Interviewee: Krista Ratcliffe [R]
Interviewer: Jennifer Juszkiewicz [J]
Transcriber: Elizabeth McGhee Williams
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Transcript

J: This is Jennifer Juszkiewicz interviewing Krista Ratcliffe on June 3, 2018. All right. So first question: When did you join RSA?

R: 1990.

J: And what was RSA like when you first joined it?

R: Well, it was very male and very white. I mentioned that last night in my talk, I believe.[1] And the topics were enthymemes and, you know, *kairos* and all of this—which I was interested in, but I had been working as a graduate student at Ohio State trying to bring together women's studies and historical rhetoric, you know. And Cheryl Glenn, Roxanne Mountford—we were all of a cohort there at Ohio State trying to do this kind of stuff. And Ed Corbett was very supportive. He was not necessarily knowledgeable on how to do it, but he was so not—I mean, he knows more about rhetoric, or he's forgotten more about rhetoric, than I will ever know. So he was great. But he encouraged us to come, and so we did. But it didn't quite feel like a fit yet, and part of it was that I was very young and not confident and that sort of thing. But part of it was it just had a more traditional feel to it than it does today.

J: What were some of the main projects or goals of RSA back then? What do you think it was trying to accomplish?

R: I think it was trying to accomplish interdisciplinary conversations about rhetoric between, particularly, comm and rhet/comp but also, you know, other areas too were welcome. And I think there was a real fervor to make sure that rhetoric was seen as a legitimate enterprise, that it wasn't, you know, anti-intellectual, or that it wasn't irrelevant. [chuckles] It's definitely irreverent. And I think the way to do that in a lot of people's mind at the time was to ground it in the classical stuff because that has *cachet*. Yeah, you know. So if you quote Plato, [chuckles] you know, you must be smart. And I don't think it was manipulative in that kind of sense, I just think that's kind of how the grouping went. So there was a lot of classical rhetoric, there was a lot of modern rhetoric.

J: Do you remember what your first presentation at RSA was about? This is one of the questions.

[1] I.e., Dr. Ratcliffe's presentation as part of the Presidents' Panel and Awards Ceremony, session R01 at the 2018 RSA conference.

R: I do. I do. It was on the feminist rhetoric of Virginia Woolf. [laughs] It was—I remember there were two people in the room and a third person kind of stumbled in and looked around, and I knew the person and I could just see it on the face, and the person thought, “Oh no, I’m going to have to sit down now.” [laughs] So as I said last night, I think that audience member was pity. And that’s part of why I wondered if I belonged. I thought, “Are people interested in, you know, Virginia Woolf and her rhetorical tactics?” [chuckles]

J: I hope so. That’s what I presented yesterday.

R: Did you? We’ll have to talk.

[both chuckle]

J: What are some—I mean that’s definitely one memory—do you have any other important or prominent memories either from, you know, the mid-90s or even moving into the 2000s that just, “Oh, that was such an RSA moment!”

R: Yeah. I remember going into that very first conference in 1990. I remember going into the [pause] the keynote and also the luncheon—they used to have luncheons for all of the members. And, again, it was the images that stayed with me, as I mentioned last night: the sort of guys with beards. And again, that just kind of made me wonder, “Do I belong?” So I came a couple more times but then I had my daughter in the mid-90s, and so I couldn’t go to as many conferences, right? So RSA fell by the wayside. And then when Pat Bizzell had her conference in Austin in 2004, I believe. She had—I had not submitted—and she shot me an email, and she said, “I need somebody for a panel; would you be interested in doing something like this?” And so I sent her a proposal and off I went. And then that was the start of my really being invested, I guess, in RSA. I think I was a little more confident that time. I had been in the academy a little bit longer. I had my ideas figured out a little bit more concretely so that I could defend them. And then I just, you know, it was just a kind of a second home in some ways. I mean, it became the place where I would come and we could, you know—this group of women could just get together and we would just laugh about things—things that would make us hopping mad at home. We would just sit at the table, and we would laugh until we cried, you know: “Can you believe this one?” And it was really, really, really a wonderful mentoring kind of experience. And it wasn’t mentoring in the sense of, you know, somebody being in charge and then everybody doing what that person said. It really was a true kind of collaborative co-mentoring. But also, as I mentioned last night, when [Winifred Bryan] Horner was—she was fabulous—she had a motto, “Don’t let the bastards get you down.” And she recited it on a regular basis. She had gotten that motto from her husband because she was the only faculty member in a department that was not necessarily open to rhetoric and composition at the time. But they needed her to direct composition. So she passed that wisdom on to the rest of us. And she had a wicked sense of humor. She was smart. And she was smart not only in an intellectual way but she was smart in a strategic kind of way: “Okay. We’ve got to get more women going. Here’s what we’ve got to do.” You know? So she was very inspiring in that way.

