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INTERVIEW WITH CARLO ROTELLA

Professor Rotella is Director of the American Studies Program and Director of the Lowell Humanities Series. He has held Guggenheim, Howard, and Du Bois fellowships and received the Whiting Writers Award, the L. L. Winship/PEN New England Award, and The American Scholar's prizes for Best Essay and Best Work by a Younger Writer, and *Cut Time* was a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize. He is an editor of the "Chicago Visions and Revisions" series at the University of Chicago Press. He writes for the *New York Times Magazine* and the *Washington Post Magazine*, he is a regular columnist for the *Boston Globe*, he has been a commentator for WGBH FM, and his work has also appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Critical Inquiry*, *American Quarterly*, *The American Scholar*, *Raritan*, *the New York Times*, *the Chicago Tribune*, *the Boston Globe*, *Transition*, *Harper's*, *DoubleTake*, *Boston*, *Slate*, *The Believer*, *TriQuarterly*, and *The Best American Essays*.

INSCAPE: Your writing recognizes people, individually and in small groups, as primary enactors of cultural change and representation. You mentioned the concept of writing yourself into the place where these subjects find themselves. What has been your experience with these immersions, and how has your behavior changed as you continue to immerse yourself into new scenes?

CARLO ROTELLA: It is true that I think one of the best ways to tell the story of a big transformation, a big change, is to tell the stories of individuals or small groups living the consequences of those

changes. A lot of what I do is finding characters to put in the foreground, to show what these big and often very abstract changes, things like globalization or deindustrialization--anything I think that ends with a -zation—to show how those huge transformations are lived on the ground by people. Over time, I think it's become more true that I've become a character in these stories; that some of the time that person in the foreground—well, if not me—is at least my sensibility, so I've become much more willing to be a character inhabiting the work. That doesn't necessarily mean that I'm more intrusive or more present when I'm interviewing people. I'm pretty unobtrusive. In fact, that's pretty much my only marketable skill—that I can disappear in plain sight. But when it comes time to write it, I've become more and more comfortable with saying “Well, some of the ways in which these big changes show up are in the ways that I think, react, and use myself as a filter more than I did in the past.” I was much more of a fly on the wall when I started, less willing to be present.

INSCAPE: For undergraduate writers who are trying to do the same, what would be the best way to transition into a less presumptuous and more research-motivated manner of writing?

CARLO ROTELLA: There is no substitute for legwork. Journalists have a kind of contemptuous term for not doing any legwork, which is “think piece.” What they mean by that is you don't have time to do any reporting, you just write your own thoughts and feelings. I have limited sympathy for that idea, but I do have some. When I teach writing, I encourage my students to go out and get

somebody else's story, even if their objective is to write their own. The training that you get in getting someone else's story is very valuable. There's set of questions that you start to ask when getting someone else's story: Am I satisfied with this version of the story? Am I getting the whole truth? Can I corroborate what's being said? All those questions can then travel into your examination of your own work, even if what you're doing is writing about yourself.

So, I am a big believer in legwork. I don't actually believe writer's block is possible for a non-fiction writer if all you need to do is go out and get someone else's story. People are crazy, they're always up to something interesting. You just have to go find them and find out what that is. I do think it's entirely possible to get writer's block if your subject is yourself.

INSCAPE: Your other work, including articles and personal, even family-oriented, essays always seem to come back around industrial urbanism, specifically through individuals. What has made you stick so firmly to that material?

