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## Kairos, Resilience, and Serendipity: An Interview with Elizabeth Flynn



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Elizabeth Flynn is Professor Emerita of Reading and Composition in the Department of Humanities at Michigan Technological University. She is the author of *Feminism Beyond Modernism* (2002) and co-editor, with Patsy Schweickart, of *Gender and Reading* (1986), with John Schilb and John Clifford of *Constellations* (1992; 1995), with Patsy Schweickart of *Reading Sites* (2004), and with Patty Sotirin and Ann Brady of *Feminist Rhetorical Resilience* (2012). She is founding editor of the journal *Reader*, which she edited or co-edited from 1982 to 2000. Her essays "Composing as a Woman" and "Gender and Reading" have been reprinted multiple times, and the Most Outstanding Article in Feminist Rhetoric and Composition, sponsored by the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition, was named for her. She has chaired her department, directed the department's graduate program in Rhetoric and Technical Communication, served twice on the executive committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, and chaired several divisions of the Modern Language Association of America. She also served as president of the Women's Caucus for the Modern Languages, an allied organization of the Modern Language Association.

This interview started over lunch at the 2014 Conference on College Composition and Communication. We originally met to talk about a collaborative research project, but the conversation shifted to our personal lives. We started talking about how our lives and our research were intertwined, discussing the serendipitous nature of our careers and the different paths we have taken. Beth had just been to a dinner with several women the night before where the theme was very similar: they had all taken risks or made choices that weren't always the most popular. We talked at lunch and decided to continue the conversation over email. What follows in this interview is Beth's reflection on her writing, her career, and her experiences as a professional woman in the field of Rhetoric and Composition.

**Tiffany:** Let's start the interview talking about an article of yours that was influential to me, as well as numerous other scholars in composition: "Composing as a Woman." At the time, did you know it would have such an impact on our field?

**Beth:** I knew in the 1980s that looking at writing from a gendered perspective was important and that a feminist perspective had not yet had a significant impact on the field of rhetoric and composition. The essay was published in *College Composition and Communication* in 1988. I remember talking to a woman representing one of the publishers at the Cs conference shortly after the article came out, and it was clear that it had made quite an impression on her. It apparently helped clarify her own situation as a woman professional, a situation that she could now see differed in some ways from that of her male colleagues. I was trying to open up an important conversation, and I'd say the article definitely did that. It has been reprinted at least seven times, and it will be included in *Landmark Essays on Rhetoric and Feminism* co-edited by Cheryl Glenn and Andrea Lunsford. I've also had opportunities to reflect on the essay. See, for instance, "Composing 'Composing as a Woman': A Perspective on Research," *College Composition and Communication* 41 (February 1990): 83-89 and "Contextualizing 'Composing as a Woman,'" *Feminism and Composition*, eds. Kirsch et al, Boston: Bedford, 2003. 339-341. The article came out in December of 1988, three months after my daughter Kate was born. It had a longer gestation period than nine months, though. I started working on the piece in the early 80s. It originated as a conference paper that was more quantitative in emphasis than the final essay ended up being. It underwent a number of revisions. I presented a version of it at a talk at the University of Calgary in the summer of 1987. The feedback I received there made clear the dangers of essentializing and presenting dichotomous representations of gender. I revised, taking these warnings into consideration, but I was nevertheless accused by some of doing just that. At least I've had opportunities to clarify my position, and there is a lot to be said for generating discussion on this crucial topic. It has been rewarding to see graduate students (and I

believe you were one) using it as a point of departure. I'm sure the essay was influential in the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition creating the Elizabeth Flynn Award for the Most Outstanding Article on Feminist Rhetoric and Composition in 2003. I recently received a *Facebook* post from Rachel Riedner of George Washington University saying that she had received the award this year. She was thrilled, but so was I. It's quite an honor to be recognized in this way.

**Tiffany:** Did you have sort of an "Aha!" moment when your research just clicked? For instance, you say that you had to figure out how to bring in a feminist perspective to your new field. How exactly did that happen?

