective understanding of empathy is favored by Kristie Fleckenstein, who writes, "As a complicated mixture of affect and rationality, empathy lends itself to deliberative discourse—to negotiation, debate, and persuasion—in the public sphere and serves as the foundation for social justice"

(Fleckenstein, 2007, 707). Fleckenstein builds upon the work of psychologist Martin Hoffman, as well as on Martha Nussbaum's theory of compassion, in an attempt to see empathy as mediated through language and, as Hoffman writes, serving as "the spark of human concern for others, the glue that makes social life possible" (Hoffman, 2001, 3; Nussbaum, 2001). Understanding empathy as language-mediated, combining affect and cognition, and as a key element in building communities, highlights empathy's value as a rhetorical concept.

Perhaps the most significant rhetorical work related to empathy is Kenneth Burke's concept of identification. Burke places identification at the very core of persuasion, writing, "You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his" (Burke, 1950, 55, emphasis in original). For Burke, this process is not a single rhetorical event but the product of "a general *body of identifications*" Burke, 1950, 24, emphasis in original). That general body of identifications contributes to the rhetorical situation that determines the possibilities for empathy. Diane Davis has expanded on Burke's concept of identification. Reading Burke's treatment of identification alongside Freud, she collapses the distance between self and other to present identification as working through "an a priori affect*ability* or persuad*ability* that precedes and exceeds symbolic intervention" (Davis, 2008, 125, emphasis in original). Davis supports her argument by citing advances in neuroscience, namely the discovery of mirror neurons, to move identification beyond individuals and symbolic mediation to include a state of being and potential for identifying together. While an emphasis on mirror neurons can distract from the social reality of empathy, Davis uses this work and Freud's to argue for a persuadability that exists prior to and in excess of intentional argument. This makes persuasion always part of the rhetorical situation. We are already to a degree identified or not identified with others prior to our encounters. In this sense, the conditions of empathy largely are determined by social and situational conditions even before one person meets another.

More recent rhetorical studies of empathy have focused on intercultural communication and the use of empathy in the advancement of social justice. Lisa Blankenship offers a theory of "rhetorical empathy" as building on Burke's identification through "appeals to emotion and personal connection based on shared experience" (Blankenship, 2013, 2). She identifies rhetorical empathy as a form of "strategic essentialism" that can be useful in

inviting identifications for the promotion of equal rights (Blankenship, 2013, 4). Peiling Zhao examines the functions of empathy in rhetorical borderlands where both the empathizer and the empathizee might challenge each other's understanding and subjectivity. As she explains, "An intersubjective rhetoric of empathy asks readers in intercultural encounters to position each other as subjects, to engage each other's emotions; not through identification either with other's emotions or pure rational reasoning, but through mutual and simultaneous recognition of difference and commonality" (Zhao, 2012, 70).

Zhao focuses on intercultural communication, but a similar dynamic underlies all empathic exchanges. I view Zhao's work as continuing that of Lynch, who also found the contested nature of empathy to be both a liability and an asset. Lynch uses the metaphor of proximity to theorize how writers can invite readers to identify with them while also purposefully frustrating readers in that identification, a strategy writers may use to inhibit easy empathy and instead promote the difficult work of trying to understand other people. Lynch finds that such texts "seduce us into ambiguous social spaces—by using the very obstacles to empathy we have been discussing—and by using those obstacles as possibilities for social exchange rather than as reasons for refusing interaction" (Lynch, 1998, 11). Empathy then becomes the reason for and field on which more nuanced exchanges might happen, with fuller discursive considerations of both commonalities and differences.

My analysis of Jacobs's series of articles draws on the work reviewed above by extending the rhetorical study of empathy to identify and analyze key social conditions that help determine empathic encounters, or their failure. The significance of empathy, especially to whom and by whom it is extended, as well as to whom it is denied, often is as much a situational effect as an interpersonal one: It varies due to social positions, values, commitments, and means of interaction. Like Zhao, I incorporate psychological concepts of empathy to better capture complex empathic interactions, and I place these in conversation with rhetorical and philosophical theories of empathy.

Interdisciplinary Contributions

Explicitly rhetorical studies of empathy are illuminated by treatments in other fields. One site of interdisciplinary conversation

is afforded by Nussbaum's theory of compassion (Nussbaum, 2001). Nussbaum draws upon an extensive philosophical and rhetorical tradition while also turning to contemporary psychological research. She arrives at three elements in the cognitive structure of compassion: (1) the "belief or appraisal that the suffering is serious rather than trivial;" (2) "the belief that the person does not deserve the suffering;" and (3) "the belief that the possibilities of the person who experiences the emotion are similar to those of the sufferer" (Nussbaum, 2001, 306). The third condition is derived from Aristotelian philosophy and adds to the idea of "eudaimonistic judgment" in which "the person must consider the suffering of another as a significant part of his or her own scheme of goals and ends. In effect, she must make herself vulnerable in the person of another" (Nussbaum, 2001, 319). I view shared vulnerability to suffering and eudaimonistic judgment as working in tandem with the related and broader condition of a "self-other overlap," as proposed by Adam Galinsky and others for the creation of social bonds (Galinsky *et al.*, 2005). These elements together produce a social condition of empathy that includes shared possibilities, vulnerabilities, recognition of a common humanity, and significance in one another's lives.

