

Spring 2014 Interview—Dr. Tarez Samra GRABAN

Interview Team: JE Edmonds, TM Maynard, KM Mitchell, JN Naftzinger

JE: Number one: How did you get into literacy studies?

GRABAN: Ok [laughs]. It's probably not going to make sense, because ... to me it's a lot of discrete experiences. And at certain moments, in each experience, I realized that that experience had tied to some antecedent experiences. ... [A]t one point, the convergence of them made me realize I wanted to apply to Purdue. ... I was getting an MA in education theory, and I was writing a thesis—I was very interested in composition theory and epistemology, and I decided to do a classroom based study comparing students composing in a hypertext environment versus a traditional environment. And at the time, I thought that just made sense with what I was doing—I was also assistant directing a writing center—and, you know, it sort of just made sense in that moment. But then... it might have been tied to interests I carried with me because I was a student of George Landow's—he had taught a course called hypertext and critical theory in hypertext's very early years—so I hadn't necessarily put those experiences together until I was doing that. Then the reason I decided to get the MA is I had been working as a glass history researcher, and a writer, and a ghost writer, and a book editor.

GRABAN: And... so the big realization I had at that job—aside from the fact that it felt very dead end for me—is it was very quiet. Writing was such a silent process and I had always thought writing was not a silent process; I thought it was tied to knowledge making, and so ... I went "my gosh, I'm not really interacting with ideas the way I thought I would." So, so, it was this chain of events and I don't think I was consciously aware that they were leading me to become so interested in public higher education, and specifically in Rhet/Comp and public higher education And then, when I was 30, I said "Oh my goodness, I think I want to get a PhD." And by then all of the experiences just sort of indicated I'm very interested in being at the center of knowledge, I'm very interested in writing as knowledge production. I had done some work in writing centers and I had done some teaching, and really I was very interested in that particular program. So, in fact, I only applied to two programs.

KM: Wow... Ok, that's very insightful. Ok, we'll skirt on to number two. You mentioned Landow—I want to know about other scholars in the field who have influenced your thinking.

GRABAN: This is so hard for me. Seriously, how am I supposed to pick?

KM: Well, you know, allow one thought to lead to another [laughs]. Whatever comes, like...

GRABAN: Do others pick?

KM: They don't. They struggle with it and then they come up with names. So, I'm thinking maybe if you approach it—

GRABAN: Well, I'll tell you my mentors. Because the thing is for me, it literally is, What decade am I in?, What project am I working on?, and Who is influencing my thinking? Because everybody I read ends up influencing my thinking. ... [T]here are, the mentors who I feel live on through me. One is Janice Lauer and one is Patricia Sullivan. And, as much I'm not like Janice, I really ... think that a lot of my teaching, and a lot of the way I do scholarship, is a reflection of her—and also Jim Kinneavy, who was her colleague. ... Pat Sullivan has influenced everything I do, and she was Walter Ong's student, and so I feel like I've inherited so much of Ong. So definitely Janice and Pat are the ones I carry around in my mind. Oh! I should also say Shirley Rose has been a huge influence in terms of teaching me just how to be a faculty citizen and a WPA, and how to do the work of Rhet/Comp. And they're all scholars. I think this counts as an answer to the question [laughs]. And then, I could mention people out of field, but then I would be deviating from the question...

KM: Well, let it go where you wanna go...

GRABAN: Well, Victor Raskin and Salvatore Attardo, who are actually in computational linguistics and pragmatics. They've totally influenced my thinking because they got me really interested in ontologies and in thinking about composition studies as a very large ontology, whose borders might be permeable and might shift and be unstable. And then lately, I've been pretty dedicated to Kendall Phillips' work and also Lu Ming Mao's and Keith Lloyd's, just because of some work I'm doing and may be doing for a while. ... I've been reading—Joan Wallach Scott has this amazing book on the feminist historical imaginary. And Martha Nussbaum's *Political Emotions*. And so, those [last two] are completely out of field, but I've been interested in those. And then Matthew Kirschenbaum.

TM: Alright then you've already spoken a little bit about life experiences and how they've led you to the field, but I guess we wanna know more about those experiences, and, specifically how those have, and are continuing to, shape your thinking. Either about the field, about epistemology, whatever you'd like it to be.