**Beth:** It happened by going to conferences, writing conference papers, and turning them into articles and sometimes books, often in collaboration with others. I received valuable feedback on drafts of articles, and I had the good fortune of being encouraged by peer critics and editors of journals and presses to keep honing my work. I revised and revised and revised. If there was an "Aha" moment, it came after much revision, almost always guided by editors or reviewers or collaborators. I am indebted to Donald Gray, then editor of *College English*, to Richard Larson, Richard Gebhart, and Joe Harris, then editors of *College Composition and Communication*, to Eric Halpern of Johns Hopkins University Press, to Gary Olson and Lynn Worsham of *JAC*, to Karl Kageff of Southern Illinois University Press, to Cheryl Glenn, editor of the *Feminisms and Rhetorics* series at Southern Illinois University Press (she has since been joined by Shirley Logan), to Sonia Kane of the Modern Language Association, to Michael Spooner of Utah State University Press, to my collaborators, to my late husband who in a sense collaborated with everything I wrote until his death in 2000, to the contributors to the volumes I have co-edited, to the reviewers of my work, and many many others.



**Tiffany:** You mentioned that you started working on this article in the 80s when times were certainly different for females in the academy. What challenges do you see that still remain for women teacher/scholars? What advice do you have for overcoming these challenges?

**Beth:** Although women scholars and teachers by now have a healthy presence within the academy, there are still many ways in which the climate is not all that healthy. Here's a small example. A colleague at Michigan Tech recently decided to teach a topics course in philosophy from a feminist perspective, calling it feminist philosophy. On the first day of class when the students found out what the topic would be, many dropped the course immediately. This was in 2013. Recently a newspaper put out by women undergraduates at Tech included evaluations of women faculty that were quite unprofessional and focused on things such as appearance and clothing. I have women colleagues with whom I get together on a regular basis, and it's clear they haven't had an easy time of it. It may be especially difficult at a technological university where the majority of the students and faculty are male. Michigan Tech does not have the infrastructure that other universities have in terms of women's studies programs and women's studies courses, though I should mention that in 2007 the Department of Humanities did create a minor in Diversity Studies. Those of us who might have developed a women's studies program were overextended as it was and didn't have the time to do so. It is possible that such programs will emerge in the future. Michigan Tech does have a very strong infrastructure when it comes to dealing with diversity issues on campus. It's just that those structures haven't had much of an impact on the curriculum. When I first came to Tech, as I've already mentioned, I was told that I was not to work in the area of feminist studies, but I did it anyway. You can see what I was up against right from the beginning. Other institutions do have strong women's studies programs and different gender ratios. The climate for women has certainly improved in recent years, so the situation is certainly better for women now than it was when I started out. And, of course, at Michigan Tech I was tenured and promoted on the basis of my work in feminist studies, our department has hired many women who do work in the area, and the university as a whole has made a concerted effort to hire women faculty across campus so the situation is in some ways getting better all the time.

**Tiffany:** I think another challenge females face is raising a family while working toward tenure. I'm especially interested in how to maintain status as a female academic and raise children, as I've recently had a baby. In fact, I know a lot of female tenure-track professors who are working to raise a family and still maintain an active career. I've heard that old saying that if you give your job 100%, then your family life will suffer. If you give your family 100%, your job will suffer. How difficult was it to raise your daughter and still be an active colleague in the field and in your department? Do you have any advice specifically about how to be a mother and simultaneously be devoted to your job?

**Beth:** It's not easy, that's for sure. The year I was pregnant and interim chair, I had presumably had the summer off before my daughter's birth, though I did become involved in the selection of the department's administrative assistant. A week before her due date, though, I had to go back to work because it was a week before classes were about to begin. There was no such thing as maternity leave at that time. My blood pressure spiked, and I had to have an emergency C-section. Kate was born September 2. Luckily we had an excellent caregiver four days a week.

Martha lived around the corner and so could walk to our house in all weather. My husband, who was part-time in the department, took care of her on Fridays. Despite this excellent situation, I've battled high blood pressure off and on ever since. I'd not recommend trying to chair a department and learning to be a new mother at the same time, especially at the age of 43. Luckily I was just interim chair so those administrative responsibilities ended with the end of the academic year. It was also a challenge when my husband died. My daughter had just turned 12. In addition to her being close to entering those difficult teenage years, she had just begun middle school so the after school daycare program that she attended when she was in elementary school was no longer available. Suddenly my work day ended when I picked her up after school rather than at 5 o'clock, and suddenly I could not share the responsibilities.