In drawing on Nussbaum's cognitive elements of compassion, I do not mean to give the impression that compassion and empathy are interchangeable. Nussbaum recognizes as much when she writes, "If empathy is not clearly necessary for compassion, it is a prominent route to it" (Nussbaum, 2001, 332). This is not to ignore the important distinctions between empathy and compassion as positions. Empathy leads to and influences moral judgments. It does not depend on congruence of judgment, as compassion tends to. In feeling compassion we generally take up a moral position parallel that of another, but, still, you can empathize with somebody you do not necessarily support. Indeed, you can experience empathy as an unpleasant call on your conscience or as an unflattering reflection of yourself in another. Others, psychologist Paul Bloom for example, position compassion as less emotionally and affectively engaged than empathy (Bloom, 2016). The affective quality of empathy, which Hoffman describes as giving empathy motive force and heat, is part of empathy's appeal (Hoffman, 2001). Nussbaum is concerned with the role of emotions in forming judgments and appraisals of others. I add to her work attention to how appraisals are socially determined, how the ways we feel about and judge others are based upon social positions and our conceptions of community. Two of the most vital social

conditions of empathy arise where responsibility and the self-other overlap are determined. I focus my own analysis there.

The more readily we see somebody as a victim the more easily we might empathize with them. A greater challenge is to empathize with those whom we do *not* see as victims, perhaps because we view them as at fault for their fate. The appraisal of fault often is a question of context, history, ideology, and social conditions. Those who understand one's life conditions to be primarily a result of social and historical forces largely beyond one's control may be more apt to empathize with people who are victims of the same forces (Bracher, 2013). Those who view one's life conditions to be largely a result of one's own decisions may be more likely to assign responsibility and resist empathizing with the victims of social forces. These attitudes inform the social conditions that underlie appraisals of responsibility and support or inhibit empathy. In *Literature and Social Justice*, Mark Bracher defines these ways of considering others as faulty person-schemas of autonomism versus a more correct situationism (Bracher, 2013). Those schemas broadly align with George Lakoff's theories of moral categories in political thinking, with the conservative "Strict Father" morality favoring autonomism in concert with responsibility and self-reliance, while the liberal "Nurturing Mother" morality emphasizes care and makes empathy itself a priority (Lakoff, 2002, 162-167). Dominant political logics, person-schemas, economic forces, and other social conditions can be understood as doing much of the work in producing possibilities for empathic encounters. Although questions of responsibility overlap with political morality, the assessment of responsibility remains a critical social condition for the contestation of empathy. As will be clear in Jacobs's series, assessments of responsibility and victim status are much disputed.

Empathy as Seeing Ourselves in Others

The empathic social condition of recognizing a self-other overlap is built on simultaneous recognition and negotiation of difference. Burke's concept of identification is useful in this context because of his attention to the necessity of difference in order for identification or any act of communication to take place (Burke, 1950). He writes, "For one need not scrutinize the concept of 'identification' very sharply to see, implied in it at every turn, its ironic counterpart: division. Rhetoric is concerned with the state of Babel after the Fall" (Burke, 1950, 23). Burke's insight is that identification is possible only if there is some difference beyond which one might identify,

some division that gives cause for seeking in rhetoric similarities and understanding among differences. That division is itself a social construction, resulting from identities and positions. There is no need or possibility for empathy if there are no differences for one to empathize across and different individuals to empathize with. The possibilities for empathy are determined by the kinds and degrees of division in any social context. I understand empathy as always an approximation that depends upon the simultaneous realization of both differences and commonalities, which often are socially constituted.

The shared significance in the self-other overlap can be traced all the way back to the Aristotelian idea that pity requires a belief that we and our loved ones have similar vulnerabilities and possibilities for suffering, as must the victims with whom we would empathize. Aristotle supports this understanding of pity, his closest comparable term to empathy. He argues that in order to understand the suffering or emotional conditions of others we need to be able to relate them to our own capacities and experiences. The social significance of pity is clear when Aristotle writes,

> Pity may be defined as a feeling of pain at an apparent evil, destructive or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it, and which we might expect to befall ourselves or some friend of ours, and moreover to befall us soon…And, generally, we feel pity whenever we are in the condition of remembering that similar misfortunes have happened to us or ours, or expecting them to happen in the future (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, II.8, 1385b2, 1386a7).

