

Fall 2017 Interview—Dr. Wendy S. HESFORD

Interview Team—JN Jeff Naftzinger, NL Netty Lehn, AB Amanda Brooks

JN: How do you get into studying rhetoric and composition?

HESFORD: Perhaps one way to address this question would be to talk about the academic precursors to my working in the area of Rhetoric and Composition: critical pedagogy and creative writing. So my interest in these areas began as an undergraduate at Montclair State University in New Jersey, which was originally a teacher education college. I started out as a Philosophy of Education major then pursued a Fine Arts focus before settling on an English major. In my first Philosophy of Education class, as a first semester undergrad, I read Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Augusta Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, and other work in critical pedagogy. The idea of not being a passive learner—the banking model of education—resonated with me. I was somewhat of an impatient student. I wanted to interact and to question. So after a stint as a Philosophy of Education major, I started to take Fine Art courses in photography, graphic design, and painting and color composition. So my interest in visual rhetoric emerged early. So from there, I went on to become an English major with a concentration in creative writing poetry.

An adjunct teacher who taught my advanced college composition course, who was also a creative writer, Professor Susanna L. Rich, greatly influenced my focus in graduate school in both creative writing and composition. So I had a couple of composition classes prior to her class that were red ink oriented and all about correctness. But she had a more creative and process-based approach to composition, which resonated with my experience as a creative writer. I attended New York University for my MA and PhD. My MA was in Creative Writing/Poetics, which consisted of a combination of creative writing, literary theory, and literature courses. And during the first year of my PhD studies, and as part of my teaching fellowship, I taught for the Expository Writing Program at NYU. And I fell in love with teaching composition and the composition practicum, which was equivalent to a pro seminar teacher-training course. Reading about pedagogy, reading about composing processes, the rhetorical tradition and its relationship to composition was exciting to me, so I switched to the PhD program in Rhetoric and Composition and then took courses in Cultural Foundations and Women's Studies.

I started my literature PhD at NYU in Modern Poetics, and had planned to do a dissertation on modernist women poets, namely H.D. and Marianne Moore, but after the first year of teaching composition and taking the pro-seminar, I shifted my emphasis and started to take courses in rhetoric and discourse analysis, Marxist and feminist theory, and materialist philosophies of education. There was a professor in the Cultural Foundations program that greatly influenced the direction of my future teaching and research. Her name was Professor Berenice Fisher. She published in the areas of materialist feminisms and feminist pedagogy, and she helped me to bring together my various interests.

NL: That covered a lot of ground academically [laughs]. Like, I like how it was so many factors. Like all... intersecting. It's a confluence... Which scholars in the field have most influenced your thinking?

HESFORD: My dissertation "Women Reading the Self, Word, and World" focused on college women's composition processes. At that point (late 1980s-early 1990s), graduate students were told, "the best dissertation is a done dissertation." We were not expected to turn our dissertations into first books. So I did not approach my dissertation as a book but rather as an isolated case study. Although my first monograph *Framing Identities* was influenced by my dissertation research, none of my dissertation appeared in that book. My interest in creative writing, critical pedagogy, and autobiography studies--in compositions of the self, or constructions of the self--directed my focus on college women's autobiographical composing processes. I've never been all that interested in notions of the "authentic" autobiographical self. I never really bought into the idea of "authentic" self or unmediated life experience. I myself experience life as a web of discourses--discursive influences and confluences. And self-representation is about negotiating through those discourses.

I recall reading a lot of work in autobiographical theory at that time, which helped to bridge my interests in literary theory and rhetoric and composition. So I was reading works like Sidonie Smith's *Poetics of Women's Autobiography and Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the 20th Century*. Sid Smith is a professor at University of Michigan, and former president of MLA, and her work taught me how to think about autobiographical acts rhetorically. Her work helped me frame my interest in how women in the academy negotiate their positions--their authority--in the classroom, but also in faculty meetings and in response to administrative challenges. How do we use...or how are any of us...using autobiographical statements, self-representations to navigate the politics of the academy? And, after the dissertation, which was focused on female college students' writing processes, I turned to a broader study of autobiographical acts in the academy. *Framing Identities* is an auto-ethnographic study of how power, authority, and identity are negotiated through autobiographical acts at Oberlin College (a small private liberal arts college in the mid-west) where I held my first academic position as a Visiting Assistant Professor. I started to just pay attention to the way in which identity scripts and stories were mobilized all around me.

