Interview with Rae Armantrout

San Diego, CA on March 27, 2014 | Interviewer: Devin Becker

1 [NOTE: The first four minutes of this interview were not captured on video and as such won't be linked out here. They are available on the audio recording however, which can be accessed here: http://ctrl-shift.org/ohms-viewer/viewer.php?cachefile=armantrout.xml

2 Devin Becker: And there we go with that. This could be a good set up. [0:00]

3 Good.

4 So, three parts to the interview. First part will be kind of how you're working now, with the computer and back and forth—kind of a brief short-answer questions. This comes out of a survey a colleague of mine and I did with a lot of kind of emerging poets about three years ago. It was like an online survey just to see how people are saving and organizing their work.

5 So that will be kind of a couple of pages, but fairly quick.

6 And then we'll talk kind of more overarchingly about your professional career and about how the processes for you have changed, have not changed with. Some idea, you know, with some sort of focus on how the computer impacted that.

7 Then, we'll talk a little bit about the computer in general, and a little bit about correspondence and teaching, and ask a few plunk questions at the end just to see what you think about computers—which is such a large question—but it gets somewhat repetitive at times. So, if you think you've answered already, say, "Skip it," or you know, "Let's go."

8 Rae Armantrout: About how long will it take? [01:09]

9 DB: It'll take about an hour and fifteen minutes.

10 RA: OK.

11 DB: And if, you know, need a break at any time, no problem.

12 RA: OK.

13 DB: So, yeah.

14 So, can we begin?

15 RA: Sure.

16 DB: If you wouldn't mind stating your name, your date of birth, and the location we're at right now.

17 RA: OK. Ray Armantrout (1:29), April 13th, 1947, and we are at my home in Norman Heights, San Diego.

18 DB: Alright. So, I'm going to first ask about how you compose currently. So what genres do you work in?

19 RA: Mostly poetry. [01:43]

20 DB: Mostly poetry.

21 RA: Once in a while I write an essay, but mostly poetry.

22 DB: OK. And what kind of devices—what kind of computer devices—do you own or have access to for your writing?

23 RA: Well, really just two. I have an iPad and I have a Dell computer upstairs.

24 RA: Oh, and I have one at work, too. Also a Dell.

25 DB: Do you use the one at work very often for actually writing?

26 RA: Actually, no. So...

27 DB: No, OK.

28 So, the operating systems are—you've got a Mac, and you have a PC?

29 RA: Uh-hmm.

30 DB: And do you work on one of these devices primarily?

31 RA: Well, actually, I probably work primarily in this old school device called "notebook" where I, you know, fill pages with illegible text, and then once I start to think that my text is coming together, very often I'll do a version of it—just type it into the iPad. And I can show you. I'll send it to myself. Sometimes, I'll send it to my friend, Ron Silliman (2:54). And you know, I mean, I like to know how he'll respond to it—but it's also kind of a lazy way of saving a record of it.

32 DB: Yeah, yeah.

33 RA: Because I send it to myself, too.

34 And then once I've done that a bit, and I have several versions, I'll go upstairs and start working on the computer.

35 DB: Oh, OK. [3:13]

36 So, you've answered my next question—you're working between notebooks and digital devices—?

37 RA: Uh-hmm.

38 DB: —and is there ever a point where you print out the poem?

39 RA: Oh, yeah.

40 DB: OK. Will that be at a point, like, after you've reached your upstairs computer?

41 RA: Yeah, yeah.

42 DB: OK.

43 RA: I mean, I've got—well, I don't know how many versions I've got that I could show—I don't know. Are you interested in seeing printout versions, versions on here of anything I've been working on recently? Because we could do that.

44 Let's see.

45 These...these might not be versions, but I could find versions. How do you want to do that? [3:53]

46 DB: Well, I think right now we can just talk about it and then at the end, I've got a camera, too. I can just take some pictures of that, and have it kind of as photographs—

47 RA: Sure.

48 DB: —which I think that's probably the best way.

49 So and then, how do you save your pre-writing, your notes there?

50 RA: I have a bunch of these filling up my shelves. Right now, I have way too many. A couple of times, I've sold or donated my papers to archives including Stanford and also at UC-San Diego. And when I do, I also include these.

51 DB: You include those?

52 RA: Hmm

53 DB: OK. How many? Do you have any idea how many you've probably gone through?

54 RA: Hundreds.

55 DB: Hundreds?

56 RA: Maybe thousands.

57 DB: OK. Do you always go for the same kind of size?

58 RA: Yeah, pretty much.

59 DB: Pretty much?

60 RA: I'd like it to be able to fit in my purse because I take it with me, and sometimes I write at a café, or, you know, someplace out in the world. So, I want to be able to stick it in my purse—

61 DB: Right.

62 RA: —-riding the airplane, or whatever.

63 So, it's nice if it's about this size, and it's nice if it's flexible. [5:00]

64 DB: OK.

65 RA: And it's nice if it's not expensive.

66 DB: Yeah, yeah because you have to buy so many of them.

67 So, in terms of your digital files, what format do you usually work in?

68 RA: .docx.

69 DB: OK, .docx.

70 As you're working in those formats, do you save drafts of the individual documents, or do you save over those drafts?

71 RA: I mostly save over, which is not a good idea. But sometimes I have printed out drafts, and I save drafts. I probably do not save all of them, which is not great, but I save a number of them and then eventually, I'll probably give them to the library.

72 DB: OK. And then you're emailing them back?

73 RA: Yeah.

74 DB: So, that's sort of a draft as well?

75 RA: Yeah.

76 DB: And what are your naming conventions for your files?

77 RA: I just name it—I mean—whatever the title of the poem.

78 DB: Whatever the title is?

79 RA: Yeah.

80 DB: And then if it's a draft?

81 RA: I number them. Sometimes, I'll have, you know, "such-and-such a title one," "such-and-such a title two,"... But when it gets too confusing, sometimes I'll just erase the old ones. So, I'm not a very good curator of my own history that way.

82 DB: Yeah? And you do save some paper copies of those drafts?

83 RA: Yeah.

84 DB: OK.

85 Do you back up your digital files any way?

86 RA: Not as much as I should. I mean, I do have a back up on a zip drive, but I haven't backed-up for several months. So, I'm careless.

