Transcript of Jeff Rice Interview

Transcribed by Eric Detweiler

[Zeugma theme plays]

Eric Detweiler: Hey out there. This is Eric Detweiler bringing you the third installment in Zeugma's summer interview series, recorded at the 2014 Rhetoric Society of America conference in San Antonio, Texas. This time, we're featuring Jeff Rice, who's a professor in the newly established Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Studies at the University of Kentucky. If you're interested in more about that department, by the way, you can check out our previous interview with Roxanne Mountford. Dr. Rice is the author of *Digital Detroit: Rhetoric and Space in the Age of the Network* as well as Th*e Rhetoric of Cool: Composition Studies and New Media*. You can check out his blog, Yellow Dog, at ydog.net. His current book project is entitled *Craft Obsession*. Part of that project, which we discuss in the interview, focuses on what Rice calls "networked terroir." He expands terroir, a concept frequently associated with the physical environments in which wines are produced, to think about the social and technological contexts in which products circulate—craft beer, for instance. He also contributed a chapter to the 2014 Parlor Press anthology Invasi*on of the MOOCs: The Promise and Perils of Massive Open Online Courses*. In that chapter, which is entitled "MOOCversations: Commonplaces as Argument," Rice relates his experiences in English Composition I: Achieving Expertise, a writing MOOC facilitated by Duke University. In our conversation, Rice talks about the portion of *Craft Obsession* he presented at the conference, about "MOOCversations," and about his perspectives on digital pedagogy and the University of Kentucky's new department. So here we go to San Antonio.

[Chris Saner's Spaghetti Western-flavored "Mor's Back" plays]

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Detweiler: Okay! I'm sitting here talking to Jeff Rice of the University of Kentucky. Thanks for taking the time to sit down today, Jeff.

Jeff Rice: Thank you.

Detweiler: So I wanted to start off to talk a little bit about the presentation that you'll be giving at RSA this year—maybe a sort of highlight, sort of abstract version of what it is you're going to be presenting on.

Rice: Well, it's a fairly large roundtable, so it'll just be a very short piece that comes out of the book I've been working on that I think is about done, called *Craft Obsession*, about craft beer and social media. And so it's from a chapter that deals more with issues of terroir and what I called "networked terroir," basically, which is thinking in terms not of fixed taxonomies of place, obviously, right? Which is the way it works in wine, where mostly the ingredients are what add to this kind of rhetorical meaning of what is the wine, if it's the land or the air or the soil, et cetera. So instead thinking more in terms of an aggregation of experiences, and emotions, and places, and things like that that are what fulfill my experience or anybody's experience when they think of this kind of product as being from some particular place.

So in terms of the digital part, I mean, it's digital—like a lot of things I do—not in terms of, let me show you some kind of multimedia whatever, but more conceptual. It borrows from digital logics and terms like aggregation and networks, the way these things come together. So if I think of something called a West Coast IPA, or if I think of Sonoma County in California as having terroir, there’s nothing about the land that actually makes those hoppy IPAs be what they are, be associated with place. It's more of emotional feelings or other kinds of experiences, or the way I relate or aggregate a number of breweries, in this case, into one space. What'll be kind of the focus of this is Russian River's Pliny the Elder. And then there's a little more, too, as I also explore the way terroir also moves in the digital spaces too. Because the minute I go online and talk about it, or how did I find out about it—obviously it was engagements online when I lived in Missouri and we don't get Russian River, and I get interested in something and I buy it online—well, how did I even know about it? It has to do with the way the discourse moves through online spaces and becomes aggregated, and that includes hype and the way other people describe something. In some ways, it's also how desire gets created. Interest gets created, or eventually I engage with it and then I leave what I call a footprint online too when I make a review of it online and put it in the RateBeer database.

So I extend the sense of terroir from the physical space—like, let's say, where it's produced—to the digital space where I also can engage with it. So it's just a small part of a chapter of the book. There's not a lot I can really say in ten minutes other than try to sketch out this idea of networked relationships when it comes to, in this case, products and our relationship to certain kinds of products. Aggregation can be with anything, but in this case the focus is on a particular product, which is craft beer.

