Review:

Stephanie L. Kerschbaum. *Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2014.

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Roughly mid-way through Stephanie Kerschbaum's recent book *Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference*, as she reflects on the shifting meanings invoked by her deafness in various contexts, she hypothetically addresses her readers, stating, "When you meet me, you might find that I fit a lot of your assumptions about deaf people and that many of your predictions were accurate. But you might also find that I challenge or resist your expectations" (66). This challenge may well serve as the theoretical backdrop for the new rhetoric of difference she forwards in this work. Her theory offers a revised orientation to difference focused on the interplay of larger identity categories and the micro-interactional communicative moments in which those categories are performed. In an effort to enrich the study of difference, Kerschbaum argues that we must resist the "difference fixation," which she defines as the attempt to render identity as a stabilized and immobile fixity, and instead devote attention to "marking difference." Markers of difference are presented and responded to in all communicative interchanges, and the practice of marking difference allows us to "identify and respond to difference as it emerges interactionally in our classrooms" (57). Teachers and scholars interested in cultivating an awareness of difference in pedagogical practice will find Kerschbaum's book not only an innovative theoretical framework for considering difference but also a well-articulated set of tools for navigating the play of difference in our classrooms, among our students, among ourselves.

While not explicitly focused on disability, this book contributes progressively to scholarship centered on the nexus of disability studies and writing studies in two ways. First, the identity category of disability serves as a case-in-point for one of the strongest points of evidence during her critique of the difference fixation, a fairly scathing analysis of Ann Jurecic's work on neurodiversity. Kerschbaum very clearly and persuasively demonstrates the manner through which Jurecic offers both diagnosis and treatment for Gregory, a student presumed to have Asperger's, thus "fixing" him with a particular disability identity. Criticism of Jurecic is common among those researchers working within the aforementioned nexus (e.g., see Cynthia Lewiecki Wilson, Dolmage, and Heilker), but Kerschbaum further develops this critique by distinguishing between "fixing" as remedy and "fixing" as stabilizing. She then demonstrates how each of these conceptual frameworks contribute to the difference fixation, which itself negatively impacts understanding between interlocutors. In privileging medical discourses of autism, Jurecic neglects to account for Gregory's own voice, thus preventing the "dialectic between statis and motion, between fixity and change" (64) that Kerschbaum is advocating throughout the book. Researchers interested in disability will find these nuances useful in theorizing disability identities. And although this work focuses heavily on writing classrooms, it's also readily applicable to community-based writing and public rhetoric, particularly in settings where recognition work is so critical to positive engagement.

Second, she points to the disability category as particularly ripe for theorizing how difference is marked due to its heightened state of variability (74). Savvy readers will find it no coincidence that the opening explication of her central theory—marking difference—

occurs after her critique of Jurecic and in tandem with an exploration of her own lived experience with difference. Drawing on Bakhtin, she develops her theory of marking difference as a rhetorical lens that simultaneously acknowledges larger identity categories while also attending to the performance of fluid identities in interaction. She reflects on the interplay between her own larger identity categories (deaf, Ohio native, glasses-wearer) and variable manifestations of that identity in everyday interaction (with friends, with new students, other deaf people).

In similar fashion, the book itself focuses on both institutional and micro-interactional contexts. Reporting on a large-scale study of difference and diversity rhetorics at Midwestern University, Kerschbaum focuses on institutional contexts for diversity discourse, attending most particularly to the Midwestern University Diversity Agenda, a ten-year initiative aimed at improving diversity on campus. Relying on critical discourse analysis, she argues that the discourse under examination both reifies and commodifies racial and ethnic differences, and as students are defined institutionally, "their own self-perceptions and orientations to difference and otherness are affected" (32). In critiquing the neoliberal discourse that links diversity to market value, she deftly unearths the ideology that subverts actual attention to issues of inequality and social injustice (a goal very much in line with the conventional aims of critical discourse analysis methodologies). This attention to issues of equity represents yet another way in which *Reflections* readers will take keen interest in her work.