87 DB: And then when you're sending these emails back and forth, is it like a Gmail or some sort of something like that?

88 RA: Yeah.

89 DB: So, you could go back and find them that way in some way?

90 RA: Yeah, yes.

91 DB: So, you're not using Dropbox or any other Cloud-based—?

92 RA: No. I have Dropbox, but I am not using it for this. I'm using it for a class that I've been teaching with someone.

93 DB: OK.

94 RA: But, I could use it that way. I mean, it's something to think about.

95 DB: Yeah.

96 As a digital archivist, I might have some suggestions. Do you ever have files saved in more than one location?

97 RA: No. Well, the zip drive and the computer hard drive.

98 DB: Yeah.

99 RA: That would be it.

100 DB: OK.

101 RA: And paper. That would be it.

102 DB: And then when you're finished with a piece, how do you—is there anything special that you do for that file?

103 RA: No, I pretty much know which is the finest—the final version. And if I start to get confused, like I say, I just erase the others, which is probably a bad idea, but—

104 DB: And then what about the final version—like the books and the journals—do you save those?

105 RA: Well, what happens—this is what I do:

106 RA: I'm going to take these out because these new papers are not very significant. Those are copies that I took with me to give a reading somewhere. So that's why they're loose.

107 RA: But this is the manuscript that I'm working on now. These are really old-fashioned. These are called thesis binders. This one is all beaten up. But you can't really even buy them. You used to be able to buy them in stationary stores.

108 DB: Yeah.

109 RA: Lyn Hejinian (8:26) in Berkeley knows. I guess she has a whole bunch of them. I don't think even she can get them anymore, but she doesn't use them anymore and she has a big stack, and so, she sends them to me.

110 DB: Oh, that's nice.

111 RA: So, this is really old school. But the way I use it is, it helps me order—not only keep the poems for the manuscript, but I order the manuscript this way. I mean, I kind of decide what reads well by trying the poems out in different places—

112 RA: —within this manuscript so that I don't do that thing you hear about writers doing about spreading the pages all over the floor, or all over the walls, or something.

113 DB: Yeah

114 RA: Because I've already been deciding as I went along by where I place them in this thesis binder.

115 DB: OK. And so, will you be working on many poems at the same time? [9:09]

116 RA: No, not usually.

117 DB: OK.

118 RA: Almost never. I'm kind of, you know, obsessive when I start something. I just work on it until I finish it. I mean, once in a while I give up on something for a while and set it aside, and go on to something else, and then go back to it. But I'm not actively working on two things at a time.

119 DB: OK. And so, just to be clear then, if you finish a piece, you would then go to your—you would print it out and then take it to this thesis binder, put it in a place where you think it may fit —

120 RA: Yes

121 DB: —with the rest that are working, and then once you have what you would—how do you know when you have a collection, then?

122 RA: Well, it used to be that I had a collection when I had enough poems for a book, but it seems as

123 RA: if I'm writing more now. So, I get to make some more choices—I get to cut things—cut a manuscript down, save some things for later. So, I get to make some decisions about how the poems work with each other and it's kind of intuitive [10:00]

124 DB: OK. Have you ever received or sought out information about methods for digitally archiving your work?

125 RA: No.

126 DB: No? OK. Those are the short answer. And I think we did cover kind of the "nuts-and-bolts" of your current practice, so that's good. So, in this section, we're going to kind of talk about sort of three areas of your writing talk about the different stages

127 RA: Sure.

128 DB: So, how long have you been writing professionally, is the question?

129 RA: Well you know—for poets, that's a hard question.

130 DB: Yeah. How long have you been—

131 RA: Taking it seriously?

132 DB: Yeah, maybe that's the better way of putting it.

133 RA: Since I was a senior in college, really.

134 DB: OK.

135 RA: I think I had my first poem published in a national magazine shortly after I graduated from college, and then I just continued to publish in magazines. I had my first book was published when I was thirty, and I've been publishing books ever since. And I suppose that now you could say, or—hmm, when would it—? If by a professional, you mean somebody who actually makes money and has a reputation, I guess I've been in that category maybe for twenty-five years, or something.

136 DB: OK, I think I should change the question.

137 RA: For poets.

138 DB: Yeah. Would you please describe, kind of, the arc of your career? Like where you started? I would say— [12:34]

139 (Phone rings)

140 DB: Wait for a second. If you need to answer that, it's fine.

141 RA: Yeah, let me hear who it is.

142 DB: Sure.

143 RA: Probably I don't need to answer, but if it's someone I really want to talk to—

144 Bad timing.

145 DB: It's OK.

146 RA: It ought to pick up after this, or maybe they'll give up. Of course I didn't answer. It's probably a sales call anyway.

147 DB: Yeah.

148 RA: OK, what were you saying?

149 DB: OK. So, if you wouldn't mind describing the arc of your career from when you started sort of seriously writing until now, just sort of a general overview. So, you know, just to start the interview.

150 RA: Alright.

151 I was interested in poetry since childhood. My mother read poetry to me. I wrote when I was a little kid, then I kind of stopped for a while. And then I started again in college and I was reading the poet Denise Levertov (13:37). [13:24].

152 Oh, and I—I grew up here in San Diego, actually, and then I went to San Diego State for two years, and I was reading the poet Denise Levertov. And then I transferred to Berkeley, and she was teaching there. So, I took a class with her, and through that experience, I met my friend Ron Silliman (13:56), who's a poet—the one I send poems to, who's still a friend of mine. And then I came back here, and then I moved to San Francisco to go to grad school and he was living there. And through him and also through the grad program, I met other poets. And there was—you know, San Francisco is a good literary town. So, there was quite a community of poets in San Francisco, and I eventually was friends with poets who became—came to be known as the "Language Poets" (scare quotes), the West Coast Language poets anyway, which would include Barret Watten, and Bob Perelman, and Lyn Hejinian, and Kit Robinson, and Ron Silliman and Carla Harryman (14:41), among others.

