**Interview with Trish Roberts-Miller**

**(transcript by Brandon Nguyen)**

ALICE: Hello, and welcome to *How We Write*. This is Alice Batt, and I'm here with Trish Roberts-Miller, professor of rhetoric and writing at the University of Texas at Austin. She is also the Director of the Writing Center at the University of Texas at Austin. And in terms of full disclosure, I should mention she’s my boss [shared laughter]. But this interview was my idea, not hers, because she does research that is valuable right now and I have questions for her. So...hi, Trish!

TRISH: Hi!

ALICE: I would love for you to tell us a little bit about your work overall. We're going to segue from that to talking about your most recent project, which is demagoguery.

[00:00:41]

TRISH: OK. Well, most people in rhetoric are really interested in times that people gave speeches or wrote text or something that persuaded people to do great and wonderful things. But I have long been very interested in times that people used rhetoric to talk themselves into disastrously bad decisions. [laughter] And so... and especially decisions that they actually had all the information that they needed to come to better ones. So things like Athenians’ decision to invade Sicily--er, I mean, Syracuse; their decision to engage in genocide; the U.S. commitment to slavery; Puritans’ decision to hang Quakers; various decisions made during World War One; and so on and so forth, so--.

ALICE: Trish, you're right: those sound like really bad decisions, and I'm wondering why are you interested in historically bad decisions.

[00:01:34]

TRISH: [laughs] Well, obviously, because I think we learn from the past, right? And because you can see what the outcome was. So I'm interested in these times that communities made decisions they later regretted. So these aren't times that you go back and you can say, “Oh, they didn't have the information that they needed” or “This is just *my* judgment that they made a bad decision.” But actually these are communities that later went “Yowza! That was not a good decision,” and not necessarily with new information is what's so interesting about it too. So, um, and I think that people can hear it about the past in a way that it's harder for them to hear it about the present. And...but also the way that we talk about the past obviously influences the ways that we make decisions right now.

So, for instance, classic example of demagoguery would be Hitler. And one of the reasons that Hitler was so persuasive to people is, in the first place, he wasn’t--it wasn't just Hitler. The stuff that he was saying, everybody was saying. Lots of people--not everybody, but lots of people were saying it; there were lots of media outlets that were saying this. There were, um, you know you could hear a lot of the same stuff in sermons or by theologians, especially about the anti-Semitism. And so the fact that it's widespread. Another, though, was that it was his narrative of the past. So his argument and the argument made in a lot of these outlets was that Germany was not at fault for World War One and in fact everything they’d done was right, that Germany was entitled to European hegemony, that it was about to win the war and was done in by a stab in the back by the liberal media, and that Germany's only problem was it was undermined by socialists, and that socialists and communists are the same and they're all Jews. And so because that was the history that people told, it made it seem as though this person who was going to be very authoritarian and decisive and anti-parliamentarian and anti-socialist and anti-Bolshevik would be a good person to put trust in. And that even though he was going to redo the mistakes that actually did lead to World War I, because that's not the story they told about World War 1, they didn't see repeating them as mistakes. They saw them as “This time we're going to get it right.” So does that make sense? It's the sort of... the story that we tell about our past has so much influence on the decisions we make in the moment.

[00:04:17]

ALICE: I'm aware that I interrupted you to ask why you were interested in historically bad decisions, but what else are you going to tell us about them?

TRISH: Specifically it was while I was working on the arguments people made for slavery that I realized that these--all these cases had certain things in common. And one of them was they didn't argue policy. They were always arguing about a policy or a set of policies, but that isn't what they really argued about. Instead they argued *identity*. They argued... they divided the world into us versus them and then argued about who was us and who was them and exactly what we should do to them.

ALICE: Trish, just to give our listeners an idea of the scope you bring to this to your work. can you tell us about other books you've written and what they've been about? And also, you know, for college students and people who might soon become UT college students, maybe tell us a bit about the courses you teach.

[00:05:13]

TRISH: My fascination is with train wrecks. And it started really with my dissertation which was about John Muir--very famous at the time that he was trying to stop the damming and flooding of the Hetch Hetchy Valley, which is in Yosemite National Park. And it should have been low-and-slow-over-the-plate for him to do that because it was in a national park, it was more expensive than other possible sources of water, it wasn't San Francisco's only option, and yet he failed. And so I was really interested in why he was unable to persuade people, and what was by all accounts--I mean, you know, if you look at it--was a worse argument, how that managed to win.