All along, I've had to devise new writing strategies. When Kate was an infant, I started working out arguments in my head since I didn't have the luxury of sitting down at a word processor for long periods of time. I did this for a conference paper I was scheduled to deliver at CCCC in March. I'd spend a few hours on Fridays getting down my thoughts. After several months of this I sent what I had written to colleagues for feedback—I had written 3 pages! As she got older, I learned to write while she pulled books off my bookshelves or took a nap or watched a DVD. Luckily my late husband did most of the grocery shopping and cooking and took responsibility for many other domestic chores, though, of course, I soon enough became responsible for everything.

One thing I did, after my husband died, was to create a group for mothers of my daughter's schoolmates. I selected women whose children, for the most part, were older than Kate and successful in school. We met most Fridays at a local coffee shop and still do. At first our children didn't like being the focus of attention, but together we've gotten them through middle school, high school, college, and, in some cases, professional school. My daughter, a writer for the National Trust for Historic Preservation in Washington DC, has an MA in journalism from American University. I might add that my daughter's feminist activism takes the form of volunteering for an organization that aims to help reduce the spread of AIDS by providing supplies such as sterile needles to gay and transgender sex workers in DC. Once a month, she rides in van all night with others in the worst sections of the city to provide assistance to those who may need it. The daughter of another member of the group is in medical school, and her son just completed Tech and has a full-time job with benefits working in the automobile industry in downstate Michigan. The son of another is getting a PhD in engineering. Another has two adopted African-American daughters one of whom now identifies as lesbian. She has completed college and has a full-time job with benefits. Her sister is completing college. A group of colleagues in the Department of Humanities at Michigan Tech, all of whom have children and several of whom are single parents, also get together from time to time for lunch at a local tea room. Some of those children are in college or have completed college and have children of their own. I do recommend getting together with other parents to talk about parenting. It's been invaluable.

**Tiffany:** What do you know now that you wish you would have known when you first started out as a tenure-track professor?

**Beth:** I guess I hadn't foreseen the commitment the position would involve and the many facets it would have. When we were in graduate school, the thinking of many of us in English was that we were somehow going to escape the corporate rat race. Only recently have I realized that we did nothing of the sort. We spent evenings, weekends, and breaks preparing for classes, grading papers, and writing scholarly articles. We inhabited and no doubt contributed to embattled departments. Our lives were our job. My daughter, who learned from me to avoid an academic career, works 9 to 5 and has evenings and weekends free. I can't even imagine it. I have chaired my department, co-directed an award-winning local women's heritage project, co-directed a very successful writing-across-the-curriculum program which focused on writing in engineering, directed a graduate program in rhetoric and technical communication, taught a variety of courses on both the undergraduate and graduate level in rhetoric, writing, technical communication, literature, and feminist studies, served on national committees in both literary studies and rhetoric and composition, and served on numerous departmental, college, and university committees at Tech and within the Conference on College Composition and Communication and the Modern Language Association. For CCCC, I served on the executive committee twice, was on the nominating committee, chaired the first committee to award what is now the James Berlin Distinguished Dissertation Award, and chaired the Exemplar Award committee and the Distinguished Dissertation Committee in Scientific and Technical Communication. For MLA, I served on the executive committees of the Division of the Teaching of Writing and the Division of the Teaching of Literature and was president of the Women's Caucus for the Modern Languages. In retrospect, I can see that I might have been more strategic when it came to my workload. I definitely tried to do too much. I was chair of my department the year my daughter was born, for instance. Not a good idea. I became the single mother of a 12 year old in 2000. Not so easy either.

**Tiffany:** Life events and personal experience seemed to have really shaped who you are and the work you do in our field. At 4Cs 2014, we talked a lot about the serendipitous nature of our lives and our careers. Where has your career



taken you? How have your career and research evolved over time?