GRABAN: You've got the best question [laughs]. So, being the child of an immigrant, also kind of growing up in a third-culture, or cross-cultural context. I grew up in a household that was literally split between east and west. It was more western than it was eastern, but, I came of age in a non-democracy where public expression was not a free entity, and I think I'm realizing more and more that got me really interested in rhetoric and composition. It got me very interested in public arts—arts of expression, arts of negotiation, arts of research ... I actually think my first language was diplomacy, and it was non-verbal [laughs], believe it or not. And so, I feel like I had a very late coming of age experience, into really thinking about verbal expression. ... Obviously I had operated, within this... system of symbols that is not like the one I wanted to study. And then growing up in that cultural context really made me value the art of argumentation. I did not have available to me very many modes of expression, so I was fascinated by learning them. ... [P]ublic delivery, I had never actually seen that—I had never really seen dialectic. There are things I just didn't witness... they were not a part of my individual reflective consciousness, so studying them was amazing, and looking at them historically was even more amazing. Personally, I have a large family. I have 12 aunts and uncles and about 26 first cousins. But I was the first

woman in the family to get a four year degree. Not the first to go to college, but the first to get a four year degree. So I think education is... there's a narrative running throughout my family line that education is, sort of, *the* opportunity.

JN: So the fourth question is ... I know, I haven't the pleasure of having you as a teacher, but...

GRABAN: Oh yes you have! Though it may not have been pleasurable...

[Laughter]

GRABAN: But you did have me.

JN: Outside, well in addition to reading group. What classes do you teach, and which are your favorite, and why are those your favorite?

GRABAN: Oh, these superlative questions!! [laughs] I can't answer them.

JN: Maybe not which is your favorite, but which one have you had the most fun teaching?

GRABAN: Oh my gosh...

TM: Or why are they all your favorite?

[Laughter]

GRABAN: ... [A] course prep for me is *so* generative, it is the most intellectually stimulating thing ... So, in terms of, ok in terms of undergraduate teaching here, I teach the upper division courses in the EWM track—and that was actually one of the reasons I was interested in this job—and I love those courses. I teach primarily Rhetorical Theory and Practice, and then I teach another course called Advanced Writing and Editing. ... I've taught it once as a course in mediated public discourse, and another time it was a course in writing and editing for the public sphere. So, as you can see, I have a real public sphere leaning. ... I've just sort of been rotated in and out of those courses over and over again, and—because we have so many sections! I'm going to start teaching *What is a Text?* and then *Theories of Composition* for undergraduates next year. And I'm completely excited about that, because I'm going to politicize the *Theories of Composition* course, and it's called "*Politics of Your Higher Education*" [laughs]. I don't know how it'll go... [laughs].

KM: Can I stop by?

GRABAN: Well I don't know it's going to go. It could flop. Honestly, I may want you *all* in as guest speakers, but anyway... I'm not answering the question well. ... I can't pick a favorite course. The three grad preps I've done here, plus the reading groups, I've enjoyed every single one of them. Maybe I haven't done enough repetitions to know what will feel like my... my area. I'll say that the course that I've found the most exciting to prep was a course

I taught here in my first year—and I've taught it other places—it was called “Modern Rhetoric: Histories and Methodologies.” ... [T]hat was a course that was really breaking the boundaries, you know. It played into everything I love: history, theory, epistemology. And, so it was the one way I could do it all at once. We could focus on developments in thinking from 1600 to 1900, but not think only like historians. ... I tried so hard to work digital and experimental activities into that class. One of the things I... haven't had a chance to do here that much, but that I remain deeply committed to, is service learning for undergraduates. And I think that's just because the EWM program is already so full, its agenda is so full. ... I'm committed to service learning and I see it as a real intellectual partnership. It's not just volunteerism. It's tied to a body of scholarship, and I think I'm kind of the consummate partner. I love sort of reaching out across campus and saying “Let's Partner!”—partner with the archives, partner with the libraries. ... I guess I would say what defines my undergraduate teaching is strong engagement. And that doesn't always get me the high evaluations, to be honest. Because I really, really, really, really make students engage in ways they may not always feel prepared to engage.

KM: Yeah... I would like to follow up that question with the service learning. Could you maybe give us an example of how you *have*.