Aristotle is arguing that the assignment of personal responsibility inhibits pity because we pity only the undeserving sufferer. More importantly for the condition of self-other overlap, he contends that we need to understand ourselves as having or as capable of having vulnerabilities similar to those of another. If we do not, we will have trouble feeling pity or, I would add, empathy. Finally, Aristotle comments on the importance of personal experience in recognizing a self-other overlap. He also realizes that we recognize that overlap not only through personal experiences and capacities but also through family and friends. As Hoffman has argued, this is one way to leverage the familiarity bias—the bias that we most readily empathize with those most like us—as a tool of empathy rather than an obstacle, by imagining those close to us in the situation of a supposed victim, a move he calls "multiple empathizing" (Hoffman,

2001, 24). Pity differs from empathy because pity depends upon imbalances in social positions. One typically pities another of lesser social standing, while empathy is enabled through similar social standings.

The social conditions of self-other overlap also reinforce Nussbaum's assertion that empathy requires eudaimonistic judgment (Nussbaum, 2001). This is the requirement that one believes the other person matters, that the life of the other holds significance for one's own life, and that the other should be included within one's circle of concern. Eudaimonistic judgment can be based upon an understanding that one and another are members of similar communities, a condition for empathizing that exists prior to the encounter itself. It can also build upon attention to the personal and human dimension of an issue. Moral philosopher Arne Vetlesen highlights the importance of this attention when he writes, "Missing the human dimension of the situation, I also, and for that very reason, miss its moral dimension" (Vetlesen, 1994, 179). The idea of a shared humanity—that there are some similarities in the human experience and that human concerns transcend difference—contributes to self-other overlap by acknowledging shared vulnerabilities and possibilities. A shared humanity also establishes a common community so that one believes that another's suffering is one's own concern. This is akin to psychologist Robert Kegan's idea of the interindividual form of identity, which Bracher describes when he writes, "When I have an interindividual identity, every other human being is an essential component of my sense of self, such that when anyone else suffers, I suffer, and when anyone else experiences joy or contentment, so do I, through that person" (Bracher, 2009, 62).

I do not intend the idea of a common humanity, however important it is as an ideal, to somehow negate important differences, a negation that tends to work in the interests of the more powerful. These are not all-encompassing commonalities. I mean to recognize those differences even while affirming that critical differences do not cancel out the basic potential similarities in human experience or, more importantly, the value of concern for others and for creating the social conditions that would enable such concern, those being a more egalitarian and just world. Acknowledging the significance that another holds for oneself is a powerful social condition that goes a long way in supporting empathy.

In general, then, the social conditions of empathy are those social forces, values, logics, and possible subject positions that create or inhibit possibilities for empathy prior to the encounter itself. They are conditions that empathy may work with or against. They are often overlooked in theories of empathy that stress the individual experience *qua* individual. Highlighting these social conditions is the work of this analysis of empathy. Two critical conditions focused upon here are (1) the designation of the victim as not at fault for his or her situation, especially through understanding the influences of history and social conditions upon another's life situation; and (2), recognition of a self-other overlap through a shared humanity, shared worthiness of concern, and shared potentialities and vulnerabilities. These conditions are made explicit in Jacobs's series and the reader comments. Awareness of these conditions is important in broadening our rhetorical understanding of empathy because they inform many of our debates over social policies, the plights and positions of others, and how we might and should respond to those situations. With these social conditions of empathy in mind, I return to Jacobs's account of his life among the nearly and newly homeless and the responses of his readers in the *Las Vegas Sun*.

Responsibility, Victimhood, and Homelessness

Empathy with the homeless is fundamentally a question of social positions and values. Homelessness is not something that resides in the individual. Homelessness is a social phenomenon, one determined by conditions of poverty, access to healthcare, and other factors. The fact that Jacobs is introduced in an editorial note as one of the "new homeless," as one who should not be blamed for his homelessness because he has a "good work history," underscores the dominant social logic that homelessness is tied to individual character and responsibility rather than social conditions. Jacobs offers his story to counter that logic. He does so by a certain role reversal of writer and audience: He addresses himself to readers who are assumed to share commonplaces about personal failure and choice whereas he, a writer on the verge of homelessness, has learned to refuse to deploy those commonplaces. There are clear social hierarchies among the homeless. Some are more deserving of empathy than others. Also at issue are the social positions of the would-be empathizers and how they understand their own vulnerabilities to homelessness and their communal commitments. These social conditions are evident throughout the discussions of responsibility and victimhood in Jacobs's series.

Jacobs writes to strengthen his position as one of the homeless who are entitled to empathy. He is a victim of the economy, of unscrupulous lenders and landlords, and of fate. In "I Am Frightened" Jacobs describes himself and his girlfriend, Michael, as "brutalized by the economy" and as in debt to a "merciless payday lender" (Jacobs, Aug. 2010). There is the "draconian" property management company, the state bureaucracy he has to contend with, and even the "cockroaches and black widow spiders" that Jacobs must pay an exterminator to eradicate (Jacobs, Aug. 2010). In the second article, "Hostile Toward Homelessness," Jacobs further presents himself as a victim of a generally hateful readership and a largely indifferent community (Jacobs, Sept. 2010).

