Transcript of Joyce Locke Carter Interview

Transcribed by Eric Detweiler

[Zeugma theme plays]

Eric Detweiler: This is Eric Detweiler, welcoming you back for the fourth installment in Zeugma’s summer interview series recorded at the 2014 Rhetoric Society of America conference in San Antonio, Texas. So far, we’ve heard from the University of Kentucky’s Roxanne Mountford and Jeff Rice as well as Syracuse University’s Collin Brooke. Our final installment, which will arrive in early August, will feature Victor Vitanza of Clemson University’s Rhetorics, Communication, and Information Design program.

For interview number four, I sat down with Joyce Locke Carter. Dr. Carter is an associate professor of English at Texas Tech University. She’s the author of the book *Market Matters*, and her work has appeared in such journals as *Technical Communication Quarterly* and *Computers and Composition*. Dr. Carter’s forthcoming book, *Reading Arguments*, is a suite of empirical studies using biometrics, usability, and field methods to find out how sophisticated readers engage with a document that asks them to make a decision. In it, she deals with a significant gap in rhetoric scholarship about what audiences actually do when they read and respond to purposeful rhetorical acts. It’s a fully digital book filled with movies, images, and data, enabling the reader to dig deep on her own into these issues. She’ll also be the program chair of the 2015 Conference on College Composition and Communication, or 4Cs, in Tampa, Florida. In our conversation, we discuss Dr. Carter’s responsibilities with 4Cs and why she believes it’s especially important for rhetoric scholars to participate in the conference. If you’re interested in more details on the workings of that conference, by the way, you can check out Dr. Carter’s YouTube profile. Her username there is Joyce Carter. We also discuss the relationship between rhetoric and writing studies as well as rhetoric and English studies. Finally, Dr. Carter reflects on her founding role in the Digital Writing and Research Lab—or, as it was called at the time, the Computer Research Lab—and we talk a little about the work such labs continue to make possible. So let’s head down the road to San Antonio.

[Chris Saner’s Spaghetti Western-flavored “Mor’s Back” plays]

[music fades out, interview audio fades in]

Detweiler: All right! I’m here with Joyce Carter. Thank you very much for taking the time to sit down with me today.

Joyce Locke Carter: Thanks!

Detweiler: I wanted to jump in first—so you’re the chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication for 2015.

Carter: Precisely, I am the conference chair—the program chair.

Detweiler: Okay.

Carter: Because the 4Cs has a chair rotation. The first year is the newbie year. It’s the learning year, right? You get elected in the summertime, they tell you you’re elected, the shock sets in, and then you’re invited to NCTE that November. And then there, you’re supposed to talk to the officers about your plans for the Cs. You don’t take office until after that meeting. And so all of this year, 2014, I’m the assistant chair. Then there’s the associate chair, which actually runs the conference, which’ll be my conference in Tampa 2015. Then the next year you’re the chair, and then you’re the immediate past chair. So anyway, I don’t want to tread on—Howard [Tinberg] is the current chair of the Cs; Adam is the current associate chair, Adam Banks. I am the assistant chair, the little junior guy, and the immediate past chair is Chris Anson. So in my podcast and my video, I’ve been trying to distinguish: I say I’m the program chair so as not to step on anybody’s toes. So one of my goals is to try to use this opportunity to drum up business for Tampa, simultaneously making some of these things more transparent and more evident—explaining the chairs rotation and the peer-review process and conference selection and that kind of stuff. So that’s a long-winded answer. The cool thing is we’ll be coming back to The Lone Star State: I will be the chair of the Cs when we’re in Houston 2016 when I give my address to the membership. So I propose to wear a big hat—a cowboy hat—and boots and say, “Welcome to Texas, y’all.” [laughs]

Detweiler: Well, I think you just officially drummed up some business for that address, and that’s good.

Carter: Okay!

Detweiler: Well, one of the things that you’ve been trying to get word out about is the importance that you see for rhetoric scholars to participate in 4Cs, to participate in conferences in and around writing and composition studies. So could you talk a little bit about what you see as some of the important aspects of rhetoric scholars participating in these things?

Carter: Absolutely. The 4Cs is a really interesting mixed bag, and maybe it’s always a categorical tension between practitioners and theorists—like we might characterize a tech comm program, right?—or between, to use Stephen North’s terminology, sort of lore epistemologists versus sort of theory epistemologists, et cetera, et cetera. I come from a rhetoric program at The University of Texas [at Austin]. I teach in a rhetoric program. It’s name is a Tech Comm and Rhetoric program, but I feel very strongly—

Detweiler: And this is Texas Tech that you’re talking about?