Detweiler: So is the sort of networks and the aggregation stuff what drives the larger book project, or what's sort of the bigger thing?

Rice: Yeah. The bigger thing is to think about craft beer—

Detweiler: Oh, okay.

Rice: —and the way it plays out in social media, but also the way it creates a kind of rhetoric of obsession. But unlike other types of texts, it's not just that I'm studying something like an ethnographer. It's also about me, because when I talk about the rhetoric of obsession, I'm talking about myself as well. And so I'm being very much a part of the story that I'm trying to tell and the various logics that I'm trying to pull out from what Tony Sampson calls "contagions": the way things repeat, particularly anecdotal stories and things like this, or networked aggregation, or the way I think delivery works in a networked way, or the way I think obsession overall works in terms of sharing logics or permission marketing or things of this sort. So each chapter plays those out, and it's kind of a study of how things work in social media spaces, but it's also about my own engagement in those spaces as well. And so I'm very much a part of the study, which makes it a little bit different than maybe other kinds of studies. If you think of Roland Barthes, there's a moment where he says, "I'm the reference of every image," so it's more about that I can't speak about something without myself being anchored in that something.

So even in my own work in the first book, I mean, there was some relationship because I'm talking about a moment in composition studies history—well, its relationship to me is because I'm in composition studies. And the second book's a little more personal because, when I write about Detroit, I lived in Detroit and taught there for five years. But *now* it gets really personal, and so it's about my own obsession—it’s not just about other people’s obsession and the way these things play out and how they contribute. In these social media logics there's a lot of collaboration, there's a lot of interaction, a lot of sharing, et cetera, but I'm there too and I'm a part of it. So it's also much more personal. There's that moment in *The Medium is the Massage* where McLuhan says something like, with new technologies, we have more and more fear of self-expression; with the advent of new technologies, we continuously fear self-expression. Well, it’s the opposite because self-expression is very much a part of new media. You know, at the most basic level, obviously, you tweet, you blog, you share. Instead of that history of writing through Ong where Ramus divorced the personal from the object of study. This taxonomy doesn't exist. It's like a folksonomy: I'm as much named as the thing I'm naming. So the tag I put on craft beer, or social media, or obsession, or whatever, I put on myself. I'm part of that tag as well, you know?

Detweiler: Yeah! So I think that gives us a place to maybe turn toward another sort of context in which your work is happening, which is the institutional context of the newly formed Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Studies at the University of Kentucky. So I'm interested to see, as this is a very new department, how you see those three subfields fitting together and how you see your work engaging with what you're hoping that that department might make possible.

Rice: So we came to University of Kentucky about three years ago, and this is my fourth stop: University of Detroit, Wayne State, University of Missouri. And when we came over, we started doing this Division of Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Studies. The best way I could start to explain to anybody—not just outside the university, but within the University of Kentucky—what it is we're doing is to say: well, you know, we're a bunch of disgruntled English professors. Because we really are! A lot of the history of English and the rhet/comp faculty over the last thirty or so years is we're the marginalized folks. And there are exceptions, of course, and there are places where rhet/comp people become chairs or have dominant roles in the department. But for the most part, we often feel on the margins: that we're not appreciated, that our work isn't valued, even if our graduate students are getting employment and the literature graduate students are not. Or even if we're sometimes, in some cases, the most productive members in terms of publishing in the department, we're still not as valued. So it's an opportunity, you know, for us to continue what a lot of other people are doing elsewhere, which is split from the English department where, even though we have PhDs in English, we just don't feel at home anymore. We don't study literature, we're not interested in the same things overall. We're interested in rhetoric and writing, and it gave us a great opportunity to be a part of something new. And, you know, it's part of a larger conversation. We're not the only ones. There are plenty of other programs that have gone this route, and we're glad to be a part of that movement.

In terms of how expression works, how communication works, you can't divorce rhetoric and writing and digital studies. Those are always intertwined, they're always part of the same thing. And now it's our challenge to bring that kind of teaching to the undergraduates at the University of Kentucky, and hopefully also show some responsibility—which, I mean, I’ve felt for a long time, in the English departments I’ve been in, there was no responsibility towards employment. And that's not to turn what we do into vocationalism, but it's also to say that, if we're going to talk a lot about things like student debt and if we're going to talk about the time to graduation and all this, we also have to share in the responsibility of teaching things that we think are valuable—even in a generic way—in terms of employment upon graduation and not to act like, "Well, it's all for the greater good, you learn to appreciate the text," et cetera.

