

Walking through Walls: Rhetoric and Composition in Southern California

Susan Jarratt, University of California, Irvine

Southern California Rhetoric & Composition Research Symposium

UCI, 4 May 2012

I'm delighted to be here at the Inaugural Southern California Rhetoric and Composition Research Symposium and particularly honored to have been invited to address you on this occasion. We're grateful to the UCI Department of English Endowed Chair in Rhetoric and Communication for the funds to support this event. And I want to thank the organizers – the UCI Rhetoric and Composition Graduate Collective – for all their creative thinking, planning, and hard work: Maureen Fitzsimmons, Lance Langdon, Jens Lloyd, Libby Martin, Abraham Romney, and Elaina Taylor. Like good writing teachers, they posed a number of questions which served as a helpful source of invention for me, enabling me to pursue and frame some thoughts that have floated around in my mind for a good while – about this place and what we do here.

The field

One question – “what does it mean to be part of ‘Rhet-Comp’ as a field?” – I feel pretty confident about, so I'm going to start with it. It's made easy by the way this event has been structured and described: it's called a “symposium,” it names both “rhetoric” and “composition,” it brings together graduate students, lecturers, and faculty, and it invites us to interact as teacher-scholars. All the elements of my professional world are there: I profess a field with a long and continuing history named “rhetoric” for its Greek source but linked with all manner of “symbolic action,” in Kenneth Burke's generous term. The significance of *writing* in the U.S. university setting at the turn of 20th century and again in the 1960s with a flood of new students entering universities through open admissions has given us “composition” as the second term in a sometimes contested pairing. In my view, the contestations enrich our particular construals of the field and enable us to sight our own investments in modes and media without threatening its existence. From oratory to various forms of visuality to new media; from communication to performativity – along a number of axes we each locate our place in a field which is at the same time a commons. Here's a loose definition for a Friday morning: “rhetoric and composition” is the production, reception, and analysis of symbolic acts in sizable chunks performed primarily in group settings with attention to power,

beauty, and craft as well as to dissemination across eras, territories, generations, and institutions.

Having spent some years recently working with writing across the university and the beyond first-year, I'm more attached these days to the formulation "rhetoric and writing studies" than to "composition," but I recognize identificatory force of "composition" for a segment of the field. It's a large and porous organism with many points of entry and zones of excitation where the conversation wanders too far from a set of core questions: Who "speaks"? To whom? On behalf of whom? In what style? To what end? Some suggest that the lack of a strongly agreed upon disciplinary definition for the field is a weakness—sometimes producing a defensive posture in relation to more easily recognizable areas of study. I disagree on two bases: first, most disciplines are in the same situation, if you really start looking at them closely; second, the debates are enlivening and generative of new knowledge and new affiliations.

What distinguishes our field for me is its refusal to separate out history and theory from pedagogy, activism, writing program administration, disciplinary reflection, and institutional critique. It's a field of practice that insists on its theoretical investments; a present set of problems constantly in search of multiple histories; an "art" in the Greek sense—i.e., a *technê*—performed usually by an individual but with the pedagogical scene, the rule-book (a discourse of craft), and the heritage of a tradition close at hand as sources of reformulation and critique as well as use. This is really quite an amazing formulation, if you really think about it, and despite my mention just now of the *individual* at her craft, it's a field that, more than other humanistic areas of study, brings people together and values collaboration.

And we are here, in Southern California, to collaborate under a perhaps unique set of conditions: because after all, there have been lots of meetings—there are meetings of composition teachers, union meetings, UCOP meetings, the Big Read. Charles Bazerman has held writing conferences in Santa Barbara open to international scholars. San Diego State invites us to its fall fora. But – here's my title metaphor – despite their value and collegiality, most of these meetings have been boxed in by various institutional walls. For example: my first visit to Southern California was on the invitation of Steve Mailloux to participate in a UC Humanities Research Institute event on the public sphere in 2000 (well—that's not actually true: on my *very* first visit, in 1983, I looked for condors in the Angeles Forest and took my then 11-year-old daughter around Hollywood with a map of stars, but more about that later . . .). This was an amazing small conference, a symposium, organized in

part by Patrick Sinclair, a brilliant classicist, who decorated our room with large-scale cut outs of Roman soldiers in short skirts and sandals, as I recall. Lyndon Barrett was still with us and gave an amazing paper on Maria Stewart, the first U.S. woman and African American orator on record. Page du Bois, Linda Brodkey, Victoria Kahn, and Brook Thomas were other speakers I remember. But later, after I came onto the faculty of UCI, and I imagined using this resource to create another such meeting with rhetoric and composition people in the area, I discovered that participation is limited to faculty of the UCs. One of my first encounters with The Master Plan.