For example, I remember going to faculty governance meetings (there is strong faculty governance tradition at Oberlin College) about revisions to the College's sexual harassment policy, and being surprised by the faculty debate over the consensual relations clause. Some faculty opposed banning consensual relations and drew on their own experiences or knowledge of faculty marrying former students. So the question of whether it was appropriate for faculty to have consensual relations with students was rather contentious at times, with many younger faculty in particular but not exclusively insisting that faculty should not engage in consensual relations with students, especially not in scenarios when faculty retained grading or evaluation power over them. I write about this in a chapter of *Framing Identities*. These self-disclosures in relation to academic policies surprised me as a new visiting assistant professor. And I soon noticed that whenever there were conflicts on campus or student protests, which there were a

lot of because Oberlin has a progressive and politicized student body, these protests were couched in highly autobiographical terms. There was one incident, which I also wrote about in *Framing Identities*, where someone spray-painted graffiti on one of the campus memorials--the memorial arch to the Chinese Boxer Rebellion. Students often walk under the memorial arch during their graduation ceremonies. Every year, some students refuse to walk under that arch because of its erasure of the Chinese who died in the Boxer Rebellion. So someone spray-painted the words "good chinks, dead chinks" on the memorial. You can imagine, right, in a very small college with a very politically active student body that such an act served as the springboard for protests and a succession of autobiographical claims. When an Asian-American student revealed that she had defaced the arch and that her intent was not to repeat a racist slur but to draw attention to the erasure of Chinese who died in the rebellion, the rhetorical complexity--the irony--of the situation came to the foreground. That event and the protests that followed raised a new set of questions for me: What's going on here on campus with identity politics? What's going on in the way in which we're talking about difference? So as you can see, woven throughout my work is an interest in self-representations and the way others appropriate them, right, and move them into other contexts or deploy them in order to advance a certain politics or ideology.

AB: So, I think our next question is very tied to some of what you've just said, so if it feels overlapping, that's okay. How has life experiences shaped your thinking?

HESFORD: For someone such as myself who focuses on critical autobiographical studies that's a complicated question. Because we're already--I'm already--approaching experience as narrative and knowledge as discourse. But I don't see the influence of life experience and knowledge in terms of a journey or origin narrative--themselves constructs. It's more, how would I explain? The relationship between life experience and knowledge is more archeological. I'm trying to think of an analogy--the relationship is more rhizomic, with knowledge sprouting when the conditions are right. The rhizomes would be like the paradigms; right, the way in which we think about something and the value we attribute to it are the sprouts.

For example, I'm working on an analysis of media representation of the Yezidi crisis in northern Iraq, and I'm asking myself why there is so much focus in Western media on ISIS's violation of moral notions of sexual purity. Why does that paradigm or that root sprout in representations of ISIS's enslavement of Yezidi women and girls? Why are we talking about sexual purity in the context of the U.S. war on terrorism in certain representations? So, I'm tracking, how mass media and U.S. government representations of the Yezidi enslaved by ISIS in northern Iraq deploy Yezidi women and girls' survivor stories to advance particular political or cultural agendas. Why these deployments, and why now? I'm interested in how survivor narratives--here's my interest in autobiography once again--take on this, you know, intensified meaning or purpose.

So I kind of think of the relation between life experiences and influence in the same way. I'm always looking for those sprouts. What's popping up where and why? And that's what I gravitate toward. It's about contingencies. What's going on in a certain context? What are the

contingencies shaping that discourse at the time? I'm on the lookout for what's rising rhetorically; what arguments emerge when and why. What is the precedent for them? What political platform or ideology do these arguments advance?

Just to make it a little more concrete let me turn back to the Yezidi example. So in Breitbart news and other conservative, particularly Christian conservative, media representations of the Yezidi crisis, Yezidi women's stories about victimization as well as photographs of post mortem Yezidi women and girls killed by ISIS are used in arguments that claim that the US government and international community should be paying more attention to the persecution of Christians worldwide. So I'm interested in the survivors' narratives, but I'm also interested in what arguments these narratives are embedded in and for what purposes. Yezidi are not Christian. Yezidi are not Muslim. So why are their narratives being mobilized to advance a Christian agenda? Not to say that Christians aren't persecuted—they are, and it is a serious problem, but why are certain media using Yezidi women and girls' stories to advance that agenda and why now? These are just some of the questions at the center of my current research project, tentatively titled *Exceptional Rhetorics: Regulating Childhood and Children's Rights*.

JN: Yeah

JL: I thought of like um, potatoes or mushrooms, underground—how it's kinda a network of roots forming. I don't know if potatoes [have roots].

HESFORD: Yeah, that might be.

JL: [laughter] That's my ecological metaphor to contribute.

