Towards a Compassionate Rhetoric:

A Buddhist & Feminist Exploration of Substance Abuse

by

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Introduction

Despite the efforts to undo the harrowing effects of the War on Drugs, preventable drug overdoses spiked in the latter half of the 2010s. According to the National Safety Council, there has been an increase of 781% in preventable drug overdose-related deaths since 1999; a grand total of 98,268 deaths in 2021 (“Drug Overdoses”). The taboo nature of substance abuse and the overwhelming stigma towards people who use drugs (PWUD) contribute to the insufficient research and discourse surrounding the subject, thus limiting alternative perspectives, such as harm reduction, that challenge the rhetoric that upholds these assumptions. Harm reduction refers to a variety of practices that reduce the consequences of substance abuse without requiring total abstinence or sobriety. Nonetheless, more scholars, politicians, and scientists endorse the positive effects of harm reduction in reducing drug addiction, illicit substance use, and overdose rates through Naloxone distribution and harm reduction care. Reconsidering the rhetoric that circulates substance abuse and harm reduction from a compassionate standpoint is more feasible than ever.

Typically understood as a feeling or desire to alleviate the suffering of others, compassion is a human expression that positions the self in relationship to others. Consequently, compassion is a relevant subject for rhetorical studies as it relates to socially constructed interactions and relationships between individuals. Compassion is frequently relegated to the rhetorical appeal pathos; however, more recent critical conceptualizations of compassion provide insight on
concretizing compassion beyond emotion, and into action.¹ Determining what constitutes a compassionate action, however, is a tall order. Conversely, considering compassion as an all-encompassing state of mind when facing instances of suffering can transform our conceptualization of rhetoric and the actualization of compassionate action.

This essay is a proposal for compassionate rhetoric, and an inquiry into compassion as a rhetorical way of being. Compassionate rhetoric is best understood as a set of human behaviors that one develops and practices to construct and reflect one’s transient identity with the world through action, even if the action is ‘not-doing.’ Founded on both feminist and Buddhist schools of thought, compassionate rhetoric consists of the following practices: (1) cultivating the beginner’s mind; (2) recognizing the similarities in our differences; and (3) the acceptance of contradiction. Inspired by Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin’s “Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal for an Invitational Rhetoric,” compassionate rhetoric relies on their explication of invitational rhetoric as the foundational rhetorical theory for compassionate communication. More specifically, compassionate rhetoric can alter the discourse around substance abuse to challenge stigmatizing discourse toward PWUD. While I invite my audience to consider compassionate rhetoric as a valuable praxis for deconstructing the mythos surrounding drug abuse and addiction, there is nothing fixed or static in the construction of this rhetorical theory; compassionate rhetoric is always in progress and open to new perspectives.

The first purpose of this essay is to demonstrate the harmful effects of the rhetorical strategies that originate from the War on Drugs and continue to hold prominence in ongoing discourse concerning substance abuse, addiction, PWUD, and harm reduction. Second, by offering Buddhist and feminist perspectives on rhetoric as a constitutive way of being with the

¹ See Matthew J. Newcomb’s “Totalized Compassion: The (Im)Possibilities for Acting out of Compassion in the Rhetoric of Hannah Arendt,” and Amy E. Winan’s “Cultivating Critical Emotional Literacy: Cognitive and Contemplative Approaches to Engaging Difference,”
world, compassionate rhetoric is a rhetorical mode that assists in dismantling arcane rhetorical strategies that oppress individuals and develop a practical way of engaging with the world through rhetoric.

**The War on Drugs and Dualistic Rhetoric**

Some of the oldest forms of rhetoric dating back to Aristotle and Plato are the origins of oppressive and domineering forms of rhetoric that perpetuate the stigmatization of PWUD. The use of persuasion subsumes a desire to hold power over another; in Foss and Griffin’s examination of traditional rhetoric, they identify persuasion as the key factor in constructing the rhetor as the authoritative interlocutor over the audience (6). A larger perusal of the influential, dualistic, and oppressive aspects of traditional rhetoric, as it appears in Richard Nixon’s legislation and statements throughout the declared War on Drugs, clarifies how persuasion and the inculcation of absolute truth create an oppressive reality for disenfranchised people.

Rhetoric, as we know and use it today, comes from Aristotle, who became the ‘father of rhetoric’ for conflating rhetoric with the art of persuasion. Although there have since been countless scholars that reframed rhetoric in terms other than persuasion, the political and social realms of discourse rely on Aristotelian rhetoric to direct the audience toward an understanding of truth. In the political world, where communication largely occurs as oratory discourse, Aristotle’s use of enthymemes, or rhetorical syllogisms, continues to be used as the most effective mode of persuasion (5). Rhetoricians in the political realm rely partially on Aristotelian rhetoric, even if they do so fallaciously, following the assumptive claim within Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*: “Things that are true and things that are just have a natural tendency to prevail over their opposites” (6). Given the current punitive public policy on substance abuse that originates from Nixon’s presidency in the 1970s, the idea that punitive action is a reasonable course of
action for PWUD is upheld as true and just. Consequently, the harrowing effects of the War on Drugs demonstrate how Western society unequivocally fails to maintain a society where justice prevails, especially for PWUD. On the contrary, many people suffer oppression as a result of unjust societal and cultural laws; people who hold and exercise power abuse persuasive rhetorical strategies, such as enthymemes, to sway public opinion in their favor. In fact, Aristotelian rhetoric is traceable throughout the statements and legislation enacted in Nixon’s War on Drugs.

Through the large-scale, political use of enthymemes and persuasion, Nixon persuades the audience to accept the positivistic belief that PWUD are detrimental to society as indefinitely factual. The basic formula of an enthymeme, according to Aristotle, is similar to a syllogism, but with the omission of (1) a major or minor premise, or (2) the conclusion, where either unstated portion of the syllogism is accepted as “a familiar fact” (11). Subsequent to the punitive legislation he set forth early in his presidency, Nixon’s well-known “Special Message to the Congress on Drug Abuse Prevention and Control” deceptively tries to persuade the audience to accept that drug addiction is an inherent defect of the drug user. The initial statements made by Nixon in his message discern how PWUD struggle to integrate into American society and inflict the belief that drug abuse is bad: “Narcotic addiction is a major contributor to crime. [. . .] Untreated narcotic addicts do not ordinarily hold jobs. Instead, they often turn to shoplifting, mugging, burglary, armed robbery, and so on” (“Special Message to the Congress”). These persuasive strategies embedded within our rhetoric infringe on the “personal integrity of others when they convey the rhetor’s belief that audience members have inadequacies that in some way can be corrected if they adhere to the viewpoint of the rhetor” (Foss and Griffin 3). Certainly, Nixon’s statement claims that the perpetuation of drug abuse leads to crime, and if the audience
chooses to disregard this fact, then more crime will occur throughout society. By integrating a particular proposition, Nixon persuades his audience to accept the following explicit premise: ‘Drug addiction and drug addicts cause crime in American society.’

By the end of this message, Nixon creates another explicit premise with an unstated conclusion that is similar, but in a larger and more complex manner, to Aristotle’s enthymemes. In a rhetorical act of personifying narcotics, Nixon states

The threat of narcotics among our people is one which properly frightens many Americans. It comes quietly into homes and destroys children, it moves into neighborhoods and breaks the fiber of community which makes neighbors. (“Special Message to Congress”)

Of course, narcotics cannot enter homes and ‘destroy’ children, neighborhoods, and communities. Yet still, the conclusive portion of his special message creates the next explicit premise: ‘Illicit substance abuse is detrimental to society.’ Conveniently, Nixon periodically states the need to rehabilitate PWUD and identifies them as “the people whom society is attempting to reach and help,” yet dubiously personifies drug addiction, as if addiction functions without a human apparatus (“Special Message to Congress”). Ironically, he even identifies the need for compassion in the face of this problem. By placing the blame for the consistent crime within America on drug addiction, Nixon persuades his audience to believe there is an inherent defect amongst PWUD that must be corrected. The result of Nixon’s stated propositions is that the audience accepts the likely truth within the unstated conclusion: PWUD are detrimental to society.