The anecdote I like to tell all the time: When I was at Missouri and I was teaching the capstone course, at the end of the course the chair of the department wanted to come in, just talk to students and say, you know, "We're glad you came to Missouri. We're glad you're in our program. Any questions?" And one student raised their hand and said, "Well, I don't understand. Why can't we have a job fair like all the other departments do?" And her only response was, "Well, English doesn't lend itself to that." That's the wrong answer! Someone just spent four years majoring in something and you tell them that what they've done is not directly applicable to a job. I don't buy into that, actually, and I'm hoping what we'll do is also bring in that responsibility by the content we teach, the subject matter we teach, the skills we'll teach regarding production, ability to communicate in writing and new media environments, and then hopefully the networking opportunities that we can develop over the next few years for students within Kentucky and the surrounding regions. That we can take more responsibility in establishing relationships so that we can place them in internships and also, hopefully, in future jobs.

Detweiler: Tied into that, you recently had a piece in an anthology from Parlor Press called *Invasion of the MOOCs*—which, I was especially excited to see, the whole thing's licensed under Creative Commons, so it's downloadable for free, which is a really wonderful resource, I think. And you talked in there—with MOOCs, massive open online courses—that the responses to them have sort of tended to go towards the extremes of enthusiasm and alarmism, and you talk about wanting to have more of a conversation about "pedagogical sameness": the fact that, in many ways, this sort of very lecture-driven model of the MOOC is not that different from a lot of what happens in physical classrooms in certain ways. And you set yourself up sort of wanting to look for a more disruptive form of disruption than MOOCs, which have been set up as disruptive in a lot of ways—but you cite Cathy Davidson to say that maybe that's not necessarily the case. So given what you were talking about, about your hopes for undergraduate pedagogy in this new department, within your own sort of pedagogical practices, how do you seek to carry out the things you were talking about in terms of employment and all those other things for students, as well as the sort of disruption that you talk about in that piece?

Rice: Yeah. Well, I mean, there isn't one moment of disruption. The problem with the MOOC thing is that, on the hyperbolic enthusiasm, it's like, "Oh, it's going to change and revolutionize," and on the other side of the binary, the hyperbolic negativity is, "Oh my gosh, it's going to disrupt all the lovely face-to face-stuff, and it's just contributing to running tenure-line jobs out of the university." Neither one is really true. They're both just hyperbolic reactions, as if one moment is so disruptive. When—you have to look at the larger picture—we're always in a moment of disruption when it comes to communicative technologies and writing. Historically, every moment is a moment of disruption. It's just—this is the McLuhan moment in the sixties, saying, "Hey, we're already in a moment of disruption with satellites and television,” and what they were calling new media then. But the only ones who aren't being disrupted, it seems, is higher education, or education in general, which is always slow to catch up to whatever the so-called disruption is and acts like, “Oh my gosh, so that's either a fad, or it's going to destroy everything." But it's not. It just becomes part of the day-to-day. And we're constantly behind in understanding the genres or whatever the disruption is supposedly helping to create, understanding the rhetorical strategies that are more conducive to the new environments that we produce, understanding how the new environments change and alter our relationships to the content or to the forms of expression that we're engaging with. So if anybody's not being disrupted, it's education. All education wants is hyperbolic reaction, either pro or con. And education's response to the new media moment we've been in the last, let's say, you know, twenty to thirty years almost—or if we go back to '93 and the creation of Mosaic—has been Blackboard, basically, and all its predecessors, WebCT and all these things, which is not a disruption. There's nothing about Blackboard or WebCT or any of these things that tap into the way we communicate in online spaces. They're completely outside of it. So we're always behind the 8-ball.