GRABAN: ... There was a curriculum I just started to love after a while. I had...it started for me in first year comp, and then I ended up moving it into a second year writing course, and it was called “community-based writing.” I used the *Fieldworking* textbook by Bonnie Sunstein and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater ...the way through the course was visual ethnography. And so, students would pick a service site, and it was one of five sites where I actually had already done volunteer work—I had to do the training, I had to know the people. And that was the place where students would go, and they would do some observation hours over the semester, and they'd sort of get integrated into the community. ... [T]hey'd play the role of insider and outsider, they'd be an ethnographer, and I scaffolded a writing project throughout the semester, and it was a little tricky, because I had to stay on par with all their individual projects. But we had common readings and we had common themes, and... there were the people from the agencies coming and visiting and participating in class discussions. ... [I]t was always limited to five, I could never handle more than five different agencies. And so, it was really a course in the arts of community-based research and writing, but visual ethnography was our... method through it. And students would... compose a final ethnographic portfolio that was supposed to show multiple views on what they thought made their community service agency unique.

JE: What's on your nightstand?

GRABAN: I can answer that. Three things at the moment. Believe it or not, I'm not getting through them very quickly. One is Pete Hessler's *Oracle Bones: A Journey Through Time in China*, and actually Terry Zawacki recommended that when she came last semester, and I picked it up and it is wonderfully weird. It's part new journalism, cultural analysis. It's mainly written from the point of view of Hessler's experiences being an expatriate teacher in China from 1999 to 2002, ... very much a modern day People's Republic of China. But his stories are interwoven with these political vignettes – some of them contemporary and

some of them not so contemporary, and then these narrative threads go through the book ... three of his students who try to sort of culturally assimilate into their hometowns after they've been studying with him. ... The other is Oliver Sacks' *The Anthropologist on Mars*. Do you know the book?

JN: I haven't read the book, but I've read "The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat."

GRABAN: That's one his seven vignettes in the book.

JN: I've read one other one by him but I can't remember.

GRABAN: I really love his stuff. He's a neurologist. And so this particular book is literally seven of the toughest cases he ever had to crack. Real paradoxes about human science and human nature. And then the third one I'm a little embarrassed to mention but I have to be truthful. It is Hubert Wolf's *The Nuns of Sant'Ambrogio* which is this meticulously narrated history of a 19th century convent in Rome that was totally embroiled in scandal. ... I read a review of it in the *New York Times* and said, "Oh, I really have to pick this up." It's so well done because it's recreated from all this archival evidence that's fascinating, but scandalous.

KM: That was great. Well, my nightstand isn't nearly as interesting as yours. So I have maybe one of the largest ones. What do you think is the most important question that students in Rhet/Comp should be considering today?

GRABAN: What do you think is the most important question?

KM: See, Royster did the same thing to us. You rhetoricians. That's really good. Well, I had a question actually about your Advanced Writing and Editing course, and you said you taught it as a mediated public discourse and maybe, I think there's something in that, you know, about how we are integrating these multimedia and multimodal technologies in the classrooms that may especially be courses that might seem to be traditionally print based. While I don't know about being the most important, it is something that is of interest to me, especially when I hear students discussing Rhet/Comp as being the working position. Like, students are like, EWM, I want to get a job.

GRABAN: "It's the skills."

KM: It's "skills-based."

GRABAN: It's really not.

KM: It's really not and so there's...You know, I'm teaching in those courses as well and so I'm interested in how your iteration of that course maybe could parlay into a larger question that we should be asking ourselves about teaching.

GRABAN: It might parlay into a long chain of complaints. And I know you may not want those. Because that course, while it was a great experience, was a wonderful way for me to see all the things we need to adjust in the EWM track, to be honest. ... [I]t's in that course where expectations come into tension with each other the most blatantly. ... [T]he title is so general and the expectations are so broad So I mean definitely there are... This maybe doesn't have anything to do with the big questions in the field, but definitely teaching that course has been a site of realization for me about how we could better help students map their way through the program Because I think we're not really guiding them through it. Okay, so you asked about mediation, and I hadn't only thought of mediation in terms of technologized mediation. I was thinking about mediation in terms of representation. But if you want me to really answer the question, I have one big word, and that's "globalization." I think I asked you because I was curious whether you would have shared that word as well. Or, if you would have had other answers.