More insidiously, Nixon’s persuasive rhetoric overtly targets a particular group of people: PWUD. By assigning attributes and tendencies, such as crime, to PWUD as correlations based in
absolute truth, Nixon’s rhetoric begins to conflate the discursive strategies from Aristotelian rhetoric with Platonic rhetoric and idealism. According to James Berlin, who traces the history of rhetorical scholarship throughout the twentieth century, Platonic rhetoric is a form of subjective rhetoric where the invocation of truth in rhetoric can only arise “within the individual or within a realm that is accessible only through the individual’s internal apprehension” (11). These idealistic beliefs create an essentialist reality, given that truth is predetermined in an “unchanging realm of ideas” (12). The perpetuation of Platonic idealistic rhetoric in regard to identity, however, leads to a judgment that creates essentially negative differences based in absolute truth.

A closer look at other rhetorical moves that Nixon made during the War on Drugs will demonstrate how the oppressive and dualistic rhetoric stemming from Platonic rhetoric leads to two major issues: (1) the assignment of identity based on a particular set of attributes, and (2) the presumption of power inherent to the rhetor over the audience on the basis of one’s identity.

President Nixon’s declaration of the inherent immorality of PWUD presumes that their identity is intrinsically tied to negative and unfavorable attributes. President Nixon notably declared substance abuse to be ‘public enemy number one,’ and began the War on Drugs by increasing prohibitive drug policies, such as the Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention Control Act of 1970 (CDAPCA). In exercising his presidential power, Nixon exhibits the assumed inherent power within his presidential identity by establishing polemic legislation. The subdual of PWUD is evident when the CDAPCA explicitly states “The illegal importation, manufacture, distribution, and possession and improper use of controlled substances have a substantial and detrimental effect on the health and general welfare of the American people” (1242). The antagonistic injunction on substance abuse alongside the former reference to substance abuse as the enemy thus reaffirms the prevalence of oppressive Platonic idealistic rhetoric in its
demonstration of the rhetor’s inherent power, as both the speaker and the president, over the audience, as it relates to identity.

Aside from the political and social realm, potent ideological spaces like schools and universities keep Platonic idealistic rhetoric as the prevailing form of communication. Rhetorical scholarship that endorses similar forms of rhetoric, such as David Bartholomae’s “Inventing the University,” exemplifies aspects of Plato’s rhetoric in popular rhetorical theory. In college-level writing and rhetoric courses, Bartholomae argues that students must “see themselves within a privileged discourse, one that already includes and excludes groups of readers. They must be either equal to or more powerful than those they would address” (9). By endorsing the concept of privileged discourse in a student’s use of rhetoric, Bartholomae subsumes the inherent power structures from Platonic idealistic rhetoric in his rhetorical theory. Mark Lawerence McPhail, who critiques both Plato and Bartholomae’s perpetuation of privileged discourse in his work Zen in the Art of Rhetoric, further emphasizes how privileging discourse contributes to an essentialist reality with a predetermined, absolute truth (29). The assumed power of the rhetor ultimately leads to the privileging of discourse, where only “those who have discovered the ‘Truth,’” can conceptualize such knowledge (McPhail 27). The teacher/student dualism is one of many self/other, subject/object, and right/wrong dichotomies; the teacher, who has authority, and the student, who relies on the teacher for guidance, demonstrate a dualistic dichotomy in our reality. Most certainly, Nixon’s presidential power influences the dualistic distinction between PWUD and people who do not use drugs by privileging discourse that deters people from using drugs and stigmatizes PWUD. Evidently, the college-level writing and rhetoric classroom is most certainly an influential locus that contributes to the perpetual invocation of dualistic power relationships in rhetoric.
Furthermore, the War on Drugs highlights how essentialized identities lead to dualistic and hierarchal power relationships and the incessant interplay between those who hold privilege and those who don’t. Adjacent to the demonization of PWUD is the stigmatization of minority groups, who ultimately became the target of Nixon’s punitive solution. Eschewed from the language within the CDAPCA, minority communities were later revealed to be the target of public policy on substance abuse by Nixon’s Presidential Assistant for Domestic Affairs, John Ehrlichman, in an interview with journalist Dan Baum. In the interview, Ehrlichman admits that “[The Nixon White House] knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities” (Baum). By associating substance abuse with Black communities, Nixon and his staffers further pushed an essentialized identity for PWUD and continued to exercise power over that essentialized group of people through his legislation.

Certainly, the reification of self/other dualism between white privileged individuals who do not use drugs and underprivileged Black and Brown PWUD in Nixon’s targeted legislation sequesters the pre-existing racist and prejudiced social relations that constitute our cultural reality. The eschewal of race as a contributing factor to the public policy on substance abuse exemplifies the issues of essentialism in Platonic rhetoric/idealism because the absolute truth of drug use abstinence subsumes the (not so) clandestine, racist assumptions as part of the ‘Truth.’ To no surprise, the social-transactional aspects of subjectivist rhetorical theories after Platonic rhetoric, according to Berlin, overlook “the place of intersubjective, social processes in shaping

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2 Although Ehrlichman’s statement is frequently contested, a plethora of statistics demonstrate how BIPOC communities unfairly suffered the consequences of public policy on substance abuse. According to publications on drug-related issues from public health scholars, the War on Drugs disproportionately incarcerated Black and Brown communities for drug-related offenses (Rosenberg, et al.).
reality” and “describes groups as sources of distortion of the individual’s true vision, and the behavior it recommends in the political and social realms is atomistic” (146). The CDAPCA is a relic of rhetorical efforts to uphold Nixon’s ‘true vision.’ Under the precedent that drugs and drug use were immoral and dangerous for the public, outlawing drugs through the demonization of essentialized groups of people caused public discourse to uphold the idea that abstinence from drugs and criminal punishment was the only formidable plan of action (Jarlais 2). Without considering the intersubjective social relations of pre-existing prejudices towards the people that the legislation targeted, the rhetoric within the CDAPCA led to a dualistic and atomistic social and political reality of inequity and oppression, where BIPOC and PWUD are consistently disenfranchised.

Over fifty years later, the oppressive persuasion strategies of rhetoric that reflect Nixon’s essentialist attitude toward PWUD continue to prevent those who suffer from addiction from receiving proper treatment. Thus, the injury, harm, and deaths caused by substance abuse continue to plague our society at an alarming rate. There is a desperate need for a rhetoric based on compassion that refuses to essentialize groups of people on negative differences and avoids oppressive forms of rhetoric. Foss and Griffin offer an inspiring critique of the oppressive effects of rhetoric as persuasion, their concept of invitational rhetoric is a formidable foundation to begin discussing a movement towards a rhetoric of compassion.

