

Spring 2016 Interview – Dr. Krista RATCLIFFE

Interview Team – MB Mandy Brooks, JE Julianna Edmonds, NL Netty Lehn

JE: I'm Julianna Edmonds, and I'm a second year PhD student in Rhetoric and Composition. I have interests in feminist pedagogy and feminist rhetorics.

NL: I'm Netty Lehn. I'm a second year PhD student here at Florida State, and I have interests in critical pedagogy and social justice.

MB: I'm Mandy Brooks. I'm a second year MA, um, and my interest right now is in self-efficacy studies. So. First question for you. How did you get into Literacy Studies/Rhetoric and Composition?

RATCLIFFE: I signed up for a Milton class as an undergraduate, and the chair of the department was teaching it. And it turns out it was a 500-level class, so I was the only undergraduate in the class, and, uh, he took a liking to me and encouraged me to go to graduate school. And so, uh, when I went to graduate school to get my Masters at Ball State, I was, uh, being trained to teach Composition by Joe Trimbur, and that's where my interest was sparked. Um, after I finished my MA, I applied to Ohio State, uh, because Joe Trimbur had told me that was a good place to go. I'd done some research; I agreed with him. I'd gone over and visited folks; it seemed like a good place to be. Uh, and then right before I left, um, Joe said to me, "There've been other people from Ball State who've gone over there, and they've all come back. So don't let them chase you home." So I had a dare on my way out the door, and, uh, I never quite forgot that. Anyway, I got over there, and I started taking Women's Literature courses and Rhetoric and Composition courses. And as I mention in the preface of my first book, um, I was taking...I was reading Women's Literature, and I was reading the Greeks in terms of rhetoric, and they weren't talking to one another. And it seemed to me that they were talking about similar things, just not to or about one another, and so that became our mission, many of us who were in graduate school at that time: how do we bring these together? And all of that was driven by an interest in women and gender and women having voices and how this all affects teaching composition, because, at heart, I'm a teacher.

MB: Thank you.

JE: Which scholars in the field have most influenced your thinking?

RATCLIFFE: Well I suppose when I was in graduate school, uh, I'd have to say Ed Corbett because, uh, the classical rhetoric training. (Laughter) When I was writing my dissertation, uh, which was a rhetorical analysis of the essays of, uh, Virginia Woolf and Adrienne Rich, I had to do a stylistic analysis as part of the rhetorical analysis, and he made me count, you know, how many periodic sentences or... (Laughter), you know, all these stylistic things. And that was before we had the software to do that. So, uh, so that was tedious but, uh, kind of intriguing at the same time. So, Ed Corbett, uh, in terms of the history of rhetoric. Uh, Win Horner. She was...when I went to the University of Missouri, my first job, she was at Texas Christian, but she lived in Columbia, Missouri. She and her family lived there for many years. And so she was

back there a lot and, uh, she became my unofficial mentor. Uh, so again, history of rhetoric, but also, how to survive as a woman in the field. Her, uh, motto that she kept repeating was, “Don’t let the bastards get you down.” (Laughter). I’ve never forgotten that. Um, and then, uh, Jackie Jones Royster, uh, was very influential in terms of, uh, her writing because it made me really question how race intersected with feminism and...and what my own, uh, thinking...what I could bring to it, uh, to that question, of that intersection. So, I’d say those were maybe the three biggest, but of course, you know, so many (Laughter)...all the prelim lists and all the people you read in the journals. And, it’s an ongoing conversation, but those are the big three I would guess.

NL: How about life experiences? How have they shaped your thinking?

RATCLIFFE: Well, when I was writing *Rhetorical Listening*, I lived in Cedarburg, Wisconsin, which is a very white, uh, suburb of Milwaukee. Milwaukee is one of the most segregated cities in the United States. When I went there in ‘93 it was strictly segregated; by the time I left this past year, it’s still in...it’s still segregated, but it’s porous. There are...people move among, uh, the areas of town in ways they didn’t when I first moved here. So that’s good. Restaurants, theatre, you know, art, things like that, people go back and forth across communities. Um, so I think trying to figure out the question of how gender and race intersected, sort of theoretically, within the field of Rhet/Comp was, you know, coupled with my daily experience. What does it mean that I’m living in this primarily white town? What does it mean that I’m raising my daughter there? What does it mean that, uh, I’m teaching primarily white students? Marquette is, uh, trying to diversify but it’s, you know, still an issue. Um, and so, the daily, you know, the everyday things – how they informed the theory and how the theory informed the everyday things, and made, you know, certain things more visible to me. It was a constant back and forth.