153 And I went to a lot of readings series and participated in small press publications, and had a very active literary life—like I said, publishing magazines and journals—and

154 my first publisher was someone that we knew there. It was called the Figures Press and his name was Jeff Young. And so, that book came out in an edition of a very small press—an edition of five hundred copies, which—I gave a lot of them away to my friends and such. [15:00]

155 And then at the end of the seventies (this was in the seventies) At the end of the seventies, I got pregnant and it just didn't seem like we were going to be able to keep living in San Francisco and raise a kid because, kind of like now—I guess it's more extreme now—but there was gentrification and yuppification going on then. And suddenly the rents were getting out of reach for us (especially if we had a kid, because you can't be so hand-to-mouth with a kid). And then my mother lived here and was willing to babysit and also Chuck got an offer of a job here that would have benefits and health insurance and all. So, we ended up back here. I was not very happy to come back here because then (and this is going to get to a topic that you like), then that was really isolating. Because that was before email, right? [15:25]

156 DB: Yeah, yeah.

157 RA: That was even before I had a computer. So, it just felt like, you know, kind of falling off a cliff. I mean, there were some poets here and I got to know them gradually—Jerome Rothenberg, and David Anton (16:22), and Michael Davidson—but not that many people of my generation really.

158 So, I had lengthy correspondences actually on paper with the people back in San Francisco—not all of them but some of them. I can't believe it now, how much time we spent writing long letters out by hand, or typing them on typewriters.

159 DB: Yeah.

160 RA: It seems surreal now that everything goes so fast. I mean, who would do that? But we did. And so, some of those letters are in archives now.

161 And meanwhile, I kept sending work out to journals. Lyn Hejinian (17:03) in the Bay Area had a small press and she published my second book which was a chap book called The Invention of Hunger. [17:03]

162 DB: And what press is that?

163 RA: It was Tuumba, T-U-U-M-B-A. Kind of, you know, a letterpress. And then, my third book—which was my second full-length book–-was published by Burning Deck in Providence.

164 DB: Yeah.

165 RA: So, that was my first kind of, you know, outside my immediate coterie publication.

166 DB: Yeah

167 RA: Still a small press, but—

168 —and then I started publishing with the Los Angeles publisher Sun and Moon, who also published people like Lyn Hejinian and Charles Bernstein (17:50). You know, it was a very active press then. It changed—he changed it to Green Integer, and I do have a book out on Green Integer, too—but the focus became, for him, became more re-publishing classics that had, you know, gone off copyright.

169 So, about that time, fortuitously, I got picked up by Wesleyan. At that time I was already fairly well known, at least, in the kind of small press world. I'd been in some anthologies. But I think that being published by Wesleyan and having a selected come out with them in 2001 really kind of gave my career, so to speak, a boost, and things have just picked up since then including my pace of writing. So that, since 2001—

170 —well, in 2001, I published two books. I published one with Green Integer called the Pretext, and then the selected with Wesleyan, which was called Veil. And then in 2004, I had Up to Speed. In 2007, I had Next Life. In 2009, I had Burst. In 2011, I had Money Shot. And then in 2013, I had Just Sayings.

171 So, yeah.

172 DB: Yeah.

173 RA: A spurt.

174 DB: Yeah, that's great.

175 And then during that time, were you supporting yourself by teaching, mostly?

176 RA: Yeah. When we first came down here, Chuck was one of the managers of the bookstore at San Diego State, and I got, about a year after we got here, I got a part-time teaching job at UC San Diego. At first, it was kind of on and off, and then after that, it was regular but adjunct.

177 I did that for many years. It wasn't until the early 2000s that I got a, you know, "real" tenured job at UCSD.

178 DB: OK. So, I guess, we want to kind of move in to talking about the different "spots" of processes for you and how it changed over the course of your career. So, in terms of like when you first started writing seriously and were kind of doing the pre-writing, the generative work for these poems, how did that look? What was the process for that? [20:00]

179 RA: Well, I think, I always used a notebook. You know, I couldn't tell you exactly what the notebooks looked like way back then, but I always wrote by hand. I think I wrote by hand then—I'm sure I did longer, took me longer to write a poem, and it also stayed in the hand-written phase longer because back then, when you left the hand-written phase, you had to go to a typewriter. You're too young to know about typewriters, but they were enormously irritating because if you made any mistakes, you had to either start over or put whiteout on it, or you know, etcetera. And then, you would make a copy. I mean, you would print it out and if you wanted another copy, you'd have to type it again. I mean, right? [20:14]

180 DB: Yeah.

181 RA: So, I mean, there's a limit to that.

182 So, you would kind of just do without when you thought you had pretty much finished version. You might be wrong, but you know...

183 DB: Yeah.

184 RA: Still.

185 DB: When you were working in the notebook, was it usually in a certain spot? Or could that be wherever you were? Was it just—

186 RA: Well, it would—I did it a lot at home, but sometimes outside.

187 DB: Outside. And was it something where you—had a line or an idea that then you would write down?

188 RA: Yeah, I mean, I often start that way—then, and still, you know. I can—just something that I hear or see, sort of peaks my interest. It could be something I read, and I'll write down a passage, or I'll write down something I overhear someone say, or even on television, I could hear something that I write down.

189 And I kind of collect those things like a magpie until something starts to take off.

190 DB: OK. And in the beginning part of your career, then, how—at what point would you go to the typewriter? Like when would you kind of feel like, "OK, this really needs to be typed?"

191 RA: Well, I guess, when I thought it was good enough to keep and good enough to maybe send a copy to someone to see what they thought, either an editor or a friend. So, that's pretty far along.

192 DB: Yeah.

193 So, would you—were you doing revisions within the notebook as well?

194 RA: Uh-hmm.

195 DB: And what type of revisions did it sort of start as? I mean, was it—would you just be crossing out and rewriting? Or would you—?

196 RA: I don't know if I would cross out. I think I would just, you know, go to another page and rewrite.

197 DB: OK. So, when did the computer start to enter in to this process?

198 RA: Let's see. When did I first get a computer?

199 The first thing I got was one of those IBM Selectrics that was sort of computerized, where you could make—you could save, and make a number of copies. But shortly after I got that, I was able to get my first computer. So, that became sort of redundant instantly.

