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Rhetorical Empathy in the Lyrics of the Grateful Dead

JAYNE G. STONE

The prompt for this essay was a personal encounter. It was August of 2020, and election season was in full swing. My mom was in town to help me move, and I asked her to choose some music for us to listen to while we cleaned my new house. I trusted her to choose something good; after all, we have very similar tastes in music, despite our very stark differences in other areas. The starkest of these is politics, and that seemed an unavoidable topic at that time. Yet, while the streets were lined with political signs and the media filled with divisive rhetoric, where we sat, things were peaceful.

That was something of an anomaly. In 2008, 2012, and 2016, we had particularly intense arguments over our political views, each one testing our relationship. Yet, there we were, in an election season that was arguably more heated than the previous three, choosing to focus on our shared goals of making it a successful move-in day and enjoying our limited time together before she flew back home. I was glad she was there, a feeling amplified when I heard the familiar and always disarming sound of Jerry Garcia tuning his guitar. I smiled; she'd chosen the Grateful Dead.

I didn't think much more about her choice at the time, but the memory later prompted me to reflect on the rhetorical power of the Grateful Dead. Despite the heated nature of the election, and our profound political differences, we simply enjoyed time together listening to music. However, this was music I associated closely with my own liberal political stance, so it was curious to me that my mom, a staunch Republican, had an affinity for the Dead, too. What was it about the Dead, their music, and the community that surrounds them that was attractive to her? What did she

and other Republicans see in the Dead that aligned with their politics and perspective? But these question also seemed close-minded. After all, as a scholar who studies the Dead phenomenon, I know that Deadheads are certainly a diverse group; why should that not extend to their politics?

Despite these questions, my interest here is not about the Dead and politics, a perennial topic that Deadheads have debated since the 1980s and scholars have discussed from a variety of perspectives.¹ Deadheads have always been more politically diverse than their popular image suggests. My approach is not an effort to resolve or reduce that diversity but rather a way to reframe the way we think about questions of difference. This paper focuses on the power of both the Dead's creative ethos and the rhetorical moves they make in their lyrics which support and exemplify that ethos.

It is important to note that the argument that a conservative Deadhead is some kind of an anomaly indirectly suggests that Deadheads are a homogenous, left-leaning group. Fans familiar with the heated arguments over Ronald Reagan's and George H. W. Bush's presidential campaigns in Deadhead fanzine *The Golden Road* might disagree, but recent polls have continued to challenge that view as well. A 2015 poll conducted by the Mellman Group (Democrat) and Public Opinion Strategies (Republican) found the Dead "well liked across political party lines [and] by all age groups." That can be seen as perhaps a testament to the band's oft-stated apolitical stance, but what was surprising was the finding that "among partisan subgroups, the greatest intensity of favorable feeling for the Grateful Dead is found among independent-leaning Republicans" (Strategic Media 2015). Though based on just over 1,000 respondents, those findings challenge the popular perception of Dead listeners skewing liberal.

The poll sparked considerable discussion. Many of the responses questioned the prevalence of conservative Deadheads: *The Washington Post* reported "Grateful Dead Fans: Surprisingly Republican" (Schwarz 2015); *Bloomberg News* argued "Why Republicans and Millennials Love the Grateful Dead All the Same" (Leitch 2015); *Washington Monthly* asked "Why Do Republicans Love the Grateful Dead?" (Longman 2015), echoed by the *Huffington Post*, "Why Do Conservatives Love the Grateful

Dead? We Ask Tucker Carlson” (Carter and Delaney 2015). Each posed potential answers to the question, what is it about the Grateful Dead that draws conservatives?

More than five years later, that question surfaced yet again, a short time after my mom and I cleaned while listening to the Grateful Dead just days before the 2020 election. In an article for *Variety* magazine, Noah Eckstein invited readers to “Meet the Deadheads Who Stump for Trump.” Three years later, the hosts of *Know Your Enemy*, a podcast whose creators describe it as “a leftist’s guide to the conservative movement,” dedicated an entire episode to the “phenomenon of the Grateful Dead conservative.”