MB: I sort of have an order question, I guess. So when you mentioned that, uh, Jacqueline Jones Royster was sort of influential in that intersectionality, and then sort of your everyday life experience, I think, brought that to the forefront....What was the back and forth of that? Was it one then the other? Was it sort of simultaneous?

RATCLIFFE: Um, well I think it...I grew up in a family of Quakers and, uh, my grandfather’s farm had a plaque out front how it had been a link...the barn had been a link in the Underground Railroad. And so it was something that had always been a point of pride in the family. But then I had also noted strands of racism in the family. So the...not everyone, but...

MB: Sure...

RATCLIFFE: Uh, so the tension between the pride in this history and then sort of unconscious attitudes perhaps is the best way to put it. Um, I’d always been sort of aware of that and wondered about it. So that was factor. And then when I was writing *Anglo American Feminist Challenges* – that was my tenure book so I needed to get it out (Laughter) - right at the last minute the press called me and, uh, said, “So, um, we noticed you don’t...that all these women are white.” And I was like, “Yes, they are,” and they said, “Would you, like, write a chapter on Alice Walker so we could, uh, advertise this as multi-cultural?” And I said, “Well, it’s not really Anglo American.” That’s a term that was used in particular at the time and kind of coded white. Um, I said, well, “One: that’s not the focus of the book. And two: it seems sort of pandering.”

(Laughter) And they were like, “We’re not sure we can publish a book.” So you know, I’m thinking “Ah, tenure on the line!” Uh, they said, “We’re not sure we can publish a book that’s kind of not multi-cultural...” And then they said to me, “Do you know Shirley, uh, Logan?” At the time, I didn’t. And, uh, they said, “Why don’t you call her up. She’s publishing a book on African-American women”—no white women in her book, all African-American—but anyway, um, “and see if she thinks it’s okay if you publish a book with...about... all white women.” And I said, “You know, I’m really not going to call her up and say, ‘Hey I’m white and you’re black, would you give me permission to uh...?’” So I just...no. (Laughter) But it did raise the question of why did I, uh, react that way, you know. And so I talk a little bit in the book *Rhetorical Listening*...in the preface I lay that out a little bit some of the assumptions that I thought were brought to bear. And I still think I was right making the decision I did. Pragmatically because of tenure, but also theoretically in terms of the frame that had been set up in that book. Uh, but it did raise the question of “How does whiteness haunt the project?” And so that became my way in to start thinking about rhetorical listening.

MB: Thank you. That was really interesting. Um, what classes do you teach, which are your favorite, and why?

RATCLIFFE: Um. Well this year, because I am, uh, the new head at Purdue, I’m not teaching at all. Uh, which frankly given everything that’s going on at Purdue at the moment, is probably a good thing because I would not be able to give my full attention to it and that would hurt my heart. Um, but in the past at Marquette, when I taught, uh, I mostly taught to undergraduate writing majors. And so I would teach...my favorite class to teach was a theory of rhetoric course. And we always, uh...we started with the, uh, Greeks and would move forward, and uh, then we’d have a kind of mini conference at the end and the students would do their projects and show me how Quintilian was alive and well today or not... (Laughter), and, uh, in terms of current events. And, uh, so that was always fun for me because I could see, one, that they had internalized the theories because they were talking about them well, but they could also apply them. Apply with quotations marks, not like a cookie cutter, but use them as, uh, either heuristics for asking questions about cultural events, um, or as, um, a set of tactics that they could, you know, develop their own kind of rhetorical thinking with. So that was always sort of fun.

JE: Did you notice any challenges in that course in terms of addressing diversity issues? Is that something that you brought up at all?

