

Interviewee: David Blakesley [B]
Interviewer: Brittany Knutson [K]
Transcriber: Elizabeth McGhee Williams
Date: 2 June 2018

Transcript

K: This is Brittany Knutson; I'm here with Dave Blakesley. First question is [papers rustling] when did you first join RSA?

B: Well, it was quite early in my career, and I didn't stay a member for that long. There was no ideological reason for that, but probably membership fees or something like that and being a fairly broke assistant professor. And then four or five years ago, I became a life member and am all in now [K chuckles] but, you know, when you get to be a senior professor you have a little more money. And so that was that, but I was always really kind of closely aligned with the ideas behind RSA through the professors I had who were involved in it and my scholarship and those sorts of things. It wasn't that I started when I was a junior faculty member and then just went all the way through. So, that's that.

K: Did you still attend the conference when you weren't a member?

B: I think I did, yeah, and paid the nonmember fee. It wouldn't have been that expensive to join, but I was a member of probably five or six others, and usually you can only go to a couple a year. But I was also very involved with Computers and Writing, which occurs a week before RSA typically, and so I chaired a couple of those conferences, so that would always interfere. And then I chaired a couple of Burke conferences and always go to those, and those are every three years but about the same time as RSA. And one time I chaired the Burke conference, it conflicted with RSA. [chuckles]

K: Oh, interesting.

B: That was a big problem for both organizations, and we didn't coordinate our calendars. And RSA was in Vegas, and the Burke conference was in New Orleans at the same time. So that was another factor. I was kind of a gregarious scholar, I guess you could say, and other things conflicted. [coughs]

K: Sure. Do you know about what year you joined RSA the first time?

B: Early 1990s, but I can't pin it to a year. I'd have to go back and look at the programs or something. So yeah, I can't pin it to an exact year.

K: Great. How did you learn about the organization?

B: I've been thinking about that as we came to this conference, and I knew I'd be talking to you. I remember the exact moment I learned about it. I was at San Diego State in my

master's program studying rhetoric under Bill Covino, who was a great rhetorician and teacher, and I was doing some research on Kenneth Burke and Aristotle. And I remember walking through the stacks, and I found this bibliography that I think Ross Winterowd had written for maybe one of the newsletters or something, and it looked like a photocopy. It was pretty low quality in terms of printing, but it was high-quality scholarship, and it was about the only thing I could find that helped me with my project, and I saw that it had been done through some mechanism of RSA, and then I kept finding other things like that. So it was through the support of scholarship, I think, that RSA fostered that eventually trickled down to me as a lowly grad student. [laughs]

K: That's a great story, that sort of moment.

B: Yeah, I remember exactly where in the stacks it was and everything.

K: [laughs]

B: And it was photocopy, a really bad photocopy, too. [chuckles] So, yeah.

K: How would you describe the organization when you first joined?

[04:36]

B: [pauses] It seemed, for me as a grad student, that it was a little bit rarefied in the sense that this is where the big scholars went and so not as welcoming to graduate students, but I don't know if that was really true or not. I think it probably wasn't true, but I was just scared. You know, when you go to your first academic conferences and you see people that you've been reading about, it's like going to the Oscars and watching stars walk by all the time, and you don't know what to say to them. And so it was intimidating, more so than a bigger conference like the 4Cs¹ where you can kind of blend in. But I think now RSA has done a great job of bringing graduate students into the conference and mentoring them, and that's evident from the program when you look at it. Clemson has 18 graduate students here presenting, and that's really good. Not that we should professionalize them too early, but, you know, we can welcome them in and mentor them. The Burke conferences do that really well, and some of that may be because people involved with those have been part of RSA too.

K: Interesting.

B: RSA now has the institutes, which are great for graduate students, and they've even opened them up to faculty and professors who have been out there for a while now—because we like to learn too. [laughs] So my impression has changed over the years, and it may be partly RSA and just partly me growing up, I guess.

K: Who are some of the key people you remember meeting or working with during your early years?

¹ Conference on College Composition and Communication.

B: Bill Covino, as I mentioned. I don't know how involved he was with RSA, but I imagine somewhat. But it came to Covino to me from Ross Winterowd. Originally Covino was Winterowd's student at the University of Southern California, and there was a great contingent of rhetoricians that came out of that program. Steven Mailloux is right there.