So what most of us have been trying to do for a long time is not even think of what we're doing as revolutionary, radical, or a disruption, but just, like, this is the norm. If I'm trying to teach someone in a class how to use research to aggregate a lot of different ideas into one space in order to come up with an idea of one's own or, let’s say, to join that conversation and contribute, that's—I mean, that's just normal. It's how you work, you know? That's how research online works: there's way too much information, you have to figure out ways to aggregate that information. Then once you aggregate it into a space, what do I do with it? What does it teach me, what does it show me that I wouldn't have known if I'd only looked at pieces of the aggregation? Or how do I bring things together that don't seem to belong together? You can call it the remix, or juxtaposition, or whatever the term is—that's just the day-to-day of communication. That's how all our shows, our films, our texts work. There's nothing really radical about that. You can't communicate any other way. Or you want to talk about just writing online, or design, or layout, or whatever these things are—using video. To go into a classroom today and say, "Well, I'm going to have students create video stories"—it's not radical because that's what a lot of people do. I mean, that's why YouTube is so big. But the idea of knowing how to edit, how to cut, how to bring together the two different parts, how to tell a coherent narrative from a lot of different pieces—those are new media logics and new ways of working, and they're everyday.

The problem is when you frame things in terms of, like, radical disruptions. Disruption doesn't happen at one moment. It happens over a period of time. So the MOOC thing too, or that piece anyway, was like, there was nothing terribly different than what I would have seen in any other first-year writing class. The only difference was, which I was trying to point out there, the student body was not a traditional student body. Those weren't first-year students. Those were either educators or those were people in other countries looking to brush up on their English skills who were already professionals. But in the case of something like the MOOC, that part is never taken into consideration. Like, what kind of role are these people taking on as they enter into this educational space? Because we just call them students, but they're not. They're not students as we would call them. And that's, you know, all the shock value of the ten percent completion rate: well, they're not really students. When I entered into a MOOC, I wasn't a student. I was there playing a completely different role, and so are a lot of other people in there. Most of the people aren't in there to complete and finish the course. They don't have the same traditional concerns, and that's very much also a McLuhan concept from the sixties about what happens to people as they take on their environment and change the way they think of themselves.

So we're doing also the McLuhan thing too, where we're trying to look at the present through a rear-view mirror. When you try to read the whole MOOC situation as if it's a traditional educational moment, and you fret over it, and the critics say, "Ah! See, I told you: they only have ten percent completion." Which is nonsense because it's not really a class in the same sense. And even if it were, ten percent of twenty thousand is the equivalent of a large lecture class anyway. I mean, it's the same thing. It doesn't matter. And also whatever audience was imagined for those types of educational spaces has never been very clear anyway. And that's not because I'm a proponent of MOOCs or an opponent. I'm neither; I don't really care. But it's just to see it as part of a larger conversation of distance learning and education that—it's unfortunate—from our end, like a lot of things we do in academia, we get all excited and hyped up over something and we don't even really understand what it is. We either pro or con it. And as we can see, I mean, the hype overall of MOOCs has died down, and at some point they may start becoming more mature spaces as people really have the time and ability to figure out how to use them. Or maybe they don't—it's just a shell that has the ability to embed video in it and register and keep track of a lot of people. There's nothing really that different from any other content management space. Or you want to talk about, you know, we’ve been doing distance ed forever. So it's not really a disruption to say we're doing distance ed. We've sort of been doing distance ed for a long, long time. People have already done this tracing of correspondence courses, the open university of the seventies—all these things were already there. Many, many people have already completed and taken classes without ever sitting face to face with an instructor. So it's not a disruption in that sense. Disruptions are kind of continuous over time, and eventually maybe there's some switch in the paradigm or the status quo so that the nightly news today doesn't look like it did in 1970. So now today, there's all kinds of stuff all over the screen, there's all this juxtaposition going on, but it's still kind of the same thing. It's still part of the same disruption—that you can become involved in world events and they can be brought into your living room—but it's been going on for a long, long time, and it just starts to look differently over time as institutions begin to adapt more and more. And we're just, in education, always really really really really really, really far behind everything because we're very resistant, for whatever reason—very suspicious in our moments of critique—of anything that's coming along.