Jacobs describes the day the first article is published. He spent much of that day responding to allegations of "sloth," "arrogance," "weak moral and ethical judgment," "alcoholism," and more, as readers attacked his character in order to assign him responsibility (Jacobs, Sept. 2010). He writes that the pain he felt in reading the comments has been enduring. He first thanks those who have shown him and Michael sympathy and support and then adds, "But any warmth of kindness was lost to judgmental creatures wrapped in their conservative ideology and intoxicated by their own venomous rhetoric" (Jacobs, Sept. 2010). He is arguing against readers who misunderstood his situation and, more significantly, against a preexisting ideology that has nothing to do with him personally but nevertheless works to undermine an empathic reading. In the third and final article, Jacobs again likens the economy to a malevolent force. Worse for him than the economic pain or the pain in his joints is the hurtful speech generated by the series. He writes of the "mean-spirited remarks that have fueled my decision to leave town" (Jacobs, Dec. 2010). Jacobs thanks those community members who offered assistance and donations, but the suffering that he describes is sufficient to compel him to leave. In his telling, he is twice the victim, first to the economic conditions that produced his homelessness and second to the "conservative ideology" and "venomous rhetoric" that fuel the mean-spirited comments of the readers (Jacobs, Dec. 2010).

Many of the commenters voice a strong individualist ideology and argue that Jacobs is responsible for his situation. Here it is worth noting that at the time of the series the *Las Vegas Sun* website asked that readers comment through registered accounts but allowed them to register those accounts under any display name they chose. The *Las Vegas Sun* likely did so in the idea that

forcing commenters to register would create more of an online community and lead to higher quality comments. While they are commenting through registered accounts, the true identity of the commenters can remain anonymous behind user names. This anonymity further increases the distance and limits the sense of social connection between Jacobs and his readers.

With greater distance, the move to empathy is weakened. The moral obligation that Vetlesen attributes to empathy as a demand placed on the viewer appears to be diminished when the viewer can act as an anonymous participant (Vetlesen, 1994). Some commenters are upset that Jacobs does not assume more responsibility. Commenter Area51 writes, "Rodger basically does not want to take responsibility for his actions" and "Oh, please. The 'they are picking on me' attitude is wearing thin" (Jacobs, Sept. 2010, posts 124, 172). Area51 sees Jacobs as appealing for status as a victim while denying his own responsibility. In a detailed comment, Thia writes,

> Tell me sir have you learned and grown as a person from this hardship? Tell me what do you intend to do differently so you do not end up in this position again? What offends so many, sir, is that you are not in as bad of a place as you believe yourself to be in. What offends so many sir is that even with all the kindness you have received you write in a manner that sees only what you do not have and did not get. What offends so many, sir, it that you write in a manner that says I am a victim pity me, and takes no responsibility for your own choices. Not once have I read that you admit you regret anything. Not once have I read that you in anyway are humbled or grateful. You write, sir, like the kindness and generosity of others is your right and due you (Jacobs, Sept. 2010, post 106).

Thia not only denies the validity of Jacobs's claim to empathy, but also is offended by the ways in which he portrays himself as a victim of social forces and circumstance.

Much of Thia's comment argues in accord with commonplace conservative beliefs regarding responsibility and victimhood. People demonstrate responsibility by taking adverse experiences as opportunities for learning and growth, promising to change, acknowledging their errors, and demonstrating work toward improvement. Thia does not see enough recognition of the proper

commonplaces that govern this topic in Jacobs's article to warrant empathy. She picks up on an idea frequently stated in the comments, that Jacobs acts as though something is owed to him. Who is granted and who is denied victim status is politically and culturally defined. Those who recognize the determinant power of social forces on another's station in life are more willing to see somebody on the verge of homelessness as a victim of the economy. Conversely, those who do not see such social forces as having a determinant power on one's station in life are more likely to attribute Jacobs's situation to a personal failing such as pride or laziness. Bracher observes as much in his critique of autonomist schemas and their contributions to social injustice (Bracher, 2013). Ideology rather than individual judgment and experience then may be seen as contributing to empathy in any given situation.