[both laughing]

Steven Mailloux: Here I am!

B: He was one of them, and I got to meet those people who were students of Ross's, and they were very motivating and great teachers and writers, and I was learning a lot from them. And then when I went to my PhD program it was with Winterowd, so I was kind of second or third generation from that group, and I really liked it. So I would attribute it to Ross primarily. Over time though, I got to meet quite a few other people who were always involved—like Janice Lauer was a colleague of mine when I moved to Purdue. And so she got me more involved and learning about the history of the evolution of the organization. And so it grew over time, but it was through people, not so much the ideas or even rhetoric really, though that's what I loved. It was people like Steven Mailloux who just walked out of the room—

[K, B, and Mailloux laugh]

Steven Mailloux: Bye!

K: It's very interactive!

B: —who are great people and really excited about what rhetoric can teach us, and so that motivated me early.

K: What was RSA doing when you first joined? What were its major projects and goals?

B: I'd be cheating if I answered this 'cause I probably didn't know at the time, but I know now having heard some of the history, and I was on a panel yesterday—a two-part panel with the history of the first 25 years and the second 25 years, so I learned a lot yesterday about that.² [chuckles]

K: [laughs]

² The panels in question are the following: (1) "The RSA Fellows Remember: 50 Years in Retrospect, the First 25 Years," chaired by Richard Leo Enos and also featuring S. Michael Halloran, Kathleen Welch, George Yoos, Janice Lauer Rice, and Victor Vitanza. (2) "The RSA Fellows Remember: 50 Years in Retrospect, the Last 25 Years," chaired by Frederick Antczak and also featuring Lester Olson, David Blakesley, Gerard Hauser, David Zarefsky, Carolyn Miller, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and Jack Selzer. The panels were, respectively, sessions F15 and G15 in the program for the 2018 RSA conference.

B: But I know some of the initiatives to bring in graduate students and mentoring and the development of the institutes—that happened quite late, or maybe more recently than some of the early-day things, but I'm not sure what exactly was happening in the 90s really, so I can't say that very good.

K: It's a hard question to answer as a graduate student, I think. You sort of—you're in it, but you can't quite understand what *it* is.

B: Right.

[09:50]

K: What are your most important or prominent memories related to RSA?

B: A very recent memory, barely 24 hours old.

K: [laughs]

B: I was on the second part of that first 25 years/second 25 years panel, and I sat in the audience for the first part and then on the stage for the second part, and it was bringing me back to my graduate school days in that Michael Halloran was on stage, and I remember my first 4Cs I ever attended in 1987, I chaired a panel with Michael Halloran on it and got to introduce him. And I was scared to *death*—I was remembering that. I was in Atlanta, and Steven Mailloux was in there, and I remember responding to a talk that he had given at University of Southern California, and it was kind of like my first big speech with a big audience, and it went really well. So I was remembering that, and then I was seeing Janice Lauer up there, my former colleague, talk about her history with the organization and thinking, "Wow!" You know, I came from this place where I was learning from these people as a grad student, and suddenly I was their colleague, and then I was on stage with them later thinking that I was an imposter in some ways, but somehow I was there, and it was kind of weird feeling. But it's a good memory, and so it was pretty neat.

K: That's a nice continuation—a coherent story there.

B: Yeah, it was all starting to come together, and then I said, "Oh, now what do I got to do? [laught] What's next?" Yeah, it was neat, and it was neat to see so many different generations coming together. And then I had to do a four-minute talk, and I think I followed David Zarefsky and Jackie Royster, and I thought, "Oh my god, if this had been 20 years ago, I would have left the room and not been able to do it." But I did it, and it was theoretical a little bit, which I thought was cool. I wasn't intending to do something different, but I did, and it seemed to go over okay. [chuckles] So that was a good moment.

K: Cool. How has the organization changed throughout the time that you've been part of it? You spoke to this a little bit already.