Each of these inquiries reaffirmed the common perception that there is a misalignment between conservative values and Deadhead values. Though grounded in the powerful cultural image of a Deadhead, and its historical roots in the counterculture of the 1960s, that view ignores the very real political differences among Deadheads. Moreover, asking this same question over and over again has produced a kind of myopia, not insight. Instead of looking at the perceived prevalence of conservative Deadheads as if that were a core “phenomenon” worthy of attention, I want to take a step back and examine what I argue is a more promising and hopeful framing of the underlying phenomenon: the band’s ability to continually attract such a diverse group of followers and bring them together in a shared celebratory and experiential space, even in the most politically divided times. Rather than ask what draws political conservatives to the Grateful Dead, we might ask a more generative set of questions. What is it about the Grateful Dead that brings members of such wide-ranging and diverse perspectives together in general harmony? How has it come to be that Deadheads across generations, wide-ranging political persuasions, and socioeconomic statuses continue to gather in celebration of and commitment to a band that, in the minds of so many people, has such strong associations with the 1960s counterculture movement and its values? These questions shift our attention away from what separates us, refocusing instead on how we relate to one another as humans, rather than as political adherents.

To explore these questions, as a rhetoric scholar, I look to language; in this context, the words that help shape every Deadhead’s experience are

the lyrics of the band's songs. One rhetorical power of the Grateful Dead's lyrics (and I believe there are many) is the power to neutralize socially constructed division, and at best, to bridge it. Lisa Blankenship's concept of "rhetorical empathy" is useful here. As "a means for ethical rhetorical engagement," rhetorical empathy focuses on understanding over persuasion (Blankenship 2019, 5). Blankenship defines rhetorical empathy as "a choice and habit of mind that invents and invites discourse informed by deep listening and its resulting emotion, characterized by narratives based on personal experience" (2019, 5). These emphases align with much of the Grateful Dead's music, as I explore below. Blankenship further explains that rhetorical empathy is "both a hermeneutic and a heuristic, a way of thinking (and feeling) constituted by language and a way of using language" (2019, 5). In analyzing the rhetorical moves of the Grateful Dead, a theoretical concept that can act as both a theory of interpretation *and* a method for rhetorical engagement is appropriate, for it provides insight into both rhetor and listener experiences, helping to provide a fuller picture of specific rhetorical moves and their effects.

Embracing rhetorical empathy as an approach to discourse also helps to create a community in which people feel more willing to engage across differences. As Blankenship asserts,

Rhetorical empathy results in an emotional engagement that can disarm; it asks for vulnerability from the speaker or writer that can, at times, promote it in return. It is born from a stance (*topos*) of learning and adjusting rather than first and foremost trying to make a point and change an audience. (Blankenship 2019, 16)

As I will show, the Grateful Dead experience is shaped in large part by that very stance. Ultimately, rhetorical empathy offers a strategy for understanding how the Dead's music invites listeners across the socio-cultural and political spectrums by highlighting how the lyrics not only exemplify rhetorical empathy, but also work to inspire rhetorical empathy in their listeners.

Blankenship's focus is on rhetorical empathy as a tool for productive argument. Here I am adapting her concept as a way of thinking, interpreting, perceiving, and feeling when we are in a rhetorical engagement—and experiencing lyric music is, I argue, to be rhetorically engaged. This

approach is inspired by rhetoric scholars interested in expanding the classical bounds of rhetorical theory, especially those who position rhetoric as not necessarily intentionally persuasive but still influential to our rhetorical experiences (cf. Gries 2015; Foss and Griffin 2020).

Rhetorical empathy is shaped by three guiding principles. First, the primary goal of rhetorical empathy is not to change an Other's mind, but to understand an Other's point of view. Second, rhetorical empathy requires telling stories about the personal. And third, rhetorical empathy depends on audience engagement. I will explain how each of these principles usefully connect to the Grateful Dead, noting lyrics that showcase aspects of rhetorical empathy at play with the goal of revealing how rhetorical empathy encourages a sense of community among diverse Deadheads by way of listening across difference.

Rhetorical empathy's requirement that rhetors enter a rhetorical engagement without the goal of changing the mind of an Other may ring familiar to Deadheads. After all, the Dead were consistent in stating they were not interested in changing anyone's mind. In 1967, in response to a question about whether the Grateful Dead's music was espousing a particular political message about the Vietnam war, Garcia noted, "We're trying to make music in such a way that it doesn't have a message for anybody. We don't have anything to tell anybody. We don't want to change anybody" (Groenke and Cramer 1985, 27). That stance became a pillar of the band's philosophy. Thirteen years later, shortly after Ronald Reagan had been elected President, Garcia reiterated the same ethos, in response to a question about whether a "certain lifestyle or philosophy based around, or rather, attributed to the Dead" existed. "No. Not in a dogmatic sense," he responded, adding, "Our trip is that everyone is entitled to believe what they want" (Tamarkin 2022). It was a stance he maintained throughout his life, and one that his bandmates shared—including Robert Hunter. Not surprisingly, we hear that belief expressed in the band's lyrics.

