

CHAPTER 19.

“CHANGING WITH THE TIMES”: EBONY ELIZABETH THOMAS AND ANNE RUGGLES GERE IN CONVERSATION

Ebony Elizabeth Thomas

University of Michigan

Anne Ruggles Gere

University of Michigan

One of the most important sites of Anne Ruggles Gere’s influence in the field of writing studies—and more—has been the Joint Program of English and Education (JPEE) at the University of Michigan. The program began in the 1960s, under the direction of Stephen Dunning. As its name suggests, JPEE receives support from both the English department and the School of Education, including having faculty members from both those units serve on the committee that manages admissions, distributes program fellowships, and sets policy (Gere, “Establishing” 160).

As noted in one UM profile of JPEE, this doctoral pathway offers students “wide latitude” to shape their degree program, while providing them “the opportunity to pursue research projects collaboratively with faculty, including social justice- and activist-oriented research” (“Joint Program”). Consistent with Gere’s own wide-ranging interdisciplinary professional profile and her leadership as chair of JPEE from 1989 to 2023, program graduates have pursued a broad range of interests, including “rhetorical theory, literacy studies, feminist theory, new media composition, disability studies, queer theory, applied linguistics, English language studies, ethnic studies, creative writing studies, and writing assessment” (“Joint Program”). Tailored for students who have already earned a master’s degree in either English or education and who have prior teaching experience, JPEE cultivates a “supportive and engaging community of scholars” to enable students’ individualized learning (“Doctoral English”).

One of those program alumni, Dr. Ebony Thomas, succeeded Anne as chair in 2023. In the interview that follows, Ebony and Anne reflect together on

connections between the field of writing studies and JPEE work, on the impact of Anne's research on the program, and on JPEE as a visionary model for graduate education.¹ Following their conversation is a list of dissertations by JPEE alumni who have contributed chapters to *Sites of Writing*. These projects, which are often scholars' first "sites of writing" in academe, speak to the interdisciplinary reach of JPEE and Anne's capacious vision for the fields of writing studies and English education.

EBONY AND ANNE IN CONVERSATION

THE FIELD OF WRITING STUDIES

Ebony: Anne, it's such a pleasure to talk with you and celebrate your work. What have been some important or vital developments in the field of writing studies over the course of your career?

Anne: Well, I could laugh and say that actually the whole field of writing studies has developed over the course of my career! When I started graduate school, Janet Emig's book *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders* hadn't yet been published. Ed Corbett's book, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, had just come out in 1968.

When I began graduate school in 1970, there wasn't yet a field of writing studies. The reason I returned to graduate school was because I didn't feel adequately prepared from my previous training as a high school English teacher to teach my students how to write. I could talk about literature all day, but I couldn't figure out how to help people write. I was one of those kids who skipped first-year writing and couldn't tell you how I first learned to write. So everything that has happened in the field has happened over the course of my career.

Ebony: Wow, that's neat! What did you learn (about the field, administrative work, writing, etc.) from your leadership roles with MLA, CCCC, and NCTE?

Anne: Starting with CCCC (Conference on College Composition and Communication), that really became my school away from home. I got to know people. We shared work. We became colleagues. That was really the incubator. And CCCC developed as the field of writing studies developed.

Again, in the 1970s, CCCC was a very tiny group, and even by the time I started at the University of Washington as an assistant professor, it was still a very small part of our academic world. Of course, over the years, it became quite central.

The other organization that you didn't mention was the National Writing Project (NWP). My best self-education was through becoming the founding

1 The interview has been lightly edited for publication.

director of the Puget Sound Writing Project at the University of Washington, because I was working with teachers. And, as you know, in that model, teachers are bringing their practice to the program, we're all exploring the research in the field, and at the same time, we're all developing our capacities as writers. And that sort of tripartite—three-part—approach really has been how I have operated ever since. You know, constantly keeping up with the research, always being in a writing group, always sharing writing, to continually *be* a writer, and at the same time, working on my teaching practice. So that, in many ways, was enormously influential.

With MLA (Modern Language Association), I was able to figure out how to make writing studies more a part of MLA. In the very early days, there wasn't much about writing. I can't quite remember the details, but very early on, I was on a committee with Lynn (Quitman) Troyka. This was back when Phyllis Franklin was executive director. She was the first woman to ever head MLA, and she was someone who knew that MLA had to have something to do with writing. A group of us met with her, and one result was that MLA published a series on writing, and I was on the board for that. That gave me another perspective on the wider field of English studies and the role that writing could play.

Within NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English), it was really CCCC where I learned the most. So for me, it was CCCC, NWP, and MLA.

Ebony: Thank you so much! It's so wonderful to learn this history. Next, I have a question about your presidential addresses: As you look back on your own major addresses for these major organizations, what reflections might you want to share about them in their own moment? As markers of where the field has gone since then and where you hope it will go?

Anne: That's a hard question! I haven't looked at these in years, so you're going to have to bear with me. I remember that in my NCTE address, I was really trying to talk about the way that we think about teaching. Teaching was at the center. It's not just something that we do mechanically, but a robust and interesting area of study.²

With CCCC, it was related to my book on women's clubs. What I was interested in is what goes on outside of school—there's so much writing that people are doing that's pretty much invisible. I wanted people in writing studies to be thinking about writing outside the academy, and the relationship between that writing and what goes on *in* the academy.³ And so I had a political agenda in that case ... I guess they're all political!