**Beth:** Serendipity would be a good word to use to describe my career. I knew in high school that I wanted to pursue the study of English—I was good at it—but the only possibility seemed to be high school teaching, so in college I majored in English but minored in English education. I did my undergraduate work at Pace College (now University) in New York City, and fortunately my student teaching assignment was at the High School of Fashion Industries in lower Manhattan, one of a small number of specialized and selective high schools in New York City, the most well known of which is the Bronx High School of Science. Those students at the Fashion High were very bright and creative. My first full-time job was at Newburgh Free Academy in Newburgh, New York where I taught literature and some writing to high school seniors. After my first year of teaching, my husband took a job in industry so we relocated to Columbus, Ohio. I wasn't sure what I was going to do, so I made an appointment with the person who directed the composition program and coordinated the work of graduate teaching assistants at Ohio State, who happened to be Edward P.J. Corbett. Once he heard that I had been trained to teach English and had a year of experience doing so, he "hired" me on the spot, before I had even applied to the program. At that time, every first-year student at Ohio State had to take three terms of first-year writing, and there were 10,000 of them! They desperately needed people to cover the many sections. I assured him that I had a very strong college record. So suddenly I was in the quite different business of teaching English at the college level. I liked this much better.

The story of how I got my job at Michigan Tech is also an interesting one. I finished my PhD in 1977, a year in which the job market was very tight. After a failed attempt to land a job that year, I decided to cast a wider net and applied to Michigan Tech, mainly because a graduate student friend had applied the previous year and gotten a preliminary interview. When it seemed possible that she might get a job at MTU, a group of us sat on our living room floor examining a map. I distinctly remember exclaiming, "Kathy, you'd have to be crazy to take a job there!" I might add that Houghton, the home of MTU, has recently been named by *Outside Magazine* 15th of 16 top places to live in the country, mainly because of its many cross-country ski, hiking, and biking trails and its many boating opportunities. Not such a bad place to live after all. I nevertheless applied the next year and got a campus interview. The position was assistant professor of reading and composition, and I had participated in a study group conducted by Susan Miller on reading theory. Very few graduate students at the time were reading Frank Smith, the Goodmans, and others. It also happened that after I completed my degree, I attended a course taught by James Britton in the School of Education at Ohio State. Britton, I was to learn, was the inspiration for the writing across the curriculum program at MTU. I wasn't the first person to be brought to campus in the winter of 1979; one of my graduate student colleagues at Ohio State preceded me. Then a woman from the University of Texas Austin followed him. The story I heard about her was that she arrived in early February and got off the airplane wearing stiletto heels. I arrived wearing woolen pants and Frye boots, especially appropriate since this was the year (indeed, I arrived the very day) the snowfall record was broken—over 365 inches! It was an exciting time as Toby Fulwiler and Art Young were developing our writing-across-the-curriculum program. Many of us were conducting WAC workshops at MTU and across the country. Several of my early publications were WAC articles that were guided by Art and Toby. After they left, I helped develop Phase II of the program, which emphasized writing in engineering. It happened that among the group of engineering faculty with whom we worked was a chemical engineer who had worked at the National Science Foundation. We were able to morph our program, which had been sponsored by the Whirlpool Foundation, into an NSF-sponsored program. We produced materials aimed at improving the writing of students in Associated Board for Engineering and Technology, Inc. (ABET)-mandated capstone design courses. We collaboratively produced a manual and hosted the first WAC conference ever. The manual is still in circulation and has been used at MTU and elsewhere. We had the assistance of graduate students in the department's brand new PhD program, and the engineers with whom we worked were diverse. One was from Africa and several were from India.

My formal training, however, was in literary studies, and my dissertation was a very early attempt to explore feminist literary theory. Although I was hired at Michigan Tech to work in the area of rhetoric and composition, especially writing across the curriculum, and my dean made it clear that I had NOT been hired to work in the area of feminist studies, I had no intention of leaving the emerging field behind. One of the first things I did after I arrived, therefore, was to co-direct an award-winning week-long program called "Discovering Copper Country Women's Heritage" in March of 1981 which was sponsored by a generous grant from the Michigan Council for the Humanities. We involved members of a number of different departments at Michigan Tech as well as representatives of the Native American community forty-five minutes south of campus. Professor Bea Medicine of the University of Wisconsin, Madison was a keynote speaker as was Gladys Beckwith of Michigan State, then president of the Michigan Women's Studies Association which had recently honored Annie Clemenc, a heroic supporter of the strikers in the 1913 struggle by copper miners for better working conditions and better pay. We showed films focusing on women's history and had discussions, one of which was conducted by Lorna Rasmussen, producer of the award-winning film *Great Grant Mother*. We also conducted oral history interviews that focused on local women from diverse backgrounds and had local speakers celebrate the accomplishments of historic and present-day Copper Country women. My late husband John conducted several of the oral history interviews and was an important committee member—the only trained

