“Multimodality Pulling into a Station: Jonathan Alexander and Jackie Rhodes”
transcribed by Eric Detweiler

[**Rhetoricity** theme plays: uptempo drums under a surf guitar riff followed by guitar chords]

Voiceover: Hey there, **Rhetoricity** listeners! This is Eric Detweiler, coming to you from my home office, where the weed whackers are out in force and the commuters are driving by at great volume. But, ambient noise aside, do I have a treat for you this time because I’m bringing you not one but two most excellent interviewees: Dr. Jonathan Alexander and Dr. Jackie Rhodes. These two scholars are not only prolific writers and media makers, but prolific collaborators as well, so it only felt right to interview them in tandem. Together, they’ve edited *The Routledge Handbook of Digital Writing and Rhetoric* as well as *Sexual Rhetorics: Methods, Publics, Identities*. In this episode, we focus especially on two of their other collaborative projects. The first is *On Multimodality: New Media in Composition Studies*, a book that came out in 2014; the other is *Techne: Queer Meditations on Writing the Self*, a digital book published by Computers and Composition Digital Press in 2015. You can find *Techne*, which won the 2015 Lavender Rhetorics Award for Excellence in Queer Scholarship, at ccdigitalpress.org/book/techne. That’s ccdigitalpress.org/book/techne.

Beyond their co-creations, Jonathan Alexander is the Chancellor’s Professor of English and Informatics at the University of California, Irvine. He’s also the current editor of the journal *College Composition and Communication* and the author of the critical memoir *Creep: A Life, A Theory, An Apology*, which is a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award and currently being turned into a podcast.

Jackie Rhodes is a professor of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures at Michigan State University and the incoming editor of the journal *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*. She’s also currently working on a documentary called *Once a Fury*, which is about a 1970s lesbian separatist group called the Furies.

The following interview was recorded at the 2017 Conference on College Composition and Communication in a defunct alcove that was once full of pay phones. In addition to *Techne* and *On Multimodality*, Drs. Rhodes and Alexander discuss the creepiness of academic disciplines, why it’s important to understand the history of media forms, and the personal and scholarly possibilities of digital publications. So let’s get this train rolling to Portland, Oregon, for an interview with Jonathan Alexander and Jackie Rhodes.

Actually, hold that train for just a second. In case you haven’t heard, this fall I will be helping organize an event called the Symposium on Sound, Rhetoric, and Writing, which will happen in Middle Tennessee on September 7th and 8th. We have a great lineup of speakers for this event, and we will be opening registration very, very soon. If you are interested in participating in this event, you can send a quick email to ssrw2018@gmail.com, or follow the Twitter account @SSRW18. Again, that’s ssrw2018@gmail.com or @SSRW18 on Twitter. All right, conductor. Take us away.
Eric Detweiler [D]: I’m sitting here talking with Jonathan Alexander and Jackie Rhodes. Thank you to both of you so much for taking the time for this interview today.

Jonathan Alexander [A]: Thank you!

Jackie Rhodes [R]: Sure.

D: Well, I wanted to talk with you guys some about two projects that you’ve put out recently collaboratively: a book called On Multimodality and a sort of—ebook, I guess? I’m not sure what the best term would be for Techne.


A: With a lot of other stuff.

R: With a lot of other stuff. A lot of video, a lot of audio. It’s multimodal, and we had often talked about On Multimodality being the theory of what we wanted to do and Techne being the actual enactment of that theory. So we see them as a pair.

D: Okay. So I wanted to begin by asking you all a question about multimodality. Specifically, I wanted to ask about that term’s relationship to some others in our field. So while “rhetoric and composition” remains a pretty common shorthand for that field, writing studies is another popular label, and plenty of folks align themselves with literacy studies, and as you all note in On Multimodality, mapping those labels onto digital and multimodal production isn’t really a simple thing. You give the example of Dr. Alexander mentioning on Facebook that he was taking a break from writing to make a video and someone replying, “Well, that’s writing too!” But you all express a little skepticism about that claim, and you cite some other pieces that question the risks of kind of mapping literacy metaphors onto every other form of text and form of production. Some scholars deal with these issues by privileging certain terms over others, maybe defining themselves as rhetoric scholars or writing studies scholars rather than compositionists, but you all draw, it seems like, on the affordances of all of these terms. So all of this to get to the actual question, which is: If we think of multimodality maybe as sort of a node in a network that also includes rhetoric, composition, writing, literacy, how do you all see these various disciplinary labels connecting or not connecting to multimodality?

R: You take the first crack at that.
A: Ah, yeah, it’s such a good question, and as I’ve been thinking about that as an issue, disciplinarity as an issue, I guess I would say I’m creeped out by disciplinarity.

[interview audio pauses for a few seconds; a low, ominous, echoing piano note plays]

[interview audio resumes; A and R laughing together]

A: I’m less interested in what we call it and more interested in that we not impose our thinking about certain sorts of disciplinary formations on other ways of doing things. So for instance, when I was quipping in the book about somebody calling my video-making a form of writing and said, “Uhh! No, wait a minute. Time out,” I don’t care what we call it. Sure, making a video—I’m happy to call that a form of writing. But I think that the point of On Multimodality and what we’re really trying to get at is that we be very aware of and attuned to how it’s too easy to pose one way of doing things, one way of working within a mode, on other modalities.

R: Mmhmm.

A: So making a video—

[montage of sounds related to video production: the clap of a clapperboard, the sound of film running through a projector, a computer mouse clicking and dragging]

A: —it’s not necessarily at all the same as writing an essay.

[montage of sounds related to writing: a pencil scratching on paper, an eraser erasing, rapid typing on a computer keyboard]

A: We might ultimately all call it “writing,” we might ultimately all call it “composing,” we might ultimately all call it a form of being literate in the world or ways of being literate in the world. The particular definition is of less interest to me. It’s the imposition of ways of thinking on other modalities that I want to call attention to. At least that’s how I understood the real thesis of On Multimodality.

