

Fall 2017 Interview—Dr. Rhea Estelle LATHAN
Interview Team—BH Brendan Hawkins, JL Jeanette Lehn, MD Megan Dykema, TR
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JT: So, are you going to do a self-introduction, then?

LATHAN: Do I need to? [Laughter.] Dr. L, 7th year – before tenure I used to say “rising tenure, rising assistant, rising associate, uh, yeah, so, what do you want me to say about myself, um...I have not participated in any of the interviews in the past, so I don’t know how they usually go, but, um, Rhea Estelle Lathan, Associate Professor of English, Rhetoric and Composition, Florida State University. PhD, um, Wisconsin – University of Wisconsin, Badgers, Big Ten. I’m From the Midwest. Uh, don’t ever want to be cold again.

MD: Thank you. Um, so our first question is kind of background as well. Um, how did you get into rhetoric and composition studies?

LATHAN: That’s a really good question. Uh, by way of African American Studies. I did my undergrad in African American Studies and English, and um, that – you know, I was done, that was it, you know. I’ve always – I’m a historian at heart, and I always say I’m a historian because I’m nosy, I like to know people’s business, right? I love archival research and looking up things, and so, um, when I decided to go – or when I was told I had to go to graduate school I did a couple of years as a, uh, Academic Advisor. And I did it in the College of Letters and Sciences, and where I was, um, this was in Milwaukee, we had advisors for transfer students, for freshman, but they had different, um, cultural units for African American – if they chose to – for African American students, for the Asian American students, for Latina/Latino, and basically it was a means to provide a space of, uh, for home, for people, to have folks that could understand, that related to what they were talking about. So anyway, to make a long story short, I got frustrated with the people who were making decisions. Only reason they were listening to them is ‘cause they had a couple alphabets behind their name. And so, I was like, but you’re not listening! And now that I have alphabets, they’re still not listening. But I decided to go to graduate school after a couple of years. Actually the advising job I had for me was one of the most fulfilling because I was helping people to get their degrees. And so I ended up going to Wisconsin – University of Wisconsin-Madison – for my PhD, but I went for, uh, my Masters, which was also a bridge program to the PhD program. And I was always interested in, um, in curriculum and instruction. I was in the Black Studies program, thought that I was just going to do an educational history, took a class with Deborah Brandt – y’all are familiar with Deborah? Okay, so I took a class with Deb Brandt, and here I am. [Laughter.] Um, because one of the things that I realized was that the questions that I was asking were aligned to productions, knowledge systems, productions of knowledge, and they just didn’t rest solely in gathering information and telling people what that information was. I went to my first CCCC conference. Deb [laughter] manipulated me into going to CCCC. I didn’t know anything about CCCC. Well, now I know that um, John Duffy – are you familiar with John Duffy? I was on a panel with John Duffy, uh, Deb Brandt, and Eli Goldblatt, so you know, yeah I got accepted. [Laughter.] But I had no idea – I’m in Black Studies, I had no idea who these people are. I knew Deb was a professor in the English department, so. And I just found out that there was so much that intersected with what I was interested in. I was asking questions at first – my Masters thesis was on looking at the, uh, the work that people did in voter

registration and around the, uh, the freedom schools, and the, um, just access, and I just realized that it was much, much bigger than that. Much bigger than that. It was more than just people trying to acquire literacy – I’m trying not to jump ahead on the questions, but, I always thought, I was raised that Rosa was tired, Martin walked up the mountain, and then we had freedom. Right? You know, that this great literacy thing came along and everybody was free, and it was great. But I could see that there were still inequalities, and there was still so much that hadn’t been taught, and you know, my generation was looking for another MLK. We were gonna have another Martin Luther King that was gonna finish the job, but when I went back and started doing my research, I found out about, you know, the grassroots people, and I found out about the average folks that I grew up with that were doing literacy and literacy work: the beauty shops, the barber shops, the pimps and the prostitutes, the everyday people. And I wanted to know how they were doing what they were doing, how did that look different from what I was doing or learning about in classrooms. You know, sometimes I would sit in my graduate classes with, uh, other graduate students, and I would think about the conversations that were going on during family reunions, you know, with Uncle Bubba and them in the garage, and some of the debates that they were having in the classroom were similar to some of the debates that were taking place in the garage. The language was a little different, but it had the same amount of intensity and intellect and criticism and critical activist stuff going on. So I just realized that there were bridges. There were bridges.