B: Yeah. Its major initiatives. And I've been involved recently in a number of different ways, but I joined the development council which is kind of the fundraising component of RSA, and I chair that now. But it gives me a chance to help the organization, but meet with people who have been here a while and really understand why it's important and its history, and so I've learned from them and that's been good, and I think it will lead to a lot of opportunities for growth later in support of students and projects that are important through fundraising. And I've also worked with RSA through Parlor Press which is my night job thing [chuckles] that's gotten pretty big. So Parlor Press published the volume from the 2014 conference as a printed book, and I did all the layout and everything and even mailed out 1,400 copies to contributors. My wife and I were in the garage putting the labels on the boxes, and they pulled up to my house in a semi-truck with all the books on a big pallet, and I thought, "Wow, this is a nice way to be able to contribute," and I said that Parlor Press would give them all the revenue from sales. And we did. That made the previous publisher a little bit irritated [chuckles] and—I think I can say this—they wrote a letter to the president, I think Greg Clark, right when he was coming in, and it was a very nasty letter about, "How could you possibly go with Parlor Press?" And, you know, "We've been doing this for you for years." And it was a pretty simple answer: "Well, Dave is an RSA person, and he's giving us all the revenue for it, so we are going to make a lot of money back on our investment in this." And that didn't make them very happy.

[15:01]

K: So, the other press kept the revenue? And you all—

B: They paid RSA just royalties.

K: Interesting, okay.

B: And we paid 100%, so it was a charitable gift of labor for RSA from Parlor Press. This year we published the EPUB version of it, and that's given away free. And to put that into bigger perspective: the expansion of RSA's publication [coughs] programs and the improvement of *RSQ* over the years, and now there is going to be a new Rhetoric Society Monthly—

K: Oh!

B: —that will promote initiatives and brag about students and faculty who are doing cool things with rhetoric, and getting the word out, and the expansion of the website, and all these things are showing RSA maturing and becoming a major society for scholars. So, a lot of different initiatives and ones that I want to be involved in and help with.

K: Sure. This leads right in to our next question then: how do you think RSA will change in the years to come? So if you sort of think that that was your answer, that's great.

B: I can talk about what I don't want it to become because this issue has come up in the last couple of days. It came up as a concept in our session yesterday on the first 25 and second 25, but from the very beginning the idea of it being a society rather than a conference or association was an important concept and a difference in that it emphasizes collegiality and collaboration and mentoring that can get lost in larger organizations. 4Cs *tries* to do these things, but it can be very—kind of a cold environment for new people especially, even though there's a lot of initiatives that they have; you know, newcomer welcoming tables and all this. It becomes such a big operation to undertake that it gets bureaucratized—and Kenneth Burke talks about bureaucratization of the imaginative, where the ideals of the society get compromised in their pursuit, and we don't want to lose that. We don't want them to be bureaucratized, and some things are being bureaucratized now. One of them in particular was, I can see the other side of how publishers are involved in a conference, and historically with RSA it's been fairly casual, not a lot of rules or regulations. And the prices have been pretty good, and this year the prices are still good, but we received a 12-page document that described all the rules that we had to follow.

K: Huh. Interesting.

B: And it was more legalese than I've ever seen from *any* other conference, and I've been to the big ones with Parlor Press, and it was annoying. And there's a place to sign at the bottom and a place to put the date, and they were calling it a contract, but a contract is between people, and it was not a contract. It was a "sign or else" sort of thing, and it was very cold. We don't need to be doing that. Ohio State University Press, they had to take it to their legal team at the university and scratch off a bunch of stuff because all the liability was being put on the publishers—

K: Oh, wow. Huh.

B: —and the publishers are a part of the organization.

K: Yeah.

B: They help the scholarship get out there, and we need them included. And we don't want them to do what NCA³ does and charge them \$8,000 for a little booth and pretend that they don't play a big role in the nature of the organization.

[20:11]

K: What sorts of things were they concerned about in the list of rules?

B: Some of them they were getting from the hotel, but it was everything from plugs to when you had to have stuff here and there and what would happen if you didn't have the right kind of box. And I know some of that is dictated through the convention rules, and they just took them and plopped them on us—which I understand why they might have to do that, but they could ignore some of that stuff. 4Cs does a little bit of that, but

³ National Communication Association.

it's not nearly as bad as it was this time. And that's a sign of an organization that's starting to get bigger than it expects a little bit too quickly, so we have to find ways of keeping the society idea alive with all the components of conferences and institutes and that sort of thing.

