

# Review of *Difficult Empathy and Rhetorical Encounters*

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Leake, Eric. *Difficult Empathy and Rhetorical Encounters*, Routledge, 2024.

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**Content Warning:** discussions of slavery, war and child abuse.

Upon first encountering rhetoric in my Masters degree program, I was completely rattled at the prospect of rhetorical belonging. I did not know that relationships and emotions had rhetorical weight, let alone that rhetorical belonging was a subject that I could study in relation to community rhetorics. A year after my initial study of rhetoric, I found Eric Leake's *Difficult Empathy and Rhetorical Encounters*, whose text also grapples with the social implications of empathy as a rhetorical subject. Leake's text is helpful for those who are seeking ways to engage with communities amidst conflicts, especially among those who are diametrically opposed in thoughts and beliefs. While many people believe empathy is a "net-positive", meaning that empathy always yields positive results in social encounters, Leake critiques this viewpoint and promotes using empathy as a recursive reflection when engaging with others.

Leake begins the introduction with an explanation of difficult empathy's exigence in the current world. Driven by declining reports of empathy, national political fissions, and a deep desire for community connection, his book comes during a kairotic moment for scholars. He begins with a definition of empathy from Amy Coplan: "Empathy is a complex imaginative process in which an observer simulates another person's situated psychological states while maintaining clear self-other differentiation" (5). Leake's main focus is on the situatedness of empathetic encounters. Some versions of empathy may aim to alleviate guilt or "be the better person," which turns empathy into a selfish act rather than a moment of genuine empathy for another person. Difficult empathy goes beyond the potentially selfish motivations of easy empathy. Difficult empathy instead "challenges the empathizer's conceptions of themselves and others in ways that can make demands upon the empathizer" (11). The introduction concludes with the comparison of easy empathy and difficult empathy, acknowledging that easy empathy is too simple and doesn't inspire change or commitment, unlike

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difficult empathy.

Chapter 2 is Leake's brief explanation of easy empathy. He defines easy empathy as "often automatic, predominantly affective, non-reflective, and reaffirming of the desirable qualities of the self without challenging the social circumstances" (19). Easy empathy does not require effort and is too quick to fall to biases of proximity and familiarity, as identified by Martin Hoffman (37). People are more likely to empathize with those they are familiar with, as well as people who are in close proximity to them, either in location or in belief. These biases make it difficult to enact empathy for people who are strangers or who have beliefs in conflict with your own. One of Leake's concerns is that easy empathy does not prompt the empathizer to reflect and identify their own positionality. Easy empathy does not require change of the self or of structures that are creating difficult circumstances.

Chapter 3, "Difficult Empathy" is where the real work begins. Leake repeats multiple times that *he is not excusing the actions or behaviors of any of the identified subjects*, but calls readers to join in a journey of difficult empathy for those who seem impossible to empathize with. He begins with an analysis of Werner Herzog's film, *Into the Abyss*, a documentary about capital punishment in prisons. Leake remarks that to engage in difficult empathy requires an act of identification, even with those that you feel are too dissimilar. By beginning with capital punishment offenders, Leake calls readers to understand the importance of context and humanity. Herzog's documentary asks viewers to empathize with felons, people who typically are outcast from empathetic urge. Leake uses the documentary to ask readers to empathize with the humanity of the other, especially regarding the contexts that put them in their current situations. His call towards context becomes clear in a brief analysis of "muscular empathy" from Ta-Nehesi Coates. Muscular empathy is an exercise one must do repeatedly to combat empathy that positions oneself as morally superior to another. Coates calls white Americans to critically reflect on their condemnation of white slave owner's complicity in slavery. Leake calls readers to think about context and asserts that too often we think ourselves to be morally superior to our ancestors. Careful reflection reveals that there is nuance and complexity missing from this kind of moral positioning. The muscular empathy exercise is one of difficult empathy that acknowledges context and humanity. The final portion of "Difficult Empathy" is centered around an analysis of Allyn Walker and their book *A Long Dark Shadow: Minor Attracted People and Their Pursuit of Dignity*. To provide reasoning for his analysis, Leake notes:

In considering the difficult work of empathizing with MAPs as evident in Walker's work and the response to it, I want to better understand how empathy is extended to a despised group of people, the work and significance of recognizing their humanity in relation to the humanity of others, and the social pressures and consequences of extending such empathy. (52)

By positioning difficult empathy in relation to MAPs, Leake is practicing difficult empathy while also challenging the reader to do the same. Learning how to empathize with a despised group of people—MAPs, felons, or otherwise—is a big step towards developing difficult empathy practices.

