

Interview Transcript for Beverly Moss

Interview with Beverly Moss, March 30, 2009

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Ruth: How did you get into the field of Rhetoric and Composition?

Moss: It's been awhile. When I was an undergraduate, I actually thought I was going to be a linguist. And when I decided I was going to graduate school, I started looking at linguistic programs. But I realized that I like; I really like language; I like thinking about language. But what I really like actually was thinking about how people communicate. I started thinking what does that mean; that's not linguistics, and I had a professor as an undergraduate, Jackie Royster, who was my professor. We met when I was 17, and she was my freshman comp professor, then my advance comp professor, and we started talking about Rhetoric and Composition. I didn't really know this was a field. I tell people all the time; I didn't know enough then to really know who she [Royster] was and what she did. She talked about it and when I started thinking more about graduate school, she said why don't you consider this.

I ended up applying for the master's program, and I got in. That was really when I started to see the field. And after the Master's, I went to the University of Chicago. It was there when I started to think more about literacy studies, and the teaching of writing. I tell people I'm a compositionist. Any way, that's the path I took to Rhetoric and Composition.

Ruth: So it's always been a field for you?

Moss: It's been a field but it's been this interest in writing also because when I was an undergraduate, I was the very first tutor for the writing center. I thought that was just great, sitting down and talking to people about their writing. – We had to battle the juke box in the student union and the snack bar behind us. People would go in, put money in and it would blast just as you were getting ready to talk to a writer. But I really liked the one- on-one discussion especially. I was about 20 years old.

I didn't know what it would become and I didn't think I necessarily saw myself as a scholar at that point, but by the end of my junior year, I knew I was coming. I was always very clear that—that was what I was going to do. But again, I thought I was going to be a linguist. I really enjoy it, taking apart, putting together. But then the other part of linguistics, I like sociolinguistics. And I think that spoke more to literacy studies. I like studying the language in the context it was used, which I also think accounts to why I do ethnographic work. The kinds of questions that I ask, the kinds of things I'm interested in, tends to be those kinds of questions that have you going back and looking at what people do.

Ruth: Do you see the field of literacy in Rhetoric and Composition as different from a sociolinguistic perspective or are they essentially the same thing?

Moss: I think in Rhetoric and Composition—Composition, you often think about how it's going to impact how we teach writing, how people produce writing. So I think in that sense it's more on education, focus on the teaching of writing. Though, I actually think we do more than that. In sociolinguistics, it is that part of linguistics where we start thinking about what people do, which is different. There are other aspects of linguistics like how language should work. Some people think it's just descriptive. That's one aspect; it's descriptive, and not necessarily about how to use that in the classroom. Now certainly, there are linguists that will say that that's a minor illustration of what linguistics is. Yes, but I think composition is about the relationship...in the classroom.

Jill: Any specific people who really influenced your work, any theorists come to mind?

Moss: There's a lot of people that come to mind. I will say that when I was in graduate school, I read "Ways with Words." The first thing I thought was this is where I grew up, not that particular spot because I grew up in Charlotte. But I know this area; this is where my relatives are. And you mean I can do this. It gave me permission to do what I was interested in doing.

Becca: So that forged a personal connection. Any other ones you rely on or go back to... to support things that you are working on?

Moss: Because I was influenced by a socioinguist as my dissertation director, I tended to read in that area. I tended to read then ethnographic literacy—Hines, Scollon and Scollon. Then I was also influenced by Scribner and Cole, psychology of literacy on a larger scale—work like that fundamentally.

Brittney: We're talking about academic influences. Because you talk about literacy in different settings, any life or personal experiences that led you to this profession?

Moss: I always knew I was going to college, and it wasn't because my parents went to college. My mother has an Associate of Arts degree in secretary sciences. She was a secretary for awhile and I think that made a huge difference in my life because it meant she worked in a white college setting. She went and worked in banking, too. My dad had a high school diploma. I didn't know all that many people who went to college. My dad's sister was a teacher. She's retired; she was a 1st grade teacher. But she was already gone, moved to New Jersey. We got to be very close, but when I grew up, she wasn't teaching. I grew up in a very working class family, and we sort of became middle class because my dad had this job working for a trucking company. Then he bought a dump truck and drove it.