MD: So our, our follow up to that question –

LATHAN: [laughter]

MD: um, that I think we’ve covered some ground on, was, uh, what experiences or ideas prompted you to focus your attention specifically on literacy activism and critical race theory, but if there’s anything you wanna expand on there.

LATHAN: One of the things that I think about is, I always think about “what didn’t I get?” What, you know, why, - one of the questions I always ask is that I’ve got all these degrees and all this education; why didn’t I know this? Why didn’t I know that there were, you know, beauty shops who were doing voter registration and teaching people how to read? Why – there’s an article by Jackie Royster and Jean Williams, “History in the Spaces Left,” just in the field, that talk about, you know – it’s not that things have been, uh, deliberately excluded, it’s that everything hasn’t been told. Right? And so, why didn’t I know that certain things existed, and where – what did I want to know? Right, um, yeah. I think for the critical race theory, I think it’s obv – well, I shouldn’t say that, it might not be obvious, but it’s obvious to me that, you know, in almost all the spaces I’ve ever been, I’ve been the only African American person, right. And a lot of times the only woman. So, I grew up through assimilation, um, when in Milwaukee the opened up the [laughter] the Northwest side of Milwaukee to, uh, Black families, my – without asking me, my parents decided that we were gonna be the first black family in our neighborhood. Oh, yes, that was fun.

ALL: [Laughter]

LATHAN: So, in middle school, I mean I was the only black student there, and then, uh, one other Black family moved into the neighborhood. So, I mean, I've always been in spaces where I was the only one, and so it just always helped to enlighten and heighten difference and inequality, right? And that's just, that's my passion.

MD: What scholars in the field have influenced your thinking?

LATHAN: Debroah Brandt and the new literacy scholars who look at literacy from a social perspective. So, new literacy studies especially, I think because they move beyond literacy as just acquiring reading and writing, and they look at literacy as a more social and inclusive acquisition. I like Brian Street and Harvey Graff. Harvey Graff was actually at Wisconsin. I did not know I had these phenomenal folks and did not appreciate them when I was at Wisconsin. It was when I got out and realized that I was studying with certain people like Gloria Ladson-Billings. In the field of Rhetoric and Composition it would be Deborah Brandt, Jackie Jones Royster, Beverly Moss, Geneva Smitherman, Elaine Richardson, Victor Villanueva, and Keith Gilyard. I could keep going but mostly Jackie Royster and Deborah Brandt.

TR: What about your life experiences? How have they shaped your thinking?

LATHAN: I think for me it's about inclusiveness. When I came up with the theory of gospel literacy, right? When I think about just trying to learn and understand the academy and think about the learning that I got as an undergrad but also as a graduate student. How I wanted to be able to understand literacy. How I wanted to be able to understand writing. How do people write? My big question is what does writing do? How do people gain access and begin to understand? My most vivid experience that I keep seeing in the realm of literacy studies and critical race theory was my first graduate class. I want to say it was Foucault, but they were discussing somebody and phallic symbols and I just wasn't getting it, but they were using references like the Louvre and references that were European sort of like they had left the country. I had two kids at that time and was divorced so I said, "O.K., it's like child birth". I don't remember what we were talking about but I remember the professor at the time, Mike Bernard Donalds, puts his head down and was like here she comes. No one else in the class could understand. He knew what I was talking about, but it was like for me to be able to relate to whatever theorist we were talking about twenty years ago I had to use models and frames that I understood. The rest of the class were twenty-one, twenty-two years old kids and I was way passed that. So, that helped to reinforce my belief that I had to come up with examples, models, and frames of some of the things that maybe we've already done, but in a way, that allows access to non-traditional. To others. To people who think the way that I think. I think differently than others.