Chapter 4 engages “The Social Conditions of Empathy”. This chapter is filled with analyses of complex and contextualized rhetorical encounters (drawing on scholars such as Ratcliffe; Blankenship; Davis; Zhao; Edbauer; among others), principally that of Rodger Jacob’s guest series in the *Las Vegas Sun* newspaper: “The New Homeless: My Story”. Jacob’s series details his own experiences with being homeless and follows months of him becoming homeless and struggling to find stability and earn empathy from other people. Here Leake situates empathy as a social phenomenon that exists outside the individual and is encountered in social situations. Leake uses Jenny Edbauer’s work to explain rhetorical situations as lived practices and feelings that destabilize the borders of rhetoric. Doing so acknowledges that rhetoric is embedded into all parts of a situation and influences our perceptions of ourselves and others. This has particular potency when considering the intersectional lives of people we encounter—how the social situations and histories driving the encounter cannot be divorced from the lived realities of those involved.

Chapter 5 is driven by an analysis of the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine and discussions around empathizing with political enemies. Leake emphasizes early on that an “enemy” is someone “whose success in a particular area is seen as coming at one’s own expense” (93). This chapter remains potent, as all of the texts that Leake analyzes have come full circle in the continued war against Ukraine, the genocide of Palestinians, and Donald Trump’s re-election. Leake promotes that if we are to have any hope living in a diverse and divisive society, we need to practice difficult empathy with the enemy. Leake never calls for forced empathy but rather acknowledges the complexity of empathizing with someone who is violent or an oppressor. Here, empathy with the enemy instead begins a reciprocal process where the purpose should be shared understanding and a more inclusive community. This form of empathy does not require agreement, but an understanding of the situatedness of empathy practices. Quoting Shui-yin Sharon Yam, Leake calls for deliberative empathy that does not reify difference but assumes an openness for change (107).

Chapter 6, “Critical Empathy” explores taking difficult empathy further into an area of action. This is where Leake calls for reflection and self-critique, recognizing our biases and subjectivities. Here Leake pushes against Rogerian rhetoric that would assume an equal encounter between all parties involved, forcing the marginalized to privilege their oppressor’s points-of-view. By acknowledging subjectivity, context, and positionality, engaging in critical empathy can open conversations that acknowledge the whole of another and prime them for understanding. Leake provides examples of critical empathy by looking at texts from genderqueer authors (Marzano-Lesnevich), authors who engage with non-human animals (Nagel; Foster), and authors of color (Rankine). Through his analyses of these texts, Leake shows the reader how to acknowledge subjectivity without assuming equality and how learning can assist in self-critique and acknowledging the other in empathetic encounters.

Leake concludes the book with a look towards the practical uses of difficult empathy. Relating the topic to pedagogy within the university, he talks about how he emphasizes difficult empathy in his teaching. He identifies the values of difficult empathy as those of generosity, curiosity, and humility. Leake explains that practicing difficult empathy is vital to connecting to others and looking toward positive change.



*Difficult Empathy and Rhetorical Encounters* comes at a precise time, when wedges are being driven between groups across the US and around the world. Readers of *Peitho* can see both familiar feminist scholars amidst its pages and principles of self-reflection, community building, and an attunement towards understanding across difference. I believe that Leake's text would be helpful for feminist rhetorical scholars as we navigate relational engagement amidst social and political tumult. More specifically, this text gives readers the language and approaches toward difficult empathy that can better prepare us for connecting with others while remaining distinct in our differences. *Peitho* readers who are looking for ways to navigate difficult conversations with people and looking for ways to grow in their abilities for empathy will appreciate this text. I can recommend this book with a single caveat: *readers must be prepared to practice difficult empathy while reading*. This text will challenge your beliefs on empathy, your urges to only find community in the familiar, and your own identities and positionalities.