And I was in a situation where a department wasn't necessarily open to rhetoric and composition all that much. They knew they needed it, but it didn't mean they loved it. And they thought the feminist rhetoric stuff might be a fad. She took my book under her wing, and she talked me through some of the first book, and she was like, "Here's where you send it. Here's who you contact." You know, "Put me down as a reader—that you want me to read it." And she goes, "I will." And so she was very much—well, she was very forceful [chuckles] in sort of saying, "You're gonna do this." And I did. So, I've always kept that in mind and tried to pay it forward.

[06:52]

J: Is that one of the memories that sort of sticks with you every RSA? This group of women, you kind of just find each other?

R: Yep. Yep. And even if we don't get together in the ways now that we did in the past—because not everybody is around anymore, you know—the presence is here. It haunts. And it's wonderful.

J: Okay, so, I know that you went into—you eventually got convinced to go into leadership at RSA. How has the organization changed from when you became first really involved with it through your leadership to now? 'Cause you were president not that long ago—just a couple of years.

R: Yeah, um, '12 to '14, I believe.[2] [pause] I think the way it's changed is twofold. One is I continued a commitment to open it up, both in terms of under-represented groups being invited in a little bit more and also different topics and different methods and different theories, you know, being invited in. And intentionally—not just kind of hoping the happenstance of a program call, you know, garnered that. So I think that was one element, and then the other is kind of behind the scenes. [chuckles] I developed a strategic plan for the organization; I made the board go through a strategic planning exercise. I made [pause] I don't like the verb "made." It's not—I asked, and people cooperated with me [laughs] to write—all the people who were like chairs of the committee to write down the processes because there was this kind of oral tradition of, "Oh yeah, I did the awards committee! Now here's what I think I did. Now, I don't know." And, you know, it was infuriating to people because back when it was more of a mom-and-pop operation with, you know, 300 members or something, you could do that. But when you've got 1,500 members, and you're getting way more applications for programs and for book awards, you just—you can't. So, that became important to me. People kind of teased me about, you know, my obsession with writing things down, but it makes the process easier. And also, it's kind of a political commitment on my part because I think if you don't write things down and make them accessible to everybody then only certain people know. And it's, [pause] you know, it's the people who hang out at lunch and talk, and they find out about it. And that's great—there's nothing wrong with that, but what's wrong is that other people don't necessarily have a seat at that table. And so writing things down and making things more accessible is important. And we're

[2] Ratcliffe served as president from 2012-13 and immediate past president from 2013-14.

still trying to do that with the website and getting things posted and all that, so it's a process. But I think those are the two things that I was most committed to.

J: Lester Olson—that was something he really emphasized, was how you convinced people to write things down and document the processes.

R: Yeah.

[10:00]

J: How do you think RSA will continue to change moving forward? [door shuts in background] Just your suspicions. Not necessarily your hopes—that's the next question.

R: Um, [pauses] I guess I think that it's going to be—I think it will continue the path of becoming more and more inclusive and making that inclusivity more visible. And maybe even kind of [door shuts] restructuring how we think about inclusivity so that it's not, "We've got this traditional thing and other things are coming in," but there's just this space that is RSA, you know. And I think that's happening now. So I think that's a major shift because it's not only a mindset of how we sort of imagine one another, but it's also a site for the kind of scholarship that can be done and imagined as, you know, crucial to the field.

J: Some people say that RSA is the umbrella institution for rhetoric, but it didn't start out that way.

R: No, it didn't.

J: Do you think that's an accurate description of it, though?

