Transcript of Interview with Roxanne Mountford

Transcribed by Eric Detweiler

[*Zeugma* theme plays]

Eric Detweiler: Hi! This is Eric Detweiler. The *Zeugma* team’s on hiatus for the summer, but I’m going to be bringing you a special interview series to fill that podcast-shaped void in your heart. In May, a number of graduate students from the Digital Writing and Research Lab—myself included—attended the 2014 Rhetoric Society of America conference in San Antonio, Texas. During the conference, I sat down with five scholars who are working at the intersections of rhetoric and technology: from the University of Kentucky, Roxanne Mountford and Jeff Rice; from Syracuse University, Collin Brooke; from Texas Tech University, Joyce Locke Carter; and from Clemson University, Victor Vitanza. Those interviews will be released individually over the course of the summer. Up first is my conference with Roxanne Mountford. Dr. Mountford was the founding director of writing, rhetoric, and digital studies at the University of Kentucky, which she led to departmental status in April of this year. She’s also an associate professor in that department. She’s served on the Rhetoric Society of America’s board of directors as well as the editorial board for the journal *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*. She’s the author of *The Gendered Pulpit: Preaching in American Protestant Spaces* and coauthor of *Women’s Ways of Making It in Rhetoric and Composition*. Much of her current work is focused on the history of speaking and writing instruction in American colleges and universities throughout the twentieth century. She is, along with Bill Keith, one of the primary authors of “The Mt. Oread Manifesto,” which was published in issue 44.1 of *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*. That manifesto calls for a reuniting of speaking and writing instruction under the banner of rhetoric—a reunion that Mountford and Keith position as an important step forward for civic education. I talked with Dr. Mountford about the manifesto, the origins of Kentucky’s writing, rhetoric, and digital studies department, and her hopes for the future of rhetorical education. So let’s head to San Antonio!

[Chris Saner’s “Mor’s Back” plays, reminiscent of a Spaghetti Western soundtrack]

Detweiler: I’m here to talk with Roxanne Mountford. So Roxanne, thanks for taking the time out of your day.

Mountford: It’s my pleasure, Eric.

Detweiler: So I wanted to start off by talking a little bit about the University of Kentucky—where you are—your new Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Studies. And I wanted to start by asking you a little bit about what you see those three sort of sub-areas having to do with each other, what the connections are between these different fields that you’re trying to articulate and put to work in this new department.

Mountford: Sounds great. I would say first of all that when we got started working on this plan, there were two pieces that it seemed to me very important to try to highlight. And one was rhetoric studies as a focus of attention for a group like ours—especially public rhetoric, was something that was really important to me—and the second part of it was the whole digital side of everything that we do. It seemed to me that there are plenty of places, including our neighbors in Louisville, that do a great job with writing studies and literacy studies, and I didn’t want to duplicate that. I wanted to make sure that what we did was additive in the Commonwealth of Kentucky and in our region. And so that was the main reason why I chose public rhetoric as a kind of focus for hiring, and then digital studies as the other. In terms of how they fit together—well, it seems kind of obvious to me, but let me take a gander at it, if I can do it. I think of rhetoric as the umbrella term for all three. Now some people would say writing studies, but for me rhetoric is the older and is the more ecumenical of the areas, and what it does is theoretically tie it all together. In a unit such as ours, we’re always working on consumption and production, so we’re thinking about analysis as well as production in everything that we do all the time, and there has to be some unifying way of understanding that. And so that for me is rhetoric, it’s rhetoric studies. Digital studies, then, is slightly different insofar as we have people on our faculty whose focus in digital studies is more cultural in some cases, in some cases it’s more almost totally production-oriented. We have a really talented documentary film writer named Tom Marksbury—

Detweiler: Oh, wow.

Mountford: —and Tom would be in that category where he has never in his life done anything with rhetoric. He would see himself more as a creative writer, and so he does the writing side of documentary films, but he has a number of films and he’s also put out a couple of books—keeps in touch with the creative community in Lexington. So he’s an example of someone who’s more on the digital production side and doesn’t help us so much with the rhetoric side. Which is fine: when you’re building a new department, when you build something from scratch, what you’re trying to do is sort of fill out the whole dance card.

Detweiler: Mmhmm.

Mountford: You know, who can teach what courses in whose specialty. But if you think about who we hired—Adam Banks, for example—Adam has spent all his time thinking about African-American rhetoric as a focus of study, on the one hand, and he also has been writing about the digital side of that. But he’s sort of smack in the middle of what we were sort of looking for. Jenny and Jeff Rice also: the two of them sort of constitute two pieces of what we do really incredibly well. Jenny works on public rhetorics—I mean, her book is just phenomenal. And Jeff’s work too—I mean, his new book on *Digital Detroit*: also phenomenal. And he does more of the digital cultural side, both of them do theory really well. I would say I’m not a great theorist. I do more of the pragmatic side of rhetoric. So then we have Jan Fernheimer, who does more of the rhetoric and cultural piece for us. So all of these scholars who are, you know, our senior scholars have done work in writing studies or have done the practical side of digital at some point or another, but have more of an area in rhetoric, on the one hand, or in digital studies on the other.

