Collin Brooke Interview Transcript

Recorded at the 2014 Rhetoric Society of America conference in San Antonio, Texas

[*Zeugma* theme plays]

Eric Detweiler: Eric Detweiler here, back again with the second in *Zeugma*’s summer interview series. In our last installment, I spoke with the University of Kentucky’s Roxanne Mountford. Up this time is Collin Brooke, associate professor of writing and rhetoric and part of the Composition and Cultural Rhetoric doctoral program at Syracuse University. Dr. Brooke is also the director of electronic resources for the Rhetoric Society of America. He’s the author of the book *Lingua Fracta: Towards a Rhetoric of New Media*. His work has also appeared in such journals as *College Composition and Communication*, *Enculturation*, *Computers and Composition*, and *JAC*. His current projects include a chapter for *Naming What You Know*, which is a forthcoming anthology on threshold concepts from Utah State University Press. He’s also working on an essay that draws together Wayne Booth’s *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent* and Bruno Latour’s *Reassembling the Social*, as well as another project entitled “World War T.” That “T,” by the way, is for trope. This summer, he’s documenting some of his research and reading on Tumblr. If you’d like to follow along, check out rhetbit.tumblr.com. That’s r-h-e-t-b-i-t dot t-u-m-b-l-r dot com. I talked with Dr. Brooke about present and future possibilities for digital rhetoric scholarship, the relationship between social media and academic conferences, and how he’s putting Bruno Latour’s work in conversation with rhetoric. So here we go again: back to the 2014 Rhetoric Society of America conference in San Antonio, Texas.

[spaghetti western music plays: “Mor’s Back” by Chris Saner]

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Detweiler: I’m here with Collin Brooke. So Collin, thanks for taking the time to sit down today.

Collin Brooke: Happy to do so!

Detweiler: In researching the history of the MLA Job Information List, Jim Ridolfo at the University of Kentucky found that the first digital rhetoric job ad was posted in 2000 by Syracuse University. And that ad is, I believe, the one that brought you to Syracuse.

Brooke: It was.

Detweiler: And so given that you were thus, in some ways, the first digital rhetoric hire, how do you think digital rhetoric has changed and developed since that ad’s posting?

Brooke: It was kind of flattering and a little bit weird to think that mine was the first digital rhetoric job. And I think it was largely accidental. Maybe I’m taking credit away from my colleagues at Syracuse, but I think in a lot of ways their ad was testing out a lot of different terminology, and it happened that a lot of it coincided with the things that I was doing. So I really felt like it was an ad that was written for me in a way that MLA ads hadn’t been before. I actually didn’t know that much about Syracuse before I applied there, so it was an ad that went through a different kind of process. In terms of how digital rhetoric’s changing, I think—and I’ve actually written about this a couple times—I think the field is slowly starting to internalize it to the extent that it’s less of a topic to be covered, say, in an isolated course and more like something that infiltrates the infrastructure of what we do, you know. And I mean there’s a sense in which every course that I teach is a digital rhetoric course, even if the topic isn’t “digital rhetoric” per se. And I think that that’s a good thing, but I think that it also kind of works in cycles—like we’re seeing right now with digital humanities: the notion of it becoming, again, sort of a named thing. My guess is that five years from now, a lot of these departments aren’t going to be looking for digital humanities people, but are going to be looking for kind of the same topics that they used to but people who can bring those sorts of methods and perspectives along with them. So I would hope that eventually it will get to the point where digital rhetoric, you know, is part of the toolkit, part of the toolbox. And honestly, I don’t have that many students at Syracuse who I think focus solely on digital rhetoric, but I hope that most of them come through able to sort of that those perspectives on whatever topic they choose. So I would guess that most people don’t sort of hope for the obsolescence of their specialty, [chuckles] but in a sense I think that’s what digital rhetoric people sort of do. Ideally, ten years from now, twenty years from now, we won’t need to advertise and hire “digital rhetoric” people because it’s something that everyone will do.

Detweiler: So maybe less an obsolescence than a sort of, like, naturalization.

Brooke: Yeah, right. Yeah.

Detweiler: Hypothetically, you can imagine that, when the printing press came out, if we had had rhetoric scholars then going, like, “Oh, I’m a print rhetoric specialist.”