JN: Um, so you talked about this a little bit earlier before the interview, but the next question is what classes do you teach or since I think you said, you're not teaching at the moment, what classes have you taught? Um, and which are your favorite? Or which haven't been your favorite and why are those your favorite?

HESFORD: Right now I'm on a residency fellowship at Yale University at the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition, and it's a center in which most of the fellows are historians, and then there's me and another woman who do work in discourse analysis. So in that context, I taught a course in the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies department that was cross-listed in Global Affairs "Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking," which is related to the fellowship itself. And, but, as you might expect, I framed the entire class, as a class in rhetoric and discourse analysis, and I brought a humanities perspective to the class. I actually really enjoyed teaching that class, because the students were not all that familiar with that perspective, so I felt like I was teaching rhetorical theory and analysis at the same time that I was teaching the content. So we looked at things like anti-trafficking campaigns, current and past, and just as we would do in any of our intro to advanced writing courses, we analyzed anti-trafficking websites and their arguments. What appeals are they making? What discourses are they drawing on from other campaigns? So there was a lot of that, analyzing movies, analyzing

crime shows representing human trafficking. We also looked at *Bones*, *Criminal Minds*, *SVU*, *Law and Order*, so there was pop culture analysis and legal analysis where we would read trafficking laws and protocols through a rhetorical lens, a narrative lens. I really enjoyed teaching that class, and I'm going to do a version of it, I think, next time I teach the Human Rights and Global English Studies course at OSU.

Also working with the International Studies program, Professor Amy Shuman (Folklore/English), and I developed a Human Rights minor at OSU, and one of the things that Amy and I as critical humanists wanted to do was to make sure there was a strong arts and humanities emphasis to the minor. So we designed the minor in consultation with the Director of International Studies, so that there were requirements in arts and humanities. So now I teach courses for the minor, including courses in the English department but also International Studies. I love to teach those classes. They're pretty much my go-to. And I actually still really do like to teach Intro to Composition, the first level. I was director of the Composition program at OSU for five years awhile back. Designed the curriculum; they've changed it since then, but I still teach some of what I designed. No matter what I'm teaching, the content might change but the methodologies are pretty similar—rhetoric and discourse analysis.

JL: I find it's really exciting to teach students analysis—especially that moment you watch them, sort of, understand what they can do with analysis. It's an “a-ha” moment.

HESFORD: Yeah.

JL: Um, and that they can look at, they can have that lens. It's really exciting.

HESFORD: Yeah, it's transferrable. It's definitely transferrable, like writing skills are transferrable. Students can use it in any area. I'll be doing an Intro to Human Rights for the International Studies program at OSU next year. Faculty members who usually teach the course are going on leave, so I'm going to teach that through a rhetorical lens as well, because I really strongly believe that students in these other areas could benefit from these frameworks, especially if they're going into the legal profession.

JL: It's where a lot of the heart or the critical thinking is, thinking rhetorically. At least, I think so.

HESFORD: I think so too. What I think again, you know, in hindsight, what I think my approach to teaching has always been is to infiltrate other fields. Not in a covert way, but in a very honest open way to say, “Let's do some multi-disciplinary or interdisciplinary work here and pull these fields together.” I've never felt a loyalty to rhet/comp as a separate discipline. I think fields are always stronger when they are porous and that's what I've tried to do with my whole career, work on that porosity and collaboration with scholars in other fields. Creating curriculum that pull together rhetoric with, in my case, human rights. We also have a new program in English called “Medical Humanities,” which has a narrative and rhetorical focus. How cool is that? Students who are going into pre-med are going to be thinking about ethics, about rhetoric. Right, I think that's awesome. That's the kind of work I like to do.

JL: That's really cool. Question five, fun question. What's on your nightstand?

HESFORD: So I have three nightstands, because I've been staying in three different locations this year, actually four if you count the hotel here. I have a studio apartment in New Haven, CT (as part of my Yale fellowship), my home with my family in Columbus, OH, and I have been staying with my mother a lot, whose lives near Hartford. I'm a voracious reader, but I'm often reading collections and journal articles.

So for example, on my hotel nightstand here, I brought three books with me: *The Girl Who Escaped ISIS*, by Farida Khalaf, that's a memoir about a young Yezidi woman who escaped ISIS and is now writing about it as a survivor-activist. And I'm reading *Sex Slaves and Discourse Masters* by Jo Doezema. She's a former sex worker turned academic. Not a traditional trajectory! [Laughter] But, what I love about her book is she does basically discourse analysis on the representation of sex trafficking campaigns. And her whole point is that there's too much emphasis on sex trafficking and not enough focus on labor exploitation and that too many anti-trafficking campaigns hyper-feminize the problem by positioning it as part of an anti-prostitution campaign rather than looking at sex worker rights frameworks. And the third book is *From Human Trafficking to Human Rights*, that's a collection. That's what's on my nightstand in the hotel. [Laughter.]