CARLO ROTELLA: Part of that is just my upbringing and where I'm from. I grew up on the south side of Chicago in the middle of this particular transformation from a city organized around its factories and train lines. It was in the last throes of shedding that identity and becoming a city organized around its high rise office buildings, universities, airport, and highways. That transformation has really colored the way I see city life. It also happens to be the big transformation that's happened in my lifetime. I now live

in Boston, and before 1980, Boston was really a kind of provincial, backwater dump, but around 1980, it started to become this high tech, happening research hub, and now Hollywood is in love with Boston, or at least it's in love with the film tax credit in Massachusetts, and Boston is gone from being a real backwater, which had peaked more than a century before to being a really happening urban center again. And so I think it's inevitable that that big story about that old Boston being replaced by newer Boston, that old Chicago being replaced by newer Chicago, is often the big picture against which my characters move, against which my characters go about their business, and often their business is creativity: making music, or writing, or—I often write about people who are good at something, and I'm interested in how they got to be good at something, and how that something they do expresses the conditions in which its made, and those conditions are often a city that's being transformed in some way. Not always, but often, that's the story.

INSCAPE: You stressed that your focus has shifted more to neighborhoods, I'm guessing as opposed to the city as a whole, but given that your writing is focused so much on these types of neighborhoods that you've always been familiar with, what are the parallels and differences that you've recognized in the other communities that you've experienced, both American and foreign?

CARLO ROTELLA: The very fact of neighborhood itself is a continuity, a human universal, that all cities have neighborhoods. I'm still trying to figure out what it is about this that I find so compelling. The neighborhood is a really strong way in which I organize

my experience in the world, so I'm interested how neighborhoods affect other people. For instance, I did a piece on a country musician, Kacey Musgraves. It was really a piece about the music industry, the changing nature of the country audience, and how this woman was trying to thread this needle, introducing change into country music but also being this really big star. Not a marginal or alternative star, but a really big star. But really what that meant was that I had to go Nashville and take a look at and move in the incredibly developed world of music in Nashville. It's very different from, say, the world of blues in Chicago, but the landmarks are kind of similar. There's a kind of continuity. It wasn't a Nashville story, but moving around Nashville gave me a sense of how the industry worked. Nashville is one of those places that's both a place and an industry, much like Hollywood, and the Nashville that refers to the place was very useful for getting into the music-industry side of Nashville. That was a magazine story that was not primarily interested in cities at all, and yet in my experience of cities, starting with Chicago and the blues business, was my template for navigating. How do clubs work? How do the record labels work? How do people flow in from the hinterlands and plug themselves into the system and move up? The way she plugged herself into the system was very 21st century. She was on a reality show, *Nashville Star*, in which she finished 7th. It felt a lot like the way blues men talked about plugging themselves into the Chicago scene in the 1950s. In that sense, I'm finding a lot of continuity.

INSCAPE: Congruence and not so much difference?

CARLO ROTELLA: There's a larger model operating here. I think of creative people as having an inchoate impulse in them, to make noise or to use language, that has to find shape. The way it often finds shape is by pouring that impulse into the containers that are available to them in the culture. Certain genres, certain styles, but also certain institutions, like a university's creative writing program, or a particular magazine, or a music club, or a record label. That model really travels. There are lots of people with all kinds of inchoate urges, lots of institutions that they can get connected to, and lots of genre and style choices that they can make. But the fact of a creative person's situation doesn't change that much in the different examples that you might encounter. It's just a question of "What was her inchoate impulse, and what were the vessels available in which to pour that impulse?" The Nashville industry gives you these very clear containers. The three minute single has to contain a pick-up truck in it, etc. That's another thing that I find really common. I write a lot just about creative people and how their impulse finds form.

INSCAPE: It seems like your writing could be assigned to a sociology class.

CARLO ROTELLA: I end up reading a lot of social science. I think that they are so good about legwork, about getting out there and finding out what people are up to, hanging around. They do a lot of hanging around, which I think is irreplaceable. They tend not to do much explanation of change over time, which is what historians do. Social scientists fill up my tool kit with the ways to figure out

the structure of a scene, figure out who's doing what, figuring out how it connects to the economy, but you need historical training to then put that in motion, and see how change over time is affecting it. You need the skills that get taught in English and Art History departments to closely interpret the work they do, to say "I see the flow of money, and I see the flow of people, but what about the flow of meaning in the texts that they create?" The thing with American Studies is you need all these different kinds of training to do it right, and you constantly need new training for each project, and I like that.