And then after that I got very interested in the American Puritans, and they made some really bad decisions like hanging Quakers. They’re pacifists, right? These are not threats. And of course the Salem witch trials and such. And so even though that book was more about other things, that intrigued me about them, and then I ended up--and then I did a book on models of democracy and implications for teaching argument. And, in that book, came down really hard on that what's called agonistic argument, which is a way of teaching argument that people used to do in the 19th century, and a lot of scholars, me included, said we should never have abandoned that. But a graduate student in a class I was teaching said, “If that was so much better, why was the slavery debate so bad?” So I ended up looking at the slavery debate and particularly got interested in the arguments for slavery, because they were really bad arguments. Really bad. But people found them persuasive, and smart people were citing these arguments. So yeah, so that was another one. So it just comes out of these times of being really interested that--that people, as I said, talked themselves into bad decisions.

So I teach a course on arguing about war how people deliberate to go to war, deliberate within war, deliberate about..evenstrategies;a book on--a class on demagoguery; a class on rhetoric and racism--so why it is that people can be racist, but good ways to argue about whether something's racist. This year I'm teaching a course on Hitler. I also teach a course on history of public argument about different models of public argument. So I think those are mainly the ones.

[00:07:45]

ALICE: Well, that brings me...you published a recent book--it's your first trade book--called *Demagoguery and Democracy,* which has been doing pretty well, it seems, right? And there's a paragraph in here where you ask us to think a little differently about demagoguery. I want to read it and then get your thoughts on it:

Conventionally demagoguery is about passion, emotionalism, populism, and pandering to crowds. Thinking about demagoguery that way makes it likely that we won't notice when we are persuaded by and promoting demagoguery because it gives us criteria that enables us to see only their demagoguery. For the term demagoguery to be a useful one, it has to involve criteria that can be applied to us and them.

And that seems to be where you were leading?

TRISH: Yes.

ALICE: So tell me more.

[00:08:31]

TRISH: Well again, you know, people making bad decisions never think they're making bad decisions. They don't get up in the morning and say “Let's make a bad policy decision today.” [muffled laughter] And often they're very, very smart people. So why don't smart people see that they're doing this? And it's because--and there are all sorts of reasons, but it really comes down to thinking that--well, for one thing, thinking that a bad decision screams “bad decision,” but also thinking that as long as you aren’t emotional, as long as you aren't irrational and as long as you have evidence to support your point of view, then what you're doing is the right thing, but that's not actually how it works. Also, what I find interesting is that when communities have made these decisions and they begin to get feedback that it was the wrong decision, they typically recommit with greater will to the same initial bad policy. And--

[00:09:26]

ALICE: Can you give an example?

TRISH: Well, so, for instance, when--well, here's a classic bad decision: So Hitler decides to throw everything at Stalingrad just as much as he possibly can. He decides not to allow a retreat from there, and then Paulus gets encircled. And he still won't order a retreat even though his failure to order a retreat previously is precisely what created this situation. So that's...that's a perfect example of it. And he didn't think that he was wrong because he could point to decisions he'd made in the past that were right so he thought of himself as a person who made good decisions and therefore couldn't admit that he'd made a bad decision. The forces for slavery in the United States were--so they got lots of feedback that they were making bad decisions, in terms of they knew all the economic consequences of slavery as far as how problematic it was for the long term. They knew the costs thatit had in terms of surveillance, in terms of their own ethical well-being, all sorts of things, but they kept enacting fiercer and fiercer laws controlling both slaves and free African-Americans, and so they kept recommitting to slavery with more extreme policies and more extreme policies, preventing even the criticism of slavery.

[00:10:50]

ALICE: What does the rhetoric around this look like? I'm seeing sort of a sketch of what happens, but what are the features? Are there particular features associated with demagoguery?

TRISH: Yes. So one is that everything gets divided into us and them. And that's just the first move. And so sometimes people will think that they're not engaged in demagoguery because they'll make a move of, like, “Well, both sides are just as bad,” but that's still accepting that basic demagogic premise that there are two sides.