**Intersubjective, Interdependent, and Invitational**

While I certainly continue to argue that protecting harm reduction services is necessary and requires some persuasion, I also believe that reframing our perceptions of language and discourse away towards a coherent social contract between interlocutors will positively affect the discourse around substance abuse. My initial response to the legislation surrounding substance
abuse in a shorter seminar paper, “The Rhetorical Contradiction Between Federal/State Legislation and Harm Reduction Kits,” paints Nixon’s legislation as largely negative. In an investigation of the subsequent legislation that followed Nixon’s presidency, I state:

The massive increase in drug policy naturally led to a spike in incarceration; drug-related crimes determined by these drug policies were the number one reason for arrests in recent decades. More insidiously, people of color faced criminal punishments and consequences for drug-related crimes at a disproportionate rate in comparison to white Americans.

(paraphrased in Couch-Tellefsen 7)

While these statements, as Richard C. Boldt concurs, remain true and support my current claims that Nixon contributes to positivistic rhetoric that scathes PWUD, I believe shifting our perception of legislation can alter the stigmatizing outcomes. In my current analysis of the CDAPCA of 1970, I presume law functions as a “machine acting on the rest of the world” where “human actors outside the governmental world are made the objects of manipulation through a series of incentives or disincentives” (White 686). However, James Boyd White’s reformation of law as a form of rhetoric suggests that we think of law “not as a bureaucratic but as a rhetorical process” (White 688). As I did in my previous seminar paper, I suggest looking at law as White does in reformation; as a form of constitutive rhetoric. Constitutive rhetoric is a process that develops “the ways we constitute ourselves as individuals, as communities, and as cultures, whenever we speak” (White 690). In concurrence with Foss and Griffin, White criticizes the use of rhetoric as persuasion to be a “second-rate way of dealing with facts that cannot really be properly known or as a way of dealing with people instrumentally or manipulatively” (688). In moving away from rhetoric as the art of persuasion and toward a process of developing society, perhaps the stigmatization of PWUD, as it stems from Nixon’s War on Drugs, can diminish as
we rethink our use of rhetoric. Looking at rhetoric as a process that invites people, White’s theory of constitutive rhetoric alongside Foss and Griffin’s invitational rhetoric can act as the basis for compassion to flourish throughout our rhetoric.

If we accept that the law is a form of rhetoric, then we must also accept that legislation contains rhetorical strategies that create primary assumptions in favor of the public’s greater interest. However, this belief can be a slippery slope to believing the law is “an objective reality in an imagined social world” (White 688). Instead, reframing the audience—United States citizens—as valid agents in developing and influencing legislation can promote law as “constitutive rhetoric,” which is a rhetorical activity where one’s engagement is relevant (White 688). Certainly, this is an idealistic rhetorical view of legislation, as it demands that more people become involved with political issues. However, if the social spaces that carry discourse on political issues were more invitational, the possibility of increasing the audience’s agency in the face of large power structures like the government could boost political involvement. Generally speaking, the environments where political discourse takes place would benefit from Foss and Griffin’s invitational rhetoric. More specifically, discourse around substance abuse should reify the agency of those directly affected by the law—PWUD—by creating social spaces based on the rhetorical forms that invitational rhetoric takes on.

Viewing rhetoric as the art of persuasion will not promote these invitational rhetorical forms in social and political contexts where persuasion leads to domination and control. This, of course, does not mean persuasion has no place in the art of rhetoric; in fact, my initial argument in “The Rhetorical Contradiction” aims to persuade my audience to not only protect the services provided by harm reduction resources, but also to see how harm reduction kits are effective in persuading its audience to use these tools to consume drugs instead of tools that could cause
injury, harm, disease, or death. Persuasion will likely always be persistent throughout the art of rhetoric and can even encourage compassionate actions. However, using persuasive strategies to demonize opposing attitudes will continue to fragment society and discourage constitutive and invitational forms of rhetoric. By following Foss and Griffin’s lead in maintaining the three feminist principles of invitational rhetoric, “equality, immanent value, and self-determination,” the tendency to create essentially negative differences between two ‘opposing’ beliefs through persuasive strategies will diminish (4). These principles, according to Foss and Griffin, are obligatory to the rhetorical forms that invitational rhetoric assumes. Moreover, if all interlocutors maintain these three principles throughout their rhetorical activity in social contexts where political discourse occurs, then the praxis of invitational and constitutive rhetoric can take place.

The rhetorical strategies set forth by the National Harm Reduction Coalition (NHRC) demonstrate invitational and constitutive rhetoric in praxis by promoting agency for all interlocutors and developing compassion through its rhetorical forms. The rhetorical forms of Foss and Griffin’s invitational rhetoric—offering perspectives and the creation of external conditions based on respect and equality—are discernable in the rhetoric of NHRC and harm reduction at large. The NHRC’s dedication to curating a safe environment for PWUD to practice recovery when they are not ready to be sober adjacently acts as a social space where political discourse occurs without the use of persuasive discourse. As a social entity, the rhetoric of the NHRC develops the practice of invitational and constitutive rhetoric as a way of being through actions. By evincing the NHRC’s constitutive and invitational discursive strategies, rhetorical ways of being in terms of compassion can be set forth.

Offering perspectives, the first rhetorical form of invitational rhetoric, demonstrates a compassionate relationship between both the rhetor and the audience. The rhetor offers a
personal narrative to “invite their careful consideration by the participants in the interaction,” without desiring an “adherence to that viewpoint” (Foss and Griffin 7). By taking persuasion out of the equation, the rhetor and the audience are on an equal playing field where all perspectives are valued. The interlocutors demonstrate a sense of compassion when there is not a desire to conquer or impede on someone else’s viewpoint, but rather “a willingness to call into question the beliefs they consider most inviolate and to relax their grip on those beliefs” (Foss and Griffin 7). In correspondence, the NHRC performs offering as a rhetorical form through personal narrative; safe consumption sites are typically run by peer workers, who are people who have overcome drug addiction. As a result, their training workshops and events include “content informed by lived experiences” (“Training and Capacity Building”). Moreover, although the leaders of the NHRC are typically sober and support abstinence from illicit drug use, they still offer a variety of alternative safe consumption options, such as needles, snorting straws, and other sanitized drug paraphernalia. By not placing superiority on abstinence and instead engaging with PWUD by providing “resources to contextualize drug use, why people use drugs, and ways to make it safer depending on your situation,” the NHRC compassionately engages in offering as their rhetorical form of communication (“Safer Drug Use Resources”).

The second rhetorical form of invitational rhetoric, external conditions built on respect and equality, is rather similar to White’s concept of constitutive rhetoric, and is demonstrable throughout the rhetorical practices of harm reduction. Foss and Griffin claim that the end result of invitational rhetoric is to create a “mutual understanding of perspectives” through an atmosphere where all rhetors and audience members experience an atmosphere that maintains safety, value, and freedom (10). While White identifies constitutive rhetoric as a process, Foss and Griffin say that creating external conditions is a rhetorical form. Here is where constitutive is
relevant as the means to achieve Foss and Griffin’s proposed end result of mutuality assists in the actualization of invitational rhetoric in practice. Constitutive rhetoric is a cultural activity, or “a way of acting with a certain set of materials found in the culture” (White 691). The process of constitutive rhetoric adheres to the social activities that create an intersubjective experience. The NHRC determines formidable actions for all interlocutors in relation to drugs, which are the cultural materials at hand, through agreed-upon intersubjective perspectives, or mutuality.

Through a process that mirrors constitutive rhetoric, harm reduction depends on communal intervention to determine the course of action for each individual within the larger community: “Harm reduction demands that interventions and policies designed to serve people who use drugs reflect specific individual and community needs” and thus, “there is no universal definition of or formula for implementing harm reduction” (“Principles of Harm Reduction”). By tending to the identity of each interlocutor in consideration of their unique circumstances through a constitutive rhetorical process, the NHRC creates the invitational external conditions of freedom, safety, and value.