While Kerschbaum's attention to institutional context demonstrates the discursive means through which difference is constructed into stable, fixed categories, her analysis of micro-interactional student exchanges in peer review sessions presents difference as dynamic, emergent, and relational, following through on her early premise that connections exist between institutional discourse and student identities (both their own performed identities and those identities imposed on them by others). Her work recognizes and reviews well-known theories of the contact zone, as well as the now well-known critiques launched against contact zone theory. She points out that while powerful, the contact zone metaphor neglects to account for the choices rhetors make as they interact with others. This critique is indicative of what many will identify as one of the greatest strengths of this book: her thorough attention to the real-time, classroom exchanges between students. She notes that most writing research on contact zones focuses on everything but the actual moment of interaction (e.g,, she cites research on curricular materials, anecdotal recall, student texts produced during the course—see pages 81-83).

Whereas the analysis of institutional diversity discourse reveals the need to avoid the "difference fixation," the analysis of student discussion crystalizes her theory of marking difference. In chapter three Kerschbaum discusses two patterns of interaction that emerged from her data—disagreeing and telling stories—and she presents two micro-episodes of student conversation during peer review to illuminate each. The first example analyzes a disagreement over the placement of a comma, and as Blia and Choua position themselves in relation to one another (i.e. mark difference), "they make predictions about what positions and identifications of themselves their classmates will accept" (99). Kerschbaum argues that "reciprocity is central to the marking of difference" and that "each woman's identity is contingent upon the unfolding interactional environment as well as the cooperation of each group member in shaping that identity" (93).

The second example in chapter three likewise looks at a student exchange during peer review, but rather than a disagreement, this transcript analysis reveals the claiming of social positions through storytelling. Each student offers the others in the peer review group a brief but telling story about their high school writing experiences, thus marking the differences between each of them. Kerschbaum is rather adamant that it is less important what the narratives are *about* and more important *how* they (the students) mark difference to accomplish certain social positions (102). Although she openly reveals that both example interactions from this chapter end in "stalemate"—which she asserts is common in classroom conflict episodes—readers may be left partially unsatisfied that an example of marking difference with a positive result (however that may be defined) is not presented. In other words, because Kerschbaum sets out to offer her theory as a way to cultivate and encourage an "interactional practice in which teachers and students are accountable to one another and willing to step forward not only to acknowledge but to engage difference" (119), readers may want a demonstration of this engagement in action.

Kerschbaum smartly deflects such misplaced desire, however, when she opens her final chapter with the assertion that "To acknowledge the limitations of marking difference is not to deny its importance, however. Rather, it is to emphasize the need for practices of answerable engagement" (118). This remark makes her choice of preposition in the book's title all the more clear. The two episodes she presents in this final chapter once again take place in peer review groups, and both demonstrate a lack of acknowledgment of difference from each side of a disagreement. These analyses should be recognized as Kerschbaum's manner of emphasizing the importance of understanding how students rhetorically negotiate difference in everyday classroom interaction. While it may seem paradoxical to some that the book offers such "failed" attempts to negotiate and respond to difference, I would suggest that such analyses only serve to reinforce Kerschbaum's argument that attention to marking difference in interaction is productive and necessary for any writing teacher and/or researcher aiming to better understand the means through which various identities are acknowledged, suppressed, supported, or ignored.

My only struggle in reading this book (and this struggle isn't necessarily a bad thing) is understanding how agency operates in her theory. She suggests that marking difference is a way to listen and that answerable engagement seeks understanding. Yet, as I read through her critique that contact zone theory has neglected to account for "rhetorical agency" (81) and later that marking difference does not often happen as a conscious choice on the part of the rhetor (83), I found myself fumbling to fully understand the agentive function of "answerable engagement" with difference. Perhaps Kerschbaum's sustained emphasis on *response* to difference provides some key to untangling this difficulty. That said, the major concepts in this book provide writing teachers with a set of tools for re-thinking the emergence of difference in our classrooms, those moments where students face each other and begin to speak or write. Taken together—avoiding the difference fixation and marking difference to cultivate answerable engagement—these tenets offer readers an innovative and valuable way to consider both difference and diversity in our classrooms and on our campuses more broadly.

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WORKS CITED

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