

David Holmes Interview Transcript

→How did you get into Rhetoric and Composition?

Well, I was a secondary school teacher from 1986 to 1993, and I loved doing that. I taught middle school for a few years and then taught high school. Actually, I taught at the high school I attended in south central Los Angeles and that was very exciting. And I was perfectly happy to do that. So it happened at the time I was going to a church where a professor from Pepperdine, who was actually chair of the English department was there and said, "You know, I've seen you teach Sunday School, and things like that, and really think you ought to go work on a Ph.D." I said whatever. I love what I'm doing. I was working on my first Master's with a possibility of moonlighting at night because, I don't know what secondary school teachers get paid here, but with the cost of living in L.A., I said, I need to do something else. The height of my aspirations was to get a Master's and teach at the community college level. So I was working on my first Master's, and "You really ought to apply for a Ph.D." And, of course, I already knew a little bit about rhetoric and composition, and I knew some of the names, including Ross Winterowd, who would be my dissertation director, and this guy just kept pushing me, and finally I applied to humor him. My wife said, "You know, you got really good grades, really good GREs, I don't know if you should apply if you don't mean it." I said, "Nah, I'm not going to get in." I got in. And so that's the way it started. So that's kind of like the back story, but if you talk about just in my life, I've always been interested in language and the play of language. And you all have started reading Gates, so you know this is not just exclusive to the African American oral tradition, but it is a part of the African American oral tradition as well as other traditions. The play of language is the thing. Like semantic determinacy is not the real issue for African American rhetoric, it's the play of language. And from the play of language, that determinacy comes about. And so I've always, without knowing, in those days, that theoretical jargon, I always had that fascination about the play of language and with the way things sounded. And so you mix that with teaching English at the secondary school level, and a nudge from a friendly friend at church and that's pretty much how I got interested in the field, and once I took my first class with Ross Winterowd, which, you all... This is your first semester, or first year?

My first semester I had a class with Ross Winterowd, but I didn't get the email about what we were supposed to do for the first class [laughter]. Well, I got part of the email somehow. I read half of it. The email said, "We want you to write a response to the reading, and then we're going to talk about it when we get to class." It was the "we're going to talk about it when we get to class" that I didn't get. So I come walking into this class already nervous, having this very deferential feeling about Winterowd and saying, well, oh, Dr. Winterowd. And he said, "Just call me Ross." Kind of like here, let's be casual about this. "So I've read so much by..." "Just sit down." And so the first thing off the bat one of the graduate students who'd been there for about three years turns to me, "Well, you know, I noticed in your response, that you said such and such. Can you tell me why you said that?" [Speaking nonsensically. Laughter] It's not like I couldn't think of anything to say, but I didn't know it was going to happen so fast. I didn't know we were going to respond to each other as we would other critical texts. So that, I just mean, I thought I messed up and so forth, but Ross and the others were so encouraging. One fellow whispered in my ear, became a really good friend of mine, Kevin Parker's his name, "David, we do this every week. Take a breath. You

haven't taken a breath since the middle of the class. You're going to die." [laughter] Yeah, I think there've been a lot of great influences, and I'm a fairly religious person, so I kind of look at it as providential. Right. These influences came in my life at a certain time, and I don't think that things are accidental. I mean, I love studying the atheistic philosophers and the rhetoric of the atheistic philosophers, particularly out of the 18th Century, as a minor passion of mine. But I'm not one. I'm not an atheist that is, so that's kind of, all of that. The way it happened and what I ended up doing in rhetoric and composition, I feel it was guided by whatever you want to call it. I call it God. Some other people might call it the universe.

→What are the specific theorists in terms of rhetoric that you find particularly influential for you?

Wow. Well, I remember Ross Winterrowd was a good friend of Kenneth Burke's, so we read Burke until we got sick, and if anybody mentions anything about Burke tonight, I will kill them. [laughter] I might mention some of his connection to, people don't realize Burke's influence on some aspects of African American rhetoric, now I might mention some of that. But, so, Burke was clearly one influence. Um, Ross loved making fun of I.A. Richards because he thought I.A. Richards was an Emersonian clone. I didn't happen to agree, by the way. Ross really got upset if you didn't agree with his critique of Emerson or anyone he thought that Emerson influenced. But that's probably a big part. Going back to the 18th Century [indecipherable], and then I became really fascinated with Blair not so much because of what I liked, but...I don't know if you guys got a chance to, I don't want to sound egotistical, because I do not have tons of stuff out there, but I have this piece on Blair, where I talked about the implications of style for current-traditionalist rhetoric, particularly as it excludes people of color. But yes, I got fascinated with Blair and all that 18th Century rhetoric because that's also the time that you have a lot of philosophers and others who are espousing, and understandably so, a racialized view of knowledge, right. These are the savages, these are the civilized. So, some of the theorists I got interested in, of course, standard people like Derrida and Foucault and people like that. Anyone who was going to question the direct correlation between the signifier and the signified. So those people and others that I can't think of right now, but that influenced me. In terms of African American rhetoric, probably the biggest influence would be Keith Gilyard. Largely because Keith Gilyard very aggressive, in-your-face, if it's not empowering the marginalized, it's not important kind of approach. He's not, of course, he's not the only one who takes that takes that, if you ever read sociologists like Johnathan Kozol, which is a bit influence on Gilliard that most people don't know. Those would be influences as well. So that's just some of the influences. Yeah.