TR: Which classes do you teach, which are your favorite, and why?

LATHAN: So, here I teach Advanced Writing and Editing, What Is a Text, Rhetorical Theory and Practice, Composition Theory, and my special topics class which is my Critical Race Theory class. I have also taught African American Literacies and African American Rhetoric. On the undergrad level, I really like the Rhetorical Theory and Practice, which I pushed back against so much because I am a literacy scholar. I don't teach rhetoric, but Shirley Wilson said that rhetoric

is what people do with their literacy. So, I went hot dog here we go! So, I've learned how to twist it and make it my own. I start off with the essay by Victor Villanueva where he talks about the rhetoric of racism. I can't remember the exact name of the essay, but he breaks down rhetorical language as racist. He uses the critical race theory lens. He uses Burkean Tropes and he uses the foundations of rhetorical theory and rhetorical language and terms to talk about the racist language within the field and what racism does. There's a line in that essay that talks about the reduction of racism. For example, folks who say that it was just an individual incident or that just happened that one time, and there is a line in there where he says, "how many coincidences do we have to have before it becomes a pattern?" If you have ever heard Victor speak, he is awesome! He is like a preacher, and I always kind of refer back to that in class and students are like "o.k. well maybe it's a pattern". So, then we can start talking about certain language and it just gets some people. Some people are going to be against it no matter what you do. So, that's one of my favorite undergraduate courses. My favorite graduate classes are critical race theory classes because students are so excited when they take the class because they just don't get it. So, it's like I'm the queen here because nobody else teaches it. We are not teaching it as much as in other fields, but we are working on that. My colleagues do critical race theory and don't even know it. I like teaching those classes because I get so many different students. I get students from over at Higher Education and History, and I get to turn them on to Rhetoric and Composition. Many times, they are like, "Oh! That's what Rhetoric and Composition is. I didn't know you guys were doing this over here." It gives them the same type of window opened up that I got. I like the fact that when I teach the Critical Race Theory class I can bring in counter story and use the foundational terms of the field in order to introduce people to what Rhetoric and Composition is because there is still a stigma attached to it. I love theorizing and I love breaking down terminology to people. I remember in grad school thinking if I hear the word discourse one more time. You don't even know what it means and you keep saying it, but to be able to break terminology down and then watch it get built back up so that everybody can have access to it and we can all speak the same language.

JL: What is on your night stand?

LATHAN: I saw that question, and it ain't academic books. I'm a tell you, it's like, it's like nooo, cause, uh maybe because I'm an academic and I don't, I don't, I have nothing that has to do with my work in my bedroom. My wife would be like no, get it out. Um, cause I would be up all night. I did it when I was in grad school though. I had, I had essays and books all over the house, but I had to, you know. Now, what's on my nightstand, is the remote control to the T.V., um coloring books, um what I read sometimes is Iyanla Vanzant, I read meditation books—I listen to meditation, um, and music. I listen to all kinds of music. Yeah, that's what's on my nightstand.

JL: What's the last song or album you listened to? I'm adding one in here...

LATHAN: (laughs) Okay, I am an R&B, gospel person and I have been listening to Tupac and Ghetto Boys and um, hip hop, but and I don't know why. But, it's, the last song that I listened to was um, um, wow, I think the Ghetto Boys song "Something's on my mind got my mind messed up" or something like that. Um, I don't know why. I think it's my, I just want to understand, I have this philosophy that it's better to understand than to be understood and so when I'm around,

you know, young folks or people who listen to that type I want to be able to say “oh, okay, okay,” just like I have a clue, right? Cause, I usually don’t understand. They’re like “we were listening to such and such?” “Who’s that?” I mean cause I’m not really up as much. Like I go to Facebook when somebody texts me and say “Rhea, you need to go check this out.” (Laughs) I don’t have time. I don’t—you know, what’s next in my, what I do bring in the bedroom with me is I’ll bring in my iPad which has dissertation stuff, prospectus and dissertations and exams. Sometimes I bring student stuff into the bedroom with me, cause, I have to.