RATCLIFFE: It is, and it’s something I wrote about in, uh, *Rhetorical Listening*, the book. The last chapter that’s all about pedagogy, and, uh...which lists a lot of different tactics for talking about intersections of gender and whiteness in particular in the classroom. Um, so yes, I did notice that. Um, there were problems in general because when students sign up for an introduction to poetry class or an introduction to fiction class, they know the genre. When they sign up to a rhetoric class they’re not quite sure what rhetoric is, you know, and then of course they read people and there are 8, 210 different definitions, and they’re like “eh.” But when you then bring it into questions of diversity, uh, particularly questions of whiteness and, uh, among an all white group, or a largely white group, who maybe many of them haven’t thought about it too much before and you’re making visible that which they haven’t really thought about, um, that becomes a challenge. And that was part of my, uh, the drive for this, uh, last chapter in my

book because I wanted to lay out particular pedagogical tactics that people could use. And what I discovered over the years is...um, I started out being trained to teach composition starting in the modes with personal narrative at the beginning and argument at the end. And it always struck me as odd because I thought that personal narratives were harder to write in some ways than argument so I always thought that was backwards. But, um, anyway, when talking about issues of diversity, when...starting with personal experience I found counterproductive for my own teaching because you make people very self-conscious and then they... especially with white kids they didn't want to say anything because they're like, "Oh, I'm a racist," or, you know, "Someone is going to think I'm a racist" or whatever. So what I found to be more productive was not to deny their personal experiences, but say "We're not going to start there. We're going to start with language. So let's talk about language coding." So, like, one of the tactics in the last chapter I talk about is, uh...one of the activities I do is we would go in and I'd say, "Okay, so what gets coded white in the United States?" and they'd look at me, you know "What do you mean?" I'd say, "Well, what gets coded young in the United States?" And they would say...at the time, the low jeans or, you know, different styles. And I'd say "Okay, so what gets coded white? What gets associated with the term white?" Then they were like food and, uh, golf clubs or country clubs, uh you know, and then they were on a roll. And, you know, we'd fill the board with this stuff, and I'd turn around and then I'd say, "How do you know this?" I said "Do you believe this?" You know, and they were like "Well, no." I said, you know, "Do only white people go to country clubs?" "Well, no"... and I'd say, "So where does this come from?" And so, to make them see that there's a discourse about race and that it's embodied in them and they can spit it out even if they don't believe it they know what it is. So I'm not asking for their opinion. I'm not asking what they're thinking. I'm asking for them to identify cultural discourses. And at that point, when you can take it to the level of discourse, you can critique the discourse and what are the potentials of this discourse for different groups of people and what are the, uh, problems for different groups of people. And when you take it away from that you're not accusing them of doing anything, you're talking about the language within which they're functioning. Gertrude Stein said that language is like an ocean from which we never surface. And so once they become aware of that, then you can talk about it in a discursive fashion that lets you analyze it, and it doesn't deny the affective. It doesn't deny all the ambient stuff around us, but it does give them a focus to talk about it in a guilt-free way. Because I find, particularly talking to white students, guilt is the most...I find it the most narcissistic and unproductive, uh, well...mode of being, (Laughter)... you know, because, when you're functioning from guilt...and that's why with rhetorical listening I try to get people from a guilt logic to an accountability logic because nobody born today is responsible for the beginning of racism. Nobody owned a slave, as some students will say, right you know, but that's really not the point. Uh, and, when somebody says "I didn't own a slave," the subject of that sentence is "I." The subject is not racism. The subject is not oppression. The subject is I, so it's a navel gazing kind of thing that I want to move people from. So when you get to the discourse you can make race or oppression or whatever the subject of your sentence, and you can talk about that in that way. Um, do I hope they go home and reflect on themselves and their practices and all of that? Yes, but I'm not making *that* the assignment. I'm not...I really don't want "road to Damascus" papers...you know, I really don't. "Oh, I thought this and now I think Oh!"...you know, "I'm curi—No, I'm...," you know...it doesn't work that way. Um, anyway, so that's a long way around answering your question, but yes, diversity is a challenge, but I tried really hard to come up with tactics that would put it on their radar and then challenge them to think about it, and you

know, how they saw it hap...you know, being played out. And I'll talk more about it, uh, this afternoon in my talk.

JE: So, what is on your nightstand?

