Transcription for Episode 10: Interview with Rebecca Dingo

Run Time: 30:52

AH: Allison Hitt (co-executive producer)
KN: Kate Navickas (host)
RD: Rebecca Dingo (guest speaker)
BK: Ben Kuebrich (co-executive producer)

Cue music: "We Have All We Ever Wanted" by Yacht.

AH: You're listening to This Rhetorical Life, a podcast dedicated to the practice, pedagogy, and public circulation of rhetoric in our lives.

KN: Hi everyone. This is Kate Navickas, your host for this week's episode. I'll be introducing a follow-up conversation that I had with Rebecca Dingo after the CCR Graduate Circle's podcast panel event on transnational feminism. Participants in the panel included Rebecca Dingo, Dana Olwan, Anna Hensley, Tim Dougherty, and Eileen Schell. For more on the transnational feminist panel, check out This Rhetorical Life episode 7.

Cue music: "Emo Step Show" by Custodian of Records.

In this episode, I talked with Rebecca Dingo about her 2012 book *Networking Arguments: Rhetoric, Transnational Feminism, and Public Policy Writing.*

In *Networking Arguments,* Rebecca Dingo enacts a feminist transnational rhetorical analysis of global policies and conferences that are about women's role in a global economy. Focusing on three rhetorical commonplaces—gender mainstreaming, fitness, and empowerment—Dingo extends traditional rhetorical analysis to account for how arguments shift rhetorically as they are networked. Our conversation begins by us discussing the differences between the three feminist transnational terms Dingo uses to explain exactly how rhetorics shift: transcoding, ideological trafficking, and interarticulation. As we talked about gender mainstreaming—the development of policies that are *intended* to promote gender equality and women's best interests—and women's empowerment, we discuss how transcoding, ideological trafficking, and interarticulation offer different nuanced ways that these well-intending rhetorics shift and are distorted.

Cue music: "Emo Step Show" by Custodian of Records.

KN: I guess I'm interested in the three methods you kind of lay out—transcoding, ideological trafficking, and interarticulation—precisely because I think that they're really useful rhetorical ideas that are inroads for doing transnational work. For me, I'm interested in all the different layers of the book, but I really see those as challenging, in a lot of ways, some of the kind of traditional understandings we have of rhetoric and how it works. So, transcoding, which is in chapter two on gender mainstreaming, I kind of understand as how, you describe it as, literally originally meaning changing code to work on different

platforms. And so, you use it to think about how meanings get shifted based on context and occasion. And then ideological trafficking, in chapter three on fitness, is kind of an attention to history and how concepts like the primitive, colonial concepts, have histories that—whether or not we're aware of them—inform every time we draw on those words or those rhetorics.

RD: Yeah, they bubble up.

KN: Yeah, and then interarticulation is the one that I feel like I don't know what I'm talking about anymore. [*laughter*] I think it has to do with how shifting meaning happens with seemingly monolithic, static terms as international policies travel; but, I guess I'm confused between interarticulation and transcoding.

RD: I think that's a really good question, and actually I just want to say that I'm really happy that you noticed that about the book because most of the time when I am talking about the book, everyone's speaking more specifically about the idea of networking and how important that is—and it is important; it's one of the key focuses—but all of those terms come from transnational feminist work, and I really wanted to talk about how they work with our rhetorical methods, so I really appreciate you recognizing that.

And I'm trying to think about how to talk about the difference between transcoding and interarticulation. I think that the difference between the two of them, for me, was that transcoding is literally scrambling a meaning to work on a different platform and the idea versus interarticulation which is the idea that—and this is a very nuanced difference between the two—that a term can hold simultaneous meanings at once. And so, I'm thinking of the notion of empowerment and the Kiva micro-lending. There is a purposeful shift, I think, to talk about the first world lender there, but at the same time they're drumming up this notion that women need to be empowered from the so-called third world. I think it's that moment of holding those two things in space at the same time—versus transcoding where you literally see—and I think empowerment is transcoded as well, and perhaps I should have been a little more particular about that in that chapter, but I think that we see [empowerment] being picked up in various places. I saw it used in a makeup ad, that "having long lashes will empower you." But the difference between mainstreaming literally where the idea is this calling of women together to recognize and mainstream women's issues into the global economy and then literally mainstreaming women through self-help groups, for example. It turned, in this way, from a very positive term and then it shifted to a negative [one].