Carter: At Texas Tech. And I feel very strongly that rhetoric is the center, it’s the gravitational center, of what I call applied rhetorics. And I do see us as a related set of fields: there’s how we learn to write, which is composition, and how we learn to teach writing; how we learn to write effectively in the workplace, which is technical communication; how we persuade people to buy things, which is marketing communication; and so on and so forth. Without rhetoric at the core of that, I think you have several alternatives: You can say, “Well, they’re all separate disciplines.” I don’t see how that works. If you don’t like rhetoric as your foundation, you can go with communication, and then you’ve got something like the Shannon–Weaver transmission model. Where I have problems with that as a foundational theory behind composition and the 4Cs is it doesn’t capture the richness, the tradition—the rhetorical tradition going back to the Presocratics all the way through now—that deals with and already has covered many, many times persuasion, delight, information. We’ve got such a rich theoretical tradition, that has just exploded in the twentieth century into the twenty-first century, that it would be criminal not to have rhetoricians at the 4Cs. Rhetoric gives classrooms and classroom teachers a foundation of persuasion. It gives us everything from style and sentence-level and word-level choices—allegory and metaphor—all the way to persuasion like with Perelman, and it gives us whole senses of society and social uses of language such as Habermas, and then all this really cool stuff about Bruno Latour and the way we work and we engage society. Rhetoric brings that to the 4Cs, and to composition and writing studies in general, in a way that a transmission model I just don’t think does. So it’s a difference in a medium focus, which a lot of—you’ll have the transmission model in mass comm schools, which is fine. It’s a generic or a genre-based sort of thing. Whereas I think of rhetoric as strategy—tactics and strategy bundled together. So rhetoric gives us such a powerful toolkit for application at the 4Cs that I think it’s absolutely critical to have rhetoric not just visiting the Cs in a small group off to the side, but core to the 4Cs activities.

Detweiler: So another thing we were talking about earlier: certainly another field that rhetoric has a historical relation to—especially throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century—is English studies, which is a different relationship, obviously, than writing studies and composition studies, which sometimes it’s lumped in a little bit more directly with. So could you talk a little bit about what you see as rhetoric’s relationship to the current state and possibilities for English studies?

Carter: It’s a difficult relationship. It doesn’t have to be, but it can be. You know, since communication studies, when we split off, and we split in the ‘20s—I think that schism has been unproductive—but since the ‘20s, rhetoric has largely been in English departments, although there have been movements, at UT as well as other schools, to form departments separate from English departments. It seems to me, and English studies may go on for decades without addressing this, but I think that sort of carving out of different uses of language is detrimental to English studies. Some of the trends that I see that are very useful—it’s weird, it’s like a Trojan horse or a back door: a lot of my colleagues, a lot of friends at other schools who teach literature and linguistics and stuff, are suddenly very, very excited about digital humanities. And I say, “That’s wonderful. I’m glad you are. We’ve been doing digital humanities—called ‘computers and writing’ and other things—in rhetoric for a very, very long time.” We can look at The University of Texas: the Digital Writing—

Detweiler: —and Research Lab.

Carter: —and Research Lab, which we used to call just the old “Computer Research Lab.” That is a core of activities, and alumni such as Cindy Selfe and Hugh Burns from University of Texas were instrumental in getting started thinking about the way the digital world affects rhetoric and writing. So I’m very encouraged. That’s a very encouraging thing to see that kind of activity grafted onto English studies. So I think that’s one really important relationship. It’s a bridge between rhetoric activity and English studies, but it’s an important bridge: the digital world. Whether we’ll have Shakespeare scholars coding or not is unknown, but I think that would be a really good opportunity. The thing that concerns me most, and the thing that I love about rhetoric—I’m an English major, by the way, both bachelor’s and master’s—the thing that concerns me is a strict adherence to sort of canonical concepts in English studies. And the thing I like about rhetoric, although we have a canonical history: rhetoric is always interested in problem solving in the here and now, and I would love to find some way to inject that same epistemology of *doing*, rather than looking at somebody else and what they’ve done, into English studies. I think possibly one way to deal with that is to look at remediations such as video games, movies, pop culture, and popular fiction—without throwing Shakespeare and John Donne and John Milton out of the canon, but keeping the canon and putting in the context of the vibrant life of letters that we see around us today through Twitter, through Facebook, podcasts. I think we are living in a really unique life of letters that English studies can capitalize on if people in English studies grab the brass ring. I don’t know if they can or not. I would love to see that. I think these schisms are not helpful. It’s really complicated.

Detweiler: Yeah. I mean, I think that’s certainly true. Maybe a more concrete way of putting it is to think about the graduate program you work with at Texas Tech and how you see that operating within some of the things that you’ve talked about: the bridge-building, the sort of here-and-now practical applied work that rhetoric can make possible, as well as its more historical and theoretical dimensions.