Looking at the ways that certain lyrics exemplify this ethos helps us to understand how listener reception of the Dead's lyrics more broadly is, in the best cases, also shaped by that ethos, and how that helps us make room for others' unique experiences. Ultimately, experiencing lyrics that are offered through an accepting and invitational ethos allows listeners not only to interpret the lyrics through their own subjective experiences,

but to be able to do so with the reassurance that the lyrics weren't written or performed didactically—with the intention to change listeners' minds. That, I argue, affords a certain comfort in subjective interpretation. It says, in essence, that each listener's subjective interpretation of the lyrics matters and is valid and true.

Both Robert Hunter and John Perry Barlow made it a point to note that listeners had agency when it came to interpreting their lyrics, even to the point of the words themselves. As Hunter noted, "*My* versions of these songs are no more 'the real ones' than those that may have spoken to some of you from a garbled tape recorded twenty years ago" (Hunter 1993, vi). Scholars have explored the implications of that indeterminacy recently, Nicholas G. Meriwether (2023/24) from a textual studies standpoint and B. Steve Csaki (2023/24) from a literary philosophy perspective. As both scholars note, even when the words were published, their deliberately open-ended construction made interpretation democratic, allowing listeners to, as Hunter put it, "add a bit of themselves to the song" (Trist and Dodd 2005, xix). For fans, that meant each listener's neighbor has an equally valid interpretation, however subjective. Barlow relished that: if an eager fan offered an interpretation of the meaning of one of his lyrics, he sometimes feigned agreement, saying "Yes. That's it exactly, but please don't tell anyone. Let's leave them room for interpretation" (Barlow 2005, 419). That understanding informed the Grateful Dead concert, making it an experiential space shaped by an explicit commitment to the very openness that rhetorical empathy depends on.

Several songs exemplify this ethos. "Eyes of the World," for example, offers lyrics that validate listeners and their subjective experiences. Lines such as, "Wake up to find out that you are the eyes of the world," "Sometimes we live no particular way but our own," and "Sometimes the songs that we hear are just songs of our own" center the listener's individual experiences. This last line, too, reminds us of "Black Muddy River," where the speaker implores, "Sing me a song of my own." The songs here—*our* songs—remind us that our perceptions, our beliefs, are just that: our own. And they also remind us that each of us has our own understanding of them, just as the band and lyricists intended. Not only do the Dead espouse this right, even duty, as a broad guiding principle of their musical project, but their lyrics exemplify, reiterate, and support it.

The second guiding principle of rhetorical empathy is that it relies on stories, and within the lyrics of the Grateful Dead, stories abound. Blankenship notes that “The act of writing stories ... consists largely in trying to inhabit the world, both interior and exterior, of an Other,” and engaging with Others’ stories can make us “more empathetic, more sensitive, more able to listen and understand” (2019, 4). In the Dead’s songbook, “Wharf Rat” offers a particularly compelling example of engaging with Others’ stories. The song opens with a man, August West, down on his luck, asking a passerby for money. The passerby—initially the song’s narrator—reflects, “I got no dime, but I got some time to hear his story.” And so he listens to West’s story, and in turn, so do we as we listen to the song. Here, the narrator’s act of listening has broader implications than it may initially seem. In his chapter, “The Other One and the Other,” Steven Gimbel argues that simply listening to West invokes a kind of productive empathy: “surely we can see this [act of] rehumanization as a morally relevant act, one that may just give us pause and slightly change the way we look at the next person who asks us for change on the corner” (2010, 98). In this way, “Wharf Rat” showcases the central claim of rhetorical empathy: when we listen and make ourselves vulnerable to change our own views of an Other, we can better understand those different from us and thereby can start to bridge divides. Moreover, the narrator’s critical act of listening, in turn, allows the audience of the Grateful Dead to listen to the story as well. Here, then, the lyrics are both modeling the act of listening to those different from ourselves, while at the same time providing the audience an opportunity to practice that very listening.²

“Wharf Rat” also showcases another potential outcome for engaging rhetorical empathy: productive introspection. At the end of the song, the speaker, moved by West’s story, finds himself reflecting on his own life, telling himself the same thing he told West: he’s sure his girl’s “been true” to him.³ Blankenship recognizes the potential for such self-reflection when audiences engage in rhetorical empathy, noting that “The use of the personal in the form of stories disarms an audience through identification (‘You’re like me on some level’) and so can help bridge gaps in understanding across marked social differences” (2019, 109). By listening to those different from us, we are in a better position not only to see them in

a different light, but with that shift in perspective, we are also positioned to see ourselves differently, too—to see ourselves as sharing something with those we initially thought to be so different from ourselves.