The eight principles of harm reduction demonstrate the NHRC’s commitment to an invitational rhetorical form through external conditions. These principles ultimately ensure that all PWUD have agency over their recovery, and have a real voice in the creation of programs and policies. The various tools and resources they provide offer safer alternatives and methods of drug consumption, such as fentanyl test strips, which identify the presence of fentanyl in the composition of unregulated drugs. Most notably, the NHRC mirrors invitational rhetoric most directly by calling for “the non-judgmental, non-coercive provision of services and resources” (“Principles of Harm Reduction”). Acting as alternative responses to the authorial language that

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3 To avoid an exhaustive explication of these eight principles, review the “Principles of Harm Reduction” on their public website, www.harmreduction.org.
dominates society in public policy, both invitational rhetoric and harm reduction create conditions that allow for smooth communication for all interlocutors.

Thus far, I have demonstrated two rhetorical approaches that deconstruct coercive, oppressive, and dualistic rhetoric in the social realm. These rhetorical forms create circumstances for a compassionate rhetoric to thrive by conceptualizing the form rhetoric takes on, and the process to develop that form. What’s left is, well, you. The role of all relevant interlocutors in traditional rhetorical theories, according to the rhetorical scholar Thomas W. Benson, have a “conception of speaker and audience that describes the two as if they were made of different materials—one a manipulator, the other a passive object” (293). In accordance with Foss and Griffin, Benson suggests that rhetorical theory ought to consider the speaker and audience as active human agents. Viewing both the speaker and audience as “persons-as-actions” working within a transactional dialogue that is neither audience-centered nor speaker-centered (qtd. in Benson 296), defines rhetoric as a way of being as a “collaboration between speaker and listener to find a mutually satisfactory notion of themselves as interacting agents” (Benson 318). In consideration of the scholarship from White, Foss, and Griffin that emphasizes the interdependence between all interlocutors within the rhetorical situation, rhetoric as a way of being is helpful in actualizing compassionate rhetoric. Looking at compassionate rhetoric as a rhetorical way of being can concretize it as an active practice that one must cultivate and work towards.

More specifically, the litany of definitions for rhetorical being in Benson’s conclusion of “Rhetoric as a Way of Being” is functionally applicable to the aforementioned characteristics of compassionate rhetoric. In summary, rhetorical being is an active, collaborative, and public action that a human agent carries out through a shared set of symbols, even when rhetorical
being occurs internally through reflection or dialogue (Benson 320). To master the art of compassionate rhetoric, one must embody rhetoric as their way of being. In other words, the characteristics of compassionate rhetoric—cultivating a beginner’s mind, recognizing interdependence, and accepting contradiction—are acts of becoming through self-reflexive practices and interactions between speaker and audience without reliance on persuasion.

The term “persons-as-actions” that Benson borrows from Carroll C. Arnold conflates one’s beings to verbs, occurrences, or states of being; thus propounding a sense of constant change and transformation for each human agent. In contrast to the previously explored traditional rhetorical theories that reinforce fixed, essential positions within our language and conceptions of truth in discourse and rhetoric, rhetorical being invites transiency. Concurrently, Zen Buddhist beliefs suggest that the “basic teaching of Buddhism is the teaching of transiency or change. That everything changes is the basic truth for each existence” (102). The language Shunryu Suzuki-roshi⁴ uses in Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind seemingly reflects the immutable truth from Platonic idealism and Aristotelian logic, however, the contradiction appears within truth itself: everything changes. If everything changes, then even the basic truth itself changes. This too suggests that all beings are transient as well. Enacting compassionate rhetoric as a transient way of being beseeches that compassionate rhetoric starts with the beginner’s mind.

**The Beginner’s Mind**

“The beginner’s mind is the mind of compassion. When our mind is compassionate, it is boundless.”⁵

Shunryu Suzuki, a Zen Master, author, and pioneer of Zen Buddhism in American culture, highlights the revolutionary concept of the beginner’s mind, or shoshin, in Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind. The beginner’s mind is a key characteristic of compassionate rhetoric.

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⁴ roshi meaning spiritual leader.

⁵ from Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind by Shunryu Suzuki, pp. 2.
insomuch that it is an inner state of being that affects one’s use of symbols through actions, perceptions, behaviors, and discourse within public and social realms. The beginner’s mind encourages an individual to treat each experience or moment as if it is the first time, even after practicing or doing the action for many years (S. Suzuki 21). By withholding one’s assumptions and preconceived knowledge about an action or practice, one can see the experience or moment with an open mind. According to Suzuki-roshi, maintaining a beginner’s mind allows us to be “true to ourselves, in sympathy with all beings” (22). As such, the commonly accepted definitions of compassion are relatively similar to the behaviors, attitudes, and actions that arise from the beginner’s mind in Zen practice.

The beginner’s mind, as an orientation of the mind, defines compassionate rhetoric as a transient way of being. The various sections of *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, according to Richard Baker’s introduction of the book, “concerns the question of how to maintain beginner’s mind through your meditation and in your life” (14). The three sections, “Right Practice,” “Right Attitude,” and “Right Understanding,” develop straightforward explanations of ways of being through the beginner’s mind. In Buddhism, the self is the locus of practice; everything one needs to know is already inside of oneself (S. Suzuki 83). Furthermore, compassionate rhetoric arises from this concept of the transient self: “Because each existence is in constant change, there is no abiding self. In fact, the self-nature of each existence is nothing but change itself, the self-nature of all existence” (S. Suzuki 102). The beginner’s mind reinforces the idea of the self as uniquely existing in each moment and circumstance, as an entirely novel existence. As such, when a human agent accepts that they are in constant change through the beginner’s mind, the fixed and static assertion of identity no longer stakes a claim over one’s self-perception.
Conversely, Western rhetoric and philosophy rely on intellect and rational discourse to create a comprehensible reality. The benefits of intellectual thought allow for creations to “be conveyed from mind to mind with tolerable ease, for the bridge between is on the same plane as the matter to be conveyed” (Humphreys 2). In an attempt to explicate Zen Buddhism to the Western world, Christmas Humphreys’ “Beyond the Intellect” in Zen Buddhism demonstrates the challenges of bringing the intuitive dimensions of Zen into Western culture. Because Zen is “beyond antithesis” and “incommunicable,” it is also “beyond discussion, and beyond the sway of ‘opposites’ by which all description and argument are carried on” (Humphreys 2-3). On the surface, Zen and rhetoric appear to be incompatible; opposites themselves. However, McPhail challenges this misconception, and reframes this division to challenge absolute truth and fixed positions: “It is not the words themselves but the ways in which words can be used to fix and categorize the world which Zen calls into question” (5). As we view ourselves in change, our language should reasonably change alongside our transient selves. Besides, the beginner’s mind suggests that one looks at all things without preconceived notions; why not look at the relationship between Zen and rhetoric with the beginner’s mind, too?

According to Suzuki-roshi, cultivating the beginner’s mind is essential for Zen practice. The beginner’s mind is self-sufficient, non-dualistic, and thus “an empty mind and a ready mind” (S. Suzuki 21). This mind has “no thought of achievement, no thought of self” and allows the mind to be open and compassionate (S. Suzuki 22). This approach is quite unlike ancient Greek rhetorics and rhetoric in pedagogy; I imagine telling my freshman writing class to have no thought of achievement, and no thought of self, and picture their faces of confusion since, up to this point, all of their life has been dedicated to developing a self, based on their achievements, so they can attend college or university. Common pedagogical practices of rhetoric encourage a
starkly intellectual approach that encourages holding the expert’s mind. Returning to David Bartholomae’s “Inventing the University,” he encourages “all writers, in order to write, must imagine for themselves the privilege of being ‘insiders’—that is, of being both inside an established and powerful discourse, and of being granted a special right to speak” (10). Bartholomae’s method of writing instruction appears to be a further privileging of discourse that arises from the dualistic mind of the intellect. Within the framework of logic and intellect, there is a false presupposition that knowledge opens the door to endless possibilities. Throughout popular scholarship on the pedagogy of rhetoric, scholars place emphasis on the power of dualistic distinctions, intellect, and fixed discursive categories.

