

Interview: Rachel Jurasevich and Building Bridges Between Popular Culture Studies and Narrative Studies

CarrieLynn D. Reinhard: Thank you for talking with me. I am going to get Zoom recording so that I can get the transcript.

Rachel Jurasevich: Life is easier when you do not have to transcribe.

CarrieLynn: Indeed. Tell me a little bit about who you are at this particular moment in time.

Rachel: I am entering my second year at Ohio State University. My background is in creative writing and rhetoric/composition. I did my undergraduate at Mills College in Creative Writing and my master's at Cal Poly Pomona in Rhetoric and Composition.

As far as what I'm interested in, one of the franchises I grew up with was Star Wars, and that is how I eventually found fanfiction, but it took a while. I had a shared desktop as a kid without context of where to look, and not too many of my friends were as into the universe as I was, so I wasn't sure of where to find content I was interested in by fans when I was young. I also found that I couldn't have conversations with people about fanfiction until my master's because it was something that felt too personal to discuss. In my final semester of my master's program, I took a narrative studies class, which was a mind blowing experience. That was when I realized it was what I wanted to do my entire academic career, but I didn't have the words and the direction to do it.

What also informs me is that I am generally a big fan of things like Star Trek, Lord of the Rings, Fallout, Transformers, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, and more. I believe when you are a fan, you take on an active role where you have the capacity to critique it and to have critical conversations about what the work does. Doing so

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just enriches the entire conversation – it enriches your relationship with the work and structures it exists within, and that also allows you to connect with people and shifting perspectives. For example, I have had validating experiences with the scholarly Star Wars community when discussing issues I perceived as a child to be questionably racist when watching *The Phantom Menace*, but back then I didn't know where to find conversations about those issues. Getting to have these conversations with people in the community is something that has been so invaluable over time. I want to continue that conversation by focusing on fanfiction as a very valid form of fan response and production as a way to have those discussions.

CarrieLynn: Especially with Star Wars, fanfiction has had a rocky history when you go back to prequels era.

Rachel: There's still rocky history happening with the Sequel trilogy, too, and it's a helpful thing to be aware of. With the paratext of fanfiction on A03 of the most current films, for example, I am trying to figure out the lines of ethical communication between author and reader, but also the conventions that are created within that community in response to something like re-characterizing General Hux. What does it mean to give him a sympathetic story in the grand scheme of what is canon? The fandom community is having really important, critical conversations right now about these topics.

CarrieLynn: Fascinating! So, you are at OSU. Are you in the English department?

Rachel: Yes, as Narrative Studies, I fall under the umbrella of the English department. Eventually, when I have my advising meeting, something I will need to figure out is where I settle major-wise. I would like to be in that bridge between popular culture and narrative studies.

CarrieLynn: Yes, that was me, too, while there. I was in the bridge of communication and media studies and film studies. So, I had classes over in the English department when I was there, and I think that is an interesting question to ask. How do you see the bridge between narrative studies and popular culture studies? Do you see it as a beneficial bridge? Have there been bumps on the bridge? What is your sense about that relationship?

Rachel: That is a great question, and I preface this, too, because I am still relatively new to narrative studies that I am figuring out the ropes. In and outside of the projects that I have worked on so far, at least, conversations between pop culture and narrative studies are always happening. Narrative studies can be such a niche field, but the fundamental elements can be important for anybody who is interested in the surface of storytelling alone. With narrative studies, I want to bring that over into popular culture from a fan production standpoint. From a rhetorical standpoint, narrative is so connective to people's everyday lives that these two things can't not come together. Because they are inseparable, it is just a matter of what balance to strike when that conversation happens between the fields.

CarrieLynn: I would imagine narrative studies has a little bit longer history, especially attached to literature. Have you been experiencing any kind of pushback? Like anyone looking at you a little bit askew because you want to look at something that they might consider more popular culture and fan studies, and maybe less legitimate.

Rachel: I think pushback is valid. I often have to give context about what fanfiction is and can do, but my advisor is incredibly supportive, and because he's so well established in the field, it's validating to hear him taking my ideas seriously. I also looked at previous dissertations that people wrote at OSU, and there was somebody who recently graduated that looked at alternate universe fanfiction. It was fascinating but also encouraging, so I am curious to see how my place in the field will develop.