200 I'm trying to think what year it was. I mean, it was probably only...when did...you tell me. When did desktops with word processing become available? It wasn't a Word. It was like Word Perfect, or Word—

201 DB: Word computers.

202 RA: Yeah.

203 DB: So, like mid-80's sort of?

204 RA: Yeah, maybe—

205 DB: —later than that?

206 RA: —later, maybe. Yeah. I think I got that Selectric in the mid-80's, maybe, you know—I probably got the computer by the late-80's, and I don't think I got internet until—there wasn't internet that you could get until the early 90's, probably.

207 DB: Yeah [23:34].

208 RA: It's incredible now, to think!

209 DB: Yeah.

210 How did—so, how did that first computer come about? I mean, did you know a friend who had a computer and then go after that, or how'd you—?

211 RA: Yeah. I think, again, Ron Silliman (23:56) who worked in the computer industry—he worked as a marketer in the computer industry—he had one. I mean, he didn't live near me at that point, but we were in touch and he had one before I did.

212 But I guess, you know, really, I mean everyone was getting it at about the same time.

213 DB: Uh-hmm. So, you got a computer

214 RA: I don't remember. I mean, I guess it was gradual. I still, like I say, work in notebooks but I am sure that I started going from the notebook to the computer sooner than I would have on a typewriter, I am sure. But I don't have a clear memory of it.

215 What I do have a clear memory of is how the internet changed things. Because then you could send someone something and say, "What do you think? I don't know about this last line, what do you think?"

216 I mean, you could have that kind of conversation.

217 DB: Yeah.

218 RA: And if you do that in a letter—which I did, but by the time you got the letter back you'd already made up your mind— [25:00]

219 DB: Right, right. So, in the early part when you were sending these by letters, you did that only a little bit and it didn't—how did you establish—?

220 RA: I think I did. I mean, I would type something up and send it, usually to a couple of people—two or three people—and I would get responses back. But it certainly—I mean, now we're so used to kind of this instant dialogue, instant gratification. Sometimes I think that that's, you know, maybe that's why I'm writing faster now. Really, it is the stimulation of that.

221 Because I'm still not—I guess, I'm insecure enough that I'm not comfortable in saying something is finished until somebody has said that they at least think it's interesting. I mean, it doesn't always have to be Ron. Sometimes I send it to somebody else, but I have to have, like, somebody's approval—not a 100% approval but, like, somebody has to think, "Oh, this is OK"—before I'll put it in a book. So that's sort of an integral part of the process. So obviously, if you could do that and get an answer in a day or two, well, you know.

222 DB: Yeah.

223 RA: Right.

224 DB: Right.

225 RA: So then I decide, at that point, whether I still need to revise.

226 DB: So, in the—like when the internet first starts coming and you start working, and kind of sending these things back and forth—was it just Ron Silliman (26:31) who was your kind of partner?

227 RA: No.

228 DB: Few more?

229 RA: I use to send them to more people. Lyn Hejinian, at first, and Bob Perelman, at first, and Lydia Davis, the fiction writer—she's a friend of mine. And later, Fanny Howe, too.

230 Now, I mostly just send them to Ron, and once in a while, to Lydia. Very rarely to Lyn Hejinian, but still once in a while, like maybe twice a year.

231 So, kind of that number of people has sort of shrunk.

232 DB: So you're looking for some sort of affirmation? [27:05]

233 RA: Yeah

234 DB: Interesting, yeah. Do they give like specific line feedback? Or do they usually just give sort of—

235 RA: Ron does.

236 DB: OK.

237 RA: I mean, it all—I could show you. This, I guess, is the kind of —my screen is dirty—kind of thing you might want to see.

238 So, let me go to my "Mail," and I'll go to my—

239 DB: Sure.

240 RA: —"Sent Mail," and you can see some of these.

241 Oh, this actually has to do with the internet.

242 I sent Ron a poem that mentions messages I was getting—it's actually in a poem from mileage.com—that I thought were funny. Well, so, Ron writes back. He said, "Not sure you need the Q and A at the end"—I had a sort of "interviewing myself" bit at the end—"Not sure you need the Q and A at the end, but other than the problems with the url"—he thought that since I was saying Mileage.com, which he says is a phishing site—he thought that, if that was ever published in an online journal, and somebody hit on it, clicked it, that I could be in trouble for that, which I don't know if that's true. He says, "You know that mileage.com is a phishing site. It sends malware to your PC if you follow through." And then I, at some point, wrote back. I said, "I don't do that."

243 RA: So, you know, that's just some of the kinds of—so there I am, there I am sending something to him and having a correspondence with him.

244 Let's see.

245 Here I am sending something to myself, just to kind of preserve it. Same poem but it has a different title with that point—there is mileage.com lit up.

246 DB: Oh, yeah!

247 RA: Yeah, because it lights up if you—it doesn't on my computer, but it does if you do it on the iPad.

248 DB: It does it in Apple.

249 RA: Yeah.

250 DB: Right! So, did you write that on your iPad?

251 RA: Well, like always, I started here and I moved it to the iPad, and then I moved it to the computer—-but I was sending—I think I start writing—usually, I write in the morning, sitting over there. And I don't want to be running up and down the stairs, so then after I'll just go, "You know, this looks good enough to kind of type." So, I'll type it here. And if I don't yet feel like sharing it with someone, I'll just send it to myself because that's a way of saving it.

252 DB: And that's when you could move it to your—

253 RA: Yeah

254 DB: —other computer?

255 RA: Uh-hmm.

256 DB: And so when did you start using the iPad?

257 RA: Gee, again, I got an iPhone maybe three years ago, and I got the iPad maybe two years ago. I don't know. Time's a blur. [30:00]

258 DB: Okay. So—

259 RA: It's an old one, though.

260 DB: So it's been a couple years, two or three years. Did you ever work on the iPhone, too?

261 RA: No, too tiny.

262 DB: Too small of a typing format.

263 So then, back to the revision correspondence. Do you think that—why do you think that Ron Silliman (30:29) has kind of been the constant of all that?