The commenters who voice a competing logic that does entitle Jacobs to empathy do so by focusing on the role of unexpected events in an individual's life. They also point out that everybody makes mistakes, a way of asserting the self-other overlap, that they too have made mistakes. They contend that it is not the reader's place to judge Jacobs's decisions, only to empathize with him. For example, in response to Jacobs's article, "Homelessness and the Indignity of Hurtful Speech," TheNextOpinion writes, "As for the people saying that bad decisions contributed to this situation- you are absolutely correct. Unfortunately, I've never met a person who made perfect decisions every time" (Jacobs, Dec. 2010, post 103). The intention is not to absolve Jacobs of his responsibility for his situation, but rather to argue that responsibility is not the real issue because everybody makes mistakes. Similarly, arguing for recognition of circumstances beyond Jacobs's control, OpinionVegas adds,

> As I read this unfortunate story, I couldn't help but think about what our society has become? It seems that many among us have forgotten the importance of helping people less fortunate than ourselves and have developed a sense of denial in concluding that other people's dire straits are always because of things that they did or did not do with their lives and that they could exert control over all of life's variables—that simply is not possible. Have those unforgiving souls actually forgotten that many things in life—good or bad—are undeniably influenced by circumstances totally beyond one's control? (Jacobs, Dec. 2010, post 15).

OpinionVegas views Jacobs's situation as "unfortunate" and admonishes others for being too quick to judge Jacobs rather than to offer support. Relatedly, psychologist C. Daniel Batson has shown that feelings of empathy can lead to altruistic actions to help others (Batson, 2011). OpinionVegas attributes the rush to judgment to "a sense of denial" because people want to view others as responsible for their own fate so that they will not have to fear the likelihood of a similar misfortune in their own lives. Notably, OpinionVegas finds the fault not with Jacobs but with what society has become, as conditions of empathy have more to do with social values, ideologies, and the uneven distribution of responsibility—weighing most heavily on the homeless themselves—than they do with individual guilt. This view conforms to Bracher's situationist schema, from which it follows that positions in life are often the products of much larger forces that are not under personal control (Bracher, 2013).

Jacobs showcases empathy and a more appropriate non-evaluative response to the situation of others when he writes in the second article of going for a haircut. "I did get a haircut — from a kind Wal-Mart beautician who was recently homeless with two teenage sons to care for," he writes, adding, "I did not ask what 'mistakes' she made that put her in that perilous position" (Jacobs, Sept. 2010). Here Jacobs is modeling the type of empathy that he would expect of his readers. Empathy is acknowledged not by those in a higher social position—those who would look down upon and judge Jacobs as a way of distancing him and his position and vulnerabilities from themselves—but from the perspective of a Wal-Mart beautician who has recently found herself in a similar social position. The possibility of empathy in this case depends on the likelihood that somebody has been in a similar social position or can imagine being so, a move that levels standing between Jacobs and his respondent.

Jacobs notes earlier in the article that a friend had warned him to be prepared for negative reader responses:

> "People are uncomfortable with and hostile toward the topic of homelessness," my friend Joseph Mailander cautioned. "More often than not, they want to believe that the homeless got in their situation because of mistakes that they have made rather than confront the uncomfortable truth that fate is often random and undeserved and homelessness could happen to anyone in the blink of an eye," (Jacobs, Sept. 2010).

Jacobs's series becomes a place for enacting and engaging competing ideologies, those that attribute homelessness largely to the homeless and those that view homelessness predominantly as the product of social forces. Perhaps because of this, Jacobs is reluctant to assign himself responsibility in contributing to his situation, because doing so might strengthen the position that homelessness is the fault of the homeless.

Responsibility is a recurring issue throughout the series and the reader comments. It speaks to how homelessness is assessed and who is considered responsible for their homelessness. For those arguing along the lines of homelessness as an individual product, Jacobs is not a victim. He is instead largely the cause of the situation in which he has found himself. These commenters do not empathize because assigning responsibility allows them to focus on the decisions that Jacobs made, fixating on his failure to acknowledge complicity in this situation rather than considering those circumstances that are beyond Jacobs's control and attending to the ways in which he is now suffering. Numerous commenters focus on factors from Jacobs's personal life, on which they draw to inform their reading of his deservingness of empathy and his assignment to positions of victim or non-victim. Jacobs is seen smoking in one of the article photos and having a beer in one of the videos. In his freelance writing career, he had previously worked as a screenwriter for adult films, which is mentioned in the comments. These biographical details are presented as evidence of personal failings and are cited as reasons that Jacobs is not entitled to empathy. Reference to these factors demonstrates the social considerations and moral values that underlie how the position of victim is determined. The empathy that would or would not be extended to Jacobs was determined by his social position and dominant social values before he sat down to write his articles. In arguing for his empathy, he has to argue against these dominant ideologies.

Self-Other Overlap: A Condition For Empathizing

The social condition of self-other overlap requires that someone views another's life as having some significance for one's own, such as membership in the same community. Self-other overlap also requires belief in some commonalities in what people experience or may experience. Cultural, historical, social, and personal interpretations and expressions of human experiences differ widely, but to recognize a self-other overlap we need to have some confidence that there is something shared within our experiences of

what it means to be human. This is necessary in order to relate one's experiences to those of another. The self-other overlap as a social condition for empathy is built upon the premise that what happens to somebody else could happen to me or at least is relatable to me through some shared vulnerabilities. If the prospect of being unemployed is not a possibility in my life, if my social position is such that I am sufficiently insulated from all concerns of homelessness, then I may find it more difficult to empathize with somebody who has recently lost his job and who is now on the verge of homelessness.