Detweiler: So you’ve talked a little bit about the scholarly focuses that all the different excellent faculty you have in your department are working on. Is there anything in particular in terms of pedagogy and teaching that you see this particular department making possible?

Mountford: [sighs] Yes. That’s the brass ring, isn’t it? Just the ability to not be part of an English department—or, if we were coming out of comm studies, it would be not to be part of comm—and all of the ways in which it holds us back from understanding ourselves across public discourse and the public sphere as a focus of interest. So, you know, for us, rhetoric and teaching rhetoric makes possible things like a course in public advocacy, as an example—different kinds of courses in rhetoric: theory, history, comparative history. And then a number of different kinds of digital courses: digital composing, visual rhetoric. I mean, it’s just the ability to put our energy into a fully realized undergraduate curriculum. It’s just not something you can do very easily when you’re within another department. So when we came out of English, for example, all we had were a couple of writing courses—just a small handful that were left behind. And we took those with us. In some cases, we’re offering seats to some English majors in a cross-listing arrangement, but, for the most part, the pedagogical opportunity has to do with our ability to focus. It’s not different from what you all do at Texas. We probably have a few more courses in terms of variety, but we don’t have a graduate program yet that we have to fill out. So we’re really spending all our energy on the undergraduates right now.

Detweiler: And so do you all have a major program specifically within your department then?

Mountford: Yes! On April 4th, the board of trustees approved our new department and our new major.

Detweiler: Congratulations!

Mountford: Yeah! It’s a B.A. and a B.S. in writing, rhetoric, and digital studies. There are three sort of—we call them tracks. They’re really not formalized; it’s going to be an advising kind of situation. One is in professional writing, one is rhetorical history and theory, and then one is digital studies. So we’re envisioning three different kinds of students that might come to us. So those three tracks constitute different kinds of students and different kinds of careers. So we really will be able to train students to go out and go right into editing; we foresee a lot of students going on and doing something with social media and writing for corporations or nonprofits. I think that’s going to be a big part of who we are going to focus on. And then there’ll be some students who want to do stuff for government, who envision themselves going on to law school, and I think we think the rhetoric track will be great for that. And digital studies will, I think, attract some students who are not even going to major, that will just do a minor in our area. Especially in fine arts—fine arts has a sort of digital piece that they’re doing and they think of us as providing the writing and more of the analytical side of media and digital media. So I think that’s going to be really great. Now the first thing that we did, prior to being a department and having a major, was to pull together the public speaking and the writing requirement into one. So before any of this building happened, the first thing we did—and the reason why we got to build—was because we got money from a big gen-ed reform that was underway. And there was a writing requirement that was four credit hours— it was basically freshman composition—and then across campus there was a defunct oral comm requirement. And so in committees, and it was a vast organizational project that involved a lot of people—

Detweiler: I’m sure.

Mountford: —in two different colleges, but we were able to set up an oral, written, and visual communication requirement that constitutes a collaboration between WRD and the Department of Communication. And so both of us are teaching this two-course sequence. Originally we were cross-training each other, also, to teach each other’s fields. So it was an opportunity to really kind of pull rhetoric back into the core of that curriculum and to help students see that studying writing, studying public speaking or other kinds of oral comm, and the visual or the digital side of production should be seamless. There are differences, but they should all be part of the same basic set of skills that they will need when they leave college. So we did that first. In lots of ways, that also would not have been possible if we hadn’t organized separately from English. Because English resisted it the most, which was kind of interesting.

Detweiler: Yeah. And so you’ve spoken a little bit to this already, certainly, in your responses, but one other thing I was thinking about and wanted to give you the chance to speak to more extensively if you’d like is how you see this particular department participating in or maybe shifting the course of the future of English studies and communication studies. And where those might go, both sort of inside and outside the academy, in the coming decades.