KM: Well, personally, I am definitely on globalization. That's my focus right now, and my research is tending toward that. And I think about that in terms of how we engage our students and our own scholarship, because my scholarship and my teaching, much like you described yourself, they feed one and the other – one is generative for the other, and so, and I would imagine that a lot of us get a lot of our experiences from our teaching, and our students teach us something about our scholarship that we may have overlooked or something that we didn't really consider when we even drafted the first syllabus. You know, we thought of it in this very particular way and then the resistance from our students leads us somewhere else. But I do always find myself on a broader perspective.

GRABAN: You just gave another key word: resistance. That may actually be a big thing for us to pay attention to.

KM: Yeah, and I think I'm learning to embrace that as a part of my teaching, my research, and my own writing – even where I resist, just as you said, a list of complaints, but I'm learning to welcome those complaints because I look at them as springboards for resolving conflict and resolving tensions, if they're even meant to be resolved. Or if we really do need some tension to get some the best diverse responses as opposed to sticking in binaries.

GRABAN: Yeah, this is making me think of so many more things I wanted to say. I guess I've had more time to think about this than I thought. I mean, s... [S]elf-actualization is a need. There are so many needs. Maybe if what you're asking me, Kendra... Am I answering this question in terms of what I see the need to be in undergraduate education or am I answering a question about what I think you all are going to be facing?

KM: Well, you know, I think in times past we've looked at as the graduate students, but I think it's however you...

GRABAN: So what do you think is the most important...

KM: I would say also you could consider both.

GRABAN: You know, the institution is not a happy place all the time. But I would hate to think that my perspective is even the truest one. So I truly am curious. I won't throw the question off completely; I will take a turn. But I'm really interested. What do you think? You're on the receiving end of so much.

JN: I have no idea. If I were given this interview and someone posed this question to me, I would probably figure out some way to skirt the question.

GRABAN: Ask what your favorite color is or something?

JN: I think the big question is "Where are we going for dinner later?" You know, like some question like that. Because I think there are so many questions to ask.

GRABAN: You're so right.

JN: It's difficult to pinpoint one.

GRABAN: Yeah, you're right.

JN: And as soon as you pinpoint one...So even when you said globalization, I was thinking where my own interests are and I think it's more with technology and everyday writing. But globalization is kind of inherent within that. So I think that every time we kind of mention one key question, there's all these other sub-questions that rearrange themselves or even meta-questions that present themselves.

GRABAN: Right. So what compels you?

JN: It's different depending on the day. I think at least for me right now it's using my own feelings toward writing, my own kind of loathing toward writing...

GRABAN: Right, right.

JN: Where I really loathe the practice of writing, for myself, but I see how important it is. And I love to read about writing. I love to look at writing, but for some reason I can't compel myself to feel happy about the practice of writing for myself.

GRABAN: Right, right.

JN: So I think about "How did I end up that way? Why did I end up that way? How do I get myself out of it and how can that help other people?"

KM: That's good.

GRABAN: I kind of want to know how that's going to turn into a dissertation.

JN: Yeah, me too.

KM: That's very fascinating.

GRABAN: Do you still have a huge chip on your shoulder?

JN: What do you mean?

GRABAN: You had one last semester.

JN: Yeah, probably.

GRABAN: I mean, if it's okay for me to be honest. Because that's a really valuable thing to be able to say, that loathing compels you. I'm completely intrigued. I would tie that to resistance; I would tie that to self-positioning. Can I ask you more about that? What compels you to continue in school?

JN: I think that I was just so...So I did the EWM program here, and I just had never really...I took AP Lang in high school...This is turning into an interview about me.

GRABAN: Is this okay? Can he strike out of the transcript if he doesn't want to be included? Who sees these things?

JN: So I took AP Language, but rhetoric was only ever presented in like, kind of, ethos, pathos, and logos.

GRABAN: Right. So flat. So disconnected.

JN: So when I took Dr. Fleckenstein's survey course, especially when we got to the modern rhetoric, it was eye-opening, in terms of just how language and how writing works. And I was also interested in linguistics and still am, but FSU's linguistics program is basically non-existent. This seemed like more of a, just interesting program. And so, when I finished coursework, I knew that I didn't want to get a job, and I thought I can just keep studying and then the same thing kind of happened with my masters.

GRABAN: Interesting ...