The influence of rhetoric on Western intellect is the greatest challenge any Western practitioner of Zen will face. The faculty of mind that relies on *logos* and intellect functions “by the interaction of opposites” where all speech is done “by choosing from an indefinite list of pairs of opposite attributes” (Humphreys 5). Of course, Nixon’s “Special Message to the Congress” demonstrates this, where the suggestion that PWUD are detrimental to society is oppositional to the idea that people who do use drugs are good for society. Admittedly, even the NHRC relies on intellect to distinguish itself in opposition to punitive public policy; *all* written and spoken language relies on intellect. However, the goal isn’t to eliminate intellect entirely, but rather through the cultivation of the beginner’s mind, surpass the dualism between suggested oppositions that arise from fixed intellectual thinking.

If the issue is not intellect, but rather dualistic thinking, then the dualistic opposition between rhetoric, in the form of language, and Zen practice is futile. Despite the suggestion that Zen is an experience of the mind, the practice of Zen is contradictorily understood through expressions in form. Most notably, one’s posture during *zazen* “expresses the oneness of duality;
not two, and not one” (S. Suzuki 25). The full lotus position and the cosmic mudra⁶ rhetorically reflect the ‘right’ state of mind to express own’s self most freely under the Zen practice. For a non-practitioner, this postural demeanor may be senseless. However, in holding a beginner’s mind, the human agent who performs these practices may actually, as Suzuki suggests, gain some insight or learn something due to its boundless nature (22). Furthermore, in the prologue of Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind, Suzuki writes that the most difficult task is maintaining one’s beginner’s mind because “there is no need to have a deep understanding of Zen” (22). The irony of reading this text, written by a well-renowned Zen monk, is that Suzuki goes on to offer a deep understanding of Zen in the form of written discourse. So, in one sense, Zen is an experience stemming from intuition rather than intellect; in another, it is an intellectual dissemination of the intuitive practice and experience of Zen. If, when holding the beginner’s mind, a practitioner of zazen can believe that “our body and mind are both two and one,” then perhaps human agents can believe that rhetoric can express Zen—that Zen and rhetoric are both two and one (S. Suzuki 22).

While the ‘two sides of the same coin’ argument seems futile in the discussion of substance use, looking at the preconceived beliefs that one holds about PWUD and drug use can reveal how drug abuse is not unlike taking a prescription drug for medical purposes. Or more radically, it can reveal how PWUD are not unlike people who don’t use drugs. While the sentiment differs, McPhail’s critique of Allan Bloom’s essentialist argumentative discourse throughout The Closing of the American Mind is merely a preliminary analysis to discuss how “we are tolerant of all positions except those that are in opposition to our own, and in order to disprove those positions we resort to essential knowledge” (57). Although I might disagree with

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⁶ The ‘cosmic mudra’ is the hand position one holds during zazen. Both hands come together to form a circle, with the tips of the thumbs touching and the left four fingers resting above the right four fingers.
Nixon’s claims about PWUD and the legislation that punishes PWUD, the assumptions I hold in defending harm reduction and PWUD are worth looking at since my own positions purport particular assumptions as truth. For starters, I am a recovering addict, and therefore I am generally more in tune with the attitudes of PWUD rather than legislation makers. Secondarily, harm reduction resources were a contributing factor in my recovery, so my personal experience can attest to its serviceability. Lastly, the stigmatization I’ve experienced as a result of preconceived notions about substance abuse led me to have a distasteful attitude toward those who view PWUD as inherently bad for society.

Though I write from experience, I am also demonstrating the practice behind the beginner’s mind to convey how intellectual inquiry presumes exclusivity between oppositional stances. To defer this tendency in intellectual inquiries, Suzuki-roshi suggests that “when you listen to someone, you should give up all your preconceived ideas and your subjective opinions; you should just listen” because when we usually engage in conversation,

when you listen to some statement, you hear it as a kind of echo of yourself. You are actually listening to your own opinion. If it agrees with your opinion, you may accept it, but if it does not, you will reject it or you may not even really hear it. (87-88)

On the one hand, I cannot condone some of the legislative actions made under Nixon’s presidency; on the other hand, I can certainly see that public safety is worth protecting. Even if it is difficult to admit, my prior addiction as a person who used drugs contributed to the suffering of others. Nonetheless, returning to the seemingly futile ‘two sides of the same coin’ argument with regard to substance abuse, I am one of the countless individuals who is/was both a person

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7 Oftentimes, people who practice sobriety continue to refer to themselves as ‘recovering’ instead of ‘recovered,’ even if they aren’t actively using drugs.
who doesn’t use drugs and a PWUD; I am also one of the countless individuals who is/was a person who used drugs recreationally and also used drugs for medical purposes.

But let not personal experience speak to this alone; in citing Paul de Man’s *The Rhetoric of Blindness*, McPhail reflects on the harmful and essentialist effects of intellectual inquiry and logical thinking. In critiquing the critiques of Bloom’s argument, McPhail points out that “this is the underlying logic of essentialism, that there is one true reality that can be discovered and defined through dialectical argumentation” (59). In retracting the assumptions he makes about Bloom’s argument as racist, McPhail offers an alternative perspective where he defends Bloom’s right to argue so we can ultimately move beyond dialectics and engage in dialogue that considers our own assumptions to find common ground (60-61). This is the practice of the beginner’s mind, and also the practice of transient being. Seeing and withholding one’s own assumptions while truly listening to another’s stance fully allows an individual to change and experience things uniquely.

Inscribing the beginner’s mind as part of one’s rhetorical being invites discourse to occur without assuming that each interlocutor functions in dialectical dualisms from the ‘other.’ The beginner’s mind allows all human agents to see that “while we can choose to believe that we can have one or the other, *essentially*, we cannot have one without the other, for the two are at some level always implicated in each other” (McPhail 62). In the practice of our rhetoric, the speaker relies on the audience to define their roles as rhetorical beings, and vice versa; the same sentiment exists in the content of their discourse. With the beginner’s mind, an interlocutor can recognize their perspective exists in contention with another in part due to the preconceived dialectical inventions within our shared system of symbols. As a result, human agents can
reconsider and contemplate the language system that creates divisions, and ultimately judge perspectives with the compassion of a beginner’s mind.

**Similarities in Difference**

Although my explication of compassionate rhetoric is rather idealistic, I truly believe that changing our relationship with language, as well as our execution of language through rhetoric, can alter reality. As McPhail contends, contemporary literary theorists argue that language constructs and reflects reality; and that our social realities are often inequitable because of the essentialist language that remains commonplace in our society (47). McPhail’s *Zen in the Art of Rhetoric* offers a rich inquiry into the nature of negative differences within both language and reality and posits solutions from a myriad of rhetorical theorists to contend for a rhetorical dialogic coherence. Certainly, compassionate rhetoric concurs with McPhail’s conceptualization of rhetorical coherence. Coherent rhetoric “considers how beliefs are contextualized in discourse, and how the system of beliefs is understood in terms of both its dialectical and dialogic manifestations” (McPhail 80). Nonetheless, emphasis on the self-reflexive aspects of compassionate rhetorical being aims to create a bridge between two seemingly oppositional beliefs held by two distinct individuals and see how one may be similar through an investigation of the difference itself.