[both laughing]

Brooke: “I’m a pencil rhetorician.” Yeah, and obsolescence is the wrong word. More internalization and incorporation, I think. And I’ve gone back and forth. I mean, we think about sort of our own dispensability and the role that we play, and I think: are there things that I do that no one else can do? Are there things that digital rhetoricians do that no one else can do, and is it worth retaining it as a specialty? I kind of go back and forth. I don’t want to argue for my own unimportance, but—I’m not sure how to answer, because there are historians of the book and I’m sure that there are people who are writing about pencils. [Detweiler chuckles] So there is a certain way in which I think there may be sort of specific areas of focus that someone who self-identifies as a digital rhetorician may always be in a position to speak first about, but I still think that internalization is kind of the ideal.

Detweiler: Yeah. I can imagine sort of a difference there between people who are maybe working with online forms of sort of, you know, op-ed discourse or something, or people who really specialize in, like, the rhetoric of advanced coding languages like Python or things like that.

Brooke: Well, yeah. I mean there’s certain pieces of it that are specialized and incredibly time-intensive, and so I’m not suggesting that twenty years from now everyone in rhetoric and composition will know how to program. I don’t think that that’s particularly realistic any more than it is that everyone speaks Latin or Greek. So there is a certain amount of specialization that I think will probably always be the case, but, you know, we don’t have to be able to read Greek to talk about classical rhetoric, necessarily. Similarly, a certain familiarity with databases and archives and understanding kind of the procedurality of coding and the sort of effects that these different technologies have on writing I think is something that should be part of everyone’s toolbox.

Detweiler: Well, we can turn now maybe to one particular tool in this conference’s toolbox, which is—as RSA’s director of electronic services—an app you helped develop for this year’s RSA conference. So we still have a print version of the program for the conference, of course, but we also have this online app that includes a fully digitized version of that program. So how do you imagine and hope that that app, via the digital program and its other features, might shift the way people engage both with the conference and with each other at the conference?

Brooke: High hopes! And I think the reality will set in slowly. It’s actually—I mean it’s kind of a similar answer. I was thinking a little bit about the app as I was answering the last question in that I think, in the same way that digital rhetoric is changing our understanding of rhetoric, I think that these tools and platforms and applications are changing what it means to do scholarship, and I think increasingly some of the talk around kind of the materiality of technology has to do with our practices just as scholars in general, you know? I wrote about this on my blog a little while ago—about how certainly the web, and increasingly these kinds of apps change the way that we interact with conferences. I see graduate students interacting with their colleagues across the country in ways that just weren’t the case when I was in graduate school, and I mean that’s fifteen years. It used to be that these conferences were the place where, like, everyone from around the country would get together and sort of be in the same area at once, and that was the only time you had contact with anybody. And even then, we used to kind of circulate through the conference like packs of wolves from individual programs. You know, you could walk into the hotel bar and you could look at the table, and each table would be staked out by all the people from one program, all the people from another program—

Detweiler: Like a middle-school lunchroom.

Brooke: Yeah! And I think that’s shifting, partly because of Twitter, partly because of Facebook—that conferences aren’t the sole point of interaction anymore, and so one of the things that I think about with the app is the idea of sort of building on the energy of a face-to-face conference, but also creating a resource that people might use later on to kind of maintain contact and to sort of feed into that. And I mean, I think we’re going to try and push the RSA website in some of those directions as well. Because I really think that sort of much more distributed contact is one of the ways that the academy is shifting. Part of our ineffectuality sometimes at effecting change in our local circumstances comes from just not knowing how other people have done it, and there’s so much more conversation that’s happening across institutions now. You know, and social media’s a small part of that, but I think it’s an important part of that. And things like conference apps, I think, can help to fuel that somewhat. It gives people a chance to interact with the conference ahead of time—you know, the Twitter activity at this conference I would guess by the end of the first day will exceed the whole activity from the last conference. You know, and that’s certainly the case for 4Cs, it’s the case for MLA. It’s getting to be at some of the smaller conferences that you can follow them online and honestly get just about as much out of them with a handful of active people at that conference who are tweeting the talks and sort of interacting with it. I feel like I’ve attended some of these conferences virtually in a way that’s cool. It gives us access to so much more information and so many more conference presentations, and ways of making contact with other people who are doing similar work to our own. And I think that the way our conferences will sort of fit in to our disciplinary activity will change eventually as a result. I think we’ll still need to kind of think through how that’s going to happen. But I hope that this conference app is one of the ways that people start to do that thinking.