JN: It was less...I'm simplifying it. It wasn't just because I didn't want to get a job. I'm very interested in it, but that was also more...just...how can I keep learning.

GRABAN: I see that as very different than just "didn't want to get a job." It's more like, "someone wants to make me artificially and arbitrarily pick something in a shape that I don't even recognize" ...So, you must be interested in embodiments of ideas. I don't know how to tie that to an issue in Rhet/Comp but you are so not alone. That's really interesting. So what do you think... What's the most important question students in Rhet/Comp should be considering today?

TM: I have two. The cynic in me wants to give a one-word answer: survival.

GRABAN: Oh, Travis.

TM: You know, because you mentioned the politics of higher education, and it's very easy for us to be represented as something that we are very much not.

GRABAN: Right, yeah.

TM: And that representation carries in such a way that we're seen as either service workers...

GRABAN: Or we're just intellectually diminished.

TM: Right. Or leftists that are here to brainwash the freshmen. But, that being said, it's used as a rationale to really question the efficacy or the need of what we do and figuring out how to stay true to what we see as what is we do or what we're supposed to do, while still being able to present that to the public in such a way that we see buy it.

GRABAN: So "public" is a kind of situatedness that includes justification.

TM: Just looking across, what happens...It seems to me that for people that preach audience awareness, we have very little when it concerns people who are not academics.

KM: That's good.

GRABAN: That's a massively huge "we."

TM: Yes, it is...

GRABAN: Maybe I'd like to not be in that "we."

TM: I wouldn't either, and that's my, ya know, sort of, short-sighted observations in my relatively short time in the field, right? But...

GRABAN: Wow, this is giving me a great idea, thank you.

TM: My other answer, and we can sort of hold off because it has more to do with the last question, but it's something about that "we," that identity, who are we? What are we supposed to be doing? Is it just the first-year course? Is it undergrad majors? Or can we, ya know, make knowledge? I'm not necessarily questioning the need for pedagogy because we need it – its one of the cornerstones, but so often I feel like we see ourselves as being built around it.

GRABAN: ... [A]n historian might try to transpose herself 100 years from now and look back, and a lot of them might say this is what was happening in the 19th century when the

university underwent a huge transformation and you just didn't know what was what. So beyond the question of where should you be teaching rhetoric, it was ... Do we have disciplines? How are we defining the disciplines? Are these arbitrary definitions or are they real definitions? Where do we belong? Are you my enemy? Are you my ally? And so, sometimes I reflect on how the job feels different now than it did a decade ago, and it can be terribly confusing ... [A]s I remain committed to public higher education, which I am, I realize it's only going to continue to get more complex, and I wonder if perhaps what we're experiencing is yet another huge transformation ... [W]hat would be very natural is you have a discipline with a sense of itself and a sense of its value, not only in one container, but in many iterations, and when, when you think the thing that's stable is the university and it's not, we should expect a lot of shake-up, and we should expect to really internalize that shake-up, and it'll call a lot of things into question, and you know, I don't know what to call that phenomenon. But I feel like that's ... what has made the job feel different for me, lately. ... [I]t could just be the state of Florida ...

[Laughter]

TM: I wish you were right.

KM: I know. I wish.

GRABAN: ... On the one hand, I want to see it as an incredibly generative, positive time. It's always going to be hard because we're straitened for resources, and that's difficult... , but I try to hold onto that silver lining, ... the shake-up is good because the strife means we're alive, but ... when we don't feel like we're in control of the outcomes, this thing we're trying to plug into, we don't know who's in control of this thing. It's like the *Matrix*. Who's running it, you know? Did someone cut the hardline?

[Laughter]

But I want to, you know, think about this as positive, that it's only going to help us continue to innovate. Sometimes I think we might throw things out with the bathwater, though.

KM: That's right

GRABAN: And I think that's what a lot of historians would say has been done unnecessarily, so you know, that's always something to keep in mind.

So maybe "change"? I don't know what word to choose there.

TM: Hope?

[Laughter]

GRABAN: Hope! That's a good one.

KM: Well, we're gonna go to our last question.

TM: Did everybody give their...

[Laughter]

JE: I have not. Weeelll, in terms of disciplinarity, we think about how when you collaborate with other disciplines, so I wanted to know what you think about that. Do you think that is a need in the field?