K: Along those same lines, what are your hopes for RSA's future?

B: Well, I kind of relate it to that idea that we continue to find ways for bringing new people into the field, which I've already talked about. One longer-term interest of mine, and that I think RSA shares, is helping a wider public understand the importance of rhetoric for dealing with political problems, cultural problems, racial issues, gender issues—that rhetoric has been around for a long time and can help us figure out how we got to where we are, especially when it's not going so well. And RSA can play a big role in that. So I have some people, we are making a movie about Kenneth Burke that is for a general audience, and we hope to win an Academy Award for it. [chuckles] To bring the message of rhetoric to the people so that we are not just talking to ourselves all the time. That's one of my goals for the organization, I think.

K: That's great. If you want to elaborate on the movie, I'd love to hear more about the movie. But—

B: Oh, okay. Well the name of the film is *The Word Man*, and we are in the process now of collecting archival material and all kinds of digital assets and everything. [coughs] We are working on developing a treatment, it's called—and it focuses on Burke in the late 30s and early 40s, both in terms of his development and articulation of rhetorical theory. I think that's his major contribution, not just the pentad or, you know, a lot of the other things he's done that have been really influential, but just a richer understanding of rhetoric in its multiple forms, in its function, and what it's useful for. And so Burke in the late 30s has written "Revolutionary Symbolism in America," "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle,'" trying to use rhetoric to understand larger social changes, including the escalation of conflict into World War II. And that's when rhetoric really comes, for Burke, and I think for our discipline ultimately, comes in or returns to the scene as an important critical method, and we want to document that emergence with the idea that this story of the emergence of rhetoric as a way of dealing with the "war of words," he would call it, might help us today when things are becoming strained seriously again. They may have been under the surface for a long time but are having a major social impact that we've seen in the news with the rise of white supremacy again and discussion of fascism and racial tension boiling over in Charlottesville. We need to return to some of these ideas that might help us understand how we got there. So the film is going to try to document that—not so much the present but the past, but look at how similar things are. And it's going to be the first film in a series called *American Words*, which focuses on a different artist or writer or critic who has helped us understand how language functions in our lives in a deeper way. So we want to get maybe some novelists, for example. We are approaching fairly soon a person who did the documentary filmmaking for HBO and kind of tell their story and bring rhetoric into it. And we are shooting for high-end kind of documentary, not, you know, something you would do for a class. We want to go to the

Academy Awards, and get something, and say, “Go, rhetoric!” [laughs] So that’s what that’s about.

[26:54]

K: That’s great.

B: We have some original footage of Burke that—a videographer in Washington contacted me because I edit the Burke journal⁴ and said, “I’ve got some 16-millimeter color film of Kenneth Burke from the 70s.” And nobody had ever seen it. So we connected with him, and we’ve now digitized all of that, and so we will be able to use some of that in the film, and we are working with the Burke family and other Burke scholars to kind of bring that period back to life, partly through Burke’s own words and presence on screen. So it will be pretty interesting to see how that turns out. There was a good movie that won a lot of awards about Derrida around 2002. We’re way ahead of that, so it should be good.

K: Yeah, the technology has sort of made different things possible.

B: Yes, it has. This one followed Derrida around on a typical day, and they were talking to him and stuff. So he was in it more, but just in terms of the quality we are shooting for and the depth of historical context that we build, we are going to go quite a lot beyond that.

K: Burke’s a perfect figure, too, because you’re right, he speaks so directly to the sort of current rhetorical situation, right? I make my students read “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle’” because it’s—I don’t know, like, “there are other ways to burn the book than on the pyre” rings in my head *daily*. Right?

B: Right. You don’t just say, “that guy’s crazy,” or evil or whatever, and then forget about him. He says that right in the beginning too. Then we have to study how this is happening so that we ward off similar concoctions in America. [laughs] I’ve had people read that and think that it was written in the 60s, interestingly—

K: Oh, really?