ALICE: Mmhm.

TRISH: There aren’t two sides. There are 10 sides or 20 sides or, you know, it's not--that's not how politics works, and it's not about sides, it's about policies. So, the other thing that “both sides are just as bad” does is it grants the demagogue premise that the purpose of political discourse is to determine which group is better. That’s not the question! It’s “Who has better policies?”

ALICE: Mmhm.

TRISH: It’s which policies are better regardless of who promotes them.

ALICE: Right.

TRISH: So that's one of the characteristics, is that it shifts to identity, it shifts into binaries, it associates good things with the ingroup and bad things with the outgroup and engages in a lot of what's called motivism.

So motivism is the rhetorical fallacy actually where you dismiss somebody's argument-- you don't even engage it, you just dismiss it completely on the grounds that you know that they have bad motives for making it. And it's a fallacy because a person might have bad motives and still have a good argument and still have a good policy. And so you haven't really engaged in an argument. You've just found an excuse for yourself not to. Another characteristic it tends to have is it silences ingroup criticism. The only ingroup criticism the demagoguery allows is criticizing the ingroup for not being strong enough, committed enough, loyal enough. And that's one of the ways that you end up with these more extreme policies. And so if somebody, if an ingroup member, criticizes the leader of the group or says we're headed in a bad direction or “we're getting too extreme,” that person is dismissed as not really “A”--and, you know, not really loyal. And that's a really, really common characteristic that this sort of stuff has.

[00:12:55]

ALICE: So I know you teach a course on Hitler.

TRISH: Yeah.

ALICE: So can you talk about times in Hitler's regime where this happened?

[00:13:02]

TRISH: Well, yeah, I mean, if you so much as told a joke about Hitler, then you would--you could find the Gestapo knocking on your door, despite the fact that people did tell jokes and they were actually kind of funny. [Laughter] But yeah, you just--you were not allowed to criticize him at all, and they made it pretty extreme in terms of you could actually end up in jail. But also if as a general you disagreed with him, you could find yourself fired. But--so just disagreement was not permitted.

ALICE: Mhmm. Can you tell us a little bit about the research you drew from when you were writing *Demagoguery & Democracy*?

[00:13:39]

TRISH: I was, at that point, also writing a scholarly version of the same argument. And so a lot of it came from that, but a lot of it came from--yeah, you know, work that I've been doing for a while, so...Actually, I'm not a classicist, but I find the Peloponnesian War and the decisions that were made in the Peloponnesian War to be really good examples of demagoguery. And in fact, the term *demagogue* is from the Greek, and there are people, speakers in Thucydides *History in the Peloponnesian War* that are called demagogues. And so, that was some of it, but then in the book, I end up talking a bunch about arguments during a hearing--a set of hearings--regarding the possible internment or mass imprisonment of Japanese Americans during World War II. And I had--there's a chapter in the scholarly book on that same issue. But I think it's a really good example because the person I tend--I focus on is Earl Warren, who is attorney general of California--really good man. Really good man. He was the Warren Court. You know, he was the one who did Brown versus Board of Education. And so I thought it was a great example--and a smart man, you know?-- a great example of how it is that, when you're in a moment where demagoguery is the dominant way not just of arguing, but of actually thinking about politics, that you can end up a good person arguing for a really bad policy.

ALICE: Any other characteristics? You've talked about binaries, ingroup/outgroup, inability of the system to handle criticism.

[00:15:24]

TRISH: Well, I think probably the most important is that people tend to argue by enthymeme. I mean Aristotle figured that out. So we'll say something like, you know, “Bunnies are cute because they're fluffy.”

ALICE: Ah, for those who have not taken rhetoric courses, what is an enthymeme?

TRISH: [laughs] All right, so, what Aristotle noticed (and he was trained by Plato--in fact, he taught great rhetoric in Plato's Academy among other things, but...) Plato and Socrates really liked syllogisms, and so syllogisms are that thing of “All men are mortal; Socrates is a man; Therefore Socrates is mortal.” And they seem to think that if we just got our syllogisms right, then we would have perfect reasoning. And what Aristotle noticed is that when people argue in public, they don't make explicit that major premise. You don't say “All men are mortal. Socrates is a man, so Socrates must be mortal.” Instead, you say “well he's got to be mortal because he’s human!” And that's an enthymeme. So an enthymeme is just a compressed syllogism.