GRABAN: I'm such a collaborator that I can't even give an objective answer to that question. ... [I]f anything, that's what keeps me going. I want to say my experience in the field was already cross-disciplinary. I really went to a program that was defined at *the* convergence of rhetoric and composition. There were not separate tracks—it literally was based in thinking “What do you do when you put rhetoric and composition together and assume that they always already work together—historically, theoretically, pedagogically?”—so I think I came to the work already seeing these things together ... I never think about ancient traditions without thinking about contemporary issues, I never really think about figures without stance, ... I do admit I have a little bit of difficulty separating them out, ... I tend to think cross-disciplinarily already, although that, maybe that's a mistaken assumption on my part and maybe what I'm, what I'm, I may just be a product of a field, Rhet/Comp, that is wonderfully merged, So in terms of answering the question of “is there a need for more?” I feel like I have accessed so much already, ... I've always been associated with these big R1 English departments, ... and I'm not so sure that the departments always see the opportunities for interdisciplinary conversation in what we bring. So, there definitely is a need, and I'm sure there are misconceptions about us all over campus, ya know, I've kind of given up. But I think we do a really good job of making pathways in and out with the projects that we do. I just think we're great citizens, great collaborators.

[Laughter]

TM: Our last question has to do with a lot of these issues that we've already just been talking about, and it's about “the field,” however you choose to define that, rhetoric, composition, anything like that.

... This has to do with I guess more the trajectory of the field. And so, you mentioned earlier, like take us 100 years in the future and look back; instead, like walk us through the next 10, 15, 20 years, what's going to come out of this period of de-stabilization that you mentioned earlier?

GRABAN: If I knew...

[Laughter]

GRABAN: I...I...I'd lead the charge!

TM: Where would you like to see us? Let's be optimistic, right?

KM: Hope.

TM: Yeah. Hope.

GRABAN: I have to think about that for a moment. I would like to see a democratization of practices, I would like to see an active commitment to shared governance, I would like to see...you know, that's a hard question, Travis, because I'm not completely discontent. I'm not so deeply unhappy. If anything, what I perceive to be the challenges for Rhet/Comp, ... are just challenges that we are dealing with in higher ed at large. But as of late, it has been a little hard for me to pull apart, ... "what feels like it's a constraint on the discipline vs. a constraint on this bigger ideal that we're tied to and really trying to support," ... I do worry that they're going to flatten every discipline, I worry sometimes that they're going to cause every discipline to take a very oversimplified view of itself, to change curriculum so that we'll only hit the highlights, to remove rigor, to remove time and leisure to think, ... I worry that programs will get shorter, I worry that the value of programs will get undermined and understated, I worry sometimes that we will forget that you can be in this field and be a humanist and a social scientist, or one or the other. I worry that, ... there will be paradigms other than the ones we want to generate dictating the terms of how we live out our work. Practically speaking, I worry that every class would go online even if it's not pedagogically sound for every class to go online, I worry that ... the real thing we need, which is better infrastructure, we won't get; ... but they'll be replaced with other Band-Aid measures. Those are maybe the things I worry about, and I think they would eventually have an impact on our scholarship because we tend to be compelled to deal with the problems that surround us everyday. ... I miss sometimes having the leisure to follow an idea, ... the money should follow the ideas.

[Laughter]

But that ain't the way it is. So, so, I don't know if that's a satisfactory answer, but those are the things I think about, and I suppose that has practical effects all the way down. I mean, I do worry about some changes that might happen in the EWM track that I don't want to see happen because I think we have other problems to solve, ... I sometimes worry that the people who are in control don't have a good, strong, fair sense of just what disciplines can do when they're healthy. When they're nurtured.

TM: This is my first interview, so... I'm not sure if...

KM: Yeah, um...veteran in the room.

TM: You know this genre...

KM: Normally, we would be you know, in full conversation, so you know...

GRABAN: Does that mean I shut us down?

ALL: No, no, no.

KM: No, no, it's just, it's a different group, and, ya know a different vibe, so it's just based on what you wanna share, and ya know, now, we can move to other questions, other conversations you want to have, so if you have anything else, like what are you working on...

GRABAN: Do you want to know more about me or have me follow up on anything? And the answer could be "no."

JE: What projects are you working on?

KM: Yeah, that's what I was gonna ask, like, what *projects*, and you just won something, so...