Finally, the third principle of rhetorical empathy is that it requires audience engagement—a foundational aspect of the Grateful Dead experience. As Blankenship explains,

Rhetorical empathy circulates both ways: it's initiated by the speaker or writer toward an audience and ideally reciprocated by the audience in return ... It's recursive: it cannot happen without a rhetor or writer listening in the first place, reacting or acting toward an Other in a spirit of goodwill rather than anger. (2019, 16)

This invokes Garcia's 1980 remark that everyone is entitled to their beliefs. In that interview, he elaborated:

There's an old Prankster proverb that goes, "The mind believes what the mind believes." Our experience has been the more the merrier. The more possible interpretations ... Like, (Robert) Hunter and I get reports on the contents of our tunes, which include incredibly complex interpretations of what the lyrics *must* mean and all that. And we find, Wow! There's no intention on our part to include those things, but it's lucky that there's that kind of openness, that that kind of range is available. (Tamarkin 2022)

It is a revealing response, one that makes space for and encourages the range and variety of necessarily subjective responses. By embracing that view, Garcia not only facilitates generative audience engagement but in doing so models the very openness central to rhetorical empathy.

If Deadheads clearly exemplify the type of audience engagement that aligns with Blankenship's argument, that example also highlights how that engagement shapes the communal rhetorical experience. This connects with politics and division. If the Dead established and embraced a particular ethos, then rhetorical empathy describes how that example encouraged Deadheads to adapt that ethos, using it to nurture and guide their own interpersonal rhetorical engagement. In simple terms, Deadheads engage with each other in this communal space by receiving rhetorical empathy and reciprocating it, reflecting it back to the band and

to each other. Ultimately, by identifying ways in which the Dead's lyrics validate individual experiences, evoke empathy, and ask audiences to listen to the stories these lyrics tell, we can see how the lyrics exemplify a defining ethos of the Grateful Dead, and simultaneously enact (and thereby model) a practice of rhetorical empathy. How we choose to enter into conversations with, listen to, and respond to Others will, in part, determine whether Garcia's ethos lives on with the music.

Blankenship acknowledges criticisms of rhetorical empathy. "Depending on your vantage point, the idea of empathy as a way of engaging with difference can be read as overly ambitious, naïve, or simply common sense," she notes. But, she reminds us, the burden of rhetorical empathy is on the rhetor; listening to the Other without the goal of changing their mind demands "that we become vulnerable enough to consider our own motives, our blind spots, and our prejudice" (2019, 11).

For Grateful Dead studies, the concept of rhetorical empathy helps sharpen the discussion over the Dead and differences among listeners by pointing to the ways in which the band and scene offered a model of community based on shared engagement. Embracing rhetorical empathy allows the extraordinarily diverse community of Deadheads to coalesce and thrive and endure over generations, geographies, and eras. That is noteworthy, and timely: in an era of intense partisan political disagreement, rhetorical empathy offers a strategy for enabling discussion—a goal that allows us to approach those who hold very different, even oppositional views, with curiosity rather than anger, with open-mindedness and not judgment. By doing so, we can more fully embody what may be one of the enduring lessons of the Grateful Dead phenomenon, and the Deadhead experience.

Notes

1. For Deadhead politics in the 1980s, see the editorials in *The Golden Road* before the 1984 election (Jackson and Mahon 1984) and again in 1988 (Jackson and Mahon 1988), as well as the letters that follow. For conservative Deadheads, see Margesson and Margesson (2010). For politics and the Dead more generally, see Ulf Olsson (2017) and most recently Jim Newton (2025).

2. The critical role listening plays in rhetorical empathy was deeply shaped by Krista Ratcliffe's concept of "rhetorical listening." Blankenship writes that rhetorical empathy "extend[s] rhetorical listening in new directions by accounting for the role of the personal and accounting for the emotions in rhetorical exchange" (18).

3. I am indebted to Jeffrey Zittrain for this idea. During a conversation following my presentation of this paper, he brought to my attention the fact that the narrator of "Wharf Rat" had a reflective moment that suggests a kind of identification with West.

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