ALICE: Mhmm.

TRISH: And enthymemes have a major premise. If they're logical, there's a major premise behind them. So in that case it's that cute things...that fuzzy things or furry things are cute. So if your argument is logical, then you will be consistent on that major premise. That's actually what matters, not whether you have data, not whether you are emotional, but those major premises and whether you're consistent on them, and in demagoguery people aren't. So tt's sometimes called post hoc reasoning in that what people will do is...they want to claim, like, you know, “Chester Burnett is the best president ever.” And then they'll find evidence to support that. But even if that evidence actually supports Hubert Sumlin, their enemy [laughter]--well, then when you bring it up about Hubert Sumlin, that it applies to him too, they'll say “No, but it doesn't--it doesn't matter there.” That's a sign that they don't actually have a logical argument. They’re just supporting the ingroup.

ALICE: Right, okay. So the work you do requires you to look in a lot of dark corners of the Internet. What's that like?

TRISH: It's really weird.

ALICE: [laughs] What are some of the scarier places you’ve investigated?

[00:17:31]

TRISH: Well, it's very strange to discover...so it's one of the things that makes the whole Left-Right break down for you, because you get off and you start corners and find flat Earth people and globalis--anti-globalist people, and they don't really fit into left or right and they can be pretty scary. So one of the things you discover is that people aren't good at logical reasoning. So if for instance, you say something like “Oh, Chester Burnett is a great president because he's really nice to dogs,” and I say “Well, Hitler was nice to dogs,” you're likely to respond with “Chester Burnett isn't Hitler.” [laughter] I'm not saying Chester Burnett is Hitler. I'm saying that your argument isn't logical, and that’s what you should recognise once you reject the major premise. So when you get off in the dark corners, they never get that argument. People do not understand the concept of major premises.

ALICE: Interesting.

TRISH: If you say “That applies to the other side,” they'll say “No it doesn't, because it's not true for the other side.” So that's really interesting. It's also really interesting to learn-- and depressing to learn--that things like the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* are still out there cited as an actual source.

ALICE: You're going to have to fill me in here.

TRISH: So *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is this forgery done under a czar in the late 19th century that purports to be a bunch of Jews sitting around describing their world domination and thisworld wide conspiracy,which--I mean, one of the things about conspiracy theories is it presumes that these people are simultaneously stupid and brilliant [laughter], because if you did have a worldwide conspiracy, you wouldn't sit around and talk about it and have the notes taken.

ALICE: Yeah, exactly.

TRISH: But anyway, so yeah, and it's been exposed a million times as a stupid forgery, but it was tremendously important for Henry Ford who actually had a version published in English in America and for Nazis and again current anti-Semitic rhetoric. It's still floating around there. So that's depressing. Yeah, and so I think something that's been surprising and weird is the extent to which those sort of--like, there's still is anti-Semitism. Another thing that's really interesting for me is people will link stuff. They'll have links in Facebook or something like that or these various places, and if you click on a link, it doesn't actually say what they say. So a lot of these kinds of ideologies get promoted by people who aren't even checking their own evidence to the extent of clicking on the link they're sharing.

ALICE: Wow. Wow. So, I've heard you say, in the past, that once a demagogue or once the demagoguery in a system starts ratcheting up, it needs to keep going that way. And I'm wondering if you can put that in context around that and explain it.

[00:20:22]

TRISH: Yeah, so demagoguery has a kind of logic to it, and what happens is you have a culture in which people are--the whole point of political public discourse is for people to demonstrate their loyalty to the group and, of course, one of the ways you do that is by demonstrating that you’re purely committed to the most ridiculous things that someone might say in favor of the ingroup. So it's sort of like you know, guys who are shirtless supporting their team in football in January in Wisconsin.

ALICE: [laughter] Right!

TRISH: That's true loyalty.