Detweiler: To use sort of a fairly well-worn phrase, it sounds like there's like a repetition with a difference happening with MOOCs that is different, but not radically different—even though it's also not the same. Which is—certainly, as you say with the nightly news—something that we certainly see with a lot of media.

Rice: I mean, the content of the course that I talked about in that particular piece was like any other course. She's teaching about expertise, so she shows a photo of Cory Doctorow sitting in his office. I think it had something to do overall with the idea of expertise in the course. But of course, you know, if you don't know who he is—that he runs a website called Boing Boing and it was all about a collection of oddities, and if you don't know about his science fiction, and if you don't know all these things—then you don't see that more nuanced and challenging notions of expertise or who he is or whatever. If you don't know anything about it, then your immediate response is going to be very commonplace. You're going to see this guy sitting in his office and you're going to say, "Well, he must be really smart because he has a lot of books," or, "He's got glasses on." I mean, how much can you really say? You just deliver a commonplace response. So that's what research and aggregation’s about. So I mean, I would say for me, the critique there would have been that that's a very limited response because the prompt itself is not a good technology for pedagogy, that it's just too limiting and the student just doesn't do anything other than react to the immediacy of the prompt and is not involved in whatever it is they're responding to, doesn't know all the surrounding details and ideas, et cetera, and gives you back a commonplace, you know?

So when I'm sitting in our campus and we're doing assessment and we're watching these videos of students giving speeches and it's like, how to save the horse industry, okay? So it's the same concept, because how on earth does an eighteen year old, even in a group of three eighteen year olds giving a presentation, know how to save the horse industry? Unless they've spent the last four or five years of their life embedded in the horse industry—which still, they're only eighteen years old, nineteen years old—I mean, they know more than I would at that age. [Detweiler chuckles] They would know more than I know about the horse industry if they'd just spent five years—you know, since twelve or fifteen or whatever. But they can't save the horse industry. They don't know anything, they're not embedded. And so what do they give you? They give you a bunch of commonplaces and clichés. So it's the same idea as I say in the expertise MOOC: you know, without all that other stuff, you just get a cliché. So that's not taking advantage even of the MOOC environment, which is already online to begin with. A number of ideas and resources could be aggregated through students' work into a space to begin to figure out the kinds of relations and patterns that could be teased out of all that stuff to say, "Okay, now here's a new idea. Here's something I've actually gotten because now I understand what the conversation is,” you know, “I'm seeing the relationships among the items in the material, and I see how they come together, and they give me this new part of the conversation that I can now join in,” rather than just spitting something out where you don't know what it is you're talking about.

Detweiler: And that seems to bring us back around to what you were talking about earlier with aggregation and having students aggregate, like, a large number of texts rather than relying on a few that might lead them, as you said, to more sort of commonplace arguments without the sense of sort of those nuances that might be gathered.

Rice: Right. In the most clichéd writing pedagogy possible, you tell someone to start with a sentence—a topic sentence, thesis, whatever—which doesn't make any sense because it's like, how the hell do I know what it is if I haven't done all the other work, right? First you’ve got to do all the aggregation and all the work, and *then* you see the patterns and a little light bulb comes over your head and you go, "Ah! This is what I want to talk about." And then you can call it a thesis if you want, or a topic sentence. But you can't get there without the other stuff. Otherwise all you do is you give a cliché or a commonplace, and then you just try to jam a bunch of stuff in there to prove that commonplace is true. That's not really how writing works, that's not how invention works, but that's how a lot of pedagogy still works—for all kinds of reasons. Some of them are labor-based, some of them have to do with patterns of habit or whatever. But it's the opposite of a new media pedagogy, which would be more about using aggregation to produce an insight that wouldn't have been there if I hadn't brought that stuff together in the first place—which is an actor-network-theory concept: take something out of the network and it's not that anymore. Then you try to trace to see how other things come together and affect one another, and then you get maybe some kind of insight. I mean, the insight could be, "I can never know the answer," or the insight can be, "A-ha! This is,” you know, “why this is the way it is.”

Detweiler: All right! So Jeff Rice, thanks again for sitting down with me today.

Rice: Thanks! Thanks for doing it.

[interview fades out, "Mor's Back" plays to close]