R: Mmhmm. I think when we started writing On Multimodality, we spent a lot of time talking about this, and we tended to come back to the idea of composing, but we had already problematized the idea of composing in some of our earlier queer work, talking about how a field that’s trying to compose us is necessarily—I don’t know, it’s that disciplinarily motivated takeover of the sorts of activities we do in knowledge production. So when we were putting together On Multimodality, we were looking at how that imposition has happened historically in composition or writing studies or rhetoric, where we see something and we don’t know what to call it, but we’ll try to call it something that we know so that we can somehow own it. So, [feigning a conversation between scholars] “Yeah, that’s like writing.” “Well, it’s not exactly like writing.” “Well, I’m going to call it like writing because then I know what to do to it.” And I think that’s a problem that we’re trying to get at.
A: Yeah, the germinating moment for me in something like *On Multimodality* comes from watching far too many videos produced as class assignments that are really essentially short essays that have been put on video.

R: Mmhmm.

A: And what was not being taught was, what does it mean to actually work with video? And so the movement from one mode to another, we still see this in many different kinds of composition assignments—the remediation assignment, the movement from one modality to another—those can be very useful and interesting assignments. But I think that’s different—moving from one mode to another is different—than actually beginning to conceive of a project from within a mode. So instead of saying, “Oh, I have an essay. Now I’m going to do the video version of it,” what would it mean to actually start with a video project and to begin composing from a video project at the very beginning, or from what’s inside the video project? That seems to me a little different, and when we conceptualize of composing that way, we run less of a risk of taking our strategies and habits of thinking about a modality or genre and then just imposing them, foisting them off on another genre or another modality.

R: Mmhmm. And I think that it’s a crucial difference, because then you’re looking at the use of video, the use of audio, any of these other modes not as illustrations—

A: Yeah, or accompaniments.

R: —or accompaniments, some sort of mode that’s in service to print. So that you’re actually working with the thing itself, if the thing itself exists. And I’m thinking of another germinating moment: when we presented at MLA early on, and we were talking about interests in film and poetry, and there was some pushback on that because people thought that what we were saying was like, “Oh, we should be teaching poetry in comp classes.” It’s like, no. It’s because Jonathan and I each have interests outside of comp in these other sorts of things, like film and poetry, and we’re encouraging people—it’s like, okay, you have all this other knowledge that isn’t necessarily compositional knowledge. How do you bring that into your work? How do you bring that into the classroom? So it was trying to get to: do what you love, and make it work and don’t try to make it into something else.

A: Right.

R: And that’s sort of the metaphysical, romantic version of it, so—

[all chuckling]

D: Well, I’m interested—so you talked a little about video essays. You know, seeing the way that they’re just someone sitting there with a piece of paper reading into the camera, and you talk about sort of the linearity as something that often gets carried over from print-based texts into the way that we approach other kinds of texts when we don’t
really have to. I’m curious, then: how do you go about trying to put those different modes or media or broadly defined fields of scholarship in conversation without letting one kind of tame the other?

A: Hmm.

R: Hmm.

A: That’s a really good question.

R: That’s a hard question. You know, I was talking the other day about composing *Techne* in particular, and I think that our compositional strategy for *Techne* is much like our other work in which we sort of gather our leftovers and detritus and bits of film and bits of audio and all these sorts of things together, and then mix them up and play and play and play and play until it feels right. And I hate saying just “feel” because it’s sort of like “voice.” It’s one of those, again, metaphysical sorts of ways of composing, but there is that sense when you’re doing something, like, “Oh, that’s right. That sounds how I want it to sound, it looks how I want it to look.” It’s coming together in this holistic sense in a way that feels like it’s clicking.

A: And that makes sense to me as a sort of lovely counternarrative for composing, counter to this sense that composing is primarily, writing is primarily cognitive acts.

R: Mmhmm.

A: And I think one of the things that Jackie and I are trying to forward is that certainly there are moments of composing, moments of writing, moments of practicing literacy that are very cognitive, and there are other ways of composing that are not about *thinking* through. They’re about *feeling* your way through.

R: Right. It’s affective, it’s somatic, it’s—

A: —experiencing composition as an embodied art in some ways.

R: Mmhmm. Mmhmm.

A: And that brings back some messiness to a process that so much of our field is—

R: —trying to clean up—

A: —and quantify.

[R chuckles]

A: And make scientific in some ways.

R: Uh huh.
A: And I get it. I have done rubric-based forms of writing assessment, and I understand the strategic and rhetorical importance of that, and even the knowledge-production importance of engaging in that kind of work. And yet I am increasingly wanting to hold on to some messiness in writing, to maintain some of the mystery in what we do, because it’s precisely in that messiness and in that mystery that we open ourselves to other ways of knowing about writing, composing, and being literate.

R: Mmhmm. Mmhmm.

A: Other ways of knowing that I think are still vitally useful, that speak to other traditions, traditions that sometimes get shunted to the side or marginalized.

R: Mmhmm. And I think some—I mean, this actually gets back to different ways of composing—but I’ve shown drafts of things before or, you know, “Here’s what we’re working on for *Techne*. Want to take a look at it?” And you get some feedback like, “I didn’t like that. It made me feel this, it made me feel that.” And you take that into account. It’s like, well, is that the affect we were going for? Were we trying to make that feeling happen?

A: Yeah.

R: And some of this comes from our earlier work doing installations at conferences where we would have 3D spaces where we wanted people to come in and actually in a physical, somatic way encounter a text. And then to sort of linger with that and stay with it and play with it and figure out, you know, “How is this making me uncomfortable, and what is that discomfort doing rhetorically?”

A: Yeah.

R: And so a lot of our compositions we’ve had, we try to get that sense of mystery or even confusion deliberately in there, and then our editors slow us down and say, “Well, you can’t be that confusing.” It’s like, okay, well—[chuckles]

A: But that’s always a tension—

R: Yeah.

A: —when we go to publish any of the online work. There are certainly folks who want there to be a discernable through line in a composed online text, and I think one of the things that probably drew us to working with online texts even in the ‘90s, as early as the ‘90s, is there—hmm, do we still say “hyperlink”? [all laughing]

A: You know, it this a dirty word now? I mean, nobody says “hyperlink” anymore. But, I mean, the plurality of linkages that—I remember being able to get lost in the web—
R: Mmhmm.

A: —and not knowing how to get back to where I was again. It’s almost impossible to get lost in the web now, and I think that that’s generative. Getting lost sometimes is generative.

R: Mmhmm.

A: Wandering is generative. Sara Ahmed uses the words “orientation” and “disorientation,” and those are I think two key terms for us. We’re always trying to map, measure, to be attuned to how not just different words, different genres, different acts of literacy, different technologies are orienting us to be in the world; we’re interested in how they can also potentially disorient us—

R: Right.