[00:20:59]

So when you get those circumstances, the fact that a claim is completely irrational without any useful logical support is--becomes a virtue. And so fanaticism and your fanatical belief in something becomes a virtue. Well, that means it's very hard, then, to stop demagoguery and to stop the sort of force that is headed out into, because it's rejecting the very notion of logical critique. So that's one way that it goes. Another is that you get people who will say things that are intended as what people sometimes call a performative. So, if I say “I'll die for Chester Burnett!” I don't literally mean that. And you know I don't literally mean that but by saying that, by being so hyperbolic, I'm showing I'm really committed. Well, I might say something like, you know, “Well, let's invade Arizona! We’ll go to war against Arizona!”, and that's a stupid comment, and you know that. But if I've said that publicly and I'm running for office, now my opposition has to say it, to show they are just as committed. And so then you can also get this sort of one-upsmanship in terms of our commitment that is demonstrated by our willingness to talk about invading Arizona. And so that's how you end up invading Arizona when no one ever actually--

ALICE: --ever wanted to in the first place [laughs].

TRISH: Yeah. But I can't suddenly at a certain point say “I was just kidding.”

ALICE: Yeah.

TRISH: “I just wanted to get elected. I didn't actually mean that.”

ALICE: So these things that people say, they don't necessarily mean, have me thinking that a lot of us are going home at the holidays. This is our December issue. So I feel like I need to ask you, when we go home to people who think very differently than we do, so we're in different in-groups, right?

TRISH: Yeah.

ALICE: What are the most productive, least painful ways to handle politics when they come up at Christmas or Hanukkah or whatever else you're going home for?

[00:23:08]

TRISH: I think ground rules can be a really useful strategy. I think people didn't--it used to be that you didn't talk about politics or religion at the table.

ALICE (finishing Trish’s sentence with her): At the table, right.

TRISH: You just didn't. And there was a reason people had that rule.

ALICE: Because if someone has worked hard to make dinner, you want them to enjoy dinner.

TRISH: Right! So I think that one is just to say “Let's not talk politics.” I think, unfortunately, especially for younger people, it means that they have to enforce that in some way and it can be sort of--sort of ugly. But I think another possibility is--and there are various advice columns, I really love where they talk about this--saying “I really don't want to talk about that. I don't want to talk about that and I don't want to talk about politics. This pie is *really* good!”

ALICE: “Let's talk about things that matter at the table, at the moment.”

[00:23:57]

TRISH: And so it's not just saying, “I don't want to talk about this,” but introducing a new topic that is likely to get, you know, other people at the table to say “Is this grandma’s recipe? I don't think this is grandma's recipe!” And so that's one. And I think also just refusing to respond can be one. I think sometimes, too,responding in what can appear to be a digressive way, but I think sometimes just telling stories can be really really helpful.

ALICE: Oh! Like what?

TRISH: So for instance when somebody says “Muslims are evil!” or something, to say “You know, our next door neighbors are Muslim, and they were so nice when Johnny broke his leg and they brought over lots of food,” and then not engage but just tell stories.

ALICE: Just counter stories, counter narratives. I'm thinking about the fact that you are easily one of the most productive people I know when it comes to scholarship, and that means you spend a lot of time in these nasty rat holes or whatever we're calling them…foxholes, corners of the Internet. So how do you take care of yourself when you're looking at all that nasty stuff all the time?

TRISH: Yeah, it's kind of hard, and I'll do it in phases. So I'll do two weeks of wiki wars or something in the summer--

ALICE: Wiki wars? You’re gonna have to explain what that is.

[00:25:22]

TRISH: So white supremacists have their nasty little paws all over Wikipedia, and so every once and a while I’ll go in and--with certain of the pages--and engage in a fight with somebody about one of these pages. I haven't actually done that in a couple of years but it's--and I always win in the short term, but I always lose in the long run.

ALICE: Now, what do you mean by win and lose in this case?

TRISH: I get the page changed.

Alice: OK, so you change what they’ve actually said.

TRISH: I change and then they'll change it back and I change it and I end up with getting an admin involved and pointing out that the other person is a white supremacist and there! So yeah, it's time consuming.

ALICE: You lose in the long term because it’s so time consuming or...?