→What life experiences have effected you and shaped your thinking?

Let's see. In 1995, I was about a year away from finishing my Ph.D. And that is the first time I met Keith Gilyard, and I don't know if any of you have ever met him, you've probably read some of his stuff. Keith is originally from Harlem. He was born exactly ten years earlier than I was. Hipster, and you know, what I mean by hipster is, he's one of those guys that personifies code switching. "Man, I don't have time for that, dude. He was a rogue." Wow. You went from dude to rogue, right? He is absolutely was of the most brilliant people I've ever met. But when I met him in 1995, I was struck by how comfortable he was switching

from the academy vernacular, for lack of a better term, to his background in African American vernacular English. It's highly problematic, of course, to say that every African American bears the same relationship to African American vernacular English, but we know from studies from people like Geneva Smitherman to people like John Rickford and to people like Elaine Richardson, that there's a certain percentage of African Americans who do bear a connection to that. And just to find someone who had accomplished what Keith had accomplished but was still comfortable enough to go back and forth like that, that really encouraged me. And then also Keith will tell you like it is. He won't say this because he'll say we're too close in age, but he's been like a mentor. And he'll tell me in a minute, you know, "Yeah, you're not doing enough work, man. Don't give me that you're at a teaching institution. Man, I used to have a four-four load at the University of New York, and I was cranking it out. What you doing, dog?" [laughter] That's kind of encouraging, and I appreciate him for that. And then, of course, Ross has been a big influence. And then Victor Villanueva, who, he's constantly on my tail as well. "You finished that second book yet, man? You got the one book out, but you finished that second one?" To have those kind of people, I kind of need that because, even though my father was a college graduate, this academy thing was something that I never dreamed of doing. And so, a lot of you perhaps, I feel like I have to be at my best, and I have to be on it, and there are people who hold me accountable, and I'm the kind of person you have to hold accountable, or I'll be some place watching a movie. Not drinking a beer. Drinking a root beer. But I'll be watching.

→Who has influenced you?

Keith (Gilyard) was at the CCCCs in 1995. That's when I first met him. And Keith really feels that, and this is something that a lot of older African, obviously not everyone, but African American or every older woman scholar, or every older poor [indecipherable] scholar would feel, but there's some people in all of those categories that feel they have to mentor people who come from that same background, whether it be poor Anglos or women or African Americans, and Keith just feels that way. So immediately he gravitates toward, I was a Scholar for the Dream in 1995, I don't know if you're familiar with that program in the CCCCs, where they try to give travel funds to underrepresented groups of graduate students to come to the conference, it's a big competition, and I competed in that and won it in 1995, and so ever since then, you know, Keith has made it his business to be in my business [laughter]. You know, that's the way I look at it. So it's kind of a traditional thing, and it's not just black folk, but a lot of marginalized people, that's what they do, they try to mentor you. So that him. And then Victor I met a year after that, and we email each other at least once a week if you can believe that, for like the past eleven years. His thing for me is, you know, don't be too hard on yourself because, like all of us who enter this field, there's this little bit of perfectionism, and he says, "Man, you always measure things by where you are at the time in your life, and like everyone else, you got a family, you got boys in high school, you got your teaching load, you got your life and community and church outside of this, so be careful not to just over-do it." Cause Victor, with all of his scholarly accomplishments and accolades, he wants you to describe him as a happy man. Have you ever heard someone say that? That's exactly the way he wants to be described. Not as a straight [indecipherable] scholar or a critical [indecipherable] but as a happy man.

→What are some of the classes you particularly enjoy teaching right now?