And then with MLA, my whole agenda was to try to make writing and writing studies as visible as possible. The approach I took there was to try to talk about the

2 See Gere, "Gladly Learn and Gladly Teach."

3 See Gere, "Kitchen Tables."

relationship between reading and writing.⁴ That seemed to be the obvious place to do so in that organization. So in every case, there was that political agenda.

REFLECTING ON RESEARCH

Ebony: As this book [*Sites of Writing*] illustrates, your research extends in many different directions. What aspects of your work have been most meaningful to you and why?

Anne: I love them all! It's like asking me which is my favorite child. I think that in some cases, I'm very self-centered when it comes to my research. All of my work comes out of something that deeply matters to me. For example, I think I've told you that my book about women's clubs⁵ was written during a time that I was dealing with my mother's dementia, and trying to find a way to stay in touch with somebody who was no longer there. That book was a way to do that. Having two daughters who are Native American obviously has led to my work in Indigenous studies.

And in a different way, I've always cared about writing. I mean, I was the kind of kid who was keeping journals and diaries. And you know, that reading-writing connection was always very powerful for me.

The kind of research I've done has always done that kind of work. From MWrite to the Beyond College project to the kind of work that I'm doing now to better understand how student writers make arguments, I'm a teacher. I care about how we can do a better job in helping students to learn. So I guess I am driven by my own personal interests and concerns, and that comes into my scholarship.

Ebony: That's beautiful—beautiful! We want you to think about the influence of your own scholarship and what you might view as “unfinished business.” What would you like to share about either or both of these interrelated points?

Anne: Well for sure, my next book is in Indigenous studies, and it's in the publishers' hands! I really think there's more to be said about Native American women who were teachers. My book really scratches the surface, but part of what I did was try to find at least some of the names of so many other women I didn't have time to write about. And so, I really see that as an ongoing project.

And certainly the work that I'm doing with this NSF (National Science Foundation) grant, trying to figure out in a world with artificial intelligence (AI), which is the world we're all in now, how do we do a better job of teaching writing?⁶ Using the strengths of AI without destroying the whole enterprise?

4 See Gere, “Presidential Address.”

5 See Gere, *Intimate Practices*.

6 NSF grant details are available at <https://www.nsf.gov/awardsearch/simpleSearchResult?queryText=2302564&ActiveAwards=true>.

Which is just really scary. That we don't know the possibilities of what could happen. Karthik Duraisamy was the chair of University of Michigan's GAIA (Generative AI Advisory) committee that I was on last spring, which came out with this big report that led to the decision that Michigan would develop its own AI.⁷ He was just at Davos being interviewed by Bloomberg to talk about AI at Michigan. We were the first university in the United States to come up with our own AI. Now Harvard and Princeton, and I've just heard Texas, are joining the ranks. But they are following *us*.

We were the first, and that's a good thing. But also, with opportunity comes responsibility. Really thinking hard about how we can do this well is something that I care about and plan to keep working on.

THE JOINT PROGRAM IN ENGLISH AND EDUCATION

Ebony: Interdisciplinarity is central to JPÉE, the program you've directed or co-directed at the University of Michigan. What do you see as some of the main benefits of this approach to graduate education that you've done so much to develop over the years?

Anne: Well, first of all, I didn't develop it. It was in place. There was always this interdisciplinarity, and I simply carried it on.

But the advantages of it, I think, are evident in our students who are able to take on varieties of different kinds of positions. Ranging from school superintendent, to headmaster of a school, to traditional academic professors on the tenure track, to people working for educational institutions, and people who simply become very good writers. And you know, I'm thinking of a student who worked for years in Washington, DC, writing policy.

Our students come out as very well educated and highly flexible people.

Ebony: That's true! I would totally agree that JPÉE opens many doors. What are some of your hopes for the future of JPÉE as you pass the torch on?

Anne: I hope that JPÉE keeps changing with the times! To keep our basic model of interdisciplinary education that captures the broad range of things that people do. And for our people to keep reaching into new areas—AI being an obvious one—where education is going in the future.

Ebony: What advice would you give to new mentors or advisors of graduate students?

Anne: I just had this conversation recently. We talked about all the ways that graduate students in many departments are still being treated as students—“take this test to prove how smart you are.” Of course, they're smart enough, or they

7 The report is available at <https://genai.umich.edu/committee-report>.

wouldn't be here! My advice is to make graduate education resemble the work that people are going to do, particularly in the area of assessment. I think there should not be these comprehensive exams as they have traditionally been construed. Testing in that narrow sense is a waste of everybody's time.

Ebony: Thank you! Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Anne: That's it!

EXAMPLES OF DISSERTATIONS BY JPEE ALUMNI

To underscore this interview's points about the interdisciplinarity of the JPEE and its graduates' broad interests, we list in chronological order dissertation titles of program alumni who contributed chapters to *Sites of Writing*. For a more complete list of JPEE alumni dissertation titles, see <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/jpee/our-people/alumni/>.

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- Wilson, Emily M. *Restorying in the Discourses and Literacies of Military-Connected Students*. 2019. University of Michigan, PhD dissertation. Deep Blue Documents, hdl.handle.net/2027.42/149930.
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