My mother then became a bank teller. This story about the bank is interesting. My mother worked for this international bank. When I was in elementary school, she worked for a

year for an attorney who filed the discrimination lawsuit against the bank she was working for.

She always wanted to go to college. She was from a large family in rural South Carolina, and women didn't do that. She got to go to the two year college because her brother was going. My grandmother said okay if she went with her brother. My grandmother was a wonderful woman. She didn't really know anyone who—women who went to college, black women. They worked in the field, sharecropping; they did domestic work, which my mother did until she got her AA degree and got a job as a secretary. So it was always there.

Brittney: So why English?

Moss: It was going to be Spanish. I was going to be an interpreter of the UN. I didn't know any one who was an interpreter for the UN.

I liked reading. I am the only child, and I can do that by myself. And I literally looked up when I was in college and saw I needed one more course. So I was done for the most part. And I took Spanish, French, German, and I can't speak any of those languages. But what I found was I like language. It helped with the grammar part, and that was pretty interesting. So there was no personal influence that led me to English; it led me to college.

Natalie: We talked, during lunch, about the classes you like to teach at your university. Speaking a little bit more to that, I guess whether it ties into the scholarly work you do or ethnography? What are you teaching?

Moss: In the undergraduate course, I teach a second level writing class, our version of the WAC course. All of us have to teach one writing course, at least. Most teach the introduction to critical writing as an introduction to writing. I tend to teach the second level, and there are several different versions. And the version that I teach is "African American Voices," and I teach that version because that's the one time I know I'm going to get black students in my class. I would like to teach black students. I taught in the fall, an honors first year writing course, and I had one African American student in my class. And that's generally what I get in an undergraduate course if African American or Black is not in the title. So I teach that course for that reason. Now beyond that I often teach the peer tutoring; we have a peer tutoring program where we pair undergraduates, we call them peer writing consultants, with basic writers, and they come to a writing group once a week. I teach this because I have writing center experience and I was a director, so I like doing that.

On a graduate level, I just started to teach classes I don't normally teach. "Race and Literacy," I taught that in the fall. I had a great time. It was interesting. I just took a look at the evaluation. It was funny; the students that pointed out that it was a good experience for them but it was interesting talking about race with other students of color, which said something. I wanted to say welcome to my world. That's interesting, but we had a great time in that class. When I decided to teach that class, one of my former doctoral students

taught a version of it at UMass. And we talked about, and I said okay. I've taught ethnography and composition, and that's related to what I do, related to the methodology, and I tell people, as I said earlier, I do ethnography not because of its methodology so much as the questions I ask tend to be best answered in ethnographic work. I don't think people should choose the methodology before the research questions. That's problematic, but I tend to ask those questions that lend themselves there.

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Moss: But, I tend to ask the kinds of questions that lend themselves, so and that doesn't (inaudible). So I do that. Usually they are looking (inaudible). I don't teach that as often. And, I also teach Introduction to Composition Theory pedagogy class, which I like to teach. I like training teachers to teach writing. I love that. I particularly like having people think about classrooms as sites of inquiry, and then you can think about your own classroom as a site.

Jill: When you did your course on African American voices, what kind of material do you have your students read and what are your aims for that course? What do you want students to take away from it?

Moss: I don't overhear the discussion about this current version. And teaching it at this time . . . at the previous time I taught it as a (inaudible) African American discourse and I want change so that we focus (inaudible) critical lens from which to examine the text. First off, I like reading the text. And I don't get to read them unless I'm teaching a class. So, I like reading, and I get to catch up on reading, but we do have an anthology. We use the Norton Anthology, and this time I'm also teaching *Beloved* because I really want to catch up on my great African American literature--gotta teach *Beloved*--and *The Piano Lesson*, August Wilson. Because if you're talking about your African American literature, you gotta talk about August Wilson. So, we're doing those and I add sometimes--we're going to read *A Raisin in the Sun*, which is in the anthology, but I've been showing them the Sydney Poitier version of that. Most of them haven't seen that. And I also show *The Piano Lesson*--the Hallmark version with Charles Dutton who was in the Broadway production. And then I added a few speeches because I think it (inaudible) public discourse. I want them to look at memory reflections in all of these different kinds of texts. And then we'll end with Little Robins Brook, because I want them again to look at how memory works in this document. And then also think about how it's being worked as a visual text in relationship to the plain text. So, we'll do some poetry I think tomorrow, on Wednesday, we will read a book of poems by Francis Harper and we will read basically . . . a couple of other people but what will be the central issue there will be how these people come together (inaudible) for these people who write about Africa and then we can talk about a collective company and the people who haven't been to Africa, how they invoke a cultural reality even though they haven't been there and what they call on and how do Cullin's heritage and how his is a little bit different from someone like (inaudible). So, we'll do the poetry, we'll do fiction, we'll do drama, we'll do (inaudible)

Jill: That's very interesting. I'd like to take that class (laughter).