GRABAN: Okay, so, here's the problem with me, and I'm not recommending this for any of you, it's just not a good way to go through life. I have my foot in two projects all the time, and thankfully that's down from three projects. It hasn't ... been a good way for me to get stuff done quickly. ... [T]hankfully, the longer I go in my career, the more I can narrow my interests, and so now I'm ... thinking a lot about archives as networks, knowledge economies, circulation, ... I'm interested in ... rebuilding our sense of our own disciplinary history by reconstructing archives from metadata. ... [T]rying so hard to see if there are ways we can trace influence, because we don't tend to historicize our influences. We historicize our objects and our people and our places, so that's a project I'm going to work with for a very long time because it allows me to deal with so many things I'm interested in—digital humanities, archives, recovery projects, and you know, just history And that's tied to the MDMP project that I presented on, and ... is turning into a book, ... [I]t wasn't supposed to, but it will.

[Laughter]

KM: Oh, Darn. I have the same problem!

GRABAN: You will have the same problem! You *all* will have the same problem. "It was supposed to be an article, and now it's a book!" ... [I]t's not a well-conceived book, so that's actually the problem. If I were the person who could just say, "I've got five chapters in my head" it would be different. So anyway, that's ongoing, and I love that project because ... a lot of things come out of it, pedagogically and collaboratively. Then I'm working on a brand new book that is going to pick up where a book I just finished left off. This is a very different part of me: this is the part of me that looks at transnationalism, that thinks about political positioning of women diplomats on the world stage, and thinks about irony. This is the linguist side of me. So I just finished a book where I was trying ... to reconstruct a theory of irony for feminist rhetorical studies that's not tied to humor, it's not tied to intention, it's not tied to lying: I wanted us to use it as a critical paradigm, so we could just

say, “Hey, let’s look at irony and understand an entire discourse situation as ironic and ... rethink how we say when retell histories of women in rhetoric.”

JE: Was that an extension of your dissertation?

GRABAN: ... [K]ind of: I really left the dissertation behind. Maybe the kernel, the genesis was in the dissertation, but the dissertation ... got as far as presenting a methodology and then at one point I realized that is not what I was interested in doing. ... I ended up taking the dissertation and breaking it up and doing small things with it and the book grew out of those other small things. ... But when I was doing that I realized I was ... ashamed about my own narrow lens ... Quite frankly, I was looking at white women, and I thought “You know, there’s so much more here.” And I already had an interest in transnationalism. ... I have ... been associated with this group called the International Society for the History of Rhetoric and in 2013 I met up with a group of pan-African scholars, and ended up ... starting a collaboration with them that is now turning into this incredible thing. And what I realized is that in the next irony book I want to look at four geopolitical regions. I want to look at women diplomats on the world stage in the capital region of India, the Middle East—there aren’t that many—and in Western and Sub-Saharan Africa. So, I actually have to go out and get my new corpus. ... Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Liberia’s first elected female president. She served two terms—and actually is still serving—... this country when it was post-conflict. ... [I]t had a terrible global reputation; it was economically impoverished, there were a lot of ills to try to cover over. ... [S]he literally steps in as the first female elected president of this nation ... and she has to go to the UN and report how she’s still trying to battle rape as a national issue, ... [T]he interesting thing about all these women that I’m interested in—Indira Gandhi, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, even Golda Meir (even though I’m not happy with the woman and I never liked her politics)—all were given one nomenclature, they were called the Iron Ladies. And so it’s that trope that I am really trying to disrupt, ... It certainly doesn’t work for women who are leading in a third culture context or in a hybrid context. It doesn’t work for women who are stateless. It does not at all work for women who didn’t inherit a kind of political privilege. It worked for Margaret Thatcher really well! [all laugh] But maybe it hasn’t been the best trope for us to remember let alone gauge the rhetorical performances of these women. So that’s where the next book is going. So I decided to go ahead and start with Africa and then I’ll move to the Middle East and then finish up with the capital region of India. I was fascinated by these regions because ... of political hybridity and cultural hybridity, ... [T]he particular women that I want to study; they don’t only have one nationality. That was way too much, but that’s it for next projects. And there are some smaller things I’m working on.