I can also add that my cohort has been very supportive. There have been plenty of instances where they'll say, "I read fanfiction, I want to talk about it," and I want to bring attention to how interconnected the spaces of fandom practices are to academic discourses. And this extends to conferences where a lot of people dabble in fascinating ways through interconnected disciplines like my cohort.

CarrieLynn: It does seem that at this point in time, there is more acceptance of not even just necessarily popular culture or fan studies – which to me fan studies is a subset of popular culture studies – it is that interdisciplinarity seems to be much more accepted.

Rachel: I agree on the note of acceptance. When I initially crafted my Hux paratext project, my personal anxiety of not knowing how it would be received made me question if it was worth doing. But the rhetorical focus I spent a semester working through helped ground my approach so I could look at the communicative effects of author and readerly positionalities, and how the fictionality and nonfictionalities we engage with every day is something that helps us work through important cultural discussions – for example the implications of sympathetic retellings of unsympathetic characters. When I also started my paratext study, I'd found one or two pieces focusing on fanfiction in a prominent narrative studies journal. Going back to bridging gaps, I'd like to see more publications that address textual fanfiction as an expression of narrative play and pop culture.

CarrieLynn: What would you define as popular culture?

Rachel: I think on one level, it includes everything that we encounter content-wise: shows, movies, books, and everything that helps us think about where we fit into or not in the world. But then it can also be defined through questions related to the fandom side of things. How do works structure information audiences actively or passively receive? How are we processing it? How are we as fans using texts we enjoy, and creating works that re-address ideologies present in past works to improve or expand? How can we encourage content creators, especially under corporations like Disney for Star Wars, to reconsider the implications of content that produces lasting narrative impacts across generational spectrums. For me, the responsive fan elements of pop culture is what I latch onto as a way to define it within my research.

CarrieLynn: So, going to the – I guess, by this point, classic – Henry Jenkins textual poaching, empowering approach. But I mean popular cultures consist largely of three entities that are in these dynamic relationships with each other: content or texts, audiences with responses, and the industries and systems within which all of that is circulated. And you are more interested in – if I think about it as a communication loop – the feedback from receiver to sender.

Rachel: That's definitely what the rhetorical narrative model provides: there is always a feedback loop that helps us as fans, as enjoyers of media, scholars, etc., to

dig into the question of who does the telling, for what reason, and how structures we might internalize affect future engagement or our work.

CarrieLynn: When you think about your research, then, in looking at fanfiction, do you have the goal of hopefully being able to educate people – educate audiences, educate content producers. I mean, what impact would you hope that your research could have?

Rachel: I know I want to bridge the two fields – the narrative and the pop culture spheres – by bringing the tools of fanfiction and fandom into the classroom. Last semester, I proposed a course that got approval to specifically look at how fandom is constituted across not just fanfiction but other modes of engagement, like sports media. I would hope this type of research is generative for students, some of whom might be writers and readers of fanfiction, for example. I want to offer students a space to process how tools of narrative studies can deepen their personal connections with content they're interested in. And to extend their ideas to empower people in their lives to think more critically about their positionalities within pop culture and beyond.

CarrieLynn: So many people are engaging with fandoms in their day-to-day lives, that fanfiction is just as valid as literature or anything else that we engage with. We need to teach what we talk about, right? It is kind of that idea of Shakespeare during his time was popular culture.

Rachel: True. The production of fanfiction also reminds me of Charles Dickens in some sense with how serialization and works in progress can inform writer-audience feedback loops. I would hope that fanfiction gets a fair shake.

CarrieLynn: When you are also saying that you are interested in influencing students, are you thinking college, high school, or younger than that?

Rachel: For the time being, because I am at OSU, I'd love to work with undergraduates. In the English 1110 courses I've taught, which is about writing and information literacy, I work to bring my voice into the curriculum. Because my students are asked to create personal research projects across the semester, I try to model versions of the projects using my research interests to encourage students to

see how they can also incorporate their experiences and voices into their work. It allows them to see who I am, and what I am interested in. In the past, I had a student create a project around Hello Kitty, which led to her questioning the changing formats of the animated shorts by focusing on their seriality and duration. It gives me life to see students actively use what might initially feel like abstract tools in narrative studies to explore what's already familiar to them. At the end of the day, it's their ideas and their work, but offering them a set of tools to start developing their research questions and directions is my goal.