Detweiler: This next question is maybe a more theoretical way of thinking about the way people and also non-people or nonhumans interact. So one of your projects is a sort of mash-up between Wayne Booth, who was a twentieth-century rhetorician, and Bruno Latour, who’s an influential figure in the sociology of science and in some other arenas—increasingly in rhetoric as well. In that piece, you discuss Latour’s concepts of “actors” and “networks,” and actor-network-theory—whichh owes quite a bit to Latour—has become a key theory for current scholars of digital rhetoric and digital literacies. So given your claim that Latour has significant things to offer rhetoric scholars, I was wondering if you could give us a quick gloss of actor-network-theory and lay out what you think it offers rhetoric. I acknowledge that this is sort of daunting—like, explain Bruno Latour in thirty seconds or less.

Brooke: Right, right. And Clay Spinuzzi’s book is one of my favorite books on actor-network-theory. I feel like most of what I have to say is probably going to be secondary or would point towards his book because it’s a really nice take on it. I mean, I’ve been reading Latour for a long time, and when *Reassembling the Social* came out, like I’d read *We Have Never Been Modern* and I wrote about it—that came out in the 2000 *JAC* piece on the posthuman—and I’d read a couple of his other books. I knew of him sort of as science studies, but *Reassembling the Social*—for whatever reason it sort of made everything that he had done kind of click together for me. So I mean, my first point to kind of gloss on actor-network-theory is that it’s descriptive rather than explanatory, and it’s a hard lesson to learn and to actually enact because we want to move to the explanation stuff really quickly. I mean, we love explanations. And Latour talks about just tracing out connections, and the connections not assuming that humans are the only thing worth connecting. For him, a network is an account of a phenomenon, and he reserves the term in *Reassembling the Social* for a really well-written account—one that kind of credits sufficiently not only the human but the nonhuman actors that are part of that network. It’s a different definition of “network” than I think most people use, and I don’t even know that I necessarily have gotten all the way there. I tend to think of myself as on this kind of spectrum from zero to Latour, [Detweiler laughs] and I’m probably not all the way there because I still really love explanations. Things that explain things resonate for me, and I haven’t quite sort of reconciled his definition of “network” with some of the others that are floating out there.

Detweiler: It sounds like, to an extent, maybe to talk about actor-network-theory in Latour’s sense, what you would have to do is maybe describe let’s say the Twitter interactions that would occur between people at and around a conference or something like that rather than sort of universalizing what a network is.

Brooke: Yeah, it’s hard to articulate. But I mean, honestly even “articulation” is a term that figures in there as well. One of the things that has always struck me about that book—and it’s probably my favorite of his books—is the way he talks about writing in there, and he talks about sort of these accounts of things as our laboratories. He’s actually talking about social science, but I think it applies to the humanities as well: the idea that that’s where we risk failure, and it’s challenging to think of our own work that way. We may not sort of accomplish a great deal in our writing, but I think we’re also pretty averse to, like, risking failure in it. And that’s something that I think about a lot: whether my writing works, and am I risking failure in it, and am I giving my work room to actually fail. Which is kind of counter-intuitive, but it makes sense given his description of networks. I think you have to risk not being able to achieve it in order to actually accomplish something with it—I worry that I’m sounding mystical here. [chuckles]

Detweiler: I think it’s probably hard to talk about without—because you don’t want to be too concrete and risk trying to pin it down in a certain way.

Brooke: Yeah, right.

Detweiler: But it is interesting because failure has become a topos for some humanities scholars in a certain way, like Jack Halberstam’s book *The Queer Art of Failure*. And I think there’s more attunement in rhetoric pedagogy to allowing students space to sort of fail in what they’ve written and then think about that failure.

Brooke: With Allison Carr, I wrote the piece on failure for the threshold concepts book that’s coming out soon, and I think our threshold concept was that failure is an important part of writing. And it’s something we definitely struggle with in our pedagogy, and I think we struggle with it in our writing too. We’re so invested in being the people who are right and the people who know, we don’t think about our work in terms of what it risks. It makes me think of the 4Cs.

Detweiler: “Risk and Reward” is the theme for next year, yeah.

Brooke: And that’s far away from the question of providing a gloss of actor-network-theory.

[Detweiler laughs]

Detweiler: But maybe we can just come back around and say we’ve failed to talk about actor-network-theory, but that doesn’t mean that actor-network-theory can’t help us think about failure.

Brooke: Yeah.

Detweiler: So finally, here, to end this interview: you align both Wayne Booth and Latour with rhetorics of assent, though you note that Latour’s “posthuman rhetoric of assent,” as you call it, differs significantly from Booth’s more humanist approach. One key issue for many scholars of rhetoric, though, is dissent: how to approach and theorize about, let’s say, dissensus in the classroom, or dissent as a political phenomenon, and so on and so forth. So do you think it’s possible, or maybe even worthwhile, to push Latour’s rhetoric of assent—whichh sometimes seems to have a serious bent toward order and systemization—in order to account for, or even just leave room for, dissensus? Or from what you were saying, it may already be in there with some of the failure stuff and things like that.