RATCLIFFE: (Laughter) Uh, Dave Egger's *The Circle*. Uh...It's about, sort of the takeover of the, uh, social discourse by social media and how, you know, junior high behavior of putting a smiley face is now the way you display approval on Facebook and, uh, you know that you're relegated to these like little notes in junior high...um, the way in which social media mediates relationships between people. It's presented as "Oh!"...you know you have this much more contact, but do you really? So the book poses some interesting questions that way. And, a friend gave it to me so I'm reading it. Another book is, uh, *Go Set a Watchmen*, because, uh, Purdue does books and coffee and one of the presentations is on that and I've not read it yet and I need to.

JL: What do you think is the most important question that students in Rhetoric and Composition should be considering today?

RATCLIFFE: Well ... that answer I guess would depend on the time of day and when you catch me.

(Laughter)

JL: Or maybe what are a few?

(Laughter)

RATCLIFFE: Um (long pause) I guess I would want them to question how the languages that they...or the discourses that they are immersed in shape not just their identity but their sort of sense, their, uh, structure of ethics and, uh, decision making for how they behave and perform their own identities and interact with others. I think that's kind of the key question. Um, and I think you can bring the old classical stuff forward with that. I mean Aristotle's enthymeme, and the audience, and all that. It's uh...I'm going to talk about the enthymeme this afternoon—I know, sounds fascinating--um, if the whole premise of rhetoric is that I only say what I need to say because you as the audience will fill it in that really raises the question of what can I assume you will fill in, um, why can I assume that? What does it mean about insider and outsider groups, uh, power dynamics among those groups, um, and that I think translates easily to the question I just posed.

MB: Okay, so last question is where do you see the field of Literacy Studies and/or Rhetoric and Composition going?

RATCLIFFE: Mmm, well, I'm glad to hear that you said the word Rhetoric and Composition, because, uh, in some places it's just Composition Studies, and I would hate to see rhetoric fall out. Um, because of my training at Ohio State, my grand narrative of the field is of course that "Well, back in '63, they had open access and then, uh, needed to have theoretical grounding for

teaching the uh, uh, first year comp class, so they said “Okay, how are we gonna do this?” And they went back to some of the classical rhetoricians as...and the eighteenth century rhetoricians as sort of grounds for, uh, designing pedagogy. Um, that I realize is not everybody’s narrative. There are some composition programs that don’t have any kind of rhetorical grounding and, uh, I find that slightly sad, because of my own, you know, obsession maybe with rhetoric, but I recognize that the field is larger than that. But I still think rhetoric has to stay in the title of the field because, uh, it’s as foundational as anything can be. So, I hope that it goes forward with rhetoric being, uh, a strong part, and I think it will. But I think, obviously the visual, obviously the digital, uh, focuses are shifting, uh, in terms of, uh, that. So, we’re gonna have to develop new theories. And they’ve done this already...started doing this in visual rhetoric. You know you can’t just lay Aristotle’s theory on top of an image and have it, you know, do this...everything it needs to do...you have to look at the actual genres that you’re using and given the way technology is developing, different genres are emerging all the time, because of the, uh, of the technology. So, theories have to be drawn out of that, so, theories of digital...that kind of thing. I think as technology changes, we’re going to be creating more and more theories, so I think that’s what’s going to be happening. I don’t think, uh, we’ll ever get away from first year writing, uh...(Laughter)...uh, students come into the university and I think they need that. And it’s both a function of high school training and state by state that’s a little bit different. Certain states have better standards for what’s going on. Uh, frankly, the Wisconsin public school system was much better than the Indiana public school system in terms of, uh, of that. Um, so I don’t think that will ever go away. Um, so there’s always going to be that connection and in some ways given the, uh, corporatization of universities these days, at least that’s our trump card for needing to exist as English departments and, uh, it’s not that literature is going to go the way of Classics. I don’t believe that, nor do I want it to, but I think writing becomes the way that we all get some sort of purchase within this new model in the university. (Laughter)

JE: Does anybody have any other questions?

(Pause)

AB: Thank you.

RATCLIFFE: You’re welcome.

JL: That was great.

JE: That was very interesting. Thank you very much.