264 RA: Well, because he's very confident about what he says, first of all, and he's also very specific. He doesn't always say why he thinks what he thinks, which drives me crazy, but he gives me something to bounce off. [30:33]

265 DB: Yeah, and is he very prompt in responding?

266 RA: Often. Not always. Sometimes it's right away, sometimes it's not for days, depends on how busy he is.

267 DB: Yeah, and does he reciprocate? Does he send you things over?

268 RA: He never has. He doesn't like to do that. Other people have.

269 So, you know, that's fine with me, but—he writes really, really long, kind of book-length things, and he doesn't revise much. He doesn't revise like I do. He just has a different kind of practice, and he seems to be very invested in his own certainty about things more than I am. But some other people will send me things. Lydia Davis sends me things and Fanny Howe (31:25) once in awhile sends me things.

270 DB: And how did you kind of develop your revision process, from the beginning, I guess?

271 RA: Well, I guess, I was just always looking for the best word, for instance, and it didn't always come to me right away. But also I will just get parts of things and I know that they're not finished, you know, and then I just try to see what can connect and I'll go one way, one direction and try to connect, you know, B to A. And then B doesn't quite connect to A, so then I'll go on to C and see if that connects to A.

272 DB: And has that been pretty constant throughout?

273 RA: Yeah.

274 DB: OK.

275 Have there been any big changes in the way you've approached kind of pushing the poem to its finished state throughout the time?

276 RA: Well, I bet there have, but you know, I was as much of a stranger to my twenty-four year-old self as you are, almost.

277 DB: Well, you did mention, though, that with the internet and with email becoming more—giving more easily available correspondence—you did start to speed up in the work. And do you think that's the only reason, or do you think it also has something to do with maybe moving onto more of a national scene?

278 RA: It could be that. It could be knowing that I have a supporting publisher. It could be just practice, you know, just that I have a better idea of what works now, you know—what works for me.

279 DB: Yeah. [33:00]

280 And I know you don't—I think in one of your other interviews you said you don't really have, like, any intentions in revising your work, but are there primary things for different pieces that you're driven by? Like, are some driven more by sound, some driven more by meaning, some driven more by connecting the parts to the whole or disconnecting the parts to the whole?

281 RA: All of those things equally, you know. I mean, I am very interested in sound, and sounds—certain sounds can really bother me, or I could get stuck on one certain sound. So yeah, meaning is important to me, too. In terms of connecting parts because, as you know, if you've looked at my work, it often—

282 DB: —in sections?

283 RA: —in sections.

284 DB: Yeah, absolutely.

285 RA: And so, the sections might be written on different days; often are. And they often come from different sources or different inspirations, and—so then, the question is how they link in. And you kind of—at least if you're me, I shouldn't say "you", but "I"—want there to be some kind of possible perceptible connection, but I also want it to be surprising. I want it to kind of go somewhere that you didn't expect it to go, or that I didn't expect it to go. So, sometimes the first thing I come up with is too obvious and sometimes what I come up with is too random. It's like Goldilocks and the Three Bears.

286 DB: Has that sort of looking for that surprising turn, or idea, been a constant throughout? I mean, has that been something that's been driving you since you started writing?

287 RA: I've probably become more conscious of it, but I think so, yeah.

288 DB: And how do—so, could you talk a little bit about how, as you say, a lot of your poems are in sections and how those sections kind of come to be a whole? I mean, could there be several different days, and then in between those different sections become different poems?

289 RA: Sometimes that happens, yeah. I mean— [35:00]

290 DB: Is it just a—do you just start to see connections? Does it —?

291 RA: Yeah, and sometimes I have an idea of what I want vaguely, but I don't know exactly where I'm going to get it or what the specifics are. But I—sometimes I have just a gut feeling about the direction that I want to go, and other times I don't, and then I just have to be surprised and just know that I want something and should keep my eyes open for it.

292 DB: And do you—I mean, there's a certain point where you say within the emails that you get some sort of affirmation. But then personally, when do you feel like a sense of, "Oh! That's surprising!" Is there like an "Aha!" moment?

293 RA: Yeah, sure.

294 Yeah, you have to please yourself first.

295 DB: Yeah.

296 RA: And I think one reason that I tend to send poems out is that I will be dissatisfied and fool with things forever unless somebody goes, "Hey, that's good."

297 DB: Yeah.

298 RA: I mean, I'll go, "Maybe it's not good. Maybe I should do something else." So, you know, I think that's why I need somebody to give me a kind of endpoint and say, "Cut it out now."

299 DB: Yeah.

300 RA: I mean, sometimes I know, but sometimes I can be insecure and just fiddle.

301 DB: Right. And then I guess is there any way—do you, once the poem kind of reaches the thesis binder stage, is there any time that you start to see the ways those are working and go back and revise there? Or once it's there it's usually kind of off limits?

302 RA: Well, I wouldn't say it's off limits, but I don't usually revise them, but I have. I mean it has happened that I've suddenly seen how something could be better and, you know, gone away from it, gone back to it and went, "Oh that could be better."

303 But I would say that's, you know, maybe one time in twenty.

304 DB: So they're more rare.

305 RA: Yeah. [36:58]

306 DB: And when did you start using the thesis binders?

307 RA: Long time ago—maybe twenty, twenty-five years ago. They used to be easy to find, but now, like I said, they're antique—old school.

308 DB: Yeah, and before, when you were first putting your first collections together, how did that work? How was that looking?

309 RA: I might have had one even then. Because everyone used to. This is what used to happen. People—everyone used to bring these to a reading and just read from them. I don't even do that anymore because they're too heavy to carry. I just print them out. But that's what people used to do, so, everyone had one.

310 DB: OK.

311 So we've talked about how the other people—

312 Is there any other role that other people play in the process of your revisions? Are there any other people that are important to those, to the kind of finding the finish pieces?

313 RA: Well, I think not really except sometimes my editor gives me a little bit of guidance—not about individual poems but about the order of poems within the manuscript. I usually think I know, but sometimes she has a different idea that she runs by me and we consider that.

314 DB: OK.

315 And then, sort of moving on to the organizational— what I call organizational/archival—and we've kind of covered some of this, but when you were first—so in the early days before the computers, when you kind of hit that, what would you say a final piece is? You'd send it out, would you also keep a printed page?