TRISH: Because, yeah, because they're living in their dad's basement. [Laughter] And I have a job so they're eventually, they're going to win. For one thing, when I'm having fun stuff, I read really crummy mystery novels and like mindless sensational novels from the 19th century. I read just absolute fluff, a lot of P.G. Wodehouse, just for fluff. And then walk my dogs a lot.

ALICE: And you post great animal pictures on the internet. “Things--What things did Ella eat today?”

[00:26:37]

TRISH: I think it's oddly enough having done the historical work makes me kind of hopeful too, because when it is depressing I think however depressing it is for us right now, it would have been worse for people trying to do civil rights in 1962, or, you know, people trying to draw attention to the danger of the Nazis in 1935 or, you know, trying to oppose slavery or something.

ALICE: What makes it easier for us?

TRISH: Because we do have access to more resources at this point. At least we are not actually in physical danger. And the numbers are better. You know, the numbers of people who were, say, opposed to slavery up until maybe 1850 were pretty low.

ALICE: I’ve got two things on my mind. One is about you as a writer, your process. And I've heard you talk about this in a number of different situations in front of students, but it’d be nice to hear sort of...what does your process look like?

I'm sitting in front of Trish’s white board which is colored...It's covered with stickies in lots of different colors and I know that all of these stickies are categorized by color and there are quite a few of them. So I'm going to just start with how you keep yourself organized.

TRISH: I don’t! [laughter] A friend once described me as the most organized disorganized person she knew. But yeah, so writing is--I'm a bad writer.

ALICE: Which means what to you?

[00:28:20]

TRISH: My first drafts are terrible. I am not one of those people who easily comes up with the right word or the right way of wording something. And so, I think that's actually why I'm a good writing teacher, is that I'm really aware of how you take something bad and get it better and what are the processes that you engage in. So I'm very much in the realm of “the first draft is terrible,” and I've written a ton of stuff that never went anywhere even, you know that seemed like a good idea until you start writing it and then it just sort of doesn't work. And then what I do is, if at all possible, try to get some distance from it in terms of days or a week or something and then come back and I typically print it up because I think there's something about seeing it in print that makes editing easier.

And then I just critique it. So I'll just go through and write notes in the margin and questions to myself and I can be pretty harsh on myself and like “Why would anyone care about this?” or something. And then go back through and will often color code those, or in the first time through will color code them, so some things will be comments about sentence level clarity, others will be “I think I need more research on this,” others will be “I need to rewrite this section.” And then also just noting the spelling errors and grammatical errors and stylistic problems. Then, I batch them and first go back and try to do the research ones, so I do more research and rewrite that, and then a lot of times those--the other issues just disappear, because the language is gone. So the difference between a first draft and a final one is just about everything. So for the demagoguery book, I rewrote it from scratch three times.

ALICE: Wow.

TRISH: And then substantially rewrote it like four times.

[00:30:13]

ALICE: This is all in a couple of months?

TRISH: No, no, no. So I started it in August of 2016 and finished in March of 2017.

ALICE: That still feels like a couple of months! [laughter] OK....

TRISH: I had a really good editor too--

ALICE: Okay, that’s good too!

TRISH: He was really good about saying “Make, make these changes.” Yeah, I think it's hard and--I think when you're writing--so, you know, as we always say to students, you have to give yourself permission to just unload onto a page all of your thinking, and that's what “writing to learn” means, that you're learning what you think by it, and sometimes things sound so smart in your head. They sound so smart when I'm walking the dogs and thinking about something, or they sound so smart in the shower, and then you sit down to write them and you're like “How did I-- there's no connection between these two ideas that I could possibly find.” So I think there's also a lot of self forgiveness...but every time I start a book, I don't know how far into it, a certain distance into it, and I find myself thinking “I can't write a book. I don’t know how to write a book! I don't know enough to write a book!”

ALICE: How many books other than the demagoguery book do you have published?

TRISH: I think, like, 4.

ALICE: Yeah, I think “like, 4” as well. OK, so take note audience: Even someone who's got four, now five books published can feel like a fraud.

TRISH: Yeah! It’s just amazing. And actually that's what I have to do, is say “I can do this because I did it.” And this is part of it, this part where you just think “This is too big a project for me this is too hard I can't possibly do it,” it's just...it's part of the process.