historian. He had a PhD in German history from Ohio State. We finished our degrees at the same time. In 1982 we were awarded a Certificate of Commendation by the American Association for State and Local History. In 2004, our project was designated one of the top 30 programs sponsored by the Council in its 30-year history. Three of us were invited by the Council to attend a gala banquet at the Henry Ford Museum.

In addition, many of my early publications were feminist in orientation. Patsy Schweickart and I co-edited *Gender and Reading* (1986), which brought feminist studies and reader-response criticism together for the first time. The collection is still in print and has sold nearly 7,000 copies. It grew out of an essay I wrote, "Gender and Reading," at the School of Criticism and Theory at Northwestern University in the summer of 1981, which was subsequently published in *College English* in 1983, and which was included in the collection Patsy and I co-edited. The essay analyzes responses to three short stories, James Joyce's "Araby," Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants," and Virginia Woolf's "Kew Gardens." The analysis was based on lecture notes I took in Tvetzan Todorov's class at the School, "The Conquest of America." He subsequently went on to publish a book by that name (*The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, Harper & Row, 1984). I suggested that readers either dominate texts, interact with them, or become subordinated to them, or some combination of all three, and that most students in the sample were subordinated to the texts but that some men demonstrated dominant tendencies, whereas no women did, while a small number of both women and men interacted with the texts. This essay, in addition to being reprinted in *Gender and Reading*, was reprinted in Susan Gabriel and Isaiah Smithson's *Gender in the Classroom* (U of Illinois P, 1990). An essay in that collection by Nina Baym took issue with my findings, providing me an opportunity to respond in an essay published in John Schilb and John Clifford's edited collection *Writing Theory and Critical Theory: Research and Scholarship in Composition* (MLA, 1994). I'm in the process of revising yet another reconsideration, this one occasioned by an essay published in the journal *Reader* by Gary Weissman in 2012. Weissman found the essay to be useful in a literature class in which he included the three short stories, my essay, Baym's response to my essay, and my response to Baym. I might add that the journal in which Weissman published his essay, *Reader*, I transformed from a newsletter into a journal and edited or co-edited it from 1982 to 2000. Succeeding editors were Mariolina Salvatori of the University of Pittsburgh and now Patricia Donohue of Lafayette College. Having focused on relationships between gender and reading, I shifted my attention to gender and writing in "Composing as a Woman."

My feminist perspective is also in evidence in a textbook I co-edited with John Clifford and John Schilb, *Constellations: A Contextual Reader for Writers*, (HarperCollins, 1992, 1995). The unique feature of this collection is that within thematic groupings we provided small clusters or constellations of essays that provided different perspectives on a topic. Those groupings were also forward thinking: identity, family relationships, places and communities, education, gender, relations among races and cultures, mass culture, language, science and cultural values, and ethics.

I went on to publish *Feminist Beyond Modernism* (2002). It comes to the defense of postmodern feminism by suggesting that it is a critique of modern feminism but not a rejection of it. It is antimodernism, i.e., romanticism, that is a rejection of modernism. The distinction is important because it makes clear that postmodern feminism does not reject science or the Enlightenment project entirely but re-envisioning it so as to include perspectives other than those of white U.S. and European men and women. The book asks how we can improve the situation of women without overthrowing the structures and ideologies of Western culture entirely. Feminist philosophers of science such as Donna Haraway and Sandra Harding have been dealing with such issues for decades. My chapter on global feminisms was one of the first to deal with transnational issues within rhetoric and composition.