My use of self-other overlap is based on Galinsky's psychological concept in conjunction with Nussbaum's explanation of eudaimonistic judgment (Galinsky *et al.*, 2005; Nussbaum, 2001). Within psychology, self-other overlap refers to seeing ourselves in others and others in ourselves, especially through perspective-taking. As Galinsky *et al.* write, "Through both seeing the self in the other and seeing the other in the self, perspective-takers are able to navigate a complex social world, coordinating their behavior with a diverse set of individuals, and establishing multicultural social bonds" (Galinsky *et al*., 2005, 110-111). But the possibility of seeing ourselves in others depends upon how we and others are socially positioned and defined, making the possibility of self-other overlap, and therefore of empathy, a social product. Nussbaum's understanding of eudaimonistic judgement does not require perspective-taking but is a process of evaluation in which the suffering of another is deemed personally significant. The overlap here occurs in looking for commonalities, sharing vulnerabilities, and recognizing the importance of our lives to one another. The particulars of human lives differ in all kinds of critical and unequal ways, but to recognize a self-other overlap we need to have some confidence that there is something common within our experiences of what it means to be human and to believe that those experiences matter.

When Jacobs writes in support of the condition of self-other overlap, he is essentially arguing for his place in the community and his likeness to other community members. In describing himself and Michael as good, hardworking, community-minded people, for example, Jacobs is also making a case for their similarity to an audience of similar folks. In "I Am Frightened," Jacobs writes of himself and Michael, "We have been hardworking people all of our lives, honest and forthright, passionate lovers of art and culture, but soon we may need to learn how to read books and study art under the glare of a streetlamp" (Jacobs, Aug. 2010). Jacobs is describing

himself and Michael in terms that many of his readers would to apply to themselves and to other members of their community. He is saying, in essence, we are like you, equal in social standing and concern.

The editor's note at the beginning of the series makes a similar argument in describing the "new homeless" as "people with good work histories," which solidifies Jacobs's and Michael's standing by distinguishing them from those homeless who supposedly do not have good work histories. Jacobs adds, then, that although they are upstanding people they are in a desperate situation, implying that his readers could just as easily find themselves in a similar spot. If we are like you, then you are also like us. If not for different circumstances, some of the readers might be in a situation very much like that of Jacobs and Michael. Indeed, the entire premise of the series is that the experiences of "The New Homeless" are common in Las Vegas during the Great Recession and that Jacobs and Michael are representative of many people facing uncertain prospects.

Jacobs is fond of evoking a sense of community at the end of his articles. At the end of the first and second pieces he attempts to showcase how his life may intersect with the lives of his readers to demonstrate that they are part of a shared community. For example, he ends his first article with a scenario in which his path crosses those of his readers:

> And so, in your travels across the Las Vegas Valley, should you encounter a weary-looking man resting against a streetlight, one hand on a wooden cane, the other clutching a dog-eared paperback of a Georges Simenon Inspector Maigret novel—my escapist lit choice of the moment—you will be gazing into the face of one of the new homeless. Give a friendly toot of the horn as you drive by and consider stopping and dropping a fiver or a ten spot into a hand that is mangled and scabbed-over by psoriasis...Don't worry, it's not contagious, (Jacobs, Aug. 2010).

Jacobs attempts several things here. By providing details as though he were a character in a scene, he works to engage the readers' imaginations as if they are encountering him not only on the page but on the street. Jacobs writes of readers "gazing into the face of one of the new homeless," which could stand for the rhetorical work of the series as a whole. His request is friendly and personal so that

readers might "give a friendly toot," and he reassures them that they need not worry about catching his psoriasis. He also is putting himself in the place of others, imagining his readers' travels and concerns. The overall effect is not only to put a friendly face on homelessness, but also to show that Jacobs and his readers are part of the same community and could pass one another on the street. The phrase that resonates most strongly is Jacobs's "should you encounter," as it may be read both as a hypothetical and as a question of social obligation. Do readers look Jacobs in the face and allow themselves the risks and obligations of such an encounter, or do they pass him by? Empathy, and the self-other overlap in particular, is directly concerned with ethical obligations and encounters, textual and otherwise.

By the second article, Jacobs has started to doubt his invitation to this encounter even as he continues to emphasize the self-other overlap. At the end of "Hostile Toward Homelessness," he notes the size and commonalities of the near homeless community at the extended-stay motel where he is living. He writes,

> My path converges with the path of the schoolchildren, backpacks and textbooks in tow, their voices loud and cheerful as they scatter across the sprawling grounds of the Budget Suites. So many families live here, so many people struggling as I am, and I cannot help but feel that we are invisible to the community at large, (Jacobs, Sept. 2010).