The places of higher education in California

California's Master Plan—the reason we are here today together is, simultaneously, the reason it has taken so long for us to get together in this way. Exploring the history of higher education in California is a lesson in the historiographical attitude. It's difficult to get distance on an attitude that has such a powerful grip on its adherents that its importance must be repeated on virtually a daily basis. Those who write histories of their own state's glories have investments (I checked this out by reading a bit about my own state's history) and are at risk of producing skepticism in their readers.

Here's a brief (skeptical) report on the history of higher education in California:

California's university was launched by the same engine that fired the Midwest public universities: the Morrill Act of 1862, a law inspired by the recognition that the sectarian (classical) colleges were not doing enough to serve the needs of a growing industrial economy. Robert Connors and James Berlin (among others) have narrated the 19thC movement from the rhetorical culture of the college to the writing requirements of the university. How does that play out in California?

The state barely made the deadline for federal funding by passing the Organic Act of 1868, establishing a single state university: the College of California (later Berkeley). The story of resistance to state funded education waged on behalf of capitalist interests – then railroads, now a whole new complex of interests – needs attention by rhetoric and composition scholars: this would be the project of linking Frank Norris's *Octopus* with the founding of the university.

What John Aubrey Douglass in *The California Idea and American Higher Education. 1850 to the 1960 Master Plan* terms “the California idea” was actually first “the Wisconsin idea”: a Progressive's faith in the social and economic advantages of higher education. This idea envisioned broadly accessible postsecondary education as the ‘crown’ of a system which would “act as a breeding

ground for new leaders in business and government, and as a source of research beneficial to industry and society” (Douglass 82-83). Around 1912, Wisconsin Governor Robert La Follette, a graduate of the University of Wisconsin, proclaimed that the state university should become “the state’s primary agent of social and economic change” (Douglass 83). The Midwesterners had the idea of access and affordability, Douglass claims; California added quality, and this is where the logic of a planned system comes in. Following a Taylorite vision of efficient and divided labor, higher education in California would be ordered into the three-tiered system with which we are so familiar: a strong web of what were first called “junior colleges” offering both academic and vocational training; the teachers’ colleges – developed from the 19th-century normal school; and at the top of the heap, the research universities. Higher education was translated into a public good “that needed to be allocated in a rational, cost-effect, and egalitarian way” (13). But Douglass acknowledges that the system served the research university by siphoning off the excess of applicants to the College of California. The positive outcome, formalized by the 1907 Caminetti Bill, providing for the nation’s first network of public “junior colleges” (Douglass 334), is much to be lauded.

Southern California figures in this narrative as the demanding outlier. A number of private universities were established in this era – USC, 1880; Pomona and Occidental, 1887 Whittier, 1901, Redlands and Biola, 1907-08, and Loyola Marymount, 1911 – but reformers would bemoan the lack of a “true university campus” in southern California. Regent Dickson, in 1912, argued for UCLA, originally a teacher’s college, as a UC campus. In the same period (1907), the Citrus Experiment Station at Riverside was established as a counterpart to the Davis agricultural unit. This is a preliminary sketch of the beginnings of higher education in Southern California and a narrative driven by multiple forces: the demand to expand the provincialism of a northern-based university into the southern region, but also what we might see as an indigenous siting of educational units.

We are all well-schooled in the details of Clark Kerr’s consolidation of the plan for free, universal higher education for Californians enacted in 1960. Given that Douglass claims that “by the end of 1960s, 23 states completed their own master plans” (312), I should perhaps consider myself a beneficiary: my brothers and I attended the University of Texas at Austin virtually for free in the 1960s. But this mini-study suggests to me that many more fine-grained histories of rhetoric, writing, and academic policy in and across states and regions at these crucial junctures are much needed. The point I wish to make is that the lines drawn by The Master Plan – the rigid hierarchization of institutions – are counterproductive to people in our

field, the very point of which is to bridge those barriers.