JL: So you kinda already answered some of this question, but I think we can extend it, so the question originally is what are reading at the moment for scholarly and non-scholarly purposes. Um, definitely, you gave us a little insight into some non-scholarly purposes. So um, I would also really be interested in what you’re reading at the moment for scholarly purposes.

LATHAN: So I wrote the answer down to that question, because I think that’s a really—I love that question—it’s a really good question. When you get to a certain point in, in, um, it’s like you go through this part where you have to read everything you can get your hands on and then you know, you get the PhD, and then you’re trying to get published so you’re reading yourself full and writing yourself empty and then you get to that one hurdle, which for me is tenure and then it’s like, everybody wants you to read everything, so like, I’m reading um, um, book proposals and um, um and paper submissions for community literacy for a couple of journals, editors are sending me. So that’s where a lot of my reading is coming, coming from, reading stuff that folks want to get published, and but the book that I’m trying to get through right now is Eric Pritchard’s um, *Fashioning Lives: Black Queers and Politics of Literacy*. And then Tamika Carey has a new book, *Rhetorical Healing*, let’s see it’s called *The Reeducation of Contemporary Black Womanhood*. Um, those two books, I’m trying to read so I can review them. Uh, and then I’m going back because I’m doing a project right now—I’m working on a project with Tamara Bertrand Jones over in the College of Education and we started a faculty of color mentoring program and as part of that program, um, I’m doing something called SWAG, Scholarly Writing Accountability Group, and we’re, it’s, uh kinda like the things that we did in grad school. We had writing groups in grad school. When you get to be faculty, good luck. Right? It’s like okay, you got it now. So, I’m like what did I do to get here? So we formulated, uh, a writing group and between the two of us, she’s looking at writing and mentoring for faculty of color as a retention tool, and um, you know, looking at the social cycle parameters of that. For me, I’m looking at what writing, how writing, is bringing people together and what’s going on in these writing—what writing is doing, we had everybody publish out of our writing collective last spring, every single person. Got their books finished, got articles submitted, got grant publications--okay, everybody but me (laughs). But it was a prep right, I didn’t—it’s like a prep. I had to put together what was accountable, I had to have the discussion questions together, but they loved it. The provost loved it, of course, cause we get publications out of it. Looking at how, how I’m approaching this group, I’m and how she’s approaching this group has been very interesting. So, we submitted a proposal and we’re working on a project together to kinda look at what this writing accountability group is doing and you know, cause the big thing is about, at least for Florida State is about retention. We can recruit all day long, but the retaining faculty of color—we hemorrhage, right, and it’s always, you know, different reasons, but it’s never the reason that it really is. I won’t say on the record what—but anyway—and so we’re working on that. Did I answer your question? What was the question?

JL: Yeah, that was, definitely, um...

LATHAN: Oh, *Presumed Incompetent*, that's what I was going to say. So there's a book *Presumed Incompetent* that looks at how women are treated, uh, evaluated and looked at in academic and higher ed, um, and I've gone back to that looking at teaching evaluations and you know, some of the reasons—there's a statistic that ninety-three percent of black women who go up for tenure do not get it—no ninety-seven percent, I'm sorry, ninety-seven percent, only three percent get it, and this was, I heard this statistic like five or six years ago. So, I went back to look again and the statistic is still the same. That, it's like okay, so—I'm trying to see what can, what can I do to make a difference in that number, right? Um, so that's why I'm looking at *Presumed Incompetent*—going back again and looking at it.

BH: What do you think is the most important question that students in rhetoric and composition should be considering today?