Jacobs demonstrates the self-other overlap in the temporary housing that he and his neighbors are forced to accept as they attempt to maintain somewhat normal lives. He asserts that their lives retain significance to the larger community—that they as a community are there struggling, seeing their children off to school, living at the motel—even if much of the larger community would ignore them.

Some readers devalue the idea of community through their arguments that the community does not owe Jacobs anything, as if you can have a community without commitments to others. A more interesting move is that which uses the self-other overlap to shift attention to one's own experiences. This occurs in comments that leverage empathy as a way of critique. It is similar to what Hoffman describes as "egoistic drift," when one's self-focused empathy becomes empathizing with oneself at the expense of the other (Hoffman, 2001, 56). These moves demonstrate ways of affirming

the value of empathy even while denying Jacobs's own claim to empathy and, through that, denying the standing of community in general. That denial may be in the form of offering one's own story as a way to validate one's judgment of Jacobs. Such an argument is, in effect, that I understand your experience, and because I understand your experience I can critique it and discount it. For example, Thia writes,

> I have empathy for you Mr. Jacobs, I know what daily pain is like, I know what it is like to be angry and defiant. I know what it is like to have your body fail you. The thing is no one owes us anything. You, sir, are asking for charity and compassion as if it is your right as if your plight is everyone's concern and problem. The truth is it is not their problem; the truth is many who are working make it on less money than you have (Jacobs, Sept. 2010, post 106).

Thia bases her empathy on her personal experience in situations supposedly similar to those facing Jacobs. Although she writes that she has empathy, she argues for an understanding of community in which "no one owes us anything." The self and other that Thia present here do not overlap, resonating with conservative ideologies that undermine the possibilities of empathy. Thia uses her expression of empathy as a way to undercut the social work of empathy. Similar moves are made by other commenters who relate stories of being homeless and how they drew upon their own resources to improve their situations, confirming a conventional morality of independence and self-reliance. Arguing against empathy in this mode may be an attractive option for commenters because it allows them to assert their own position as empathic individuals while denying Jacobs's claim to empathy. This point is important because empathy holds strong status as a positive social value. Those denying empathy do not want to deny empathy based upon of the value of empathy itself. Instead they deny empathy based upon questions of entitlement and individual responsibility.

Much more common in the comments is affirmation of the self-other overlap. This occurs in the form of quotes and commonplaces, such as when tonyasal4369 writes, "There but for the grace of God go I" (Jacobs, Sept. 2010, post 263). Some comment that Jacobs is not so unlike others in the decisions he has made. Askmrmark responds to criticism of Jacobs and Michael eating at a Denny's, apparently an unsightly indulgence to some readers, by writing, "Give them a break, folks. You would do the exact same thing when

you get in this position" (Jacobs, Sept. 2010, post 186). Some commenters validate the social condition of self-other overlap by writing that they understand Jacobs's situation because they have had similar experiences, further underscoring the argument that Jacobs's situation is not unique. They use their positions as community members and as readers and commenters to argue that others should see Jacobs as not so dissimilar from themselves. For example, Kausinkonfusion writes, "You two do not deserve the ridicule that was bestowed upon you in your 1st article (or the articles to come), and I told you face-to-face, I am in similar shoes as you both, and in life you can not possibly always have the 'right' choice to be made" (Jacobs, Sept. 2010, post 65). The self-other overlap is a complex condition that may be evident in many of the types of statements related to Jacobs's series: in recognizing one's place in a community, in arguing for similar possibilities and vulnerabilities to suffering, and in making the case for the significance of one's own life in relation to the lives and concerns of others. It is at the heart of empathy.

At Stake in the Social Conditions of Empathy

Jacobs's series garnered media attention well beyond Las Vegas for what it said about social conditions and the ways that people relate to one another in times of economic distress. The reaction was consistently one of dismay at how the responses of the commenters suggested a further breakdown in community during the Great Recession. For example, Choire Sicha writes in *The Awl*,

> The constant reminder of the American lack of empathy is astounding. It's everywhere...And so it was with great wariness that I approached the comments section at the end of this first-person story by a man in Nevada who, driven into destitution by disability, family medical bills, the current lack of work and shady landlords, will find himself homeless at midnight tomorrow. These comments: well, they *did* disappoint. They went from awful to judgmental to trashing to witch hunt (Sicha, 2010).

