Rhetoric(s) of Becoming: Possibilities for Composing Intersectional Identities of Difference

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Mrs. Austen: "Jane!"
Lady Gresham: "What is she doing?"
Mrs. Austen: "Writing."
Lady Gresham: "Can anything be done about it?"
—From Becoming Jane

I read William DeGenaro’s essay, “Eight-Mile and Woodward: Intersections of Difference and the Rhetoric of Detroit,” shortly after seeing the recently released Mirimax film Becoming Jane. While drawing connections between the complicated urban landscape of inner-city Detroit and the idyllic countryside imagined for Jane Austen might seem a stretch, narratives of identity formation forge the cultural work associated with place in both. In short, DeGenaro argues quite convincingly that the intersections between identity markers of race, class, gender, and experience illustrate an appropriately complex—and oftentimes, productively “disruptive”—understanding of self (135). Jane, portrayed at various stages of her life by Anne Hathaway in the movie, is shown at the intersection of several conflicting identity markers as well. Against a restrictive Victorian backdrop, she represents the lesser: according to gender, class, family configuration, and marital status. Jane’s resistance to tradition, despite her precarious social position, is explicitly linked to her discontent and to the discomfort of her contemporaries who favor predictable roles. As Jane gallops across dirt roads in search of love and passion, intellectual fulfillment, and a means to support herself financially, she “becomes” the Jane Austen of modern times. It is this notion of becoming in relation to specific intersectional identity markers that surround us, both materially and conceptually, that I want to pursue in this response.

One of the reasons DeGenaro provides for examining identity through an intersectional lens is the ineffectiveness of “liberal narrative[s] of
awareness” that are “clichéd, linear, and reductive” (136). In such narratives, the unaware or misinformed storyteller speaking from a position of dominance experiences an epiphany of sorts, and “finally enlightened,” offers a revised understanding of a formerly polarized Other. DeGenaro suggests that this plot reveals an “assume[d] evolution” of the assigned relationship between self and O/other (136)—through a series of events, storytellers gain insight into the troubling portrayal of the marginalized and henceforth change their attitudes and behaviors towards members of this clearly constructed group. Not surprisingly, DeGenaro is critical of the assumptions about identity that the liberal narrative suggests. Apparently, the liberal doing the talking simply changes position on identities that are largely “fixed and stable” as opposed to rethinking the very (shifting) categories of identity in the first place.

Alternatively, conceptualizing identity formation as a process of becoming enables us to hold onto the complexity of intersectional (categories of) identity as well as the dynamism that must be at the heart of how we view ourselves to be. A true rhetoric of becoming provides no fixed end point, and each “intersection” experienced along the way to becoming exists in an unfixable time and space: we do not know for sure how the act of becoming will complicate our understanding of the intersections through which we travel, since we construct them from a range of future perspectives. The promises of a rhetoric of becoming aside, I do not want to suggest that Becoming Jane (or the extensive biography by Spence that inspired the film) offers a glimpse of how we should be conceptualizing identity in composition studies; in fact, a linear narrative is apparent in both versions: Jane’s experiences lead to her eventual, arguably stable, identity as authoress of books on romance and social expectations. Rather, I think that DeGenaro’s “snapshots” of urban dwellers negotiating a “complex cityspace” and “their own complex selves” can be situated in a rhetoric(s) of becoming, allowing the kinds of intersectional identity formations that he argues are necessary to “confronting and problematizing liberal narratives” (138).
Snapshots of Becoming

DeGenaro's use of the term "snapshot" is in itself significant, since it connotes a partial glimpse of a much larger scene. As he stops to describe the "selves" inhabiting Detroit, DeGenaro implies that each walks on to another intersection, perhaps pausing briefly to be captured in a new frame. Wherever they might wander, individuals are identified both by certain territorial markers as well as by the experiences that challenge and extend these material points.

As I read DeGenaro's essay, I wondered about the position from which such snapshots are taken and how the dynamic between the "framer" and "framed" might influence the profiles that are presented. In The Tourist Gaze, John Urry theorizes the ways in which landscapes and cultural sites are selected and constructed for travelers—designating what constitutes a tourist experience and how it should be remembered. Drawing on Foucault's notion of an institutional medical gaze, Urry suggests that tourism industries similarly assume control over place and "order" experience for visitors requiring guidance in an unfamiliar environment. Accordingly, travel as leisure is defined by "difference" between the everyday "normal practices" of a society and the experiences and locales that take travelers out of the anticipated worlds of work and home. A "departure," in Urry's framework, involves the pursuit not only of pleasure but also of difference—a search for the unusual, the exotic, the picturesque. As in DeGenaro's Detroit, tourist identities are inextricably linked to the locational spaces in which they evolve—both at home and away.

The urban dwellers that DeGenaro describes appear to have devised self-adopted gazes, gazes that allow looking at material and social surroundings as well as on selves dynamically and complexly identified through experience and reflection. The richness of such a gaze, multidimensional and unique, simultaneously empowers the city dwellers who alone own their perspectives on/in an unstable urban landscape and disempowers the spectator who attempts to assign identities to simple, linear narratives juxtaposing us and them. By taking an unexpected (non-linear) route through Detroit, the poets, garage rockers, and memoirists depicted in DeGenaro's essay complicate the social and material map of the city and its inhabitants.
Snapshots become random and unexpected according to this new configuration, as the identities of people and places circulate in unpredictable though "tactical" patterns—in lines of poetry, lyrics, and autobiography. Unlike the ending of *Becoming Jane*, at which point audience members are offered a tidy close to Jane’s narrative of becoming, DeGenaro does not provide a final frame for the stories/snapshots of his city dwellers. By portraying intersections of difference as openings for possibility rather than as barriers (151), even the memoirists who tell their stories from a distanced stance appear to situate themselves in an ongoing act of writing, and by extension, of becoming.