Mountford: I was just—on the plane ride over here, I was sitting next to someone who’s in an English department as a rhetoric and composition specialist, and we had a conversation that I’ve been having now all across the nation. It goes exactly the same way: “We can’t get hires, we can’t get any traction in being part of an undergraduate curriculum in English, we’re very marginalized but we bring in almost all of the credit hours. So we’re really tired of this; we’re really getting tired of this marginalization.” And I say to them, “Why don’t you leave? Because, you know, your dean would really like to give you those lines because it’s much more productive for the university to have more writing lines, because we do so much service in the university and, you know, the more people you have, the better that work gets done. And then you have less, you know, use for adjuncts and so forth.” You know, it depends on the kind of school. I mean, the smaller schools couldn’t have pulled this off quite as well. But still, it is a puzzlement to me that more people don’t just pick up and move. So I think there are going to be two things that this change will do for the United States, you know, field of English studies. One is I think it’s going to make it possible for more to leave, and the reason I say this is because our dean was chair of history at Michigan State and they have a separate—you know, they have writing and American studies [transcriber’s note: now the Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures]. So that department—he watched it happen and he saw that once they split, you know, writing studies got very large because it was really a viable focus for building. And so when he came down and we were asking him for the same thing, it was, “Oh, yeah. I’ve seen that before. No problem, I will do that.” And so it will make it possible for deans to see, “Oh, there’s another organizational model and we can do this.” The other way it might work—and this is happening at places like Texas Tech—is that our leaving and more places leaving the way we did also puts pressure on English departments to go, “Hey, if we want to hold on to all those credit hours, we might want to think about reforming.” But I’m a little worried about English studies because all the conversations that were going on in the eighties and nineties about reforming English studies around writing and culture, putting production more into the picture—that seems to have gone away. In its place is just a much more, even more locked-down focus on periods—literary periods. So I don’t have a lot of hope for English studies right now. I feel really sad about it because there are a lot of people in our field who really like being in English studies, but I don’t see much future in it. You know, Tom Miller says that English departments are going to be the classics departments of the twenty-first century. And it’s possible, I think, that it will go down that way if English doesn’t figure out a way to think more about what we do as part of what they do.

Detweiler: So yeah, I guess the last thing that I wanted to ask you about, which is very tied to all these issues we’ve been talking about, is: in a recent issue of *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, you were the coauthor—along with William Keith, who happens to be sitting down the table from us—of “The Mt. Oread Manifesto.” And since you chose the style of the manifesto for that, I didn’t know if you wanted to end today with issuing any sort of particular manifesto-style calls [Mountford laughs] or reiterating any of the things that you put in the manifesto.

Mountford: I should really pass the mic to Bill.

Detweiler: You certainly can if you’d like!

Mountford: Okay. Well, I’ll say something and I’ll pass the mic to Bill, because I think since he just happened to sit down this is perfect. Yes. I think, to cycle back to the first thing I said about organizing WRD around rhetoric studies, I think that we really do need—in rhetoric and composition studies and in communication—to start thinking a lot more about rhetoric as an organizing principle around which we think about general education. I don’t mean just the required writing and oral comm courses, which I think need to be merged, but if we have rhetoricians involved in that process, it allows us to start thinking about civic education again in a much more targeted way because we, again, can get the focus back out on the public, the public sphere. Composition studies has a tendency to pull things in to the individual writer, and even though that has been a sort of dead idea for a really long time—the romantic notion of the writer in his or her creative mind—that’s still the dominant paradigm across which a lot of composition studies is taught. And so I think what makes this problematic is the idea that academic writing is the thing that we’re doing. Now when you make academic writing the focus of your work, it means that you’re not focusing on the public sphere and you’re not thinking about rhetoric across a lifetime of use and in different places. And for me, Sharon Crowley was the one who really nailed this in saying, from a point of view of epistemology, we are still in the current-traditional paradigm and we’re going to have to rehabilitate rhetoric—she says classical rhetoric. It would be nice to look at a better inventional model, you know, for what we’re doing in the first year—but that’s why I think we need rhetoricians to be doing this work. So can I pass this to Bill?

Detweiler: Yeah! Most certainly.

Keith: Okay, I’m happy to have the chance to weigh in on this. It’s a little bit pretentious to say so, but I’d like to think that the stuff Roxanne and I are doing is actually fulfilling the dearest wishes of Mike Leff, who, in his last years, talked constantly about the fact that, as rhetoricians, we are stronger together than we are apart and it’s all about pedagogy. It’s not all about theory. And the thing is, in one sense you can look at it as: A hundred years ago we drifted apart; we’re not going to drift back together. There are many, many moments of institutional and disciplinary and theoretical inertia that are going to work to keep us apart. And so the notion of posing this as a manifesto is, we don’t have the last word but we have to have the first word. It has to start someplace, and the group in Kansas last summer thought, “Well, here’s a project that could actually bring people together to begin the conversation which could create this kind of alliance.” Because it is not going to be easy on any of these levels to do it, and it’s going to take a lot of people with will to do it. But as Roxanne has pointed out, this is the moment. This is the kairotic moment where we could really strike. Ten years ago at the ARS, it was not quite the right moment. The landscape has shifted enough and people’s understanding has shifted enough that we might actually make something happen.

Detweiler: Thank you very much! Well I’ll pass this back real quick. [to Mountford] So anything you’d like to add to wrap up?

Mountford: What he said. [both laugh]

Detweiler: Perfect. Well, Roxanne Mountford and William Keith, thank you both for taking some time to talk with us here today.

Mountford: Thank you, Eric. Thanks very much.

Detweiler: Yeah!

[“Mor’s Back” plays]