[00:31:48]

ALICE: So what do you do when you're in that place? You're like “I can't do this.”

TRISH:I take the dogs on a walk. Yeah, I really do have to remind myself of it and it's because--I mean, you get to that point because you're thinking about the whole project-- this whole big book, the final version of it--when what you need to be thinking about is the 50 pages you've got so far and what they mean. And so some of the projects I've done, an early version of it was almost like a sketch. So, what I thought was the first third of a book turned out to be the whole book, but I had to fill it in, you know? And then there are other books where what I thought was going to be one tiny part of the book because it was--so I was going to do the slavery book, I was going to do the two chapters on pro slavery, two chapters on antislavery, and one chapter on the people who mediated.

ALICE: Which sounds really organized.

TRISH: Yeah, and then it ended up being a book about the proslavery argument between 1830 and, like, 1835.

ALICE: Oh, wow.

TRISH: So yeah. You also, when you're in the first year or so--at least in academic writing, writing a book--you don't really know what the final version is going to be like. And that moment of panic comes because of not knowing that, but you kind of have to trust the process that something will happen.

[00:33:12]

ALICE: And there are so many places that ask you to know or to pretend that you know-- so the scholarship application, the application for time off, etc., etc., etc.

TRISH: And the people I know who are good at it, lie.

ALICE: Really?

TRISH: Yeah, they just lie.

ALICE: So back over to demagoguery. If a culture is steeped in it, as some people would argue that ours is right now, what's the way out?

TRISH: So demagoguery is like an infection that can't stand sunlight.

ALICE: Hmm.

[00:33:46]

TRISH: So one of the things demagoguery does is it engages in a lot of what's called “inoculation,” and inoculation is when you say, “You don't need to listen to the opposition. Here's what they're going to tell you,” and then you actually give them the weak version of that argument. But you say all the time “Don't listen to them, you don't need to listen to them. You don't need to listen.” So demagoguery spends as much time and energy telling people what to think as what not to listen to. So that's one way that you know that you're engaged in demagoguery. Demagoguery will also pretend to present the opposition point of view without inoculation but also sometimes, they'll get what appear to be, you know, they'll have an argument both sides, so they'll have someone representing this side and someone representing that side arguing, but in fact the person representing the other side is a stooge

ALICE: Straw man.

TRISH: Yeah! A complete straw man! And the reason that demagogues make such a big deal about “Don't listen to them. Rely on our representation of them” is it couldn't withstand your going to those sources, that if you actually--if you spent a lot of time hearing how terrible Hubert Sumlin supporters are--

ALICE: Hubert’s your dog, right?

[00:34:55] Yes, I had two dogs, and Hubert is one of them, and I always use them as examples because otherwise people get so attached to the content that--

ALICE: That they can’t hear the theory. Yeah.

TRISH: So, you know, there's all this “Hubert Sumlin, they believe this and they believe that,” if that's true, then you could go to Hubert Sumlin sources and see that very easily. And you can't in fact. And that's how demagoguery works, so, I mean..and if you really want to get ugly at Christmas dinner--

ALICE: [pained sound and laughter]

TRISH: --then that's all you do.

ALICE: Is that...point to the sources over and over again and you like pull them up online--

TRISH: Or you say “You show me your source. Show me the liberals who are saying this.” Because that was the other thing that I found, is that in looking--that's the important thing about clicking on links and the links actually didn't say what they claimed to say. Sometimes the links were ads. Sometimes the links did have a headline but the article was completely unrelated. Sometimes article’s related but it didn't actually show it. I won’t even give examples. But anyway. So sometimes just asking for “Ok, fine show me the source,” that says that.

People who are extremist in their politics tend to think in terms of black and white. And they actually appear to hear and perceive in black and white. So if you say something like “You know, most bunnies are fluffy,” they really will believe that you said “*All* bunnies are *always* fluffy.” And so if you say something like “I don't think all bunnies are cute,” they're going to hear you say “No bunny is cute,” and cite you that way. Right? So people like that tend to be very drawn to demagoguery. So that's another point: trying to get people to support their sources--I mean to support their claims with primary sources, but also to try to get them to hear that the all-or-nothing is in their head. It's not actually in the arguments that other people are making.