**Locational and Occasional Narratives**

As DeGenaro suggests, acknowledging the material place-based settings for identity formation is crucial. Individuals do not, he reminds us, act apart from the environments in which they dwell; rather, they act from within, often "disrupting" conventional physical and social boundaries.

At the risk of adding yet another layer of theory to this response, I want to draw on the work of autobiography critics Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson to illustrate the connections among a rhetoric of becoming, the intersectional identities offered by DeGenaro, and Urry’s conception of the tourist gaze. Smith and Watson claim that life-writing draws on two interconnected forms of narrative. The first, "locational narrative," arises from the place and position from which we tell our stories, the “specific ‘mise en scène’ or context of narration” (56). Locational narratives occur in response to particular logistical factors, for instance, the conventions of storytelling that are assumed to be relevant to a particular setting such as a classroom or a courtroom. Smith and Watson suggest that sites for narration are more than just physical spaces; they are also “moment[s] in history, . . . sociopolitical space[s] in culture” in which only certain narratives “seem ‘credible’ and ‘real’” (56).

Smith and Watson also discuss the “occasional narrative,” which is a story of self that responds to the circumstances, or action, in which the
storyteller is situated. While locational space is clearly a component of circumstance, the exigency or call to speak or write distinguishes this narrative form. For example, the physical space of Oprah’s television studio establishes the kinds of communication that are anticipated by viewers, audience members, and the guests themselves. The location, however, turns into an occasion as Oprah strategically solicits certain narratives by how she frames a show, introduces her guests, asks questions, and so on. In the spirit of Burke, Smith and Watson complicate the “intersections” at which locational and occasional narratives converge. While theoretically one assumes a distinction between the place of storytelling and the factors encouraging particular narratives over others, the two become inextricably entwined in practice.

In exploring the intersectional identities of city dwellers, DeGenaro effectively displays the intersections of locational and occasional sites for narration as well. During a campus event featuring “politically engaged, spoken-word art” performed by Detroit-based African-American and Arab-American poets, dialogue and tension build as artists recognize and articulate the complicated juxtapositions of race, class, and sex that affect individuals from diverse communities in unexpected (non-linear) ways. The “chaotic urban space” of Detroit materializes in conversations that challenge traditional boundaries of identity formation—a conflict between African-American customers and Arab-American shopkeepers centering on class or gender as opposed to racial markers (138–40). DeGenaro writes that “identity in the city is tangled” (137), as are the assumed locational realities of storytelling and the occasional experiences that influence how and who we “become” in inner-city Detroit, idyllic England, or a travel resort off the coast of Spain.

But what’s “gaze” got to do with it? Everything. I would argue that the “tourist gaze” need not be associated with a journey to a new and unknown locale. The narratives we are encouraged to take up in our own neighborhoods are “controlled” and “ordered” (Urry) by strategic configurations of material space and socially assigned roles. As we travel the “locations” identified within these configurations, however, we happen upon “occasions” that divert us from the planned itinerary that has been devised according to clear markers indicating how we should self-
identify and relate to others who also self-identify in appropriate ways. As we begin to recognize and live “difference” that has not been mapped out for us, but by us, we become agents of dynamic and perhaps “disruptive” narratives.

**Doing Something About It**

I began this response with dialogue from *Becoming Jane* because I think that it effectively illustrates (albeit idealistically) how writing can be a tool for engaging in a rhetoric(s) of becoming. Simply put, Lady Gresham asks whether “anything can be done about” Jane’s writing habit because the habit itself is disruptive—not only to Lady Gresham, but also to the institutions that produce and control clear categories of identity and guidelines for proper behavior. Jane’s writing narrates the lives dwelling in the closed physical and social space that surround her; however, this narration draws on differences of Jane’s own making (for example, the difference between a “good” marriage by society’s standards of acceptability and a “good” marriage based on passion, respect, and independence).

Writing, it seems, is the “something” that individuals situated in material and social spaces can do to negotiate the “gaze” that falls on them and seeks to control which paths to becoming may be taken. It is not coincidental that DeGenaro’s snapshots focus on city dwellers in the act of composing their own identities.

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**Works Cited**


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The Tragic Limits of Compassionate Politics

**Patricia Roberts-Miller**

In "Totalized Compassion: The (Im)Possibilities for Acting out of Compassion in the Rhetoric of Hannah Arendt," Matthew J. Newcomb calls for a semi-Arendtian "critical form of compassion" (107). This form of compassion, Newcomb argues, "can lead to imaginative connections between people when it is not a totalizing concept or sole basis for relationship" (107). This proposal is semi-Arendtian insofar as Newcomb acknowledges, and responds to, the discomfort many people feel about Hannah Arendt's deep mistrust of (if not active hostility to) empathy.

As Newcomb says, this attitude toward empathy has long been something for which advocates of Arendt's theories of public discourse have felt the need to apologize or explain. Newcomb argues, correctly I think, that Arendt mistrusts this emotion as a basis for political action on several grounds. First, the love that one feels for someone with whom one empathizes is a kind of self-love. One loves the other person because (and to the extent that) one could be that person. Insofar as this self-love collapses the space between people, it thereby prohibits genuine political *action* (as opposed to mere behavior, which is compelled). That is, because empathy makes us feel that we *must* help the