

Spring 2018 Interview—Dr. Stephen J. MCELROY
Interview Team—JE Jennifer Enoch, BH Brendan Hawkins, TR Tricia Rizza, JT Jessi Thomsen

[JT: lead in opening banter and summary of the interview and interview's goals.]

TR: How did you get into rhetoric and composition studies?

MCELROY: What do they call this, the conversion narrative? Have you all heard of this term? It's usually some kind of variation on "I was interested in literature, or I was interested in creative writing when I came to Rhet/Comp." But for me I have a conversion narrative that begins before then, because I was working in IT. And, you know, I enjoyed the work I was doing. and I was working with the law school doing support for faculty and staff there. I enjoyed it. I was good at it. But I didn't find it as rewarding as I thought a career should be. And I'd always been interested in writing and teaching. So just sort of on a whim—I had been thinking about it for a while—applied to an MA program at Belmont University in the English Department there. And didn't know Rhet/Comp was a thing, and in my first semester—no my second semester—I took a class on literacy studies and another on composition theory with Amy Hodges Hamilton (who is a graduate of this program, actually) and learned about the field and learned about the fact that there were already long-standing connections between or at the intersection of literacy studies, writing studies, and technology. Right? So, it seemed like a pretty good way to go.

TR: As a follow up, what experiences or ideas prompted you to focus on areas such as visual rhetoric, multimodality, digital composing, and assemblage?

MCELROY: With my interests in technology, and when I came here and started working in the Digital Studio, learning about multimodality—and we know Jody Shipka and Jason Palmieri have talked about all types of modalities—but the rise of computing technology has brought about a new...So, I think those things go hand in hand when talking about writing studies. My interest in digital composing, that's going way back a long while, and I also work with students and work with technologies in ways that I hadn't done before, so I got the opportunity to learn about Photoshop, Adobe InDesign, not only about the functions of those programs but also the possibilities.

For assemblage that really came out of the [FSU] Postcard Archive, actually. We were creating the postcard archive, and I got interested in the history of these things...the postcard manufacturers, and it turns out one of them had this archive of all the materials that went into the production of the postcards. I took a trip up there and made photocopies of some of the stuff, some of the interesting artifacts that show that progress, how the postcard was transformed from a black and white photograph to a full colored thing and the kinds of Photoshop and inventions that they engaged with. And I was talking with folks about what I had seen, and the notion of assemblage emerged, and the rest is history. There you go, that's how I got into those things.

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

MCELROY: The person whose work has brought me to Rhet/Comp, that really resonated with me, was Cindy Selfe. Her book, *Perils of Not Paying Attention* [and article “Technology and Literacy in the 21st Century: The Importance of Paying Attention”], the book she wrote after she gave her Cs address, talking about the varied concerted efforts to put computers in the hands of consumers, building the internet as a means of international influence really gave me a perspective that I hadn't had before. Because I was very interested in the functional side of computers and technology. Her work has been very influential. Of course, Kathi [Yancey's] work. Who else? Gunther Kress, you know, he is not in the field of Rhet/Comp, but his work is so wrapped up in the work we do that I have to mention him. Kristin Arola, her work. There's someone else I wanted to mention [Oh!]: Johnson-Eilola and Selber, of course, with assemblage. And also, with multiliteracies, the functional, critical, and rhetorical...is influential in how I teach.

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

MCELROY: It's sort of been very influential, using... Let me talk about the work that I did at Vanderbilt. I worked with these legal scholars who were also practicing, many of them were practicing attorneys who argued cases in front of the Supreme Court and didn't always have the best computer skills, and didn't know necessarily how to use a mouse, and didn't know how to interact with Microsoft Word, and these sorts of things. That gave me some insight into you know there are lots of types of literacies. We have to respect the different experiences and levels of expertise that people have and kind of meet them there when we think about instruction and working with people in the Studio, Writing Center, in the classroom, how we interact with them and meet them in that space. That's less about the technology itself and more about that kind of support.

Then, also I've talked about moving from IT into English and R/C, that's one kind of narrative I can talk about. I can also tell my life story in terms of mentors, how mentors I have worked with have shaped the next moves and have led me to other mentors, so I think mentors are just really important and that's something that I want to do myself and to take pride in that type of work, mentorship work, and to help people think through their situations... [JT asks for an example.] Sure, so I mentioned Amy Hodges Hamilton at Belmont. So, I got into a couple different PhD programs, and I was trying to decide. One of them was closer to home, but it did not have...I mean it wasn't exactly a Rhet/Comp program, first of all, and it didn't have the same kind of [searches for the word] wasn't as respected as the program here. But again, it was closer to home. She was like “Well, you can stay closer to home for the next four years while you're in your program, or you can go here and try to come back, because you have to think about not just what the next four years look like, but what kind of doors will the next four years open.” That's a pivotal example. Before I also switched majors about four times in undergrad. It took me about five years to graduate. I started out in philosophy, and then thought I'd try journalism. I had some people talk me out of them. Philosophy and journalism are both...my heart is still in those places, but they kind of help me think about my own situation about what would be best for me. At the time that was going into computers.