A: —so we can open up other ways of thinking. And that may be our most persistent kind of queerness.

R: It is. It’s like, the table of contents in *Techne* came late in the game. We put the table of contents in, but then we also provided other ways through the text that still might be disorienting. So if you want to look at just the videos, if you want to look at just this sort of modality, if you want to go through it by playing with the search engine, you can do that. So if people want to go through it in a linear way, they can go through it in a linear way.

[sound of a 2-pop interrupts interview audio, introducing linear montage of clips from *Techne*]

[from video entitled “Techne”]

R: Techne has no precise equivalent in English. It has been variously translated as “art” or “craft,” “technical knowledge,” “skill,” et cetera.

[from video entitled “We are/not sound bites”]

A: We are/not sound bites. We are/not status updates. We are/not items in a newsfeed.

[from video entitled “Queertext”]

R [voice altered, lowered in pitch]: Techne.

R [unaltered voice]: Techne.

R [altered]: Go forth.
R [unaltered]: Go forth.
R [altered]: Multiply.
R [unaltered]: Multiply.
R [altered, overlapping with previous line]: Or not.
R [unaltered]: Or not.
R [altered]: This is we and not-we.
R [unaltered]: This is we—
R [altered]: “I”—
R [unaltered]: —and not-we.
R [altered]: —is another. We are dispersed.
R [unaltered]: “I” is another.
R [altered]: And yet we are here—
R [unaltered]: We are dispersed.
R [altered]: —and queer. We are everywhere.
R [unaltered, overlapping with previous line]: And yet we are here and queer. We are everywhere.

[from video entitled “Work”]

R: Reorientation sometimes starts without our knowing it. When Jonathan trains in to visit and work with me, he’s already reorienting his body and mind to a different locale, a changed venue, an alternate situation—even if he thinks he’s only taking a train ride.

[2-pop plays, signaling end of montage and resumption of interview]

R: So if people want to go through it in a linear way, they can go through it in a linear way. If they go absolutely in a linear way, they’re going to miss things.

A: Yeah.

R: I think one of the most productive ways through my favorite online work is just an associational way.
[2-pop plays, introducing nonlinear montage of fragments of the Techne clips featured in the previous montage; soundtrack to “Dream train” video plays under this montage]

R [altered]: We are everywhere.

R [unaltered]: And yet we are here and queer.

A: We are/not sound bites.

R: Reorientation sometimes starts without our knowing it.

A: We are sound bites. We are—

R: Jonathan.

A: —sound bites.

R: Or not.

R [altered]: This is we and not-we.

R [unaltered]: This is we—

R: —as “art” or “craft.”

A: We are/not items in a newsfeed.

R [unaltered]: Multiply.

R [altered, overlapping with previous line]: Or not.

R: Techne has no precise equivalent in English.

R [unaltered]: Multiply.

R [altered, overlapping with previous line]: Or not.

R [unaltered]: Multiply.

R [altered, overlapping with previous line]: Or not.

R [unaltered]: Multiply.

R [altered, overlapping with previous line]: Or not.

R [unaltered]: Multiply.

R [altered, overlapping with previous line]: Or not.

[the word “multiply” begins to echo and reverberate quickly, then fades as the “Dream train” song fades into the foreground]
R: The composing of multimodal work is, for me, most rewarding when I honor that sort of associational thinking, which we might have before just said, “Well, it’s hyperlinked.”

A: Right.

R: It’s a hypertextual sort of way of thinking where you’re going in these horizontal and diagonal pathways and you can get lost, and I think some of that gets lost for composers when they’re tied too much to the software instead of the idea. So if you compose something with a software that emphasizes wireframing, you’re actually trying to compose in hierarchies of information, and that delineates a certain sort of text. If you compose in ways that are not hierarchical, if you compose in associational sorts of ways, you have to work, you have to queer the technologies because the technologies want you to do that hierarchical ordering of information. So I think that is one of our persistent things: queering the technologies, queering the composing process, and queering that sense that the audience needs to be catered to in a particular way. I keep thinking of things like the move toward user-centered design, which I think is a productive—I mean, certainly I’m happy when my technology is easy and efficient, but there’s—

A: And accessible.

R: And accessible! Absolutely. But I think that when you’re teaching or you’re composing, if your primary focus is making things easy and efficient, that calls into question, you know, what are your politics? What are the politics of efficiency? And *Techne* is not an efficient text. *On Multimodality* is efficient. It’s print.

A: Right.

R: But the ongoing stuff is not efficient and it’s designed specifically not to be efficient.

A: Yeah.

D: Mmm.

A: And we provided a table of contents—

R: Mmhmm.

A: —but we also insisted that we build in a search engine so that people can follow, as Jackie’s saying, their own associational ways—

R: Logics.
A: —and logics. Logics, and ways of working through the text. I’m still myself very much drawn as a reader to the kinds of texts that are accessible, that I can get into, but are also at the same time disorienting—

R: Mmhmm.

A: —that open me up to ways of thinking, ways of experiencing, feeling, being that I hadn’t experienced before, and those remain for me my most powerful kinds of reading experiences. And they’re the ones that I want to continue to offer people. All the while recognizing, of course, that we are knowledge producers and scholars—

R: Mmhmm.

A: —and so it’s been a real privilege and a joy to work on a text like On Multimodality, which, as Jackie’s saying, is an attempt to logically and theoretically think through, what does multimodality offer us? Our answer, I think, is, it can offer us somewhat disorienting but also possibly reorienting ways of working with media and working with different rhetorical affordances, and then we have the opportunity to explore that, to enact that, to embody that in a piece like Techne.

R: Mmhmm. Yeah. And I need to remember to focus on the “orientation” and “disorientation,” because I said “confusing”—

D: Mmhmm.

R: —because I get confused. [chuckles]

A: But I don’t think confusion is bad.

R: But I think that it is that disorienting or a-orienting or reorienting that we’re trying to do purposefully, but at the same time keep the text accessible to as many viewers, readers, listeners as possible. One of the compositional strategies going through there was captioning in rhetorically sound ways. Sean Zdenek did something on rhetorical captioning that’s been very influential, and we used that for the captioning of the videos, as well as transcriptions, as well as, with the videos, using a filter from After Effects, actually, so that when you watch the music videos, the equalizer bar plays at the same time. So even if you can’t hear the music, you can see the music. And so trying to make the text accessible to as many people as possible in rhetorically sound ways was really generative and interesting and necessary.