ALICE: Mhmm. Mhmm….Teaching. Teaching has to have something to do with this.

TRISH: Yeah.

ALICE: With fighting the forces of demagoguery.

TRISH: Yeah!

ALICE: What kind of exercises in class help students see how this works?

[00:37:18]

TRISH: So in the demagoguery class, one of the things that students always have to do is they have to find demagoguery in service of a political agenda or policy that they support.

ALICE: Oh! Interesting. Their own in-group is participating in it?

TRISH: Yeah.

ALICE: Very cool.

TRISH: And it's really hard for some students. It's really, really hard.

ALICE: Yeah!

TRISH: And then I try to bring in ingroup demagoguery, too, as examples to show them you can disagree with the way that something is being made-- the way an argument is being made--and still endorse argument. So it's not us versus them. It's actually how we're reasoning. So that's--I think that's one. I also find it really helpful to start with distant historical things so that so that people can-- it's like the Hubert Sumlin versus Chester Burnett, so that they they can hear the forms and think about forms.

ALICE: They're not invested in the content--

TRISH: Yeah, they don't--

ALICE: --so they can just hear how it's working.

TRISH: Yeah, they're not really going to care whether Sparta or Athens wins the Peloponnesian war.

ALICE: Done deal!

TRISH: Yeah.

ALICE: Any tips that you would have for people who want to do this kind of work professionally?

TRISH: Well, the writing world has has gotten more open and more complicated.

ALICE: When you say the writing world, what do you mean?

TRISH: So I mean, like, as far as wanting to be a writer and wanting to write, on the one hand, there aren't clear career paths the way there used to be. You know, it used to be that if you wanted to be a journalist, you got a job at a little bitty newspaper, very local newspaper, and you went to city council meetings and things and flower shows. And that just--those papers don't even exist anymore. So that's not the route that people take. So there's no longer this clear route. On the other hand, a lot of people are getting attention and making a life writing by starting off in fanfiction groups or blog posts or something. So it's also opened. You know, there are people who've had successful book contracts come out of Facebook posts that went viral.

ALICE: Really?

TRISH: Yeah.

ALICE: Wow.

TRISH: Yeah, I think the main thing is everybody says “Just keep writing,” just to write a lot. We don't think about writing the way we do about other arts. So you know, if we hear that a musician takes days and days and days to write a song and fiddles around a lot with it, we don't see that as wasted time. Right?

ALICE: Right.

TRISH: We don't talk about Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks full of sketches of hands in different positions as dead ends [laughter].We don't think that somebody who practices violin even when they're not performing is wasting their time. You know if somebody is going to run a marathon we don't say that the time that they ran--

ALICE: --prepping for it--

TRISH: But suddenly when it comes to writing, we have this weird way of thinking that if you write something that doesn't become part of the published final version, you've wasted your time. And that's--I think that's very damaging. I think that that contributes to people sitting down and trying to write perfect stuff. I think it ignores the history of actual writers. So I think it’s Stephen King who talks about--he had a nail, I think, next to his desk, and he would put rejection slips on it, and it got to the point that there was a pile they couldn't even--

ALICE: All fit on the nail?

TRISH: Yeah! But what he was actually doing was learning to write. He was learning his craft as he was doing that. I think it's John Grisham who...what people think of as his first book is actually his fourth.

ALICE: Wow.

TRISH: And he wrote a book, and I think he asked his wife to read it, and she was like “Ehhh. Love you honey, but--”

ALICE: “But not working!”

TRISH: Yeah! And then finally she was like “This is good.” And I mean, as you know, because you go to some of the same writers conferences and things, that's often the story. That what people think of as a first book is not. It's a third. It's a fourth. And so yeah, writing just-- it takes time, and it takes practice.

ALICE: All right. Well, thank you so much for joining us today.

TRISH: Well, thank you!

ALICE: This was really fun. This is Alice Batt. I'm here with Trish Roberts Miller, talking about demagoguery and also the art of writing.

[00:41:42]

ALICE: *How We Write* is produced by the University Writing Center at the University of Texas at Austin. Our music is by Michelle Solberg, our tech support is by Vince Lozano, and today's episode was edited by Ann Morris. Until next time, keep writing.