Patsy Schweickart and I went on to co-edit a sequel to *Gender and Reading*, *Reading Sites: Social Difference and Reader Response* (MLA, 2004). The collection expands the considerations of *Gender and Reading* to include factors such as race and ethnicity. In the introduction, co-authored by Schweickart and myself, we reiterate the critique of positivism by reader-response critics as well as their insistence on the inclusion of subjective factors in accounts of the reading process. We then consider ethical issues and suggest that concerns with developing reading strategies that attend to the otherness of the text are similar to attending to other people who have different experiences and perspectives. Doing so necessitates resisting totalizing interpretive frameworks and recognizing multiple systems of social and cultural domination.

Returning to a more overt feminist perspective, in 2012, colleagues Ann Brady, Patty Sotirin, and I co-edited *Feminist Rhetorical Resilience*. It is the first major consideration of the concept of resilience within feminist rhetoric and composition or even rhetoric and composition more generally, though the term has been important in fields such as psychology, social work, and communication for decades. We define resilience using three concepts: agency, *mêtis*, and relationality and resist conceptions of it that assume that it is an inherent and unchanging personality trait. The collection has a unique character. Seven authors focus on seven very different contexts such as the biodiversity in India, the musical genre the *fado* among Azorean-Americans, hymen reconstructions of rural, migrant women in Ankara, Turkey, dual career couples at U.S. universities, nineteenth-century feminists who colluded with eugenicists

to advance their feminist cause, and teachers who employ the strategy of queering in their writing classrooms. Each essay is followed by a response by an established scholar in feminist rhetoric, and these responses, in turn, are followed by reflections by the original authors. The result is a highly dialogic structure that contributes to our understanding of resilience, feminist resilience, and feminist rhetorical resilience. The book grew out of the Feminism(s) and Rhetoric(s) Conference which Brady, Sotirin, and I co-coordinated in October of 2005.

As you know, I am co-editing a collection of essays with you that deals with the serendipitous nature of the careers of many women in rhetoric and composition including your own. I'd say all of the developments I describe here were serendipitous as well as the result of good timing and good fortune. I had a friend who used to say I lead a charmed life. In some ways I think this is true.

**Tiffany:** You've obviously been involved with your department while maintaining a status in the field as prolific writer. What's your writing process? Do you write every day? In chunks or blocks of time? How have your views on writing changed since you first entered the field?

**Beth:** Early in my career when I was conducting a WAC workshop for MTU faculty, I wrote a humorous piece entitled "Writing as a Crisis-Inducing Activity, Crisis as a Writing-Inducing Activity." I suggested that I timed writing projects to coincide with life events that forced me to produce. Right now, for instance, I am writing on the eve of a departure for a ten-day vacation. Why did I choose this moment? Why didn't I write a few paragraphs a day for the past few weeks? I don't know. It probably goes back to graduate school where I was rewarded for pulling all-nighters and turning in papers that were the result of a kind of frenzy. I seem to work best under pressure. I've mentioned that "Composing as a Woman" coincided, roughly, with the birth of my daughter. *Feminism Beyond Modernism*, I regret to say, in some ways coincided with my husband's illness and death. I did some of the writing and much of the revising while he was sick. It was published two years after his death. I've gotten somewhat better since my body will not permit me to pull all-nighters. But then I think of the essay I wrote this February in four days. I'm working on it, though.

I certainly view writing as a more complex and complicated process than I did at the beginning of my career. What seemed to be a fairly straightforward, transparent process now seems winding, circuitous, full of the potential for misunderstanding, and highly charged politically. I have more respect for the vagaries of the publishing world and the reputations of scholars. Sometimes it seems like blind chance that some of my work has reached a wide audience. I was on vacation with family recently, and the subject of my reputation as a scholar came up. My sister, who is a wonderful kitchen designer, said she had talked to someone from the University of Buffalo who was impressed that she was my sister. My niece, who teaches English at the high school level, said one of her professors when she was in graduate school at Colorado State was impressed that she was my niece. My sister-in-law, who teaches English at several community colleges, said her colleagues know of me. My daughter used one of my articles in a paper she wrote when she was an undergraduate and revealed at the end of the course that I was her mother. On another occasion, my ex-brother-in-law, who has retired from a very successful business that sold furniture to companies such as Pottery Barn, said he once bumped into someone on a hiking trail who was in literary studies and had heard of me. I'm happy to be perceived as successful by family members, especially considering that they are all much better Scrabble players than I am. I say that I'd have to have a PhD in Scrabble in order to match their skills.