The region

So we come to the regional question – “what does it mean to situate rhetoric and composition in Southern California?” That the regional is a form of spatiality deserving attention from rhetoric and composition scholars—the mode of thinking made possible by space and place—is a point made eloquently by Nedra Reynolds in her wonderful book *Geographies of Writing*. She reminds us that spatial configurations are ingrained in our ways of thinking about rhetoric and writing from early sources: that ancient Greek *ethos/ethê* were associated with habituation and hangout, and that *topoi* or common-places as they become in the Latin tradition are not purely metaphorical but take shape in architectural and urban maps. We can draw a line from Reynolds’ work to that of scholars like John Ackerman and Peter Simonson, both at the University of Colorado, Boulder, now, and exploring that terrain. For them, the West becomes a fruitful figure for examination in rhetoric and writing studies, as it does for like Kathleen Boardman at University of Nevada, Reno. At ASU, Peter Goggin does sustainability/environmental studies related to composition. But we’re not exactly in the West here—how *do* we characterize our region?

On the radio one morning this week (5/1), an NPR story drew a contrast between the management styles of Exxon and Steve Jobs, the latter “creative, individualist, California.” There’s a regional enthymeme for you: they abound and were much on my mind when I accepted a position at UCI in 2001. In preparation for my road trip, I was given an Eagles CD (back when people still listened to CDs) with a song about Winslow, Arizona, and listening to it, discovered that Southern California is at the end of Route 66. This experience marked the beginning of my understanding of our region as defined by highways and driving. And what a place to end up: a place of escape, or time suspended. Leisure, beauty, wealth, superficiality, film and media, star culture, surfing, slacking, beautiful bodies: as a sophist, I can’t simply reject these cultural myths. You have to turn them over, turn them inside out, see where their kernel of truth lies. Turning them over in my mind, I asked myself if I was in pursuit of a California like Jack Kerouac’s (in *On the Road*): “white as a sheet on a line and empty-headed.” Kerouac came for adventure and gold, as did the “Argonauts” (gold-seekers) a hundred years before him. But he only dallied—a tourist in the world of Mexican immigrant agricultural workers.

Despite the beat energy – and his desire to write – I had to turn away from Kerouac to more current writers. In Joan Didion’s *Where We Were From* and Mike Davis’ *Ecology of Fear*, I discovered another vision of Southern California as a

beautiful lure with darkness at heart – economic exploitation, racism, and environmental devastation. At the same time I was absorbing *doxa* about Orange County: a place of political conservatism, the birthplace of the John Birch Society.

Brilliant insight for this morning: You can't believe everything you read and hear. Arriving in the fall of 2001, just a month before 9/11, I found a place of encounter: of both rootedness and movement. After the devastation of that September morning, I was able to link up instantly with long-standing political action groups – on campus and in churches—Congregational, Unitarian, Quaker. Later—finding my place in the beautiful natural spaces here—I soon learned about ecological battles won: Frances and Frank Robinson's successful effort, waged from 1963-75, to have the land swap – arranged by the Irvine Company and the Orange County Board of Supervisors to turn Upper Newport Bay into a channelized pleasure boat harbor like the Lower Bay – declared unconstitutional. In 1975 the Upper Bay was acquired by the State of California as a wild life preserve. In other arenas, I was welcomed into contact with the lecturers' teachers' union and discovered more about the history of activism in Southern California through Juan Gomez-Quinones' work on the Chicano student movement in the 60s and 70s. Later Alexandra Sartor's dissertation on the Owen's Valley Water Wars illuminated on a crucial period of rhetorical action in the region in the early 20th century.

Doing rhet-comp here

Some of us were drawn here and some of us have been here all along. As the former, I can own up to the lure of Southern California in my own case: I came for difference. Having taught at Miami University in southwestern Ohio for 16 years, I was enticed by the prospect of a new population of writing students. My students at Miami—well prepared for the most part, and many of them fine and interesting writers, they were mostly white, upper-middle class, and (frankly) a bit limited in perspective. The racial politics of southwestern Ohio were absorbing—if you think of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* that's exactly the history and geography, but the prospect of working with a much more ethnically and linguistically diverse group of students was a powerful draw.

I got what I was seeking. Working with graduate student David Puente and then-Humanities Core Course writing director Elizabeth Losh, we surveyed almost 1,000 first year students about their language experiences and found amazing results—well, these results would not be amazing to you: fifty and more different languages, a wide range of literacy capacities and practices, including reading comics, writing and reading letters, but few people with full bilingual capacity. Using the recommendations of 2nd language compositionists such as Guadalupe Valdés and

Paul Kei Matsuda as our guide, we studied the writing of first-year students who were not “at risk” but were competent in English. How did the layering of another language and culture influence the choice of topic and analysis in a first-year research project? Our results (spelled out in “Transnational Identifications”) can’t usefully be telegraphed in our time this morning, but I can report that the complexity of these students’ histories and investments makes for case studies in walking through walls of language, geography, and pedagogical experience. They speak to the beauty and complexity of the place where we find ourselves as writing teachers and researchers in Southern California. Here I have found what I was looking for, and a lot more.