INSCAPE: I'm intrigued by your writing and explanations of the layering of human interaction, for example the article about the scene around a women's boxing match, what is happening in the scene with all the spectators. I think that's beautiful and one of the most amazing things you can capture in writing, the layered human interaction.

CARLO ROTELLA: That's totally true.

INSCAPE: And how do you feel that analysis of community fits into your more personal essays?

CARLO ROTELLA: Yeah, well I'm still working on that!

INSCAPE: Yeah I think you definitely do it, I just want to know how.

CARLO ROTELLA: I'm still working out the form to connect the personal experience of neighborhood to these larger theories of neighborhood. So far, my presence in my writing tends to be that I'm just a sensibility moving through the world trying to put things together, but if I'm writing about my old neighborhood, growing up, I am, on some level, writing about myself. Not in a memoir, but kind of a first person essay. I'm still fumbling my way towards that form. I don't know what that is, exactly. But to go back to the first part of what you said, the layering is very important. I'm much more comfortable talking about the layering of society and experience than I am about my role in it, and also the layering of me's, layering of selves inside of me that are produced by this historical change over time. But one thing that is pretty clear to me is that people are remarkably adaptable, even wonderfully adaptable, but they're not as flexible as money. So in a place like Chicago, the economy changes faster than the life-ways of the people in that city. Or, in the case of this boxing match, which was in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, the economy of Bethlehem changed faster than people's conception of what a man is and what a woman is and what work is and what leisure is. When people go to the fights, those old layers of what it means to play and to work and to be good with your hands and to be masculine or feminine are still in the air, and the newer ones are also in the air. That's very exciting and compelling. I know how to write about that, I think, but I'm not sure I know how to write about when all those layers are happening inside my sensibility. There's the 1970s me responding to the neighborhood, and there's the me who hasn't lived in that neighborhood for more than 30 years, responding to the neighborhood as I see it.

INSCAPE: I've enjoyed reading the essays that are more about your personal, family life, such as "Ghosts." You wrote about things that were telling about you, but they left so much mystery still. Mystery in a good way. I feel like self, especially in undergraduate work, is such a delicate thing, because people either write too much about themselves, or people avoid it like the plague because they don't want to be too much. I'm wondering—and like you said, it's still something that you're working on—but what do you think for yourself and for your students is the best way, a good way to approach self?

CARLO ROTELLA: When I'm writing and my self or my sensibility is close to the center of what's going on, I'm usually describing things that are happening, so that if you're learning about me, you're learning about the way my eyes work, the way my ears work, and what I'm filtering out of it, as opposed to lots of paragraphs that begin with "I thought this, I felt that." I think that one of the things that you're responding to very astutely is that when I write more personal, more first person, I do more showing and less obvious analyzing. There are fewer topic sentences that advance an interpretation of what happened, and there's more "There was this dog, it lived on the corner. This is what it was like to walk past that dog," instead of me saying "Here's a topic sentence that analyzes that dog and here's a last sentence of the paragraph that delivers the kicker." I tend to show more. That showing is not about me. If you're learning about me, and I think you're always learning about the writer, it's just "This is how I looked, this is how I saw, and this

is what I made of it,” as opposed to “Then I went down the street and did this, and then I had this feeling when I went down the street and did this.”

I also just think that there are writers who live really interesting lives and can write about their lives in interesting ways, but I don't think I'm one of those writers. I don't feel like I've had the kind of experiences that need to be recorded. Whereas, I do think that I see things that other people do or have done, or bits of landscape, or juxtapositions in city life that I think are worth recording. And so that's the trick: write a first person essay that is not a memoir. I know I don't want it to be a memoir, but knowing what you don't want it to be isn't the same as being able to write.

INSCAPE: What do you teach at Boston College, generally American Studies or English classes?