Brooke: Right. I think it kind of is. It was interesting to go back and read Booth’s book. I had read it as part of the core course in rhetoric that I had at [The University of Texas at] Arlington. And it’s not a book that I think a lot of people pay attention to in our field, but it’s very much at the beginning of kind of the emergence of the field. And Booth is coming at rhetoric more sort of philosophically than maybe rhetoric and composition does, but he’s also sort of coming at it at the end of a fifty- or sixty-year stretch of kind of a positivist philosophy, and he’s responding to people that we don’t read very often in the field.

Detweiler: You mention Bertrand Russell, I think?

 Brooke: Yeah, yeah. That’s a big one. I mean, he’s really arguing against sort of default skepticism. And I definitely don’t think that he’s arguing for, like, we should just all get along. That’s not his point. And he starts his book in the context of the political protests over Vietnam in the late ‘60s, early ‘70s, and saying that what’s happening on these campuses is that they’re not even able to have a conversation about their disagreements because there isn’t kind of that—in humanist terms, you would say something like “respect.” And I don’t know that it necessarily even needs to be that, but I think we do see the same kinds of things happening today: where the only way to be heard, say, politically is to kind of be strong counter-statement. I don’t want to say, like, nasty things about one party or another party, but I mean you see these strategies in these political primary races where you’re never allowed to say that something’s a good idea, even if it was your idea to begin with, because if you do that you sort of give up some sort of oppositional juice that, like, is what you’re running on. I mean, it’s almost politics by disposition rather than any sort of policy or proposal. It’s so strongly just oppositional. And so I don’t think Booth wants, you know, that we all eventually agree with one another. I think that he makes room for that disagreement, but there has to be some sort of initial “yes.” You have to be willing to consider the idea that your opposition has reasons, whether you agree with them or not, or dissent. It shifts with Latour, for me, because the assent is not that humanist kind of respect for another person’s position so much as it is—and I’m drifting into a whole separate area of stuff, but—understanding that things have rhetorics, and that it’s not just one-stage-removed kind of application, like somebody built this chair so this chair embodies the rhetoric that that person holds. ‘Cause it’s never that simple. I mean, that’s such a massive kind of reduction of the way that the world works. I mean, and maybe that’s one of the places where actor-network-theory kind of connects with this, is this idea that you trace everything out, and you see the vast kind of interaction of forces and rhetorics and everything that’s kind of shaping even just like the smallest thing. I mean, [Latour’s] *Aramis* is a book-length treatment of just this one train. And so that’s where I sort of see that assent. I think of it a little bit in terms of Derrida, who talked about saying “yes” to the text twice: there has to be that first sort of affirmative attempt at understanding before you can disagree with it, before you can dissent from it. For Latour, that assent is that notion of tracing those connections, of connecting those various things and treating nonhumans as mediators rather than intermediaries—you know, that nonhumans are not just conduits for the rhetorics of the people who, you know, create them and/or use them. And the funny thing about going back and looking at Booth closely is that he actually sort of gestures towards nonhuman rhetorics in some of the footnotes in that book. He talks about rhetoric as this force that could conceivably be ascribed to nonhumans as well. And so it was interesting—just having decided that I was going to kind of treat them equally—it’s interesting to see how much one sort of began to resemble the other. And I mean, they’re clearly different in important ways, but the way that they ultimately fit together for the chapter was kind of fun. But back to the original question: I think that it makes room for dissensus, and I think we’re at a point now where, with dissensus, I think of it less in the negative sense and more, because our contemporary politics is so oppositional, that it actually is a positive goal to work towards. You know, I mean honestly: to have the other side admit that you have a position seems to me to almost now be a victory. So maybe we need to assent to the dissent. Another level to that idea of agreeing to disagree. I mean, even agreeing to consider that someone is worth disagreeing with or something like that. Latour is relevant especially for the connection to science, and I think about issues like climate change and vaccination where people are so opposed to the people associated with those positions that they don’t even learn the position. When you turn climate change and other, you know, matters of fact into things that can be opposed without ever even hearing the position that’s being espoused, it has real consequences for public discourse, and ultimately for the health of the world, in ways that I think are just frightening—to think that we’re at that point. And so if a rhetoric of assent helps, that’s probably a good thing.

Detweiler: Yeah. All right. Well, Collin Brooke, thanks so much again!

Brooke: Yeah! Thank you.

[“Mor’s Back” fades in]