KN: One thing I'm hearing, that I don't know if I caught when I read it, was that transcoding is a literal changing in the code. That sounds a little bit more [like] awareness almost—as in "I'm using this for a different purpose so it has to shift." Whereas, maybe, interarticulation is [the idea that] while there are different meanings in every word, you're attempting to utilize the same meaning, but you don't.

RD: Yes, I think that's a really good way to put it. Yeah. [*laughter*] Maybe I should put a little footnote in the book, in the next versions of it, just to clarify.

KN: Yeah, those [the feminist transnational methods] are awesome, and I hope people pick those up because I think that those are so useful, clearly useful, for rhetoric.

Cue music: "Emo Step Show" by Custodian of Records.

When you started employing your methods for this, so you already kind of said that in your dissertation you were thinking about policies on the local, regional, state, nation level. I'm wondering if it's possible to describe some of the tangibleness of how you did that tracing or some of those observations. Like, did you think, okay, I'm going to start thinking about how neoliberalism works across all of these.

RD: Well, I think that because all of the materials that I looked at came out of the late 90's, for the most part, into the early 2000's, and I was very aware of this economic shift across the globe towards neoliberalism. So I had that in the back of my mind the entire time. And, really my dissertation probably is more of a focus on neoliberal rhetoric than it is on transnational feminist analyses. And I'm trying to think how I got to that place. I mean, I think that I'm lucky that because I looked at these local, national, and global policies, it gave me a chance to sit back, you know, after a year, re-read my dissertation, and start to be like—wait a minute: look at this notion of fitness that is in all of these different documents or in this ideology of what it means to be a neoliberal citizen. Or, wow, every one of these policies is focusing on a person's personal responsibility or their personal agency or their own abilities—and I was like, *there's something here that I need to talk about.*

I'm trying to think about how it was that I traced all of the World Bank policies. I mean I think that I would read about one policy that I was looking at, and someone would refer to another policy—and I would look it up. And then, I'd noticed all these other policies at the same time. And so it was almost like this, kind of, domino effect to some extent. Or, you get on the internet and you're reading a page and they have a link to something else and so you link on that and then you link on that—and then all of a sudden, you have all this knowledge. And I think that oftentimes that's how that happened. And so I had this huge wealth of policy information, and when I kept seeing the patterns over and over and over again—I was like, I am onto something, and this is something that's really important that needs to be talked about.

KN: What's the biggest challenges you've faced—using the methods, writing the book, doing this kind of work?

RD: You know I think that the biggest challenge has been trying to carve a conversation out in the field of Rhetoric and Composition—to convince scholars in our field that they need to take up the transnational. I think that has been actually the biggest challenge. I think that more and more. I notice with graduate students, for example, are picking it up and so that makes me feel really good. But I think that's been, sort of, the biggest challenge—being worried that I was writing to an audience that didn't exist.

KN: Do you still feel like that?

RD: There are some days. I'm feeling less so, that way. But yeah, there are some days I feel that way.

KN: I asked Rebecca about responses to *Networking Arguments.*

RD: In the field of Rhetoric and Composition, we have historically always—I mean if we think about the "good man," with little quotes around "man" speaking well has always been this very localized event. When I was first presenting my work as a graduate student and then a new professor, I would frequently get critiques saying, *Well, I'm looking at these policies but I haven't actually talked to the women and let them speak about their experiences with the policies.* And that is true, but I'm not an ethnographer, and that's not the kind of work I'm doing. But I do think it's equally important to think about the way that language structures the material on a local level. And people's experiences of a policy: like, you know, you and I may be affected by homeland security policy, for example, but the way we interpret it and the way it's affected our lives may be very different. And so I think that it's dangerous to boil it down to one certain person's experiences.

KN: I asked Rebecca about her understanding of the uptake of feminist work in Rhetoric and Composition, specifically whether or not she thought the field was supportive or resistant to feminist work and what brought her to a feminist transnational project.

You were talking about how you think the field has been kind of resistant to feminist work and that maybe that's part of the resistance to, or the slow pick up of, transnational work?

RD: Well, let me say this, I don't actually, just to shift that slightly, I don't think that the field has been *resistant* to feminist work. It's one of the only ways I think that I can imagine that there has. I wouldn't say it was like an active resistance, but maybe it's because, I think, the term feminism in front of anything assumes it's just about women, even thought we know that a feminist lens is not just about women. It's about gender, it's about power, it's about geopolitical relationships, it's about race, it's about class, it's about ability, ethnicity—all those things. But I sometimes wonder if it's easier to sort of overlook because of that term.