A: Absolutely.

D: Um, well, in On Multimodality especially—and this speaks to some of the things you’ve talked about, about not just mapping writing or whatever onto everything else—you’re adamant about the importance of historicizing new media, thinking about how and why certain media and genres developed. So I was wondering, then, how you all went about developing a historical understanding of some of the media you use in
Techne and that, you know, you’ve been using in other projects, installations for a very long time. Whether it’s video, audio, images, even things like fonts or web browsers—things like that.

A: Well, we’ve long been interested in avant-gardist movements, in particular the Situationist International and other groups that have attempted to use media in ways that are disruptive, right? And even sometimes purposefully disorienting.

R: Mmhmm.

A: But we’re also keenly attuned to the fact that when a new medium has emerged, it has often emerged to disrupt patterned or normative ways of seeing and experiencing and being, so one of my favorite parts of Techne is the train.

[interview audio pauses; distant sound of a train approaching with its horn blowing and a train crossing signal clanging in the foreground]

[interview and signal sounds continue under interview]

A: The old film from the Lumière brothers.

R: Train Arriving at the Station in La Ciotat.

A: In which we have, from firsthand eyewitness reports, that when that film was first shown, the audience backed away from the screen because they thought the train was actually coming at them.

[train sounds fades back to foreground, approaching in the right channel of the stereo recording and panning to the left as the train grows louder and passes the listener]

[train sounds fade out, interview resumes]

A: And that was one of the first films ever publically aired, and it’s an interesting reminder that the emergence of “new media” actually have the capacity to make us see our world in different ways, to experience the world in different ways. And so part of that persistent queerness that I was talking about is a desire to constantly question normative, naturalized, sedimented ways of experiencing.

R: Mmhmm.

A: And so using the Lumière brothers film Train Arriving at the Station, and then remixing it with some of our own sounds—it’s a reminder that part of what’s at stake for us is to recapture some of the newness in media from this old, old film. And to recognize that that is part of the history of new media is itself a form of disruption.

R: I would say—this is a slightly different take on the answer—you know, Jonathan is more of a film buff than I am. He knows these histories and is a great fan of Cocteau,
and I’m coming at it as somebody who worked for ten years as a typesetter and a graphic designer. So I have attachments to fonts and colors and design and things like that in particular ways. And so when we came to new media, both of us from our different perspectives think, “Well, this is not new.” It’s new if you approach it without its history. [laughs once] I want, and I still want, to approach that history less haphazardly. Because I think both of us have approached it from a particularly Western view of, say, film or typography or design, and that’s where we are, and hopefully we will get better. Because I’m thinking of some of the films—because my wife is also a film buff—but French film but also West African film. How do those sorts of things inform how we might use film? Not to illustrate, but as modes that speak, modes that do something. And to back way up to the literacy narrative, what happens very often—maybe not so much anymore—but when we first started doing this, we did a survey of quite a few literacy narratives on YouTube where not only were the videos used to illustrate a print text, and therefore were not capacious at all [chuckles]—very often they harked back to even older forms where you would have a literacy narrative that’s like, “Here’s my point, here are three set pieces that explain my point, and here’s the conclusion.” So you essentially had a five-paragraph essay showing up in film.

[iInterview pauses; clip from Tony Zhou’s video “How to Structure a Video Essay” begins to play]

[Duke Ellington, Charles Mingus, and Max Roach’s “Very Special,” an uptempo, piano-driven jazz song, plays as video’s soundtrack]

Voiceover: Hi. My name is Tony, and this is Every Frame a Painting.

[2-pop sounds]

Zhou: When you’re structuring a video essay, there’s one thing you really want to avoid.

John Sturges: If you tell a story that’s “and then they, and then, and then,” you’re in big trouble.

Zhou: This is the number one mistake I make in my own work. Like here. Watch how repetitive this is.

[Zhou rolls clip of another of his videos, this one about the films of Martin Scorsese; background music speeds up throughout this clip-within-a-clip]

Zhou: Choosing to take the money, choosing not to fight back, choosing to hide their emotions, choosing not to trust someone, choosing to wait out their discomfort, choosing to get—

[clip-within-a-clip cuts off, music slows and stops abruptly]

Zhou: This is a list you could put in any order. That’s why it’s so boring.
R: Why bother? Why use the movie?

A: Right. So, in a way, when you think about it, it totally makes sense. When you move to a new medium—just as when our students work in new genres, they will often fall back on older ways of thinking, and so a five-paragraph theme is a very standard, very old way of thinking that many young people are still introduced to today. So it’s not surprising that we find it appearing all over the place—

R: Well, no.

A: —even when people move to other forms of media-making. And so our point was, well, you know, we’re not totally against the five-paragraph essay. I have nothing in particular against it, except—

R: But there are other things to do.

A: —there are other things to do. If you’re going to make a film, let’s start from the tradition of actual filmmaking, video production, and what does that tradition look like? What does that offer us that more text-based traditions don’t?

R: Mmhmm.

[2-pop plays; a second clip from Zhou’s “How to Structure a Video Essay” begins]

Voice of Trey Parker: What should happen between every beat that you’ve written down is either the word “therefore” or “but.” Right?

[hip-hop act A Tribe Called Quest’s “Oh My God (Instrumental)” fades in: horn sample over a beat]

Parker: So what I’m saying is you come up with an idea and it’s like, “Okay, this happens. And therefore this happens. But this happens, therefore this happens.”

[2-pop plays; music cuts out and Zhou clip continues]

John Sturges: I’ll call [Alfred] Hitchcock again. He said the name of making movies is “meanwhile, back at the ranch.” He’s absolutely right. You want to have two things going. You reach the peak of one, you go to the other.

[clip from The Empire Strikes Back]

Princess Leia: I hope you know what you’re doing.

[sound of a spaceship accelerating over the movie’s orchestral score, which crossfades into sounds from another scene happening elsewhere]
Sturges: You pick the other up right where you want her. When it loses interest, drop it. “Meanwhile, back at the ranch.”