CarrieLynn: I know this type of work also occurs at high school levels. Libraries are doing it, increasingly. I am on a Ph.D. dissertation committee at my school for an information studies and library studies student analyzing the information needs of queer fanfiction writers.

Rachel: I love that. Historically, fanfiction has existed as queer spaces and ways of expressing and exploring gender and sexuality. And, with how concentrated platforms like A03 have blown up in the last decade in contrast to sites I used to get fics from like Angelfire, LiveJournal, and Quizilla, which doesn't even exist anymore, there's also more consideration toward the diversity of fanfiction offerings.

Back in my master's program, when I first started to ask how I could do something with fanfiction, my rhetoric and composition focus led me to scholars like Rebecca Black, whose work focused on literacy studies for English-language learners. I found her work to be inspiring because she merged literacy, fanfiction, the experience of people of color, which I identify with, and their connections to grade school and high school. What she's done was something that I didn't know I needed to hear, but I needed to hear it.

CarrieLynn: You mentioned that it was something you did not think you needed to hear. Have you had other experiences where, during a master's or into the Ph.D., you have had these encounters with knowledge, skills, or scholars that kind of just sparked that epiphany?

Rachel: When I first looked into master's programs, I had honestly thought to pursue literature as opposed to rhetoric and composition because that was closer to what I was familiar with in my undergraduate studies. But the more that I

researched what rhetoric and composition was, and what Cal Poly's program offered, it combined my undergraduate love for creative writing and literature with a critical focus toward understanding the structures that informed my past experiences as a writer and reader.

An early "aha!" moment happened in my first rhetoric course that made me realize it is where I needed to be to have the conversations I desired to have but didn't have the toolkit for. Following that, another "aha!" moment I mentioned earlier came in the final semester of my master's program when I took an intro to narrative studies class with Dr. Donald Kraemer. The readings, discussions, and research I did for that class empowered me to realize the combination of rhetoric and narrative studies was what I wanted to do. Up until that point, I was doing forms of narrative studies in an unconcentrated manner. So, while applying to Ph.D. programs, OSU became my top choice because I wanted to more directly combine my love of fanfiction with studying it through a lens of narrative, rhetoric, and pop culture.

CarrieLynn: What do you think helped you navigate all of that?

Rachel: Aside from my master's coursework, the small program I was in allowed me to have conversations with professors outside of classes. I want to shout out Dr. Kate Ozment, an associate professor in literature at Cal Poly for this reason. After taking her class on Transatlantic literature, she was very kind to offer me help with figuring out the process of reworking and submitting my work to journals. That opened up room for me to reach out to other professors so I could start connecting the dots to research fanfiction. Just having those brainstorming sessions allowed me to bounce ideas and gave me something as simple as key wording and phrasing to start searching through databases I had access to at that time.

Once I started figuring out the basics, my next step was to ask, how are people writing about fandom and fanfiction? What is the history of the work? I also need to shout out my best friend since undergraduate, Tiffany Watson, because she has been my sounding board for over a decade. Her openness to unraveling ideas with me has been an invaluable support system because it also lets me rethink concepts I'm still learning about. Connected to academia, I joined a writing group last year that supported me first as a person and as an academic. I would not be here without these support networks.

CarrieLynn: Which is interesting. We often hear the stereotype of the scholar is the person who is sitting by themselves, nose in a book. But it does not seem that that is always the best, most fruitful, or even healthiest approach when it comes to scholarship.

Rachel: Going back to my points about my cohort, the conversations we have in the grad lounge or other spaces is where ideas from coursework and project threads carry over and click for me. By myself, I'll write six versions of a single essay because there are so many ideas that I want to put into it. But having people willing to listen and hear what I am trying to say, being open to letting me know what I have to tease out, or that I am not making enough connections yet is key. Even though I remind myself my ideas are valid, I don't think I would be where I am without all of that. It also reflects aspects of fandom – although we're all in it for some reason or another, the interconnections we create helps us develop.

CarrieLynn: I do not know if it was my generation or the generations in the past, there was always this talk about being careful with your ideas. You do not want them to get stolen. Have you ever come across that concern?