KN: That's actually one of my questions, and it's because I do feminist composition and feminist pedagogy, and I'm really interested in rhetoric. I just don't have a rhetorical project yet, and I'm hoping some day that'll happen sort of magically. But, um, so I guess, I think that question comes up a lot in scholarship, so it's not that I need to be reified, or it's not like I need you to explain to me why feminist work is awesome, or why we need the feminist work, but I'm wondering if that's a question that comes up from people for you a lot, like, why is it feminist? And Anna kind of talked in the panel about the difference between content that's clearly feminist. Yours is kind of both, like,

methodologically feminist without the content, and also you're looking at specific gendered issues that affect women.

RD: Yes. It's interesting because the *Transnational Studies Reader*, which is a collection of essays that sort of pulls together kind of a genealogy of the creation of transnational studies, which is still sort of a pretty marginalized area of cross or interdisciplinary studies. You know, for me, because I entered transnational studies from a feminist perspective, and when I look at the way that that book is put together and how they define transnationalism and transnational studies—which I can't get into because it's 15 pages of them being really specific about it—they do really, they draw so much from transnational feminist work and feminist work in political economy. And so, for me, I can't imagine doing transnational studies without it because. Partially because I'm schooled in Women and Gender Studies that everything has a gendered lens to it, and I'm trained to look for that.

So can you do transnational studies without transnational feminism? It's interesting. I was talking a little with Krista Olsen about this at the Cs and we were trying to put together a potential transnational feminist or transnational rhetorical SIG or transnational feminist SIG, we weren't sure as we were talking about it. Krista said, "Well, I don't really do the gender part of it or the feminist part of it," and I actually think she does because I think that one of the things feminists are always concerned with [is] issues of power. Who has power? Who doesn't have power? Where power is produced, how power can be productive. And I think that that's one of the key things that transnational study or that transnational feminist studies does and why you don't necessarily have to have such a gendered lens, but if you're thinking about relations of power, then it is a transnational feminist project.

KN: I also think about Chandra Mohanty's call about genealogies and academic genealogies, and I just think you're so right about placing that as coming out of Women and Gender Studies. I'm hesitant to say that because I don't really know.

RD: Yeah. And that's one of the things that I think that I've realized about thinking about in terms of the turn towards thinking about the ecologies or thinking about networks that to me, I feel like transnational feminists have been talking about those kinds of things for a number of years. And so, that's my entryway into it, as opposed to looking at Latour, for example, who is very important but I think that I just have a different inroads.

KN: And I see feminist also as that coming out of intersectional work. You know we were talking about matrixes a long, long time ago.

RD: Yeah, absolutely. And there's a really good article by Inderpal Grewal and Karen Caplan about sort of the legacy of transnational femininities. I forget what the article's name is, but they kind of talk about how intersectionality is the precursor of transnational studies. Absolutely.

KN: Because that's really what got us thinking about 1) the differences in everybody and in groups, but then also how material bodies are affected by place and space and policies and things like that. One of the things, I hadn't thought about the word "feminism," and I think that that speaks mostly to my place at Syracuse. I'm in this nice little liberal haven here. But as a graduate student I think about you, Eileen [Schell], and Wendy Hesford's work, and I think about also I feel this very much coming into the Women and Gender Studies transnational work that we see happening. It is so responsible and so many layers that it's daunting. I keep thinking about Jacqueline Jones Royster's *Traces of the Stream*, where she says, "Oh yeah, seventeen years it took me to write this work," and I think about not so much being afraid of the commitment, but how do you start a lifelong career project like that and think about negotiating all those layers at once?

RD: This is a question I actually get a lot, and it frequently comes particularly from my graduate students who are working on doing a transnational methodology, and they don't know where to stop. And I think that's a difficult question to answer because I think for almost every project is going to be different, and I realize it sounds sort of wishy-washy, but eventually…I think that once you have enough of the primary data, the analyses that you've made of your work and you can start enough to be able to tell the story that pulls on all of these layers, then that's kind of where to stop. But I think, and I look at my book. I probably could have written volumes and volumes and volumes. I think at one point I remember in writing, thinking, *I should just write a book about the rhetoric of empowerment. There's so much here. There's so much richness in this notion of empowerment.* But I think that though putting it together with all of these other terms told a much wider story, I guess. And so, I don't know if I've answered your question, but I think that you're right. One thing that happened when writing *Networking Arguments* and looking at the rhetoric of empowerment is that I realized that there are so many jumping-off other projects that could be done, and then, so it just spurs you on I guess to do more.