[sound of film running through a projector, then a 2-pop, and the Zhou clip ends]

R: And I think it points to the idea that technology brings with it its own nostalgia and comfort. So if you look at when Gutenberg developed movable type then you have the Gutenberg Bible, if you start looking at the fonts—Germanic fonts that come out at that point—they’re supposed to look like hand-lettered fonts. There’s a nostalgia at that moment of transition for something that looks older so you know how to deal with it. If you look at Web 1.0, if you start looking at a lot of online publications that give you just PDFs: we want things that look like print because that’s what safe and comfortable and we have that nostalgia for it and we know what to do. We’re not disoriented. So maybe what On Multimodality is pointing to is that we’ve passed that transition point. We’ve passed it, and we need to then look at, okay, what does this offer us with its own history and its own context? And I think it’s imperative that we start talking to people in art design and graphic design and the visual arts and sonic rhetorics and things like that to talk about, “Well, where did this come from and what are the different traditions? What can it do? What can it make me think differently about?” And that’s how we get really rich multimodal compositions. You know, print is just one tradition, and Western print is just a narrow part of that.

D: I’m curious—have there been any recent moments when you suddenly found yourselves learning something new about a medium that disoriented you in a way that made you rethink the way you were approaching one of your projects?

R: Recently?

A: Such an interesting question. [laughs]

D: And it doesn’t have to be recent—

R: I find myself disoriented frequently, so—

[all laugh]

[A continues chuckling]

R: No, as I said before, some of the West African films that I’ve been privileged to watch—I guess not being disoriented by the medium as much as confronted with my own narrowness of context, of what does it mean to look at different film traditions? What does it mean to look at African film? What does it mean to look at Bollywood cinema, and maybe not colonize and use it disrespectfully, but to sort of think about, “Okay, when I say that video does this, am I speaking in a wise and ethical way? Are there more things I could learn?” Yeah.
A: And you get this sensation in good old fashioned text too.

R: Yeah!

A: One of my favorite recent books is Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts*, which is a wonderful text. And she’s a fascinating writer who’s worked in several different genres. *The Argonauts* is a sort of memoir of her relationship with a trans man, but it’s also a thick work of scholarship. It’s a very personally driven story, personally narrated, but also full of references to queer theory and short disquisitions on queer theoretical subjects, all written in this nearly aphoristic set of paragraphs that seem initially disconnected, but then over time build up. And when I was reading it, I thought, “Oh my god, this is sort of an extraordinary interweaving of the personal, the theoretical,” et cetera. And then I had to remember, “Oh, wait a minute. Roland Barthes is doing this in a book like *A Lover’s Discourse*—

R: Mmm. Right.

A: —and in many of his other books as well.” So it’s intriguing to constantly be coming up against—even within the Western tradition—a seemingly new thing that itself is really a manifestation of an ever-evolving set of experimentations with genre, with modality, with different kinds of media. I mean, Nelson is clever enough that she even uses, much like Barthes did, little side notes, and you get the text running up and down the page with little side notes and citations. So even the rearrangement of the page itself to reflect a different approach to profoundly interesting material: those remain, I think, engaging, rapturous moments—

R: See, and that reminds me of looking at rabbinical texts like the Tanakh, where you have multiple rabbis through the ages writing. Now here’s the text, here’s the margin, here’s the margin that comments on the margin, and to get a sense of the thing, you have to look at all of it at once. And so looking at very old things too can have that moment of, “Oh, yeah!” One of the things that I wanted to say is that even though with *On Multimodality*, the book focuses a lot on the digital, it’s important to remember that multimodality isn’t just digital. So I’m thinking of Jody Shipka’s work, I’m thinking of books like Keri Hulme’s *Bone People*, where people are blending poetry and different languages and different voices trying to get at, again, a more complete or an adequate sense of what the topic is. So, you know, being surprised by things that you’ve already read is of great value too.

A: Something that’s intriguing about what you were just saying, and I think relevant to all of the multimodality we’re interested in, is a kind of layering. And before, you were talking about assemblage. And “assemblage” has certainly been one of our modes of composing, one of our ways of composing, of bringing a variety of different things together.

R: Right. I like to think of it as collecting ourselves.
A: Collecting ourselves [R laughs] as opposed to composing ourselves. [R and A laugh] We don’t compose ourselves, we collect ourselves. But it’s also a layering effect—

[ambient laughter in background; some ambient conference chatter continues in background for a few minutes]

A: —seeing something through something else, or in close proximity and juxtaposition, or adjacent to other things. That kind of overlap, we think, is really intriguing and is itself very different than linear composing, and very different than building an argument and then unpacking an argument—which both Jackie and I do in a variety of scholarly texts. But that’s to engage a certain kind of thinking. Layering, assembling—

R: Juxtaposing.

A: Juxtaposing.

R: Collecting.

A: Those generate different kinds of thoughts, different ways of being and experiencing, and we want to value those as well.

D: Well, to approach this from a slightly different angle: So even for scholars who are immensely well-versed in media theory, media history, many of the kinds of issues and questions that you all have been kind of discussing here, developing the production skills necessary to work with things like audio, video, digital media I think often seems overwhelming. So I was wondering, given that you all have so much experience developing these skills, working with these kinds of technologies, is there any advice you would offer to scholars or teachers or students who are interested in developing not just the intellectual frameworks—

A: Right.

D: —but the practical abilities necessary for working with these sorts of things?

R: You have to embrace failure.

A: Yeah, I was going to say.

R: Failure.

A: Be willing to fail. Be willing to play to the point of failure, and then fail better next time.

R: Yeah. And I think I have a very queer approach to learning the technologies—and I think this comes from working with so many different weird, dedicated computer systems that don’t exist anymore back when I was a typesetter—having a sense of what a
technology should be able to do, and then monkeying around with it until it does that. And failing over and over. And playing; I think that’s the main thing. And I think that one of the worries that we’re trying to get at—because we talked about that in the infamous MLA panel where they thought we were advocating poetry in the classroom—is decentering the teacher. We’ve talked about decentering the teacher for decades in the field, but people are so attached to being the authority in the classroom—they’re so nervous about not knowing what to do—that they don’t take advantage of the fact that their students know what to do, or their students will help them fail, they will help them play, and then they can work this stuff together. A lot of my technology comes from spending twelve hours with the same thirty-second video clip [laughs briefly] until it feels right. You know, and there’s the luxury of time involved there, obviously, but it’s not like I’m doing that all the time. It’s like I know that I have to play. You have to put aside your knowledge, your expertise, your authority, and play.