Because compassionate rhetoric manifests as a way of being in and with the world, considering the human experience within a rhetorical situation is paramount. In the context of substance abuse, the human experience of PWUD within a world that stigmatizes and alienates drug users is too often ignored and overlooked. Rather, people and social entities who hold power maintain the socially constructed image of PWUD, drug abuse, and addicts. Historically, politicians, government officials, organizations, and people who retain social influence over the
world are the speakers; the audience oftentimes are the PWUD. However, perhaps we should take up Benson on his recommendation to “learn to listen to the listener,” because “just as the speaker creates the listener, the listener creates the speaker” (320). In a research study that investigates how addicts construct the ‘self,’ Dr. Adams L. Silbey describes the creation of identity as such:

Within the social constructionist framework, and by extension discourse theory, identity is not static but a culturally negotiated process of formation and transformation (De Fina et al., 2006). Whether sent down through institutional ideologies or carried up through the interactional contexts of everyday talk, discourse constrains (or enables, depending on one’s view of agency) the possible selfhoods one can assume. (Silbey, et al. 2279)

In alignment with the belief that a compassionate rhetorical being is a self-proclaimed state of transiency, this study on the selfhood of addicts is a practical starting point for demonstrating the self-reflexive practice of seeing similarities in difference.

To develop a strong sense of compassionate rhetoric, attention must be given to the constraints of a rhetorical situation. As Sibley acknowledges in his research, large-scale discourses are both socially constituted and constitutive in the sense that all discourses reinforce the hegemonic ideology (2285). In this case, PWUD preemptively exist within an ideology that stigmatizes addiction and drug use; retrospectively, many of their conceptions of selfhood reflect the stigmatized view that the systems in power bestow upon their identity (2285). In acknowledging how hegemony reduces one’s identity by delimiting the subjectivity of individuals through negative differences, one can see how impermanent identity truly is.

Ingesting a drug is an action that most certainly alters one’s state of being and is thus reflective of the transient and impermanent nature of the self. However, PWUD often describe their
addiction experience as “arising from an inexorable loss of control” and are ultimately “imbued with undesirable attributes that are taken as permanent” (2285). By self-identifying with the ideological narratives that further oppress and alienate PWUD and addiction, there is a false positivistic belief that addicts retain a permanent sense of identity. As a result, the implications of this study suggest that efforts to help PWUD should promote agency and collective action to delineate the tendency of PWUD to identify with hegemonic impositions of negative attributes (2286). Agency and collective action, I argue, is a necessity for developing the ability to see similarities in differences and ultimately conceptualize a compassionate rhetorical way of being in the world.

My earlier analysis of the NHRC demonstrates how harm reduction organizations produce invitational environments that promote agency and collective action. However, to conceptualize compassionate rhetoric as a rhetorical way of being, developing a sense of agency for one’s self and others should be a self-reflexive practice. A closer look at the self/other dichotomy that PWUD create in developing their identity is worthwhile. Amongst the twenty-seven interviewees in Sibley’s research study, he found that “[t]here is a compulsion for normality. But in subsuming normality, there is inevitably a construction of abnormality; the archetypal addict-other is corroborated, reinforcing the very discourse that most would wish to subvert” (2285). More specifically, the rhetorical devices that the PWUD used in their interview demonstrate a necessity to reimagine the self in contention to ‘other’ drug users. In responding to the change in drug use over time, one participant of Sibley’s study says that current drug users have “gotten progressively more and more reckless as far as, uh, getting drugs” and that in recent times, people lack a conscience when it comes to consuming drugs (qtd. in Sibley 2283). Despite almost all of the interviewees describing their personal situation as one that lacked
control and stemmed from instability and traumatic experiences, there was an overarching theme of intragroup stigma (Sibley et al., 2286). By and large, Sibley’s discourse analysis of the language deployed by PWUD reveals a general theme that, at the individual level, PWUD make a distinction between one’s self and an ‘other.’

Of course, the self/other distinction coincides with earlier essentialist concessions from ancient Greek rhetoric; but the self/other dualism issue perpetuates even in contemporary discourse on substance abuse. Similar to Sibley’s discourse analysis, Sharon Rødner’s earlier qualitative research (2005) on identity construction through discourse amongst forty-four drug users largely affirms similar findings on the creation of self/other dualism within PWUD’s rhetoric. Rødner found that PWUD depict their self-identity through “individualism and the notion of control,” where the individual prioritizes themselves over the larger community (337). More cunningly, the interviewees often frame other PWUD—the ‘other’—to have passive agency through the use of rhetorical devices, such as metaphors, to demonstrate their lack of control (Rødner 341). Despite the larger discourse around PWUD and substance abuse, even the participants insinuate an ‘other’ even if they identity similarly through intentional discursive strategies. The creation of the other within an intragroup of similarly identifying individuals perpetuate dualistic rhetoric further.

Given that Rødner claims that individualistic tendencies arise from Western ideological implications, inviting other perspectives to change this mode of thinking could reap beneficial results for a compassionate rhetorical way of being. The first woman-identifying American

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8 Adams L. Sibley’s “‘I Was Raised in Addiction’: Constructions of the Self and the Other in Discourses of Addiction and Recovery” clarifies the restraints/limitations of this qualitative health research to be bound geographically. Sibley notes that the sample was from “rural Appalachian Ohio” and that “with any social phenomenon, discourse is culturally, temporally, and physically contextual” (2286). Nonetheless, various other studies concur with similar findings in investigating the discourse of PWUD; See Bailey’s “Control and desire: The issue of identity in popular discourses of addiction” (2005) and Rødner’s “‘I am not a drug abuser, I am a drug user’: A discourse analysis of 44 drug users’ construction of identity” (2005).
Buddhist nun, Pema Chödrön, renowned for developing Tibetan Buddhist knowledge in the Western world, offers insight from Buddhist thought in dealing with addiction. In contrast to typical understandings of addiction, Chödrön claims that “we’re all addicted to hope—hope that the doubt and mystery will go away” (40). In a self-reflexive narrative, Chödrön opens up *When Things Fall Apart* by describing how “everything fell apart . . . All the ways I shield myself, all the ways I delude myself, all the ways I maintain my well-polished self-image—all of it fell apart” (6). However, learning to *stay* with that sense of groundlessness allowed Chödrön to develop self-compassion. Similar to this experience, Sibley notes how PWUD gain success in recovery once they reach “a breaking point like ‘hitting rock bottom’ or ‘hitting the end of my run’ as the moment they committed to change” (2284). Comparatively, both situations demonstrate how total groundlessness is a valuable space to develop compassion and “wake ourselves up,” and thus develop agency over how we define ourselves in the current situation (Chödrön 9). Moments where one loses everything and all sense of self, even if that self is defined by substance abuse, can become an invitation to accepting the transient nature of being.

The moment of total loss can become a moment to develop a compassionate rhetorical way of being not just *in* the world, but *with* the world by acknowledging the similarities of our subjective experience through our perceived differences. Chödrön notes that in trying to “awaken compassion and in trying to help others, we might come to realize that compassionate action involves working with ourselves as much as working with others” (78). Similarly, Benson describes the most ideal way to conceptualize rhetoric as a way of being as “ideally a collaboration between speaker and listener to find a mutually satisfactory notion of themselves as interacting agents” (318). Both of these ideas, when thought of interdependently, develop a compassionate rhetoric as a way of being through investigating the self as part of the other
during a rhetorical interaction. In recognizing the influence of larger power structures that contextualize the rhetorical event and define the discourse at hand, therein lies the ability to transcend it.