316 RA: Oh, sure.

317 DB: OK.

318 And that would be in—

319 RA: In thesis binders.

320 DB: —and how would you communicate with your publisher with those?

321 RA: I suppose we had to communicate by snail mail, how else was there?

322 DB: Right, and so you would collect those all—would you make a copy of it before you send it off? [38:38]

323 RA: Oh, yeah. I probably Xeroxed it. I mean, there were Xerox machines.

324 DB: Yeah, OK.

325 And once things were published, and things, did you start to kind of keep an archive—and archive of your work at that point? I mean, did you have boxes with your papers in it even at the beginning, or did that start to come more gradually?

326 RA: That came more gradually. I mean, I wish that I had kept my letters right from the beginning, because I had letters from George Oppen (39:10) and I had letter from Robert Creeley (39:12). It really took me awhile to realize that this was going to be worth anything.

327 DB: Yeah.

328 RA: It took seeing some of my friend—the way some of my friends took it seriously, like Lyn Hejinian (39:27), and organized things, and treated it as if it was all worthwhile.

329 DB: Yeah.

330 RA: But I didn't, you know, I didn't come from an intellectual family or background, and so it wasn't natural really for me, and I had to learn it.

331 DB: I'm interested in that, and like how did—so, the lessons were just from watching them do that, or were they from the conversations? I mean, did you just sort of notice that Lyn Hejinian (40:00) sort of had, like, kept things better? [40:00]

332 RA: Well, I think at some point she sold her papers and I went, "Oh, people sell their papers and they get money." And also I would notice that she wrote letters as if she was writing for an archive. I mean, she would kind of give you the back story that you already knew, and I'm going, "What? Who is she talking to?" The archive!

333 DB: I never thought of that as being one of the correspondents, but that's a good point.

334 Yeah, and so, I guess—

335 RA: I still don't do that. But I think email has pretty much ended that for most people. Now, people just shoot off emails and so I don't know what's happening to archives.

336 DB: Yeah, I know, right? I mean, is there any way you try to save your emails? Are there any that you—?

337 RA: I have saved emails, and even printed them out and given them to libraries, but I just—I think Ron saves everything. So, everything I send to him gets saved. That's how I look at it. He's my archivist.

338 I mean, I only—you know, there's only so much space in my house.

339 DB: Oh, yeah.

340 RA: I know you can save things on your hard drive and give your hard drive to a library, but God knows what's on my hard drive. So, so far I've just—what I do now is, if there's anything that seems especially interesting or valuable, I'll print it out and keep it.

341 DB: And did you—like when you first started writing the emails back and forth, and kind of like general correspondence, what was the sort of tenor of those? Did it still feel more like a letter? I mean, did you notice a gradual change?

342 RA: Yeah. I mean, sure, letters were letters and—I should go look up my old letters. I could go to an archive and look at them.

343 Yeah, I think you would talk about various things—how your life was going and then you would say, "And by the way I wrote this" include it—but you would be catching up. Sure, now we catch up all the time, you know.

344 DB: Right, so, kind of constantly. Are you on any social media things?

345 RA: I'm on Facebook.

346 DB: You do Facebook.

347 RA: And I'm also on Twitter, but I don't tweet much.

348 DB: Just follow whatever's going on?

349 RA: A few things, yeah.

350 DB: A little bit?

351 RA: Yeah, but sure, I'm on Facebook and that's how I get some of my news.

352 DB: Yeah, yeah.

353 Do you remember your first email? Or any of that sort of thing? Sort of nostalgic, but—?

354 RA: I don't remember my first email. I remember that Ron said that I had "ramped up quickly." That was flattering, so I remember it.

355 DB: Were you first given an email because of your work—because of UCSD? Was that your first? [42:31]

356 RA: No, I got it on my own and when my son was still living here, and he helped me set everything up. I mean, you know, he was probably fourteen or something. So that's why I have a really stupid—I mean, my university address—I guess you wrote me at my university address? Or did you write me—?

357 DB: Yeah, I think both. You gave me the other one because you were traveling.

358 RA: Which is really stupid because it's "RAEA100900." I shouldn't say that anything my son said was stupid, but he was only about fourteen and I guess he thought that was—I feel like I'm James Bond or something with that email address, but whatever.

359 DB: Let me see here—

360 So, I mean, it seems to me like, in sort of talking about the progression, that the main difference—the main change—has really just been the kind of speed with which email allows you to kind of get to a point where you think things are solid enough for a collection.

361 RA: Yeah

362 DB: Is there anything else you can think of that really changed as technology changed, or do you feel like for the most part—not that the type writer and computer are the same—but that the relationship between the notebook and those sort of typing procedures were similar?

363 RA: Well, I was never a great typist, so I was always making mistakes. So, it was always frustrating. Of course sometimes I hate my computer, too. I mean, it's not a question of the typing issue, but just—you know, we all hate our computers.

364 DB: Yeah.

365 RA: They're slow. Whatever. Sometimes I'm yelling at my computer, "What did you just do?" You know, it'll lose a document and I'll go, "What? I did what? It's gone!" You know?

366 DB: Yeah.

367 RA: So, I have kind of an adversarial relationship with it, but I use it all the time.

368 DB: And if you lost something, then you would go back—what would be your first move?

369 RA: Well, supposedly you can hit—I think it's CTRL-X—and get it back, but that doesn't work very well for me.

370 DB: Would you go back to an email? I mean like if you—?

371 RA: Well, if I sent an email, sure.

372 DB: What does the revision, if it's just you on your upstairs computer, what does that revision look like? I mean, are you moving things around a lot or are you—is it more just sort of reading and then deleting and inserting new words?

373 RA: Yeah, that would be it.

374 DB: Mostly. Do you read them out loud to yourself?

375 RA: Yeah, always. [45:00]

376 DB: OK.

377 When do you start doing that?

378 RA: In the notebook.

379 DB: In the notebook. And so—well, can you talk a little bit more about how that works? I mean, is it something that as you're writing the first line, you're reading out loud, or is it like you finish something?

380 RA: I probably—well, in between—not the first line, but I'd probably have to have a few lines before I thought it was worth reading them out loud.