A: When I play with these sorts of things, I always have a sort of vision of what I want to accomplish, and then I realize, “Oh wait, the technology allows me to do something that I didn’t even know that I wanted to do—

R: Mmhmm.

A: —and that I didn’t even know it was possible to do.” And so you kind of just haphazardly work your way into all sorts of interesting effects and affects—

R: Mmhmm.

A: —but you have to be open, and maybe not so doggedly attached to a particular vision, or be willing to allow some exploration to take place.

R: And then, like with all play, as you play more and more, you discover more workarounds. I mean, you get to a point where you have enough expertise, adequate expertise, to play better and to play with others.

A: The playing with others is key. Because inevitably, Jackie and I are going to think of things that the other won’t, and so being able to have that sort of frission is really good. It’s so transformed my pedagogy. I ask my students now always, in all my classes, to collaborate with each other on a video project of some kind, and that comes directly out of my collaboration with Jackie. Because I want the students to have the exact same experience of working together on a project, learning from each other but then also producing a thing. And I’ve gravitated more and more to having them produce video projects.

R: Mmhmm.

A: And we always begin those assignments by taking a skills inventory. What do you know how to do, what can you bring to the table? Because inevitably, everyone in your group is going to rely on each other being able to know how to do things that not everybody knows how to do. And so finding the partners who can do things you can’t,
but who can also benefit from discussion with you—that’s a huge part of learning and creating.

R: I do a similar inventory at the beginning of my classes, and I have two questions. One is, “What do you know how to do?” But the second question is, “How comfortable are you with the technologies? How comfortable are you with playing at the technologies?” Because there are a lot of people who may not necessarily know how to use the entire Adobe suite such as it is, but they’re okay playing with it. They’re not scared of it.

D: Mmhmm.

R: And then you have other people who have learned how to do one thing, like, “I know how to do Photoshop but I’m never going to do InDesign because it just scares me.” Who just have the skill but not the play.

D: Hmm.

R: So having a good balance of people who are players with people who are adepts. That’s a good thing to do. Right now, in my program at Michigan State, we have an undergraduate program in professional writing and another one in experience architecture. Those students come in with far more software knowledge than I could ever have, but it makes for a very rich classroom.

D: Hmm. There’s two things that strike me that I wanted to ask if you have any examples that you don’t mind sharing. One would be, since our let’s say scholarly failures often get left on the cutting-room floor and do not see the light of day, would there be any noteworthy failures that you wouldn’t mind sharing—

[A chuckles]

R: Oh, failures?

D: —as a way of trying to perhaps inspire people who are nervous about this? And I’m also interested in the specific ways you both talked about trying to sort of bend or play with software to make them either do things they weren’t designed to do, or—

R: Well, that one’s easy. It’s just monkeying around with Microsoft Word until it does something interesting. Failures? Yeah, I fill up my hard drive with failures.

[A laughs]

R: I have—especially video failures. And every time I try to clean off my hard drive, I’ll have fifteen versions of the same video, and they’re slightly different and I just didn’t like them, or something wasn’t working right, or they were fuzzy or something. And yet I can’t bring myself to delete them because I think I might use them.

A: Yeah.
R: So I can’t even call them total failures.

A: I was going to say that we’ve published many of our failures. [laughs]

R: Published failures, yeah.

A: We turn our failures into weird things that people—eh, we don’t know what to do with that, so we might as well publish it.

R: I think actually there are parts of *Techne* that are like that, and we’ll just mention very briefly *Topoi*, which is going to make use of a lot of these failures. I don’t know, I recycle practically everything. More of my failures have come from print texts than from multimodal texts. Like, “Oh wow, yeah, that was a good argument that I presented at a conference and I’m never going to use it again. Goodbye.”

A: So one of our, I think, most interesting failures was at the Computers and Writing Conference in two thousand—seven?

R: Seven? Yeah.

A: At Wayne State outside of Detroit, and we had written an earlier version of the piece that we ultimately published in *Rhetoric Review*—actually, that gets recast even in *On Multimodality*.

R: The fifth chapter.

A: The fifth chapter on Cho, the young man who committed the assault at Virginia Tech. And he was himself a media producer, and in our earliest version of this presentation, we looked at the plays he had written, the videos that he composed before he went on his killing spree, and we were trying to understand and wrap our own minds around, what does it mean to be a composer, a digital composer? How did these texts circulate, these often violent texts circulate? And so the material was already a little heady, and we had arranged both a print talk that I was going to read and a video component that was going to accompany it. However, we couldn’t get the projector to work, there was something wrong—

R: Yeah, technology wasn’t working. [laughs]

A: Yeah, [French phrase]. Technology was failing us. So we decided, “Well, the show must go on. I have to read the text.” And so Jackie was in the back of the room sort of sifting back and forth between a variety of different images that we had—

R: Collected. [chuckles]

A: —collected for the presentation, but that we couldn’t play because the video wasn’t working.
D: Right.

A: And so it was almost as though you, Jackie, were DJing. [laughs]

R: I was DJing the presentation, yeah.

A: And it actually created a far more disturbing, unsettling experience because I think our original presentation was a little more linear.

R: Yes.

A: It followed the print text more carefully.

D: Hmm.

A: But since we couldn’t get that to work, Jackie had to create on the fly this far more associational set of images that were just coming and going and popping up and repeating, going in and out while I was giving the linearly driven textual argument. And I think that was one of the times—first times in which we thought, oh—

R: This is something.

A: This is a thing. This is interesting.

R: Yeah.

A: We have failed into something that we could potentially use, and then the very next year, I think, we were at the Watson conference, creating installations—

R: Doing installations, right.

A: —3D installations that attempted to do, to recreate that sense of what we hope was productive disorientation—

R: Right.

A: —that was based on associational and layered thinking.

R: I guess I’d forgot about that failure. That was an excellent failure.

A: I wouldn’t have a career without failure. [laughs]

R: Well yeah. Failure is productive, generative. You don’t even necessarily have to learn from it.
A: You know, and I am—it’s so interesting that that is such a radical thought. Because when I sit down—just last week, I was sitting down with some of my teaching assistants who were bringing me examples of writing from their students, saying, “Oh, this is,” you know, “this piece of writing isn’t working. It’s not going to pass,” blah blah blah. And I’m like, okay, but look at what the writer is actually doing. It is not a linear argument yet. And yet in much of this writing, you can see someone thinking, someone writing towards interesting ideas, and using writing to actually get to those ideas. And so it is such a—this is the NC-17 part—it’s such a mindfuck for the TA to realize, no wait a minute, this writing isn’t failing. It isn’t the polished piece that you’re going to turn in and submit, but it is working as writing because it’s actually generating thoughts and the pedagogical moment there is to invite the student to recognize, okay, not what you’re ultimately going to submit at the end of the class for a grade, but this writing works because it’s actually giving you thoughts. And learning how to recognize writing as doing that—I mean, if that’s not what we’re teaching, I don’t know what we’re teaching. That seems to me the only thing worth teaching.