The earlier divulgence into how discourse disseminates from power structures and influences our self-perceptions and perceptions of others seems to strip us of our agency; yet still, Chödrön believes that agency is found in the present moment when we see ourselves clearly. Employing mindfulness and refraining from action is a compassionate action, where mindfulness is “a sense of clear seeing with respect and compassion for what it is we see,” and refraining is “the practice of not immediately filling up space” with action as a result of what we ‘see’ (Chödrön 33-34). Where rhetorical being is a mode of action, compassionate rhetoric is also the action of non-action; doing nothing is still doing something. This space one creates of mindfulness and refrainment, especially in times of groundlessness, is a transformative space where we can develop compassion as part of our being. However, without mindfulness and refrainment as the defining practices of our rhetorical being, these situations of total groundlessness can lead to further addictions: “We feel we have to soften it, pad it with something, and we become addicted to whatever it is that seems to ease the pain” (Chödrön 13). For PWUD, this critical moment can shape the way we think of ourselves, our relationship with others, and ultimately, develop an action into a practice of rhetorical being that connects two diametrically opposed selves as one relates to substance abuse.

Although PWUD tend to critique the motives of other PWUD through the inscription of negative attributes from larger social discourse, self-reflexive actions rooted in mindfulness and refrainment could have the power to transcend the resulting dualisms. Even though Sibley does not consider the qualitative effects of mindfulness in overcoming intragroup stigma, he posits
that “PWUDs should thus be empowered to reflect upon, critique, and modify their own repertoires of addiction, rather than subscribe to repertoires provided by authority figures” (2286). Of course, this requires a recognition that when one PWUD offers compassion towards another PWUD’s actions and sense of being, there is a recognition of self in the other. This is relational to the aforementioned concept of rhetorical coherence, where dialogue “recognizes the interrelatedness of seemingly distinct positions, and assumes common epistemological and ontological foundations” (McPhail 76). For PWUD, the common thread in ontological and epistemological experience is stigmatizing labels and illicit substance abuse, even if the individual experience is unique from another. Chödrön demonstrates this assumption of common foundations to be interdependent on our self-reflective view: “What we hate in ourselves, we’ll hate in others. To the degree that we have compassion for ourselves, we will also have compassion for others” (80). Compassion can reduce stigmatization; in knowing ourselves through practicing mindfulness and refrainment, one can develop a rhetorical way of being built on compassion for oneself and others.

Most assuredly, efforts to reduce dualistic oppositions between the self and the other exists in scholarship from literary scholars, philosophers, feminists, Buddhist lamas, and Zen masters alike. Mindfulness and refrainment, or non-action, is a useful and rhetorical way of addressing dualistic oppositions in language. Although, language, understood through structuralist theories, appears to have a fixed and static nature. Efforts by post-structuralist theorists to undo these absolutist notions often leads to an uncomfortable confrontation with paradox and contradiction. Confronting contradiction in literary scholarship, nonetheless, has yet to curate a compassionate rhetorical expression or way of being. The potential in addressing
contradiction in terms of one’s identity in terms of rhetoric, however, can cultivate and express compassion through one’s being.

Accepting Contradiction

The myriad of rhetorical theories this inquiry draws upon—involuntary rhetoric, constitutive rhetoric, rhetorical coherence, rhetorical being—to develop compassionate rhetoric into a practical and applicable way of being, all reveal the contradictory nature of the shared symbolic system of language. Contemporary post-structuralist and postmodern theories concede that the fixed and static nature of our language is rather fragmentary in its delegation of meaning. Reactionary pragmatist and post-positivist theories try to mitigate the contradictions that arise as a result of the fallible nature of language, attempting to reframe the justificatory strategies of our rhetoric to determine a sensible and revisionary approach to conceptions of truth and reclaim a sense of ‘truthiness.’ In our postmodern society that relentlessly incurs a sense of instability and misinformation, these approaches are certainly appropriate. An exemplary theorist in demonstrating the current mistrust towards truth, Jacques Derrida, investigates the validity of truth in our language in opposition to structuralist notions.

Not unlike Zen Buddhist critiques of the intellect, Derrida’s post-structuralist theory in Of Grammatology is a deconstruction of the truth claims that arise from intellectual logocentrism. Derrida, in reference to the written text, proposes that the absolute ‘present’ concept that a sign refers to is nonexistent; signifiers merely refer to other signifiers (Derrida 73). Both areas of study question the accuracy of intellectual logos in representing a true or absolute reality. Unlike Zen Buddhism, however, Derrida and other poststructural theories tend to argue that language simply cannot capture a singular, absolute reality; ‘meaning’ is not fixed. Practitioners of Zen will argue in contradictory terms: that meaning is both fixed and infinitely changing.
Of course, the purpose of highlighting relevant theoretical trends is not to make Zen practice distinct from Derrida’s deconstruction, or any poststructuralist theory for that matter. Rather, the relevancy of poststructuralism, postmodernism, and the theoretical approaches that arise in reaction to these theories captures our own unwillingness to accept contradiction. Where Derrida points to the exorbitant and illusory nature of the written word through the indefinite multiplication of meaning that occurs in the abyss (or non-existent sign-referent), he simultaneously demonstrates how the act of deconstruction is an attempt to mitigate contradiction itself (163). While deconstruction is valuable in challenging the absolute truths of logocentrism, the praxis of compassionate rhetoric does not go further than the self; compassionate rhetoric is instead accepting or abiding in our inner contradictions.

Before I explicate the practice of accepting contradiction, let’s return to “The Rhetorical Contradiction.” Investigating the rhetorical contradiction in harm reduction was foundational in developing compassionate rhetoric. The safe consumption kit became the catalyst for demonstrating a “direct rhetorical contradiction of the legislation by redefining the target audience to be PWUD and reframing the exigency to be helping those who suffer from the consequences of militant drug policies and substance ab/use with compassion” (Couch-Tellefsen 9). Exemplifying how providing PWUD with drug paraphernalia paradoxically offers compassion despite the legislation that deems these objects as contraband reveals how the safe consumption kit is transcendental of the rhetorical strategies within the legislation, not antithetical. In the current larger explication of compassionate rhetoric, one must go beyond analyzing the contradictory rhetorical strategies to inscribe the transcendental effects of contradiction to one’s rhetorical way of being.
Returning to Zen Buddhism, practitioners hold the belief that the Self abides in the realm of absolute subjectivity. D. T. Suzuki, another well-renowned Zen Master, quickly contradicts the statical nature of the absolute self, saying that the Self “is a zero which is a staticity, and at the same time an infinity” (25). To further the contradiction of the concept of the Self in another comparison, D.T. Suzuki says “the Self is comparable to a circle which has no circumference, it is thus śūnyatā, emptiness. But it is also the center of such a circle, which is found everywhere and anywhere in the circle” (25). Viewing the Self as emptiness is akin to the earlier idea of action through non-action; it is rhetorical not through abstracting the self, but through one’s lack of mitigation or external intervention to pacify inner contradictions.