381 Let's see...

382 I should get to something bad that changed a lot, but then that would be embarrassing.

383 DB: We're only being recorded by like four devices, so—

384 RA: Yeah, right.

385 I don't know what to do here because the things that I start out writing change so much.

386 Let's see.

387 I can get to a poem that's finished, and I can read a little bit from my journal that were the beginning of it, I guess. [46:00]

388 DB: OK, yeah, that'd be great.

389 RA: OK, although the beginning is going to be very bad—

390 DB: Give the rest of us hope!

391 RA: —you can stand that. OK.

392 So, this is in two parts, and I think this part is working on—first of all, it's very hard to read my hand writing, even for me to read it when I'm looking back at something I wrote a while ago now.

393 That's bad.

394 OK, there is—is it okay if I read the poem, or is that a waste of time?

395 DB: No! Absolutely.

396 RA: OK, so, this is called "Particular:"

397 Rough, squat, bent, crabbed, cranky. A cranky person who is over enthusiastic about a particular topic. To be particular is to be choosy. A particle is a body whose extent and internal structure, if any, are irrelevant. You there, let's dispense with these properties of matter such anachronistic clothes as ghosts wear. Let's be mirrors, facing mirrors. Fall in love.

398 OK, so, here's some build up to that, which really doesn't sound like a poem at all. OK, this is embarrassing but:

399 To love, you show yourself willing to erase yourself. Make yourself blank together for a few moments—see, this is just prose—"in order to reflect the other." That ended up being, "Let's be mirrors facing mirrors. Fall in love."

400 Two cloudless skies, no earth between. The young do it best, now everyone has lost the trick of it. For love, they emptied—

401 —and then I guess I'm rewriting:

402 For love, they emptied themselves. Mirrors reflecting mirrors.

403 So, that gets a bit of that.

404 The young, two cloudless skies, nothing between. Not like us, condensed into these peculiar shapes. For love they emptied themselves—

405 —and this is starting over again:

406 —"until they're mirrors reflecting mirrors. The young unlike us, who have assumed these peculiar shapes, they forget everything until they're mirrors reflecting mirrors, the young open channels"—

407 —I took that out eventually

408 —"through which charges flow, not us. They forget everything until they're mirrors reflecting mirrors, they fall in love. The trick young can do, unlike us with our definite opinions and habits, these properties and mass change, spin"—

409 —so that gets to where I was talking about a particle is a body. So that's like subatomic, right?

410 —"its extended internal structure, if any are irrelevant, let's dispense with these properties of matter."

411 So anyway, here I'm starting to get in to that. "These properties and mass charge spin are like the clothes that ghosts wear." Well, that gets in to here, except there's no simile. It just goes:

412 Let's dispense with these properties of matter. Such anachronistic clothes as ghosts wear. Let's be mirrors facing mirrors.

413 You can see how some of that worked into that. [49:28]

414 DB: Yeah, absolutely! And then—so, it kind of moves, not quite chronologically, but sequentially, and it's not even a winnowing; it's an addition and subtraction, and addition—

415 RA: Now this is stuff not even Ron Silliman sees because I wouldn't send anything that inchoate to anyone.

416 DB: OK.

417 RA: So, now, you're seeing something, you're hearing something, that nobody has—

418 DB: Yeah. No, it's fascinating. And then so, at a certain point when you move to that, does that sort of stop in the journal, in the notebook?

419 RA: Yeah. [50:00]

420 DB: I mean, in the next poem?

421 RA: Once I move to this, then I seldom go back to the notebook.

422 DB: OK. But then the next page, then, would be the next poem that you work on, essentially?

423 RA: Yeah, unless I decide that, say, the last part of this is bad and then I might start over in the notebook.

424 DB: And so the type of revision, then, that happens on the iPad —? I mean, it's not as easy to kind of move things around there. What usually occurs?

425 RA: Fortunately for me my poems don't have a lot of words and they have short lines, so I just back things out and start over. I just do that.

426 DB: OK.

427 Is there any sort of formatting that you use, either here or on your PC, that you kind of developed? Like do you have a certain font that you use or anything like that, or is that not really a concern of yours?

428 RA: That's not really a concern.

429 DB: OK.

430 RA: I mean, I wouldn't want to hate a font but I'm okay with the standard font.

431 DB: Yeah. And then I guess I'm wondering, then, before there were—before you had the iPad—you would just take the notebook up to your computer and write it down there?

432 RA: Yeah.

433 DB: That would be the thing?

434 RA: Sure, of course.

435 DB: So, it's almost like an ease of place, almost.

436 RA: Yeah.

437 DB: More than anything else.

438 RA: Absolutely, because I'm just comfortable in this room and I would just stay there with my coffee playing around here for quite a while. So, I think that's just, you know, habit. [51:24]

439 DB: Yeah, yeah.

440 Do you use the—when you're connected up there, is the internet always connected as well? Are you always connected to the internet?

441 RA: Yeah.

442 DB: Are you doing any, are you using it for research purposes or reference purposes when you're up there?

443 RA: Yeah, I mean in terms of my teaching—

444 DB: OK.

445 RA: —because I'm preparing to teach this class I've never taught before, and I'm going to be teaching it with a guy, with a physicist, where it's called Poetry for Physicists—

446 DB: That's great!

447 RA: —and he's been getting a lot press lately. I don't know if you've seen it. Bryan Keating (52:01), he was involved with the discovery at the South Pole?

448 DB: Yeah, yeah, absolutely!

449 RA: Yeah, yeah.

450 DB: Oh, wow!

451 RA: And he's interested in poetry!

452 So anyway, I'm doing research for that, and I was just—I'm using some ancient poets like Lucretius, who wrote about science, you know. I mean, he wrote—the ancient Greeks like Lucretius knew about—or, not knew but hypothesized the existence of atoms and the void. So, I was just doing some research about him on the computer and then printing them out.

453 Yeah, so, sure.

454 DB: Yeah, I know. When I was reading your work and read about those kinds of things—discovery or confirmation of the Inflation Theory, I was like, "I would really like to see a poem by Rae Armantrout about this."