The quality of the comments also concerns Susan Bruce at the AFL-CIO's *Working America* blog. She writes, "The lack of compassion is troubling—but the level of anger is even more disconcerting. I suspect that the anger some people have for the homeless is fueled by their own fears that they are only a paycheck or two away from being homeless themselves" (Bruce, 2010). It is a denial of

personal vulnerability via self-other overlap that Bruce views as fueling angry reader responses. For Sicha and Bruce, the reader comments begin to eclipse the articles themselves as the most significant rhetorical events within the series due to how the readers argue against empathy and how their comments draw attention to debates concerning our positions and obligations to others.

As ethical considerations—and as considerations that have been shown to contribute to altruistic or pro-social action (Batson, 2011)—the social conditions of empathy contain rhetorical and practical consequences. Empathy makes demands based upon our memberships in communities. The social conditions of empathy support the position that we are owed something by others, even if only common regard. This is part of being human. Vetlesen argues as much when he writes of the connection between the human and the moral: "The link is such that the perceived human reality of a situation involving the weal and woe of others *addresses* me, calls upon me, lays a moral obligation on me because I am, see myself as, and wish to be able to continue to see myself as a human being" (Vetlesen, 1994, 10, emphasis in original). He adds that such recognition requires a participatory, rather than a detached, attitude. This is what is at stake in the social conditions of empathy, whether people assume a participatory rather than a detached attitude. To recognize and support the social conditions of empathy is thus to view oneself as part of that human—and perhaps also nonhuman—community, so that one might succeed or fail in keeping the terms of membership in that community, the first expectation of which is the equal regard of others. The consequences are evident in Jacobs's series. Once one empathizes, it is more difficult simply to continue to the next article and leave Jacobs and others like him to their fates while resting easily and confident that those fates are not shared.

Debate over the social conditions of empathy demonstrates how these conditions are reinforced or undermined. It also bears on my primary claim, that empathy is not only an individual matter. Empathy itself is presented throughout the series and the comments as a positive social value, so attention to responsibility and self-other overlap stand in for empathy as they are the conditions that support it. Many commenters may be resistant to Jacobs's claim to empathy because they are afraid to acknowledge their own perilous positions, which points to the demands that empathy makes on us and our relations, even in how we understand ourselves and our own vulnerabilities. Precarious positions can

hinder empathy because, as Hoffman writes, people are less likely to empathize when they are themselves in uncomfortable or unstable positions (Hoffman, 2001). A precarious society is a less empathic one. Furthermore, as Bracher notes, most people externalize and attack their vulnerabilities or negative attributes in the form of others, so that they can remain "largely ignorant of just how similar they are in the depth of their selves or souls to those they consider to be the dregs of humanity" (Bracher, 2009, 55).

Identity is among the most fiercely guarded of personal concepts. To open up one's identity to questioning and to acknowledge vulnerabilities is a frightening prospect, especially for those who are not so secure in their conceptions of self or in their social standing. The social conditions of empathy matter because they inform the ways that we understand ourselves and our relations and responsibilities to one another. The importance of context in Jacobs's series and the disputed nature of empathy suggests we need a greater appreciation of situation in our study of empathy and the conditions upon which is it enabled and suppressed, if we are to see that empathy should be viewed as a rhetorically mediated social phenomenon. The setting of Las Vegas also is a significant factor, as it was then the national leader in foreclosures, adding a sense of communal, and not just individual, instability. Jacobs felt that he had to escape this situation if he was successfully to solicit the empathy of his readers and his community. His solution was to move to a different community, one he at least expected would offer greater possibilities for empathy. Jacobs and Michael both left Las Vegas for California. In researching this essay, I learned that they both died in 2016 (Mailander, 2016).

A rhetorical perspective pushes our understanding of empathy in new directions. It demonstrates that empathy is not something contained within our heads so much as something that emerges in social encounters and that depends upon out social values, positions, and how those inform the ways we read and respond to one another. These are the social conditions of empathy, the structures of relation and discourse that support or inhibit empathic responses. A rhetorical perspective reminds us that empathy is unevenly distributed, that some people are considered more entitled to it than others are. Considerations of Jacobs's status as a victim, his personal responsibility for his situation, and his place within the community are not so much about Jacobs himself as they are about the values attributed to those social positions and what it means to be a member of a community. A

rhetorical perspective of empathy shifts our attention from individual appeals to the social conditions that structure and determine the validity of those appeals so that we are able to ask, Who gets to be empathized with? Who gets to empathize? And what are the implications of that empathy or its absence?

The unfortunate irony of empathy is that precisely when empathy is most needed, when division and inequalities are greatest, the social conditions that support it often are at their weakest. During the Great Recession, for example, the economic factors that pushed more people toward homelessness also pushed others to attempt to reassure themselves and imagine that they did not share the vulnerabilities that made their neighbors homeless. This response is of concern during a time of increasing income inequality, physical vulnerability, political partisanship, and social division. A rhetorical perspective on empathy foregrounds questions of the relationships between self and other, imbalances in power and positions, and how we might work to bolster the social conditions that enable more empathic relations.

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