KN: What's your advice to graduate students, then, who are starting this work? I think that what happens is that you get interested in the scholarship you see, and you're not attached to particular materials or projects going on. You know, like Anna's talking about, "Oh on my blog feed…" because she's connected now. She's at a point where in her project she's already connected. I guess I'm interested in advice you might have for anybody in between those points. I've read the scholarship, and I want to enter these conversations, but how do you locate a project and get materials and start connecting?

RD: Anna and I actually talked about this a little bit at the Cs. To some extent, what I look at is that you spend…the point of coursework is that you get this kind of archive of knowledge that you get to sort of put in the back of your head to pull out when you need it, and I would really suggest that if you have a particular project that you're working on—whether it's an analysis of a policy document, whether it's a teaching practice that you're working on in the classroom, whatever the thing is that you're working on—that you sit with that thing for a long time, and I actually really like *Writing Analytically's* idea of how before you start writing that you just make observations. Because I think that when you sit with something and make the observations that is where all of a sudden you start pulling the theory, pulling the archive and you start seeing how to really understand

how to make the best practice of the messy composition classroom as we talked about in the podcast event earlier.You know, in order to justify why this messy composition classroom is necessary, I can pull from *x, y*. I can pull from all these different places, and that's where I think you can start to put the theoretical framing on the project.

I think that as graduate students it's really hard because you've got such a small, minute amount of time to actually get your project together and start writing it and whether you're going to be in this lens or another lens. But oftentimes if you can sit with the material for a longer period of time and just kind of be with it and then see how to go from there is probably…would be my advice. And it's not necessarily advice I admittedly took when I was a graduate student because you know, the way, at least in my graduate program we had several fellowships to apply for and various kinds of leads and whatnot, so we were always asked to produce, and I think that sometimes that made me produce before I was ready. And I say that by also recognizing the need to write always—always and early and often. But sometimes that writing's messy, and you don't end up using it, but I think that being in that practice of writing is always good.

Cue music: "Emo Step Show" by Custodian of Records.

KN: As feminist composition, on that side of the divide, obviously this is…I see transnational work and especially feminists in the field tending to be picked up in rhetoric, right? I guess I'm interested in one, how you take this up in the classroom—and I know you covered a little bit of that in the panel—but also how you could imagine it being picked up by feminist compositionists in the future?

RD: Yeah, I mean, I think that…composition to me is one, teaching students how to be writers and responders, but I also think that part of what we do in the composition classroom is get them to be—I mean I hate to use the word "critical" thinkers—but I think that's part of what we're trying to have them do, which is to wallow in the gray areas and take risks and not just the writing but kind of the research that they do and the materials they bring together. So I actually think that a transnational feminist method because it's messy oftentimes and you're pulling in so many different vectors and ideas into one thing, it can be overwhelming. But I actually think it's a really good place to be in that moment of being overwhelmed.

So for me when I'm teaching students writing, what I ask them to do is ask them to do is to start to peel away the layers of an onion. I mean, one of the things I talked about in the podcast event is seriously not taking things at face value, and what does that mean? So getting them to move beyond their comfort zone of just researching on Wikipedia and instead actually getting into the nitty gritty of archives, for example, or of even contacting—oftentimes I use a lot of documentary films—and taking the next step and contacting the documentary filmmaker to see what he or she says since they were on the ground and exploring a particular kind of issue. So I do think that it's a method that's fairly easily adaptable, and it's not just about teaching students about globalization or global issues but how to think about global issues. And I don't mean that in telling them,

"You need to think this way," but the multiple ways and multiple layers you can come at an issue.

Part of this comes from…I remember a long time ago when I was a graduate student talking with Nan Johnson and having a disagreement with her because she does a lot of work with historiography and rhetoric. She would always say, "Well, you're looking at the material results of discourse, but we know that there's a bullet in Gettysburg," and my way of looking at it was like, "Well, yes, but who shot the bullet? Or where it came from or the result of that bullet depends on who you are. Were you a Native American who was there and watching things happen? Were you an African American who was being forced to fight? Were you a woman who was there who was a nurse? Which side were you on? Were you up on the hill? Were you down below?" If you start thinking about all those different perspectives, then a story's going to look very, very different. And I think that's one way it can be adaptable in the composition classroom—or even taking one issue and having students try to look at them from these different perspectives and then putting those together makes you realize that you have a really rich research and writing project then.