Rachel: I haven't found myself butting up against this experience, but it's valid and I don't want to disregard very real concerns. I am also in the early stages of my career, and I'm still meeting people. In spaces like conferences or social media, I want to create connections, but I also try to be cognizant of my own time and boundaries. And that's an exercise I am always working on, which can be difficult.

CarrieLynn: I also think that social networking sites like Twitter and others, and the extent to which people have that support system, even indirectly, or just the willingness to be there for people, even if you do not know them – all of that seems to be growing in academia.

Rachel: I agree. Recently, Adam Sherif, a fellow presenter at the Realizing Resistance Episode III conference I attended, turned out to be a friend of a friend in my writing group. I bring him up because it was initially through Discord, email, and then a personal connection that helped us meet over Zoom and have a wonderfully generative conversation about our work, ideas, and to just be fans over stuff. I don't think I could imagine working up the courage to talk to people prior

to my graduate career, but opening myself up and saying I want to have these conversations with people is, again, a process.

CarrieLynn: That was one of the hardest things was to get over, the shock that these “big name scholars” – these BNSs – are just human beings and a lot of them are really nice. That if you reach out to them, it is good.

Rachel: That is exactly what I have been trying to do. Dr. Katlin Sweeney-Romero, who is a dear friend and currently working at UC Davis, set me up for conferences early on. In my second conference experience where I presented with a brilliant panel of women (including Kiedra Taylor, a fellow Ph.D. student and the founder of Write On Black Girl!, and Dr. Christian M. Hines who works at Texas State University), Katie encouraged me to acknowledge my feelings of vulnerability, but to also challenge myself to speak to at least three people by the end of the conference.

It’s never as bad as I think it’s going to be. The gentle nudge to hold me accountable by reporting on three conversations I had with big name scholars helped ease the worry I went in with. And I try to pay it forward by encouraging friends to do something similar.

CarrieLynn: Seeing places like PCA and MPCA – I am going to guess other ones as well – increasing these mentor programs that they have on site for conferences, that is hopeful. I was also brought up on ICA – International Communication Association – which might be a little bit more cutthroat.

Rachel: There are plenty of smaller societies where dynamics might be tougher to break through, and I don’t want to invalidate anyone’s experiences. But, so far, the experiences that I’ve had with the people that I’ve either presented with or am friends with within certain societies, has been encouraging.

CarrieLynn: If you were to give a piece of advice to an undergraduate who is thinking graduate school, or a grad student who is just about to start – and they are somehow engaging in popular culture studies – well, given your experiences, what would you tell them?

Rachel: Oh, that is a big question. I think one stage, which is advice my dad always told me, and what I also tell my students, is that there is no dumb question. Much of what I am doing now has come from learning how to ask questions that I worried were going to be disregarded because I was afraid of not being smart enough, which is its own can of worms. But if you find people you are interested in talking to, or maybe you find a book, and it happens to be by an author who is at a university, and they have their email listed on the website – it’s okay to reach out. The worst that can happen is you get no response. Then you can figure out, okay, is there somebody else that maybe I can talk to instead or a Discord to join?

I would also say, practice and work your way up, but ask those questions. It’s not always cut and dry in systems that can undercut student agency, but there are ways to empower yourself into those spaces with questions. By the time your focus becomes more niche, or you’re starting to figure out who is in the field, then you can figure out who is talking about the things that are important to you. And it’s okay to reach out to them. Your ideas matter even if responses might not validate them from the outset.

CarrieLynn: From my perspective I would say, if someone says that your question is dumb, then that person is someone you do not have to talk to, and you can move on. Their response is not a reflection of you.

Rachel: Exactly, and it might just be the situation: that person might be having a bad day, you never know. It’s not a perfect response because there can be any number of systemic roadblocks, and advice is easier to give.

CarrieLynn: You need at least ten rejections under your belt before you start being better with rejection. And that is, of course, if you do not have rejection sensitive dysphoria, which makes handling any rejection harder. But the lovely thing is these days, the more open we are, and genuine, I think the more the same will be visited upon us.

Rachel: I have friends who remind me “you’re learning, and it’s okay.” Plus, everybody is at a different stage, and it is okay to not feel adequate, but to recognize that you’re here for a reason. It just takes time. My best friend loves to tell me “It’s a marathon, not a sprint,” and I need to hear that a lot.