LATHAN: What's missing? What's missing? Wha—What's missing? What's missing?! [Laughter all.] Wha—Do I need to say that again? What's missing? [Laughter all.] Um... I say that because we're not done. A lot of times we say, "Oh somebody wrote about that. But nobody wrote about it the way you would. Or...nobody looked at it from your lens. There's always a different way. And the way you look at it could be the way someone else—trust me—somebody else is going to need that. So I think that the question for us is, "What's missing in what writing does? What's missing in the how the field is approaching...theories of composition...who's missing—who, indigenous voices, multiracial voices, multicultural voices. Just—yeah. And that's usually the best place to start is to look at what's missing. And: *What do I want to know?* Right? What am I curious about, because—I don't know if anybody's told you this—you pick something you like 'cause you're going to be with it a minute. [Laughter all.] I've been trying to get out of 1955 for 15 years now. [Laughter all.] I'm still in 1955.

BH: Where do you see the fields of literacy studies, rhetoric, and composition going?

LATHAN: That's a good question. I—uh. Hmm. I don't know. I looked at that question a couple of times today, and I'm trying to figure it out. With the things that are going on in our flagship organizations, like NCTE, CCCC, and the caucuses, and the state, and going to Missouri [location of this year's CCCC] and how a lot of the underrepresented populations are feeling, a lot of folks are going to other places. I mean, you've got Gwen Pough. She used to be, she was president of Cs a few years ago. She's straight-up women's studies. Elaine Richardson is still part of Cs, but she is in higher ed., so she goes to ARA. We've already been teetering, especially those who are underrepresented, already been teetering, and LGBTQ people are not going to Cs AT ALL and I don't know if they're going to NCTE. It's like, *what are y'all doing?* Now, I think that's where the history comes in. And if you know the history [sighs]—and from what I understand the reasons that they...the reasons they gave was monetary that tipped, especially for the people of the black caucus—they [Cs organizers] said, "Well, we're going to lose this money." And I'm like, "Are you kidding me? You're going to lose? And my body is not valued?" And it's not like these people do language. Did they not talk to somebody? [Laughter all.] They could have just called me.

I see, I think that the field, um, it's growing, but it's going through growing pains. So, we have these new journals that are really starting to take off and...um...address issues that are inclusive and address themes and looking at counter-stories and looking back at spaces that have been left. There's a piece in, I can't remember who it's by, that talk about—Kells, her last name is Kells—and she talks about the Mexican uprising at...UT Austin. So we got people looking back, but these articles are being printed in *Community Literacy* and...online literacy journals. They're peer reviewed, so they're getting a lot more respect than they used to, but you can clearly see the difference. You know how many women and people of color are being published here as opposed to our flagship journals. I see right now a separation, and I'm kind of nervous about it, because I don't think people realize how inclusive Rhetoric and Comp is, how much you can do here and how incredible and wonderful it is to think and create. And I guess that goes back to one of the earlier questions: I can think—where else can you do gospel literacy? You can do hip-hop literacy, cultural literacy, see I can do gospel literacy, right? And theorize—people prioritize and they give...our field gives...if you make it right and you back it up and you work critically with your theories, people respect that.

JL: Anything else you'd like to add that we didn't address?

LATHAN: I don't think so. I think these questions are really, really good. I think that for the most part, I would like to see us look more inclusively at who we are as scholars and for that to be valued. I feel like we don't sometimes—when I say “we,” I mean Rhet/Comp—we don't value. We talk about diversity a lot, but we don't value inclusion. ...And also to value those who are doing the work—like I said, my colleagues are doing some of the work and doing some of the same kinds of work that I'm doing, we just don't know it. Right, so we never...you never get to the point where you're done, you're done learning. “I'm done forming myself as a scholar, this is who I am, and that's it.” That doesn't happen. We keep learning. And we keep valuing what we all do, what each does, and what each person brings to the table. The other thing is finding...getting your own understanding and not getting into urban legends and myths and all these things. Form your own perspective and your own opinions about scholarship, about different scholars. Just use the opportunity to branch yourself out, because your experience with Netty could be totally different than my experience. You know? And I come and tell you what my experience is, and maybe that's maybe because of my own stuff. Go find out for yourself. It's kind of like interpretation, you know, you read an essay and somebody says, “It means such and such,” and you're reading it like “That ain't what I saw. I didn't. How'd you get that?” So you find out what you're bringing to it. yeah.

[General conversation. End.]