B: —and I said, “Well, no, he wrote that in 1937.” But, you know, Hitler had laid out everything that he was gonna do. There was no mystery there, and everybody—they weren’t ignoring it. They were just saying, “he’s crazy” or “he will surely see the light.” And Burke said, “Well here it all is,” and it came to be, so we don’t want to do that again.

K: No, I think about the date of it, too, just because it was so brave to come forth and talk about such a sort of large-scale trauma so quickly after it happened, right? So I sat in on a public memory panel this morning, and they said, “You know, we didn’t talk about the Holocaust really until 20 years after it happened, and we didn’t talk about

⁴ *KB Journal*, the journal of the Kenneth Burke Society.

Rwanda until about 20 years after it happened.” And then America could sort of be like, “Okay, this is what we think, this is how we coped, this is what it means for us.”

B: And that involves a lot of rationalization.

K: Yep, yep.

[29:55]

B: And the story becomes something different. There has been a lot of interesting work that has come out to debunk that. There’s a great book by Erik Larson—*In the Garden of Good and Evil*?⁵ Something like that, but it was about the ambassador to Germany in like 1932. He was an academic, a historian, at the University of Chicago, and somebody put his name up—nobody wanted to be the ambassador to Germany—and somebody put his name up because he had written some book about the history of Europe or whatever. And they didn’t necessarily want him to succeed, but they put him in the position, so he became the ambassador, and he didn’t know exactly what he was doing, and he was not a political person, and they thought they could manipulate him to make Hitler do what we wanted or something. And he started to learn more and more about what was going on, and he was writing letters to FDR and they were being totally ignored.

K: Oh, wow.

B: He kind of laid out the rise of the SS and the Gestapo, and nobody paid any attention to him, and then he left, and it exploded.

K: Wow.

B: Erik Larson wrote *Devil in the White City* and several other books that document historical moments in a kind of creative nonfiction way. So we want to bring those moments back to life because they are still relevant.

K: Yeah, absolutely.

B: So, we are going to have a premiere in about a year and a half. [laughs] We’ll see how it goes.

K: I’ll see it. It sounds great.

B: It will be good. We have a grad student who has a long history in the film industry—

K: Oh!

⁵ *In The Garden of Beasts: Love, Terror, and an American Family in Hitler’s Berlin.*

B: —and he decided to come back to school and learn rhetoric. I don't know why, but he is enjoying it, and he knows actors and directors, and he has developed software for filmmaking, and he understands the technical issues in the process. So he is going to be the director and I'm the producer, and we will apply for some grants and stuff.

K: That's lucky. Not every day you have someone wander in with a film background.

B: No, and it was interesting because Irv Broughton, the guy that was the videographer from the 70s, contacted me, and then a week later I found out that Mike Collins was gonna come to Clemson, and Victor Vitanza told me about his background, and I said, "Oh my god! This is perfect!" So I got him as my assistant to work on these kinds of projects. And then we're going to develop that into a kind of film studio-like space and curriculum at Clemson for students so they can be involved in this. Students want to make videos—

K: They really do.

B: —and there's a lot of rhetoric involved in that whole process.

K: Yeah, that's sort of a great way to keep that going too, once the graduate student is gone. That's wonderful. Well, that's all I have as far as questions for you, but if you have anything that you were hoping to get to talk about, we have the time.

B: No, I have been talking for the last two and a half days. [laughs] But I am glad you guys are doing this, and I look forward to seeing what you come up with. If I say anything stupid you can edit that out, you have my permission.

K: [laughs]

B: It was great. I worked with Eric [Detweiler] on the soundscapes for the new EPUB that we just published. They are in there; they are really interesting.

K: That is interesting.

B: Sonic rhetoric is *back*. I don't know if it was ever here in the first place. [laughs]

K: I was going to ask, is there a long history of sonic rhetoric somewhere? Yeah—

B: Well, happening in other areas, maybe. Somebody mentioned Brian Eno earlier in a session I was in, and, you know, he goes around and collects ambient sounds from all these places and is very interested in rhetorical invention, you know, putting different sounds together. He works with David Byrne, and I just saw a David Byrne concert a couple of weeks ago. It was unbelievable. He's transformed the way a show occurs; it was really cool. This doesn't need to be on the tape. [laughs]

K: [laughs]

[34:59]