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

MCELROY: I don't get to teach that often in this position, because most...they do what they call an "assignment of responsibilities," and officially 50% of my time is administrative work. So, every class that I teach is my favorite class, because I get to do it so little. We deliver classes as part of the Writing Center, but it's not the same because I don't get to work with those students directly. But the classes I have taught include all three of the core courses for the EWM major track: WEPO, Rhetoric, and History of Text Technologies. I've taught in the first-year comp program here when it was still the first-year comp program. I haven't had a chance to teach 2135. I haven't had the chance yet, though I'd like to. Every summer I teach one of the two courses for incoming graduate students, the TA training we have here. Of course, Deborah Coxwell-Teague teaches the other one. We talk about working with individual writers, specifically in the context of the Reading Writing center. Then, the undergraduate course I've taught most recently is the "What is a Text?" course. It is essentially an exploration of the intertextuality and everything that that entails, which is nice for me because it's given me the opportunity to work with assemblage with undergraduates and see what kinds of lights that come on for them and the kinds of questions that emerge from that as well. Lots of fun! I enjoy teaching all of those classes.

JT: What's on your nightstand?

MCELROY: That's an interesting question. First of all, I have to say there's not much on my nightstand. One, my nightstand is really small and it's also very short. The second reason is that I have a toddler—we have a toddler. She likes to take things off my nightstand, so I don't keep much on there. The sort of things that get on there and then get taken off there by the baby are the remote control for the stereo because we like to listen to the classical radio station 91.5 WFSU, you know, as we're getting ready for bed. And the remote control for our lamp, so that neither of us have to reach over and actually have to deal with the thing on the lamp. That's pretty much it.

TR: What are you reading at the moment for scholarly and non-scholarly purposes?

MCELROY: For scholarly purposes, I'm reading too much. That's a really good way to procrastinate on the writing part, so I'm reading too much. For reasons that I'm going to talk about in the presentation tomorrow, I've been reading a lot of Deleuze, for better or for worse. I can both recommend it and *not* recommend it. Also, reading secondary works that help explain Deleuze. That's where I'm at right now. In terms of scholarly work that I'm reading, in addition to the book you recommended, Jessi, the N. Katherine Hayles—it's called *Unthought*—which is pretty interesting. Then, in terms of non-scholarly reading...Like you guys, I read all of the time. That's pretty much all I do is sit in front of a screen and read. But, I also read the *New Yorker*, which is like magic and they bring it to your house. Every week you get to read this amazing writing. *Harper's Magazine* as well. I get to read it every month, and it's like a special treat. Any time that shows up in my mailbox the rest of my day is shot.

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

MCELROY: This is kind of back again to what I'm going to be talking about tomorrow. I think the most important question is: How do we map or navigate the situation that we're in and how

do we respond to the situation? That's a little abstract, so I'm thinking specifically about the proliferation of social media and global technologies. I'm giving essentially a polemic in May at Computers and Writing against Facebook, which sounded a lot edgier when I wrote the proposal back in October than it does now with all of the revelations that have come out about the sharing of data and the Cambridge Analytic stuff. How is this reshaping us as individuals and as groups? How can we start to respond to that, beginning with how can we change that for the better? With all of the data tracking and all of the problems that have come to light, recently. I think that proliferation of discourse online and how it's getting all messed up by the technologies that can manipulate what's real and what isn't. How do we respond to that in productive ways?

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

MCELROY: That's one of the questions that came up with Susan Miller-Cochran's talk, right? That was one of the things that was being discussed in the meeting afterwards. I think there is a—my answer is kind of similar to the last question—these fields are going to have to attend to: [...] How do we keep ourselves relevant in an increasingly fragmented world? Of course, that's not a new question. Lester Faigley's work from the late 80s or early 90s was taking on fragmentation... I think that the stakes are being raised by some of these changes in technology that I have mentioned. So, how do we stay relevant not only in terms of preserving ourselves but also by preserving our values and making those values matter to other people as well? In other words: enacting, which now may also seem a bit abstract, putting us all to sleep, but it's the best answer I have today...a Wednesday.

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

MCELROY: I don't think so. It's Wednesday [sigh]—it's the penultimate week of the semester, so like you all I'm just trying to get through it. I want to thank you for the questions and for the thoughtful discussion.

[ALL: Thank yous and closing banter.]