**Tiffany:** Even though you're not "pulling all-nighters," you still manage to write and publish a lot. In addition to our co-edited collection, I know you're also currently working on a new book. Can you tell us more about that project and what it means for our field?

**Beth:** The tentative title is "Feminist Rhetorical Theories: Internationalisms, Interdisciplinarity, and Adisciplinarity." It grows out of the thinking and writing I've been doing recently. For instance, I've written an essay that has a transnational emphasis and that juxtaposes the work of Gayatri Spivak, high Brahmin of literary theory, with the memoir of a Sudanese woman, Mende Nazar, who was enslaved in the late twentieth century. Both are now actively working to improve the situation of those less fortunate than themselves—in Spivak's case developing literacy programs in her native India and in Nazar's case assisting the anti-slavery movement in London. I've been working on interdisciplinary approaches to feminism, especially the wonderful contributions by women in the social sciences, the sciences, and in philosophy, for instance. I'm now working on an essay on Barack Obama's rhetoric, which is necessarily interdisciplinary. I've also written recently on Buddhist meditation and mindfulness. This is where the adisciplinarity comes in. These approaches are not academic, though they have been taught in religion and philosophy courses within the academy. They provide an alternative to mind-oriented Western intellectual traditions in suggesting, for instance, that an important aspect of spiritual practice is taming the mind and recognizing that the idea of a separate self is an illusion. There are some parallels between these concepts and recent approaches to the philosophy of mind and to deconstruction. Since they are primarily spiritual practices, though, they provide an alternative to academic disciplines.



**Tiffany:** I want to switch gears slightly to talk about your teaching, as I know much of your scholarship results from teaching and vice versa. How have your views on teaching changed over your career?

**Beth:** I remember saying early in my career that I couldn't give up teaching—it has nurtured and sustained me. I think, however, that teaching has gotten harder of late because students are under greater pressure than they have been in the past. There are fewer jobs while the cost of education has increased exponentially. Also, it's been a challenge to keep up with the technological revolution within rhetoric and composition that has occurred within the past twenty years. So it was easier to give up undergraduate teaching than I would have predicted early on. That said, I take pleasure in reflecting back on some memorable undergraduate teaching experiences. For instance, I team-taught a course called "Images of Paris in Literature" in Paris as part of Michigan Tech's study abroad program. The highlight of the course was the literary tour we coordinated of the many sites frequented by Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein and others. Also, while I was teaching Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Alexie himself walked into the room. It wasn't entirely unexpected since he was on campus as part of our summer reading program. I wasn't sure he'd have time to stop by, however. The students had good questions, and when he walked in, one was in the process of reporting on a review of the book that confused two of the characters. Alexie said this happens all too frequently. In a different class, we had a visit from Valentino Achak Deng, the subject of Dave Eggers's partially fictionalized account of the plight of the lost boys in the Sudan in *What Is the What* (2006). The students in that class hadn't read the book but nevertheless asked great questions. In a team-taught class on Shakespeare, members of the cast of an Aquila Theater production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* met with the students and discussed their careers and the way they prepared for their parts. It was after they explained that they were free to provide their own interpretations of the characters that I started having students do oral interpretive readings in class. In the 2000s I also started to focus undergraduate literature classes on postcolonial literature. At that time, no one else in my department was doing so, and I felt students needed to expand their awareness to non-Western literatures. Now, in addition to faculty from a number of European countries, we have faculty from Cameroon and Ghana, a faculty member who is of Haitian-American descent, and many international undergraduates and graduate students.

I'm happy that I now I have more time to devote to research and to community service, though I certainly miss teaching graduate courses. I'm still on graduate committees, though. A student recently wrote a dissertation on representations of Native Americans in film under my direction and completed it since I have retired. I am serving on comprehensive examination committees and on dissertation committees. A student writing on representations of veterans in visual media recently defended her dissertation, a topic is especially meaningful to me since my late husband was wounded in the Vietnam War. I'm on the committee of a student interested in labor history and another of a student interested in visual representations of war.