R: Mmhmm. And I think remembering that polish does not equal success.

A: Right.

R: And that messiness is not necessarily failure. Those things get tied up so much, especially when you get to the point of grading something.

A: Right, right.

R: We’ve been fortunate being able to publish some of our failures. I think there need to be more places to publish this sort of work that is rough and interesting and disorienting, and that probably means changing a lot of our publication practices. Sorry, Jonathan. [regretful laughter]

A: It’s true, I know. As the editor of a journal, how much failure can I get away with publishing?

R: Exactly, exactly.

A: And yet, you know, no doubt even the things that I ultimately have to reject, it’s always a pleasure when somebody emails me back later saying, “Wow, that was a really important rejection because I was able to take the advice and publish the piece somewhere else.” And those are successes.

R: Mmhmm.

A: That’s the actual process working.

D: All right, well, as we’ve already discussed a little bit, On Multimodality and Techne both explore new digital possibilities for scholarship and pedagogy, but as we’ve talked about some, you don’t just push on the limits of the platforms or the technologies or the
media that we use. You’re also trying to expand the genres and the affects that are generally accepted as legitimate scholarship. I’m thinking specifically of the way that *Techne* interweaves personal narrative with more traditional scholarly language, or, as you put it in *On Multimodality*, quote, “narrative, broadly conceived, is often profoundly rhetorical even as many narratives do not rely on logical or syllogistic thinking.” End quote. So I’d love to hear a little more about that—the potential roles you see for narrative in scholarly work, and are there ways in which the possibilities of narrative as a kind of rhetorical or scholarly act become particularly salient when we’re dealing with multimodal and digital media?

R: Hmm. I think it’s crucial that we tell stories. I’m thinking of Rosi Braidotti and her book on the posthuman. And this came out just a couple of years ago, and I think about this a lot—that the task of theory, the task of critical theory now is to try to create an adequate representation of the self in its context. And it ties back to some early interests I had in radical feminism and consciousness-raising groups and all that, where the feminists would say at the time, “the personal is political.” And it wasn’t the point that you were just supposed to navel-gaze and look at, you know, the first person and what was going on, but you’re always trying to tie it to that larger context. You’re always trying to say, “Okay, I experienced this and this is how it relates to these other things systemically that are going on.” So the personal is political and rhetorical, I would say. And I think that we tell stories even when we’re not doing first person. I mean, the best arguments are people trying to frame a story for you: this is the story of composition, this is the story of object-oriented ontology, this is the story of this—

A: This is the story of my lab experiment.

R: —this is the story of my lab experiment. You know, narrative has a very important role in most of what’s written now because we are story-loving animals. I’m not sure how I would tie it directly to multimodality except to say that it makes the stories richer. And I’m thinking of Anzaldúa and “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” and how that essay, that story, becomes richer because she’s trying to get at different aspects of that first person.

A: Right.

R: If I’m using video in part of *Techne*, it’s because I’m trying to get at not just, “Let me tell you my story,” but, “Here: Inhabit my story. Feel this with me.” So I think, yeah, multimodality—whether it’s digital or print or, you know, people making charts and things—lets you get at that sense of “come along with me for my story.”

A: Yeah. I like what you’re saying, Jackie. And it’s not just that the stories are richer. They’re more honest in some way.

R: Mmhmm. You can’t hide.

A: You can’t hide. And there are also some things that we talk about—“talk about,” quote-unquote—through multimodality that you can’t really talk about in print, in text.
And I’m thinking in a wonderful part—to me it’s wonderful—wonderful part in “Genealogy” in *Techne* in which I was reflecting on having written a whole set of poems in which I’m trying to imagine what was it like for my mother to move to New Orleans with her gay brother, to leave the home, leave the home that they had known. Essentially to have been thrust out of it as the black sheep in some way. And we decided that we would not only print part of those poems, but that I would read them and we would make a video out of those poems, and Jackie came across the brilliant idea of tweaking my voice so that it wasn’t my voice. It sounded a little more like a woman’s voice, which was right because this is a poem that I’m writing from my mother’s perspective, but it also wasn’t my mother’s voice either, and so what Jackie did with the technology I thought was brilliant in the sense that she could tune my voice so that it was an other voice, which is right because the voice of me trying to imagine my mother talking about this story can only really be an other voice. I don’t know what her experience was, I’m not replicating it. I’m not even really trying to represent it. It’s refracting through my experiences and how I need to tell that story.

[clip from the video “Morning” from *Techne*, read by Jonathan in a voice that is pitched up slightly]

A [altered]: This morning I left my father’s house. / I never knew how easy it would be / but I opened the door and stepped onto / the porch as his spit hit me between the / shoulder blades. I couldn’t help but smile. / The sun struggled with a cloud as I turned / down the dirt road that would soon separate / the life given me from the life taken.

[clip ends and interview resumes]

A: So the first time I heard what Jackie had down in sort of retuning that voice just chilled me because it sounded right—that it was this other voice speaking, and it got to a sort of truth, an honesty about the complexity of representing these experiences and representing not only someone else’s experiences, but trying to imagine what their experience was like. I think the technologies allow us to be even more honest in representing, through manipulation of the technologies, just the sheer complexity and nuance of those attempts to narrate, to tell stories. Does that make sense?

R: It does make sense, and I’m thinking of the video in the “Rhizomes” chapter. Sometimes it’s not video, it’s the sound.

A: Yeah.

R: We’re so visually oriented that the sound gets at a sort of truth. I’m fascinating by Steph Ceraso’s work and Steven Hammer’s work with sound, and in our next project we’re playing a little bit more with soundscapes. But in that section in “Rhizomes” where I’m talking about, you know, I heard the rain, I could smell the rain, and thinking about what it was like to be in that space of facing rejection from my family and my church and all this because I was gay—trying to get at that, and I try to get at it by using a drone in the background.
R: There’s just a drone that’s almost a church organ.