Carter: Sure. Well, at Texas Tech we have actually six degrees: B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. in tech comm and rhetoric, and B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. in English with emphases in creative writing, linguistics, American literature, and British literature, and film studies. I think we’re beginning to see just what I was talking about in the last question about digital humanities and digital rhetorics as forming some sort of bridge between the sides of the department. We’re in an interesting position: we haven’t spun off in the way that The University of Texas, the University of Kentucky just recently did with their WRD program. But we are within the English department because we believe there are synergies to be had. We all love the spoken word—I mean the written and spoken word. We believe words make things happen. And so in a departments of words or signs, which is what I think English departments can be, I think there’s a lot of synergy. The cool thing is we are autonomous within the department, so the rhetoricians do our own hiring, we do our own tenure and promotion processes, we set up our own curriculum. So it’s a separate relationship, but we’re within one house. And I think that makes for some very—sometimes it’s tense, but sometimes it’s very vibrant synergies that are possible. And it’d be great to almost imagine breaking down silo walls and coming back to the speech departments and coming to the mass comm departments, and the mark comm and the biz comm and the prof comm, and saying, “You know, those Venn diagrams overlap seventy percent, probably.” And so we spend all this extra effort keeping these silos. There might be—I’m not arguing for breaking down of departments, but I think we see a lot of those trends happening already with creative colleges of arts and sciences, or provosts who are looking for ways of finding research synergies, particularly if we’re trying to teach more students and do more and more creative research. That’s one way, maybe, of approaching it. So our department’s not a model for that, but there is a trace of possibly what a productive direction might be.

Detweiler: So the final question I wanted to pose to you here before we have to adjourn to the next session is: you were present in some of the first days of what is now the Digital Writing and Research Lab, so could you talk a little bit about that experience—what possibilities it opened up for you as a graduate student and what experiences you had there?

Carter: Absolutely, and some of this is already in print. But basically about 1985 or ’86, Fred Kemp and I and Paul Taylor were pursuing our—I was master’s. Yeah, Paul and I were master’s, Fred was Ph.D., but I soon joined the Ph.D. program. But we all had this is common: we were all computer programmers. I had taken a lot of computer science in my undergrad and graduate coursework; Fred was self-taught. So between his sort of spaghetti BASIC and my more structured training in Pascal and other structured programming—and Paul was self-taught too, but he learned on Pascal—we were very excited by Carolyn Handa’s book and by a course that Jerry Bump and Hugh Burns taught at The University of Texas about thinking through constructivist thinking. Like Seymour Papert and other constructivists, right? So it was just serendipity, sort of, but Jerry Bump had some computers and didn’t know what to do with them because he won this nice grant from Quest, which was administered by George Culp. And so he said, “Just put them over there in the undergraduate library where there’s a little office.” Well we did, and sort of—we’re imperialists: we began taking over different offices and stringing them together. And then—we couldn’t afford at the time—there was WordStar, there was some interesting software that we could buy that did stuff like concordances and real simple stuff, but they’re still very valuable. Like sentence length: you want to teach people how to do sentence length, you can make bar graphs of the sentence length and show them. If they’re all the same height, they have a staccato style. If there’s variability, they have a different varied style. And so some of these things do very good jobs of that. But we said—in our optimism, we said, “I think we could program this stuff ourselves!” We had Pascal and BASIC and we had all these IBM PCs, and then we had a couple of XTs, and they ran—I don’t know, compared to today’s standards they’re just sad, but we started building our own software. And we built our own chat software, which didn’t exist on local area networks at the time. That eventually became Daedalus Interchange. We wrote our own email program to use in the classroom, our own invention heuristics based on Hugh Burns’s dissertation, which were really really cool, and our own bibliography system, and all that. We began building.

Detweiler: Wow.

Carter: And so we were in the little office at the end of the undergraduate hallway in this basement floor on the left, and the classroom was on the right. And we taught classes next door in kind of a reconfiguration, and we could literally—we did what we call these days in design “iterative testing,” right? We didn’t know it at the time. Someone like Valerie Ballester or Kay Halasek or David Harvey would be teaching a class next door, they would walk over after class and say, “You know what would be really great? My students can’t do this. What if we could do this?” And we’re [imitates sound of rapid typing] typing away furiously. By the next class, we’ve already implemented that feature. So it was a great feedback loop. It was technology informing pedagogy informing technology, and it was a wonderful feedback loop. And these days, of course, in technical writing and any kind of product design, the idea is: that’s cutting edge. You have the SMEs, the subject matter experts, but you also have that programmers, the marketing people, and cross-functional teams all bringing information into a shared epistemology as we design forward. And we iterate: design, test, learn, ramp up, design, test, learn. And looking back on it, that’s what we had from about 1986 through about 1989 or 1990. And the lab continues to this day.

Detweiler: Still in the same basement!

Carter: I think we all graduated and moved on and it was picked up by different people using different technologies. You know, the local area network went away and was replaced by a connection to the Internet. But that spirit of innovation is using tools and not being told by the tool designers what you can do with it, but imagining what do we want to with it and then finding a way for those two vectors—the technological determinism from the system and the user desire from teachers and researchers—finding a way for those two vectors to meet at something creative like a practice or a software or some research findings.

Detweiler: Well, Joyce Carter, thank you very much for taking the time to sit down today.

Carter: Sure, it’s been my pleasure, Eric.

Detweiler: And we will all—2016 in Houston with the cowboy hat?

Carter: That’s correct!

Detweiler: Okay! We’ll look forward to it! Carter: All right. Thanks very much.

[interview fades out, “Mor’s Back” plays to close]