I'm also beginning to think of myself as a student again. I just completed a digital photography class, quite a shift from the orientation of much of my career. The instructor was a graduate student in the department whom I had in class as a student. The undergraduates, I think, were amused by my participation and were very helpful. We devoted much time to Photoshop, which I struggled with. I say this class was a significant departure from my previous work, but I might mention that the essay on witnessing in Guatemala that I co-authored included five of my photographs of murals. Maybe the course was in some ways an extension rather than a departure from my previous orientations. My final project consisted of photographs of an abandoned threshing machine partially covered by the remains of a shed that collapsed around it. The machine is in one of the fields on my 180-acre farm. I mounted the photos on one of the very weathered boards from the shed. One of my photos was a shot of patent dates printed on the back of the machine, the first of which is May 2, 1899 and the last of which is Nov. 5, 1907. I wanted to encourage appreciation for the very hard work that took place on these farms. The machine is actually in a field on what had been an adjacent farm. I purchased a 20-acre parcel of it a few years ago and hence purchased the thresher. Our farm was a dairy farm originally owned for over a century by a family that emigrated from Italy. The farmer from whom we purchased the homestead in 1988 was born in the log cabin that is now our kitchen. It is often the case that photographs of industrial ruins are given a grainy quality and made to appear cold and abandoned. I took my pictures, though, on a bright, sunny day so the tone is celebratory rather than depressing. Also, I may sit in on a Spanish class in preparation for a trip to Guatemala in the fall of 2015 with the director and some other members of the board of our local Copper Country Guatemala Accompaniment Project. This summer I volunteered with our local land trust to help maintain a trail at a nature preserve, something I'd never done before, and I just bought a kayak. Several years ago I took classical guitar lessons. Now that I have more time, I'm getting back to the guitar on my own. In the summer, I have a communal vegetable and fruit garden with friends. I try to walk every day and when there is snow I showshoe or cross-country ski. I also sometimes hike, swim, or bike. Retirement is a wonderful opportunity for making changes in paths I've already trod and for growing in new directions.



**Figures 1-4.** Examples of Flynn's photographs. Click on an image to view it.

**Tiffany:** Where do you think you'll grow next?

**Beth:** Good question. As you can see, I haven't ventured that far afield during my long career. I started out in English and ended up in English, though it's a vast field that includes both literary studies and rhetoric and composition as well as postcolonial studies, literacy studies, new media, and much more. It has helped enormously that I have been part of a very interdisciplinary Department of Humanities that includes such fields as rhetoric, technical communication, composition studies, modern languages, philosophy, linguistics, communication, and English as a second language. As I've indicated, I've become interested in visual media. I've been going to a holistic doctor for the past few years and as a result have become increasingly interested in nutrition. Right now I'm off gluten, dairy, salt, sugar, caffeine, and genetically modified fruits and vegetables. I'm also interested in environmental issues. I recently looked into going solar but decided it wasn't a good idea right now. I will be having an energy audit of my house, though, and will be getting window coverings, filling in leaks, and closing off part of the house in the winter to save on propane. Eileen Schell thinks I should write a memoir about running a 180-acre tree farm. When I was an undergraduate, some of us used to talk about why we chose literature rather than philosophy. In many ways literary theory and rhetoric are philosophy, so I guess I've headed in that direction anyway. I'm also interested in psychology, though, and in spirituality. How can we improve our lives? How can we let go of counterproductive habits? How can we have an impact on this world that seems to be imploding and exploding all around us?

**Tiffany:** These are all great questions to leave for your readers. I want to take this opportunity to say thanks so much for letting me interview you. I learned a lot about you during this interview—things I didn't know about your career, as well as your personal history. Your answers make me realize that you are so much more than the feminist scholar we all know and respect.

In the spirit of serendipity, I just want to tell readers how random it was that we met, which became the impetus for this reflective interview. We met one day at Cs a few years ago because we knew a mutual colleague. Since then, we've presented at Cs together and we're now working on an edited collection. It's been a privilege for me to work with you. I've learned a lot from you from both your work and your mentorship. It's been an honor!

**Beth:** Thank YOU, Tiffany, for suggesting that we do the interview and for so patiently encouraging me to tell more and more of my story.

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