R: And that’s the truth I want you to get to. It’s like, that’s what it feels like. That’s the brain at that moment.

R: And, you know, how do you get at that beyond language, beyond the visual? And I think multimodal composition, that process of layering and sampling and collecting, lets you get at those things we can’t say.

A: Yeah. It gives voice and sight to things that you otherwise can’t say or see, if that makes sense.

R: Mmhmm.

A: Another part of me wants to respond to your wonderful question by saying, look, I use critical theory books as self-help manuals. And so those are my self-help books.

A: Deleuze is my guru.

R: Yeah.

R: It’s just like, wow. Because you just go with it and enjoy the ride.

A: Deleuze is my guru.

A: So if you think of the books that way, for me, queer theory is not a set of thoughts. It’s sort of a survival tactic in some significant ways. And so the only way to get at the realities, the truths of queer theory such as they are, is to find ways to articulate their embodiedness, the way that we live these theories.

R: Which means throwing your body into it, which is what Jonathan and I have been trying to do with our multimodal work You put your own body on the line in order to compose this way.

A: Yeah. It’s—I am still so turned on and provoked by text. I love text, but I also think—and this is the point perhaps of all of the work that we’ve done recently—it’s to just be open to the rhetorical affordances and possibilities of other kinds of order as well, other kinds of media production.
R: Mmhmm.

A: The end.

R: The end.

[D laughs, followed by R and then A]

D: Well, interestingly—interesting that you say that, because the last component of these interviews, the way I wrap them up, is by allowing my interviewee to pose a question for the next person I interview without knowing who this question is going to go to specifically. And the question that you all are getting here today comes from Steven Alvarez of St. John’s University. And his question is this, which actually kind of takes us back around to where this conversation began.

[clip of Alvarez from previous episode]

Steven Alvarez: I guess I would ask the next person, what are the possibilities for literacy studies in composition and rhetoric, but also what are some of the constraints? And I would open that up to thinking about digital literacies as well as more traditional literacies. How we can turn to composition and rhetoric as a complement to literacy, as something that literacy may not be able to reach?

[interview resumes]

R: This is an interesting question, and a difficult question for me, because it gets way back the beginning of the interview when we were talking about how discipliniarity creeps you out.

[low, echoing piano note from early on in episode plays again]

[A laughs]

R: Because I’m trying to figure out, okay, where do these things diverge and, you know, like, is rhet/comp part of literacy studies? Is literacy studies part of rhet/comp? It presumes this division that’s difficult for me to sort of find my way into.

[ambient conference chatter in background of next minute of recording]

A: Yeah, and I spent some time trying to wrap my mind around this as well, because I have variously identified myself as part of rhet/comp, rhetorical studies, media studies, literacy studies. I think the word “literacy” has probably appeared in the title of all of my single-authored books. I’m interested in literacy as a problem. I would say—ugh. [pauses] I can’t imagine literacy and rhetoric as ultimately separate, even though I recognize that they do separate things—that people who do literacy studies, people who do rhetorical studies really do different kinds of things. And yet it seems to me that what
is at stake right now for so many people in our country, in our world is the need for an expanded notion of what it means to be literate. I think we run the risk, particularly in composition studies, of narrowing what it means to be literate, what it means to write, to just a set of survival skills. To be able to get the job, to be able to get the career, to be able to survive the status quo. And I've always understood literacy as access to the tools not just for survival, but for cultural and sort of political transformation.

R: Mmhmm.

A: And rhetoric is the sort of art of persuasion that grows out of being literate, and so without wanting to privilege or prioritize or even schematize one versus the other, I guess what I would say is what we need now are not just narrowed versions of what it means to be literate or means to be rhetorical, but following all the work that we've done in On Multimodality, we'd like composition to be more. We'd like literacy and rhetorical studies to be more, to expand the power of available resources to the ways of thinking about how we make meaning in the world, how we transform our worlds to make them more socially just and equitable and sustainable.

R: And I think this is great because it ties in—I was talking with Brenda Glascott, who's one of the editors of Literacy in Composition Studies, the other night about the question. This was like, “I don't know how to answer this question, Brenda. Help me.” And she was saying that she thinks that the most exciting work that’s happening—forgive me if I’m misquoting you, Brenda—some of the most exciting work that’s happening in literacy studies has to do with transnational and global literacies. And I think that ties very much to what you’re saying. I mean, who are we in the world and how do we operate in the world? And one of those ways that we operate is through composition and meaning-making and knowledge production—I mean, obviously, communication. What is our place in that world and how do we, I guess—acknowledge it, use it, work it to make the world a better place? Again with the romantic.

A: Is it romantic or is it real?

R: I think it has to be real, I mean—

A: I think it’s real.

R: Yeah.

A: I think of writing, to get back to the first term we used—what is writing? Writing is world-building.

R: Yes.

A: And in that world-building, you’re either reifying, naturalizing what we already know—like, repeating it—and/or you’re also pushing against it. You’re generating new ways of thinking, new ways of feeling, experiencing, and being in the world. And so until
we have an understanding of writing as really a form of world-building—which means it is necessarily a political act—

R: Right.

A: —until we actually fully understand that, then I think it’s all just disciplinary creepy play. [R and D laughing] And so maybe I’ll stop there.

[all laughing]

D: Well, the final thing, then, is that you guys now get your chance to pitch the question that you want to ask to the next person that I interview.

A: Oh, do we get to do that now?

D: Yeah, or—

A: Oh, well the question is, what is writing?

R: Oh my god.

[D and A laughing to the point of wheezing]

R: That’s a great question. I might piggyback on that. I was going to ask something like, how do you make your writing matter?

A: Well, how about, what is writing, and how do you make your writing matter?

R: Yes.

D: All right!

A: Done.

D: Well, Jonathan Alexander, Jackie Rhodes, thank you again so much for taking the time for this interview.

R: Thank you very much for having us, yeah.

A: Thank you.

[drumbeat from Rhetoricity theme plays]

D [outro voice over]: That’s it for this episode! I’ll be back later this summer with an episode on the weird possibilities of podcasting as a scholarly practice, as well as a series of conversations between PhD students in rhetoric and their dissertation advisors. Till then, this is Eric Detweiler, leaving the station.
[toy train whistle blows twice]

[drumbeat fades to foreground, *Rhetoricity* theme plays]