R: I do. It started out being kind of the secondary organization for a lot of people, you know. People went to Cs[3] if they were in rhet/comp and that was sort of primary, and if they were in comm, they went to NCA,[4] and then they came to RSA as a way—as kind of a kick. It was like, "Oh, well, let's shake this up a little bit!", right? But I think as both NCA and CCCC drifted farther and farther away from rhetoric as kind of a foundational principle—and I don't know that that's a bad thing, but that just is what happened—I think RSA became more important to people. And so what was fascinating in the survey after Kendall [Phillips]'s conference was, in 2014, was that [pause]—I don't remember the statistics now, but, you'll have to check with Kendall—but it's something like half of the membership now think of RSA as its primary organization. And if indeed that's the case, then the leadership has to think about the organization a little bit differently because if it's the secondary organization, then you can count on 4Cs and NCA to provide a lot of member benefits and that we don't have to have that responsibility. But suddenly if we are the primary, what do we need to offer? And then the question becomes, "How in offering these things do we change productively?" Because we don't

[3] Conference on College Composition and Communication.
[4] National Communication Association.

want to, like, suddenly just become a shadow NCA or 4Cs. I think that defeats the purpose. Um, so I think Michelle [Ballif]'s got a—I think that's a challenge facing Michelle: how to change [chuckles] moving forward with a membership that identifies primarily here.

J: What do you hope will happen in terms of RSA? What do you hope the future will look like?

R: Well, as I mentioned in my talk last night, I hope it faces forward a little bit more. [pause] It's always been very careful in terms of making statements, and we have—one of the things that when I was in leadership we did was come up with a policy. I think it's when I was the immediate past president and Kendall was president. We came up with a policy for how to respond to contemporary issues. And we didn't want to be—we didn't want to have a particular ideological agenda that we were trying to promote. That wasn't it. But we ended up saying what we would do is if something affected our membership or individual members, we would speak out on it. So, for example, when Ersula Ore experienced what she experienced at ASU[5] when the policeman threw her to the ground and the video went viral,[6] we responded to that. When certain people get elected, we didn't respond to that, right? And that's, I think, appropriate. But that doesn't mean then that we can't have an arm of the organization that isn't [pause] focused on this outward kind of movement. [door shuts] And it can be research, so that you're going in and doing community kind of research. It can be. But I think it also needs to be educational. I think we need to get more involved with state governments, and how, you know, the common core or states that don't have the common core and have put it their own—most all of them have rhetoric in there somehow, and we ought to be in there defining how rhetoric gets taught at elementary, junior high, and high school. Rhetoric should not be something that you learn when you're a graduate student or an advanced undergraduate. It ought to be in—I think—it ought to be threaded through all the levels. And it ought to be threaded through in a more sophisticated way. I don't think we give students enough credit for what they can do. And so, textbooks sometimes are too often, "Oh, ethos, logos, pathos! The triangle!" You know? "Audience!" And that's great—all those things are important—but rhetoric is more complicated than that, the world is more complicated than that. And I think if we bring that approach and ground the theory in very particular things that are going on around us, then students see it, and suddenly, my hope is, that they won't—that they'll understand structure. I think structure has become invisible to Americans for the most part. And so they focus on the level of claims—you're right, you're wrong, you're right, you're wrong, and if you're wrong, I vilify you. And as I said last night, one of the principles of my rhetorical study with Ed Corbett was that reasonable people can disagree, right? And I also joke that you have to be very wary, my corollary says, of who defines reasonable. But still, you've got to be able to disagree and still work together. And I think that's been lost a little bit. Not in the communities—not in the local communities. I think that happens more. But the national level, for certain, it's become a dominant trope to vilify. And I think one way to prevent

[5] Arizona State University.

[6] For more context, see the introduction to Ore's book *Lynching: Violence, Rhetoric, and American Identity*, published in 2019 by the University of Mississippi Press.

that from happening is make rhetoric more visible in the educational system. Because people just don't understand what argument is—they just don't. And that's on us.

[16:28]

J: It's become almost a bad word. "Don't argue."

R: It is. Yeah.

J: So this is the 50th anniversary of RSA, and this is the last day of the conference. Is there one memory from this particular conference, the 50th, that stands out to you?

R: Hmm. Oh, that would be hard. [pause] No. It's more like a pastiche. I see images of friends laughing in the lobby. I see some of the keynotes, you know, people reminiscing. I think Andrea [Lunsford]'s talk was fabulous. I went to a panel yesterday morning at 8:00 a.m. about difference and how it functions in the field of rhetoric and—no, it's more a pastiche. It's just, you know, it's just this engagement. Rhetoric 24/7. All day, every day.

[both laugh]

J: I think that's perfect.

R: Okay.

J: We'll stop there. This is the end of the interview.