In practice, compassionate rhetoric is not the suppression of action and individuality, but the active choice to withhold action and presumed exclusivity through ontological difference. D.T. Suzuki refers to ontological difference as “individuation,” which is “an objective term distinguishing one from another” (31). Objectification, in its perpetuation through the subject-object dualism throughout our rhetoric, is circumvented through the practice of refrainment, which is both emptiness and absolute subjectivity. By excluding all objective impositions through the practice of refraining from preconceived notions leads to interconnectedness. In other words, it is “standing all by himself and yet not separated from the rest of existence” (D. Suzuki 31). On its own, emptiness, or śūnyatā, is a mystifying term; in rhetorical terms, one can conceive of emptiness as boundless possibilities despite contradictions.

The practice of accepting contradictions arises from viewing the Self as emptiness as a rhetorical action and practice. With similar sentiments to Foss and Griffin, D.T. Suzuki writes: “When the distinction becomes exclusive, the desire for power lifts its head and frequently becomes uncontrollable” (31). In other words, transcending the subject-object duality creates a
reality built on interconnectedness through an acceptance of one’s inner contradictions. By refraining from overpowering another through individuation and thus negative difference, the Self is boundless.

An exemplary theory that demonstrates the acceptance of contradiction appears in feminist scholarship written by Gloria Anzaldúa, who intends to transcend the subject-object duality by curating the mestiza consciousness (80). Working at both the individual and collective level, the mestiza consciousness is an acceptance of contradiction and ambiguity in one’s identity and played out in collective society (79). Stemming from her intersectional feminist beliefs, Anzaldúa predicates the mestiza consciousness on the dualistic separation of men and women. In relationship to one’s racial and ethnic identity, Anzaldúa demonstrates how the practice of mestiza consciousness is one of recognition. People who identify with multiple ethnicities, for example, tend to “get multiple, opposing messages. The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes un choque, a cultural collision” (Anzaldúa 78). More specifically, the experience of indigenous people who are also Mexican within a hegemonically white culture often leads to contradictory internal experiences. This example that Anzaldúa provides, however, is one of many contradictory internal experiences.

One’s contradictory psyche is present in countless individuals; notably, PWUD. In a culture with legislation that controls and punishes drug use and influences the experience of addiction through discourse, PWUD navigate a world where their sense of identity is paradoxical. On one hand, the medico-legal discourse presumes that PWUD are ‘addicts,’ and therefore suffer from addiction; conceding the experience that “addiction entails a sense of powerlessness,” (Sibley, et al. 2282). On the other hand, many PWUD identify with attributes that do not involve drug use, and therefore view the consumption of illicit drugs as a choice.

9 Often referred to as Chicana/Chicano.
Moreover, the liminal space between addiction and recovery is boundless and paradoxical; some people choose to be completely sober, while others choose to be sober from their drug of choice (DOC), or some people may regulate their drug consumption, and so on. There is no collective identity, even amongst PWUD. However the internal contradictory experience does not have to be fixed nor static; rather, the mestiza consciousness offers a mindset that involves an acceptance of one’s contradictory experiences that is limitless.

Given that her work is rhetorical in itself, as “La conciencia de la mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness” blends Spanish and English, poetry and prose, as well as narrative and analysis, Anzaldúa’s writing embodies the paradoxical ‘way of being’ as a form of rhetoric. Her recommended practice, like the former practices of compassionate rhetoric, involves actions that occur within the psyche:

*La mestiza* constantly has to shift out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes.

(Anzaldúa 79)

In other words, Anzaldúa questions the Western implications on our thinking that aligns with the Buddhist critique of intellect; she locates the practice of *la mestiza* on the transcendental mind. To alter one’s inner self-perception is part of rhetorical being, since “[r]hetorical being is a becoming, both the revelation of an inner condition and the ongoing creation of interacting selves” (Benson 320). Driven by the *mestiza* consciousness, the inner ‘self’ curates how they will act in a rhetorical interaction between themselves and the speaker/listener in terms of inclusivity. In concurrence, Anzaldúa claims that an “[a]wareness of our situation must come before inner
changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the ‘real’ world unless it first happens in the images in our heads” (87). By first addressing the external situation, and then readdressing the inner self, one can change the society around them. As such, the cultivation of mestiza consciousness is a demonstration of compassionate action through one’s rhetorical being.

Certainly, the mestiza consciousness is an act of compassion. The unfettering devotion towards a new collective identity “free of the tainted biases of male dominance,” despite one’s internal contradictory experiences, entails a recognition of suffering and dedication toward liberation (Anzaldúa 87). For PWUD, this means recognizing the tainted biases around substance abuse, regardless if one is still using drugs, in recovery, or practicing sobriety. Removing the individuation as an rhetorical identifying label that trickles down from large power structures, and seeing oneself as emptiness, and therefore boundless, creates an identity that is absolute and dynamic; you might be here, but you can go anywhere from where you are.

Certainly, recovery is difficult. All PWUD at one point identified as a Self who does not abuse substances, or suffer from addiction. Practicing discourse through compassionate rhetoric means recognizing that the possibilities are infinite, contradictory, and also interconnected. Compassion will not always occur without flaw, nor does recovery. However, the following actions—cultivating the beginner’s mind, seeing similarities in difference, and accepting contradiction—are paradoxically imperfectly perfect actions to inscribe as a praxis in one’s rhetorical being. In this current moment, harm reduction is the closest practice to compassionate rhetoric to intervene in, and minimize the pain that arises from common dualistic rhetorical practices that demonize substance abuse and PWUD. But, like us, the possibilities for harm reduction are boundless.
Conclusion

At the height of my addiction, I overdosed. Despite the rhetoric toward PWUD that suggests otherwise, I was a decent student, a passionate feminist, and a writer; I had many good friends, close familial relationships, a job I loved, and a serious romantic relationship. All in all, aside from using drugs, I was an active part of the community. Yet still, after buying and consuming my DOC, I began to overdose on an incidental ‘lacing’ of fentanyl. Although I was totally oblivious to harm reduction practices at the time, I was fortunate to know and be with at least one person who was Narcan-trained and carried it on their person. With no consideration of the alarming rates of overdose in the county I lived in, nor any concern toward possible harmful outcomes, I, like many other PWUD, consumed drugs to distract myself from feeling pain.

Buddhist teachings say that life is suffering, and all suffering comes from craving, attachment, and desire. While I acknowledge this is an assumption I believe in, I am certain that addiction is a perpetual desire to not feel pain. This cyclic pain is compounded by the dominant rhetoric around substance abuse that targets the very being PWUD embody as inherently adverse for society, and ultimately diminishes the national integration of harm reduction resources. This stigmatizing discourse, whether we acknowledge it or otherwise, effects the reality we exist in. So, when we partake in discourse, we should consider what McPhail says about language: “Like a double-edged sword, language can empower or disempower depending on who is using it, and the purpose for which it is used” (154). McPhail’s observation is not only a reminder of the power of language in constructing our reality but also a reminder of the relevancy in the type of ‘being’ we constitute ourselves as. Given the dominant discourse on substance abuse, addiction, and PWUD, a reconsideration of the rhetorical type of ‘being’ we are is long overdue.
Facing the scathing addiction that was consuming my life led me to develop an active practice of compassion toward myself and others with the help of a committed Buddhist practice and insight from feminist scholarship. While I am still uncertain about what constitutes an absolutely compassionate action, I am certain that any individual can develop a compassionate way of being through rhetoric. Despite the shame and stigmatization that come from the discourse on substance abuse, I find there is value in sharing my experience with addiction in a privileged space such as this to hopefully challenge the dominant discourse that shames PWUD, and assert that PWUD can recover with the help of some compassion.

Of course, compassion can be rhetorical. If rhetoric is a method of developing how we constitute our shared reality, then invite compassion to be the primary lens to define ourselves in the world with others.
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