Moss: And in the midst of all of that, you have to also talk about writing.

(Laughter) yes.

Moss: And that part.. you need to try to strike that balance because the text themselves dominate the class so much. But they're saying, "Wait a minute, let's talk about how you make this . . . how do you write a persuasive essay, so . . .

Ruth: So it's a three year course.

Moss: Two weeks! Actually in nine, because I'm here today. They still have class today, and we have Memorial Day, so . . .

Ruth: I have a couple of questions that maybe have one answer, so listening to your focus for the class, I'm wondering if that comes out of what you've learned through your research and if there's one thing that is the most interesting or the most surprising or the most important that you've learned through your research?

Moss: I won't say that that particular class, that African American literature class, emerged so much out of my research although the connection is talking about memories in order (inaudible). There are other courses . . .the Basic Literacy graduate survey emerges out of (inaudible). It's hard to pick, so I don't know if I can answer that, but what I will say about the kind of work that I do, particularly with literacy in the African American community sites, is that some of the most interesting and adventurous pieces of language and literacy are heard in this particular culture. And that people . . . It's not news. They are not deficient. There is not a deficit. They're just different sometimes. And I think we could learn a lot from what--how to be successful teachers of students that we have systemically failed. We need to spend some time figuring what those students want.

Jill: Pretty important to me (laughter).

Moss: It's my one deep thought for the day....

Jill: Well, it's recorded . . . (laughter)

Brittney: For your ethnographic studies I'm wondering how, methodology-wise, how do you choose the settings? For instance, the church specifically--how did you choose the churches? I assume that one might have been personal and that you went to church, but how did you choose the other churches or how many churches?

Moss: When I did that one, at the beginning of my book, I say this little (inaudible). And I think at some level that probably is true. But, you know, I grew up in black churches in

the south primarily. But I was in graduate school--I did not go to graduate school thinking I was going to do this work on black churches. But I was sitting there in the church one Sunday morning and realized at some point that I was paying more attention to how the minister was saying what he was saying and what was going on in the context (inaudible/laughing). But I really started looking around thinking, "this is really interesting--look at how it happens when this happens and look at how he's doing this and . . . what's that mean? What does that mean? And I went back and I was talking to somebody about it--I don't remember who I was talking to; it may have even been my professor--and he said, "well, you can study that." And I thought . . . so that had happened. But before that happened, I had read *Ways with Words*, and I had read another Heath essay and then to hear that she was talking about the church that she went to--the black church in the area and what was happening with it--and I grew up with that. Yes! And so, putting them together really helped me see the possibilities. So, that was how that site emerged--the church. And then, I had to go about the task--once I really decided this was what I wanted to pursue--the way literacy functions in African American churches, I had tons of sites. And, so I started with the churches I had been attending--started with that first, but I wanted to do more than one site and so I did three. And I probably went through twelve churches with visiting at twelve different churches and asked more than the three ministers who were featured in the study and some said no. And, that was okay. I was very aware that after a couple of them, they were pretty clear that they didn't trust academics. They thought that what the academics were going to do was go trash what people did in black churches. And, I can say that's not what I'm doing, but I couldn't argue that it hadn't been done. I couldn't argue that people hadn't used scholarship to trash the way that African Americans use language. And, so . . . So, I kept looking, and I ended up with three sites where the ministers were very welcoming and open. And, what was very helpful is that in each of those three sites, I actually knew someone in the site. But sometimes that's really the important access. In two of the three, I actually gained commission before I realized that there was a person there who had a connection to the church and to the minister, but it didn't hurt that once I gained permission, I mentioned those people and that was like, "Oh, you're okay." And then the other one, that person actually suggested that I . . . "You should come to our church." And I thought, "Okay." So, that's how that one happened. With the project I am working on now with the African American women, I did know a person in the club. You were at the CCCCs panel where I talked about that a little bit, I knew someone in the club, but I didn't know that they (inaudible) even though I knew people in the club. But, once I found out about it and then I realized that this would be a perfect site for the study, I was able to go to the person I knew--to go out there and say "Okay, we were thinking about this," and that person has suggested, "Why don't you just study us," and I just said "Oh yeah, right," and I just (inaudible). I didn't think about it. But, given the question that I was interested in--what I wanted to study--I went in another (inaudible) community site in the African American community and I was interested in looking at women. You know, I did the church. I actually happened to do three male ministers. It wasn't by . . . I didn't start out looking for male ministers. They just happened to be the ministers in the churches that I proposed to study. But I really was looking for (inaudible). And it was going to be a much different study. It was going to be looking at African American women in all these multiple kinds of communities and institutions and maybe even in