MB: Uh, so what is, or what do you think is the most important question that students in Rhetoric and Composition should be considering today?

HESFORD: Yeah, that's a really hard question. I'm just thinking of the way I advise graduate students – the question might need to be, you know, tailored to an individual student's interests, right? So if you're interested in a certain area, I might say this is the set of questions that you should probably examine. Let me give you an example. I'll try to pull on what I can recall from the last meeting I had with one of my graduate advisees. This student is working on racism and diversity initiatives in the academy, which relates to your interests, right?

NL: Yeah, my research, yeah.

HESFORD: Yeah. And, he is interested in configurations of diversity, and examining the various ways in which diversity is presented in academic contexts. He's interested in the liberal multicultural celebration platforms that many universities often put forth in comparison to the more social justice, equality, or rights-based platforms, and how these diversity discourses move through the President's Office to the Office of Diversity and Inclusion to the classroom. And when we started to talk more about it, and, I said you know what, you might want to consider the relationship between campus activism on diversity and the Black Lives Matter movement which is very strong in Columbus. What is the relationship between the movement and its institutionalization? He's interested in antiracist critical pedagogy, right, so the question in that case was about thinking about the broader context. So I often ask students to think

about the spheres of influence and political or cultural contingencies that might impact their projects. And another key question would be, how do you situate yourself in relationship to other scholars writing about this? That would be the other kind of key move, right? And that's something we all continually have to assess. That's why I'm reading all these books on terrorism and sex slavery, 'cause I need to figure out how I am going to position myself as a rhetorician in relationship to all this material? How am I going to bring it in to the field of rhetorical studies? So I guess I'm saying that among the most important questions you can ask are rhetorical questions about situation, positionality, context, and contingencies.

JN: Um, so you hinted at this next and last question a little bit in your response for the previous one, but, um, where do you see the field of rhetoric and composition going now and in the future?

HESFORD: Yeah, so again, there are different pockets within the field, and they're all going in different directions—different subfields and areas of expertise. I'm thinking maybe a good place to start would be the article that I wrote for *PMLA* in 2006 called "Global Turns and Cautions in Rhetoric and Composition." I was asked to write this article by the then editor and later president of *PMLA* Professor Marianne Hirsch, who I had worked with on other projects to do with memory. She asked me if I could write a piece on the state of the field. I was just recently tenured and not therefore an advanced person in the field per se then, but I'm like, sure I'll do it. During that same period, I was asked to be a judge on the committee for the CCCC book award. There were a number of us on that committee. And so I had just received a box of about forty books as submissions. And I thought, okay, maybe I can kill two birds with one stone here. So I read all of the award submission books and used that as a way to start thinking about what's going on in the field. Here are the most recent publications that have been nominated, so they're all well received, and that's what I did. I wrote that article based on my analysis of those submissions and other new or emergent work that I had heard at recent conferences. In that essay I noted a global and transnational turn in a lot of scholarship in the field, and emphasis on questions related to citizenship, notions of belonging, national identity, and works that questioned the geopolitical parameters of our discipline.

But I guess the other trend would be new materialisms. I know our students at OSU are very interested in post-humanism and new materialisms. And that's an area that I've started to read more in because of their interests. The more I read work like Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*, Karen Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway* as well as critical approaches to new materialisms, the more I've come to realize, you know what? I've felt like this for a long time. [Laughter] New materialisms are giving me a vocabulary for thinking about agency as I've long understood it, not as something that we solely own or exhibit, but as a process that is contingent on human and non-human forces – nonhuman forces meaning the environment, chemicals, toxins, and technologies. I'm moving toward a new materialist framework for my current book. In the past, I've articulated my methodology as rhetorical intercontextuality—a focus on context, text, and citationality, but now I'm thinking, I need methodology that can better account for disruption, and fractures. New materialisms and post-humanism are areas to which the field may be turning, but these turns also run the risk, as did the postmodern turn a few decades ago, of

turning away from populations who are just now gaining recognition and stronger voices in the profession. But what I love about new materialism is its relational understanding of human and structural vulnerabilities. It's about interdependences, right; it's not about intentionality. So in this regard, new materialisms' focus on interdependencies can mitigate the risks of social and professional exclusion.

JN: Great. Thank you.

HESFORD: You're welcome.

MB: And that's all of our questions. Thank you.