CARLO ROTELLA: I teach classes on the critical side, that are more like English classes. I teach this class on the City in Literature and Film, and then I also teach straight writing workshops. I teach a course every year called Writing for Magazines, and part of the point of that course is that you don't get to write about yourself. We remove that first person prompt. You have to find out what other people are up to and write about that, unless you're already famous, which none of us in that room is. Nobody wants to hear about your life, so we set aside that first person question, or that personal essay question, and we're thinking about the profile and other features, reviews. That doesn't mean we don't use the first

person, but we're not writing memoirs, because magazines don't run memoirs unless you've already won the Pulitzer Prize. They don't really care about your individual experience.

INSCAPE: First off, in light of what you're saying, I love the line "dogs and people wanting what they want."

CARLO ROTELLA: That is the nugget!

INSCAPE: It recognizes it in a way that people can understand, but doesn't oblige them to indulge in themselves.

CARLO ROTELLA: That's very well put, that's the ambition. Essay writing is a lot like short story writing. The great short story writer Stuart Dybek just gave a talk at BC this week, and he was talking about the different kinds of endings short stories can have, saying, "Well, they can have a punch line, you can have a realization, and epiphany," and essays are like that, too. That one's kind of a realization essay, but I didn't want to lean too hard on the realization. I did want a slow building awareness in the reader to finally find expression somewhere of dogs and people wanting what they want. Those who have less want more and those who have more want to keep it. That's the end of the short story realization. That's the climax of what is actually an analytical point. If you look at these episodes that I've just described, this is the main idea that comes out of them, but it's not "Thus we see, here's the main idea." I feel like you do owe it to the reader to give them at least a scaffolding on which to build that realization, and not leave it totally up to the reader, not to just say, "Hey. Decide what you want discuss."

INSCAPE: That's excellent advice. What is some writing advice that you have received that has shaped you?

CARLO ROTELLA: That's a good question. It comes in the weirdest forms and from the strangest directions, and I didn't often recognize it at the time. I got my Ph.D. in American Studies, and writing was not really the focus. It was much more the content of the work, and at one point, I was talking to my dissertation adviser, a guy with no ambitions to do any kind of nonfiction writing other than scholarly work, but I was saying "Well, how am I going to do what I want to do?" and he just said "You can tell a story!" And that turned out to be the thing I needed to hear, it didn't have to be just an analysis. So sometimes it's just like that. Sometimes it's something you read. I love reading writers on writing, so Raymond Chandler is one I think about, his advice: "Just write scenes that work." Even when I'm writing scholarly work, a piece of criticism, I think of the analytical equivalent of just write scenes that work. Write the bits and chunks of it that you can write, and then later, worry about how they fit together. Write some piece of it you can write. So there's practical advice like that. But I think the main thing, and it's come from a lot of different people, is to not think of the writing and the legwork as separate. The writing generates the research agenda, and the research agenda generates your ability to know what to cut and what to keep. Instead of thinking, "I'm going to do all my research, all my reporting, and then I'm going to write it up," I think "I am now embarking on an intertwined process of writing and gathering more evidence, and it's going to go back and forth, and I'm going to write and fail, and wherever I fail, that will tell me

what evidence I need to gather, and I'm going to gather evidence, and the more I gather, the more sure I'm going to be about what the point is, and the surer I am about the point, the more I can cut and revise and make my writing lean," and I've banished the idea that there's a research phase and a writing and moved to a "There's a dialectical relationship between them." You need to keep that in play all the way through.

INSCAPE: What is something that you see in undergraduate writing that generally impedes them from fulfilling a purpose in a productive manner in their writing?