455 RA: Well, turns out he's my bud!

456 DB: Yeah, that's awesome! Yeah, that's a good—and how long have you been in conversation with him?

457 RA: I dedicated a poem to him in this book. So, I've been in conversation with him for, I don't know, maybe three years? So the poem called "Accounts" is based on a conversation that we had.

458 DB: And what are his books?

459 RA: Here it is. See? "For Bryan Keating." (53:18)

460 DB: Oh, cool! OK.

461 RA: I don't think scientists—I mean, he's an astrophysicist. They don't write books.

462 DB: You mentioned somebody that—there was some, like, more popular science writer that you were reading—?

463 RA: You know I read Brian Greene, different Brian—

464 DB: Yeah, I was getting confused because of the Brian's.

465 And how long has that been a sort of subject of fascination for you?

466 RA: I think—the first time I did anything with particle physics was really when it first became popularized, like when The Tao of Physics came out in the 80's. And at first I thought it was just kind of absurd, all the particles, and I thought it was just like, "How many angels can stamd on the head of a pin?" or whatever. But I was still reading it and sort of interested in it, and then I guess starting with my book Up To Speed in 2004, I've taken a more sustained interest in it.

467 DB: What's this class going to look like overall? Do you have like a shape to it?

468 RA: Yeah. I mean, I've never team-taught before, but some days I'll be talking—I've chosen poems that either have something to do with cosmology or physics in some way, or that have to do with objectivity and subjectivity and theories of mind. Or then, in a different way, going off of kind of Chaos Theory where complexity can be—can grow from the iteration of simple rules. I'm using some poets like,

469 well, like Ron Silliman, and like Jackson Macklow (55:01), and like Christian Bök, that (Indiscernible, 55:05) poet who use constraints, or rules, to generate poems and have math in their poems, you know, not as a subject but as a generative principle. [55:00]

470 DB: Right.

471 RA: So I'm doing some of that.

472 And Brian is, you know, he likes poetry but he's not exactly up to the avant-garde, shall we say? He likes sonnets and such, so we have a bit of that.

473 DB: OK, and will it be a class in which you ask the students to write, or is it more—?

474 RA: It's not really a writing class.

475 DB: —survey?

476 RA: I mean, they're going to write one poem and they're going to write a couple of essays and there's going to be a couple of tests, and it's mostly a reading and discussion course.

477 DB: OK, and its next fall?

478 RA: No, it's in the spring. It starts in a week.

479 DB: Oh, right!

480 RA: It starts next Tuesday.

481 DB: You guys are quarters.

482 RA: Yeah.

483 DB: OK.

484 So, let me see here.

485 We're fairly well along, almost done actually.

486 Are there any other—I mean, these are kind of—I don't know how far you want to get in to this, but in terms of teaching, when did that sort of email and computer start to kind of take over that? I mean, sort of like the 2000's, early 2000's?

487 RA: Email? I think that was in the 90's, wasn't it?

488 DB: Yeah, yeah.

489 And has that—do you feel like that's changed how you approach students and how you approach your classes?

490 RA: Well, yeah. Now your students can always find you. It certainly made it easier to write a syllabus having a computer —

491 DB: Yeah

492 RA: —and, you know, you can constantly email your students and remind them of what they're supposed to be doing. I think its just made things easier for everyone.

493 DB: Do you see any sort of differences in understanding of your students now as to your students like, say, fifteen or twenty years ago?

494 RA: Well, I think that, you know, certainly students do gradually change. I think that when you teach young people, you kind of, sort of stay in that world. You hear their expressions—I'm not saying I'm a digital native by a long shot—but you know, you sort of hear the way they talk and you get a bit of their mind set, and you know, you know their lingo. In a way that, I think, when I retire, I might miss that.

495 DB: Yeah, yeah.

496 RA: But still, if something goes wrong with my computer I have to get my son to help me.

497 DB: So, that's actually—I've found that this has been kind of a theme. Do you have somebody who comes in and helps you if you have any computer problems?

498 RA: Yeah, he lives in Seattle, but he's walked me through things on the phone.

499 DB: OK.

500 And has he set up—did he set up your computer when you first got it and stuff like that?

501 RA: Yeah.

502 DB: OK.

503 RA: And he was 14. He's built a computer, even.

504 DB: Oh, is he working—if he's in Seattle, is he working in the computer industry?

505 RA: No, he's a scientist but he's not in the computer industry. He's a biologist.

506 DB: Oh, OK.

507 So, I'm fairly well through. We've covered pretty much what I liked to cover. I do have my blunt questions at the end. So, is there any sort of overarching thing that you think has changed with the advent of computers in terms of writing? I mean, do you see a sort of maybe change in tone, a change in tenor, a change in ideas that have been—?

508 RA: Well, yeah. I mean, the fact that I've just recently wrote a poem that references Mileage.com—

509 DB: Right.

510 RA: —and if I could bring up that section of it for you, anyway, because it's certainly something that would not have been written had there not been computers. It goes: "Protect your identities says mileage.com, three times today as if it knew something. I may want to fly cheap, cruise in luxury, buy a walk-in tub, and burial insurance."

511 Yeah, they try to sell you things.

512 So yeah, I mean, I think that that gets into the content of the work, and then there are groups of poets who work in that realm kind of specifically and almost exclusively—like the Flarf poets, for instance, just do what they call "Google mining."

513 DB: Yeah, and what's—what do you—

514 RA: And also of course, there are digital poets. There's digital poetry where people write poems especially for the computer, where the—I don't know, the words fall off the screen at different rates, and such.

515 DB: Yeah, do you do—if you were willing to be reading poems for whatever reason, do you find that you're reading them a lot more on your screen than you used to?

516 RA: I don't like to read on the screen. I mean, I do read things on the screen, but if I'm judging a contest or something, which I sometimes do, I ask for hard copies. Or if I get them on the screen, I print them because I just don't like to read on the screen. I mean, I don't want to sit up there on a hard chair. I don't want to look at that light— [1:00:00]

517 DB: Right.

518 RA: You know?

519 DB: No, I think that's pretty typical.

520 OK, I think that's good, Rae.

521 Thank you very much.

522 RA: Alright, this was painless.

523 DB: Yeah! Alright.

524 Just at an hour.

525 RA: Good.

526 DB: Good.

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