KN: We also use *Writing Analytically* here, so I'm sure you know it's a very dense, difficult, writing handbook. So, thinking about the complexities of bringing this kind of feminist transnational approach into the classroom, I'm interested in the terms you choose to use with students versus when you decide to just bring the concept in. So, for instance, we often talk as graduate students about how some people use the term "evolving thesis" and some people don't. I guess I'm wondering if there are any transnational concepts that you explicitly talk about and use because you find them useful terms or if there [are] certain concepts you slide in without really giving them the terms for.

RD: I think that when I teach writing that oftentimes I probably put more emphasis on the gathering of materials before having the thesis. I mean I will at the end talk about an evolving thesis and what not. But to me, particularly in the 20th century after No Child Left Behind and whatnot, students aren't equipped to make good arguments. They know how to write a thesis, they know how to write, at least at Missouri. They know how to write a five-paragraph essay, but they don't have any kind of way of getting outside that comfort zone and gathering lots of information, so I talk a lot about peeling away the layers of the onion. I talk a lot about the notion of networking, taking an issue and starting to connect one thing to another.

I had students who…last semester I taught a globalization and gender class, and this wasn't really a composition class, but we had an end of the semester project that was a writing project. It ended up being almost like a documentary podcast kind of thing, and they wanted to respond to Nicholas Kristoff and Sheryl WuDunn's *Half The Sky* because they felt like there were a lot of holes: 1) in the arguments they were making about women's oppression across the globe but also in the way that the material was being presented. They never really came up with a focused thesis per se, but what they came to in looking at all the different layers—whether it was a call for them to look at postcolonial relationships or neocolonial relationships to looking at environmental issues

to looking at the way that women are represented in the book itself. But they really got to the term "structural violence," and it was interesting to me to see that process and to see how so much of that project ended up being about that process and I think that that process was so rich and important.

And I think that when we have them in the composition classroom, we have them for what, like 16 weeks? There's not a lot you can teach them in that time period, but you can start having them think beyond what they have already learned. So I've been shying away more from those static conventions, probably to the chagrin of professors across the university who are looking for the composition classes to be the gateway entity into teaching students how to write, but I actually think that they have to learn how to think before they can even sit down to start writing an evolving thesis because you can't have an evolving thesis until you recognize that an interesting paper and an interesting thesis is not just a statemen—that it is actually has a lot more layers to it.

KN: I think feminist pedagogy—a circulating question that comes up again and again—is, you know, the ideological question. Are you trying to indoctrinate your students to get them to see the point? And I feel like you hear very different articulations of that, so I guess I'm just curious about your reaction and ways of working with students who are really resistant to day one—like the topic of inquiry, say.

RD: Yeah, you know in Missouri that actually has deep material affects around that because we are of an academic diversity statement that is state mandated because called the Emily Brooker Bill where a student sued her professor who she claimed made her write a letter to an organization that she didn't believe in, and so we have to be very careful about what we teach and how we teach that we're not indoctrinating students.

But anyway, so, I don't believe in indoctrinating students with particular views, but I do believe in presenting students with methods of finding information so that they can start to put the story together. And that's what I really have found that I think that as a teacher I do really well because I am a Half the Sky ambassador on my campus, which means that I have shown the film, I've talked about the film, I've taught the book. And I begin that oftentimes there because oftentimes students really love the material, and they're moved by it. But by the end of the semester, they recognize—because of the histories I've taught them, because of the ways of research that I've taught them—that they really see the holes. I try really hard to say, "Okay, I see that you have this perspective, I respect that perspective, and now I want you to start peeling away the layers of the onion. So what else is going on here that's not obvious?" And oftentimes they get there themselves.

KN: I know "indoctrination," using that word, makes it sound bad.

RD: Right.

KN: But in the back of my head, I'm always thinking of Jonathan Alexander who in his book says things like, "Yeah, I do want them to change their minds by the end of the semester. Who doesn't?"

RD: Yeah, we all do yeah. But I think it hurts a lot less on them if they can do it themselves.

KN: Yes.

Cue music: "Emo Step Show" by Custodian of Records.

Thank you to Rebecca Dingo for taking the time to talk with us. I'm Kate Navickas, and you've been listening to This Rhetorical Life.

Cue music: "Golden" by High Places.

BK: This Rhetorical Life is brought to you by graduate students in the Composition and Cultural Rhetoric Program at Syracuse University. Executive Producers of this Rhetorical Life are Ben Kuebrich and Allison Hitt with additional production and editing from Karrieann Soto, Tamara Issak, and Seth Davis.

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