CARLO ROTELLA: Well, I read a lot of undergraduate writing that I really like, that I'm impressed by. Students are very professional these days, the ones that want to be writers say, "I've got my blog going, and I'm already freelancing for this magazine." They're very engaged in the world of writing, which I think is great. I guess if I were to say "What do I frequently see that's holding people back," I'd say there's a couple things. One is an unwillingness to do legwork. Sometimes I feel like "If you would leave the house, this would be better. This feels like you wrote down everything you could gather by googling, or you're still focusing on yourself in a way that it might be better to go find out what other people were up to in the world." So that's one, it's just an unwillingness to leave the house and do the work. And it's not just students. People in general these days, especially for technological reasons, are just less and less willing to get out there and use up shoe leather. Another thing holding them back is a dutiful voice that—this is more true the

academic side—that students think I want to hear, this elevated diction of “Throughout all time, man has struggled to. ...” I’m not telling them to write like that, but I do think you need to invent the voice and the style of the work to match what you’re trying to talk about. You should try out different stylistic approaches and voices and don’t be afraid to imitate. If it’s for school, as opposed to writing for a magazine, and you say “Well you know what, I’m going to go check out this band that’s playing downtown, and I’m going to cover it the way Tom Wolfe would cover it, and then when I’ve done that, I’m going to write it up the way Joan Didion would write it up, and let’s see what the relationship is between the two.” That’s a perfectly legitimate exercise to do, just to fool around with voice and be aware of it, as opposed to a general “this is how smart people talk” voice. So there’s the legwork question, and the question of voice, or the two.

Look, I sat down to write a hundred times in my early twenties and didn’t write one word, so I’m the worst kind of zealot. I’m a convert. I had to go to graduate school in order to have something to write. Let’s start with the fact that I’m impressed that they’re writing anything at all, because I didn’t until much further along.

INSCAPE: In your writing, you show how different generations add a layer to the community. What distinguishes this generation?

CARLO ROTELLA: There’s a couple things about it. One is that this is obviously a club that the 18-year-old me would not have been invited to join. I would not have gotten into BC. These are people who

aced adolescence. I'm sure it's true here, and its true lots of places, that these are people who nailed adolescence in a way that is now necessary, and which I did not do. They are professional students in a way that I wasn't. The other thing that I think is true of this layer is that they're coming of age in a time when the middle class is hollowing out, and it's much more a county of haves and have-nots, and there's a general feeling that the aperture that lets you into the haves is narrowing. They are under a lot more felt pressure to do something great and get up over the top into the category of the haves. When I went to college, everyone expected us to be better than our parents. The students I teach would like it if they could get back to where their parents are. That is a really big change in outlook, in expectation, in what's possible. I think that they're under a lot more self-imposed pressure to make it. And they have also done a much better job of making it, just to get into college, than I ever had to do. It was fairly easy to get into college when I went, I went to Wesleyan, and it was pretty much understood that when I left there, I could just go get a job making money. The real question was, are you going to accept that job making money, or are you going to do something bohemian and weird. Now, there is what I call the mandatory bohemain phase that everyone has to go through, like you're going to be an unpaid intern until you're 30. We don't have a job for you, there's no job security, no benefits, and I think that the knowledge that that's coming trickles down into the classroom. It makes my students professionally much more hungry, but also much more aware that they can mess this up.

INSCAPE: So last question. *Inscape* is our literary journal, and we talk about what the purpose of a literary journal is. What would you say is something that is essential for both selecting submissions for a journal and helping in the revision of such pieces?

CARLO ROTELLA: That's a hard question to answer. The doing it well is really the point of it. I think the most important way that you learn is by making other people's work better, which is also the premise of a writing workshop. You become a better editor and that makes you a better writer. The whole idea that it's an enterprise, that it's an undertaking, that there are issues that must be put out, there are people that submit the work, and you see the work, and you have to decide "Does it fit with our mission, does it fit what we want to do? How could this work be better?" that whole process of applying your analytical powers to another's work is how you hone the ability to do this with your own work. I think it's nearly impossible to do that with your own work just out of the gate, from scratch. It's very hard to ask someone who's just getting started as a writer to say, "Okay, here's your work, this is as good as you can make it, now make it better." But you can do that with other's people's work. What is the intention of this work? How can I help it meet its intention? And the more you do that, the more that becomes part of your writing process. Even if your motives are selfish, the idea of trying to put out the best issue you can of a literary journal is essential cross-training for you sitting there with your own work and thinking, "Is this good, how can it be better?"