schools. That's going too big for me. That would have been the kind of study I would want to do with a team of people. But, once I realized I really wanted to do one site and that that group really would be a good group to study because they had a range of women and ages. And then I talked to the group back and said, "Remember when you said that your group would be a good group to study," (inaudible) and (inaudible) she said yes, and I said, "I think you're right." And here I am fourteen months, thirteen months into it.

Natalie: This may be a selfish question, but (laughter) . . . so you've done a lot of research, so what advice do you have for us? You know, if there's one thing you can tell graduate students working on research? What would it be?

Moss: Be organized--I'll have to work at that.

(laughter)

Moss: Believe in what you're doing. Enjoy what you do. (inaudible) They are so much fun. And they are so funny. And they argue. And they laugh. I love that part of it. I love the fieldwork part of--it's the writing part that I don't like. (laughter) I love the fieldwork part of it. But, I think you do have to believe in what you are doing. I think you have to say it's okay if it doesn't go exactly like what you thought it would. You have to be okay when the tape recorder stops working when . . . for me . . . you'll understand this . . . because when the technology doesn't work you have to be okay with that. Always take good notes. I think you have to put yourself in a position to get some support. And that is, to be able to talk to other people who (inaudible) to support you. I think that's really important. And make sure it's not too big. Dissertations are little things. They're big documents, but the actual research is just looking at something small. Because . . . this is the advice I tell people: if that dissertation is better than a book, the dissertation would be a book. Trying to solve all the problems of the world (laughter).

Ruth: A good dissertation is a done dissertation (laughter).

Moss: And so, I think what happens when people really do good research is that sometimes it's just too big and for me to recognize . . . what I was thinking about was just insanely large and could be done with a team of people. And we could have done it, but I didn't have a team of people. I didn't even have a partner. It was just me. And so that was tough. So that's what I tell people. And I would give people the advice (inaudible). And I'd pay for it. But I think when you do the kind of research that I do with an emphasis on ethnographic . . .now I love (inaudible), but I think people need to do it every day . . . a little bit a day. (inaudible). And so what I do (inaudible). You don't want to wait until the end of (inaudible).

Ruth: So, if we want to make research a part of our career—not just our dissertation—do you have any career advice for . . . what we should do, what kind of position we should look for, or how do you go about getting one? (laughter)

Jill: Do you know people? (laughter)

Moss: Who is close to going on the job market? (laughter)

Ruth: Is this a selfish question? (yeah) . . . and . . . yeah, what kind of work we should do while we're in graduate school to put us in a position to do that kind of work after?

Moss: I'm going to answer your last question. I actually think you can do research in any institution. I think it's harder at I think they have to think about what (inaudible) . You also have to think about classrooms as sites for teacher research. I think there are people who make that work. There are people who do great work who are really productive who have been at teaching institutions all their lives. They've been at liberal art institutions (inaudible). And I had this conversation with one of my former students who was so disappointed that she wasn't at a tier one research institution. I said, "Tell me what (inaudible) she wrote her dissertation research on (inaudible). And I asked, "Isn't Pat Bizzell at a smaller one?" (inaudible) So you can make it work wherever you are. I think . . . I ended up at a big research institution. And the difference is they expect you to be doing this all the time. But I also think there are trade-offs. I get a lot of support for research (inaudible) . . . not as much as people think, but I get good support.