My conclusion today, after thinking carefully about rhetoric and writing studies in Southern California, is that, *despite* the Master Plan, the field of rhetoric and writing studies in all of its major areas has flourished in Southern California and holds out considerable promise at this time—despite, and perhaps even because of, the economic crisis in state education. Here is the encomiastic moment of the paper: Consider all the major corners or parts of our profession. Is there a single one not performed with distinction by a scholar in Southern California?

- *Theory and disciplinarity*: Ross Winterowd, Steve Mailloux, Daniel Gross
 - *Students at the margins*: Mike Rose, Brenda Borrón
 - *Writing assessment*: Charles Cooper and his students, Peter Mortensen and Gesa Kirsch
 - *Writing across the curriculum*: Sue McLeod
 - *Longitudinal writing studies*: Lee Ann Carroll
 - *Race*: Glenn McLish, Jacqueline Bacon, and Vorriss Nunley
 - *Queer studies and feminism*: Jonathan Alexander, Ian Barnard, Aneil Rallin, Jacqueline Rhodes
 - *Writing and ideology*: Jeanne Gunner (former editor of *College English*)
 - *Quantitative studies of school writing*: Carol Booth Olson
 - *Writing center and argument studies*: Irene Clark
 - *Rhetorics’ histories*: Ellen Quandahl, Jody Enders, Suzanne Bordelon
 - *New media*: Richard Lanham, Elizabeth Losh, Kristi Wilson
 - *Rhetoric and nation*: Cesar Ornatowski, Rene de los Santos
- and so many more.

Together we look less like an edifice and something more like a map: maybe like one of those huge beautiful floor mosaics created for the Mediterranean villas in antiquity. The villa is a suitable figure for a place whose climate, as I read when I

arrived, is the only other “truly Mediterranean” climate in the world. So—what better place to hold a symposium, an ancient Greek custom, after all: an opportunity to talk about our ideas and plans, to eat and drink, and to take pleasure in our collectivity?

Select Bibliography

- Ackerman, John. “The Space for Rhetoric in Everyday Life.” In *Towards a Rhetoric of Everyday Life: New Directions in Research on Writing, Text, and Discourse*. Ed. Martin Nystrand and John Duffy. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003. Print.
- Berlin, James. *Writing Instruction in Nineteenth-Century American Colleges*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1984. Print.
- Boardman, Kathleen., co-editor with Gioia Woods. *On Western Subjects: Autobiographical Writing in the North American West*. Salt Lake: University of Utah P, 2004. Print.
- Burke, Kenneth. *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1966. Print.
- Caroll, Lee Ann. *Rehearsing New Roles: How College Students Develop as Writers*. NCTE: 2002. Print.
- Connors, Robert. *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh, 1997. Print.
- Davis, Mike. *Ecology of Fear. Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster*. New York: Vintage, 1999. Print.
- Douglass, John Aubrey. *The California Idea and American Higher Education. 1850 to the 1960 Master Plan*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000. Print.
- Goggin, Peter N. *Rhetorics, Literacies, and Narratives of Sustainability*. New York: Routledge, 2009. Print.
- Jarratt, Susan C., Elizabeth Losh, and David Puente. “Transnational Identifications: Biliterate Writers in a First-Year Humanities Course” *Journal of Second Language Writing* 15.1 (March 2006): 24-48. Print.
- Kerouac, Jack. *On the Road*. New York: Viking, 1957. Print.

- Matsuda, Paul Kei. "The Myth of Linguistic Homogeneity in U.S. College Composition." *College English* 68.6 (2006): 637-51. Print.
- Quioñones, Juan Gómez. *Chicano Student Movement in Southern California 1967-77*. Santa Barbara: Editorial La Causa, 1978. Print.
- Reynolds, Nedra. *Geographies of Writing. Inhabiting Places and Encountering Difference*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2003. Print.
- Simonson, Peter. "Our Places in a Rhetorical Century." Rhetoric Society of America Summer Institute. Boulder, 2011. Lecture.
- Valdés, Guadalupe. "Bilingual Minorities and Language Issues in Writing." *Written Communication* 9 (1992): 85-96. Print.