KM: I have a question about this book project, but it’s more so [about] your process. I’m interested in and I think it might be useful for us—we’re at different phases but still as graduate students—how do you know 1) the difference between a book project versus an article versus whatever other publication opportunity? And then 2) What suggestions might you give for us to approach...to hone it, to strengthen it, to you know make it something that is...you know, useful.

GRABAN: The first thing I would say is that book writing is not easy for me, so if I finish a book it's like a gift from the gods [all chuckle]. It's not a natural genre for me. I actually love articles because I feel like, I don't know, my intellectual capital is tied to things that circulate more quickly and are shorter. ... I am definitely much more comfortable writing articles: I understand the beginning and end point, I understand the scope, I really feel like I get the argument and how much it should do and how much it shouldn't do. So, I'm not a very strong planner and writer of a book. I'll say the book I just finished took me a long time to finish—much longer than it should have mainly because I started out ... treating it as if it were an extension of my dissertation and it truly wasn't. It went through three revisions and resubmits. ... [all chuckle] And it was only in the third revision where I ended up having to sit down and reimagine the whole thing. So it was hard because I felt like I wrote it over a long period of time, and each time I came back to it I was a different scholar. And it occurred to me that I wasn't even ready to write it until the third time, ... Why not wait until you're an associate professor to write a book? It makes a whole lot more sense at that time to write a book [chuckling]; however, you'll be fine. [all laugh] I say you'll be fine because unfortunately I had just too many projects going on at the time. ... I responded to every call that I saw as soon as the dissertation was done [all chuckle]. I wanted to take that dissertation apart and respond to everything, and I did. And that caused me to lose focus. I think I would definitely say, "Keep focus." If you're excited about the dissertation and you see it as a coherent piece of work, begin working on it. I did not do that. I broke it up because I somehow was just a little bored by the [fact that the] dissertation didn't do everything I wanted it to do, ... and that created a little existential crisis for me ... It could just be that I have a terrible time making choices, as well. So what I really want to say is, remain committed to it and believe in it long enough so you won't stop believing in it. ... I disbelieved in it the moment I defended, and I really shouldn't have. [all laugh] I think none of my mentors thought that I was going to disbelieve in it, so they never bothered to tell me that. I think they thought I would turn it around right away and then ... years later, "So where is it? [all laugh] You haven't disbelieved in it, have you?" ... I will just say that the dissertation is the last thing you write as a student, not the first thing you write as a professional. So do something that you think will allow you to find a point of intervention. Don't expect *that thing* to be the book. [F]or us, we actually have to find a new narrative arc, we have to have a reason for being, we have to make it very clear what is our intervention in history or theory or pedagogy. ... I just allowed myself to lose focus. Now in terms of how do I know—how do I identify projects, I say yes to everything and that's not a good thing. It's just that...*I'm so excited!* [all chuckle] I just want to do everything! So I tell you what I find myself doing a lot more of is edited collections. When the calls come out, those jazz me. ... I'll never participate in one where I think the editors aren't good. I'll never participate in one where I think there's a risk of it ... falling through. And I won't participate in one that's not going to be peer-reviewed. ... [I]t's the combination of those three things that makes me feel like participating in the edited collection is helping me improve as a scholar. And what I want is a collaboration as well. You get attention not only from the editors as your collaborators but also from your outside reviewers. ... [I]t is ... the process of doing so many chapters in edited collections that really helped me finish writing my book. ... [O]kay, get focused as, you know, be the scholar you need to be—find a narrative point from start to finish. ... [A]s much as I loved my dissertation, somehow I did lose sight of that. ... I don't tend to publish articles as much. I had a couple lucky breaks early on, and

it really is luck. ... [W]hen I started moving more into rhetoric and digital humanities, I found there was not enough preceding work in the journals, and the reviewers were giving me ... terribly discouraging reviews. So, I ... cooled my heels on that for a couple years. ... Sometimes you have to let the field show it has an interest in that, and then wait until something circulates and ... jump at it. Okay in terms of pragmatic feedback, if you are interested in keeping up an active body of publication—and I don't think you actually have to to be a whole human being—but if you are, then my point of thumb has been, every year, to be working on something that I think is going to be finished, to have something coming out, and then to be identifying a potentially new work. And then even if I have an off year, that means that at least every couple of years I know I have ... something that I can say is done. ... [O]h, but don't start that until after grad school. ... [I]f anyone had told me that before I graduated, I would have said, *You're crazy!* [laughter]