Well right now, it's anything to do with civil rights, particularly looking at narrative as something that, you know, all sorts of theorists would tell us is constructed, and how the historical narratives are in some ways fictionalized. And obviously we know that fiction tries to pick up on some historical, so-called truths, but just playing through those kinds of courses. I have a course right now called Literature of the Civil Rights Movement: The Politics and Poetics of the Civil Rights Movement, so we're looking at *Eyes on the Prize* documentaries, we're looking at speeches from the Civil Rights Movement, but we're also looking at fictional books that try to recast the movement, such as Charles Johnson's *Dreamer*, which is an amazing book. Based on the 1966 campaign in Chicago, but it's the story of a man by the name Chaym Smith, who's chosen to be King's body double, so that he won't get assassinated. Never happened, right? But this body double is brilliant, but he's agnostic, and he's a womanizer, but he can mimic King, he already looks like King, and he can mimic King. And the whole notion of who becomes the hero. That's interesting when you juxtapose it with an A&E biographer on King, which I don't know if y'all are with, where you just get so many surprises about Martin Luther King you're going, "What?" Like he wanted, at one point, to marry a white woman. You know, and it seems like, "I didn't know that!" You know. And he did this, and he did that, so just the notion of how we have constructed one image and how that is in discrepancy and contestation with other views. So that's one course I really love to teach. I also like to do courses in Harlem Renaissance for similar reasons. How our views of discourse and identity, racialized discourse and identity in particular, are very much constructed by certain cultural lenses. Is the Harlem Renaissance really a black movement when patrons like Charlotte Osgood Mason has to sign off on what is black literature. That's a part of what I get at, and we'll talk about this more later tonight when I'm talking about the sovereignty, the idea of resisting colonization of your discourse, is in some ways resisting the colonization of your land, and African Americans have to play with that in very interesting ways that are slightly different from but have the same goals as Native American people have with land. So that's part of what I'm getting at, but it's going to be real interesting to, this is one thing I miss, I told Kathy, I said, "I don't have graduate students, right." I'm going to be a visiting professor at Arizona State next semester, so I have graduate students [indecipherable] to feed off of Ph.D. students, "Yeah, dog, I see that man, but what about this?" So that's going to help me out, right, to be able to do that. But, yeah, I love that course. Let's see. And then we have for the undergraduates a colloquium, a colloquia of courses called Social Action and Justice, and basically that's a service-learning course where they read people like Mary Louise Pratt, where they read, to some degree, we just give them a little taste of Bakhtin, but they read different people that will help them think through how you critique certain social institutions. And then, to piggy back on that, they also have to do a certain amount of service learning. They go down skid row. They'll do twenty hours of service. So those are the courses I really enjoy. Um, sometimes I get to do some composition theory classes, some rhetorical theory classes, but not as much with undergrads. Because you only give them a taste. I remember the last time I did composition theory, we did a little bit of Burke, we did a little bit of Bakhtin, but then I thought, you know what, I think the rest of the stuff I'm going to give them is historical cultural, so we did James Berlin. Who is, by the way, a huge influence on the way I think too, social epistemic rhetoric. People like James Berlin. I, you know, I dig him. I don't dig everything he says but [indecipherable].

→ There's an article that came out in *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* arguing that the "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" was a deconstructionist text.

So this may not have been Keith Miller. Yeah, you're telling me about a piece I don't know. I do know that Keith Miller at Arizona State has done some work on "The Letter from a Birmingham Jail," arguing partly that, kind of, making a deconstructionist argument. But more than that, talking about the prophetic critique people often miss in the letter. But I tell you what, make sure I get that reference because I'd be very interested to look at that. Because I tell you someone who usually does a deconstructive argument without using that word because it's a historian and historians I know at least don't believe in that, they take the language as it is, uh, is Jonathan Bass. *Blessed Are the Peace Makers*. In that book, Jonathan Bass is looking at the question, first of all, how is the letter constructed and what kind of journeys does the letter take that is away from what it's really supposed to mean, which is a kind of deconstructive argument. But then he looks at the eight religious leaders that King was writing to, and he delves into their responses to King individually, biographically. So it's a good work to look at even though he doesn't use those terms. But tell me a little bit more about this article.

Scott: Well, I've only had a chance to skim it.

David: And it's recent?

Scott: It is recent.

David: Like as in when?

Scott: As in I believe, don't quote me on this, but I believe maybe the last issue, like in September or August.

David: I should know this then. I get that journal. And usually my lights go on when there's civil rights stuff. So tell me the gist of the argument.

Scott: The argument basically is that King is actually a deconstructionist, and that the literary techniques that he's using during the course of writing the letter make him as such.

David: And I think that's valid. As a matter of fact, again going back to, partly what I'm getting at with the sovereignty thing. African Americans and other marginalized people, but particularly African Americans who didn't migrate here, or immigrate here the same way that others did, they have to begin to wrestle with terms in very rhetorical ways, in terms that don't assume a clear, cogent connection between signifier and signified. And, you know, if you ever get a chance to read the entire *Signifying Monkey*, that's precisely what Gates is getting at. He's saying, to some degree, that African Americans have out-Derrida Derrida, which interestingly enough, most people don't read him anymore because some of his stuff is dated, but you want to see someone in dialogue with Henry Louis Gates, then check out a guy named Houston Baker, okay. And some of Houston Baker's stuff, he will argue, you think that black folk are doing what Derrida is doing, and this is a very reductive Cliff Notes version of what he's saying. If you think black folk are doing what Derrida has always done,

then what do black folk need Derrida for? Because again he's wrestling with this, I think Gates responds to him really well, he, Baker's wrestling with this whole notion of colonization discourse. What is black enough? Which I think, in some of my research, I talk about that's a problematic idea. What is black enough? And how can it be black enough if we find ourselves, actually, constantly paying homage the patriarchy of, you know, theoretical fathers. Which is a point to be made. Do you see what I'm saying?

→Ruth: Yeah. I just never thought about what the black vernacular being, doing what Derrida's talking about. I'm wondering why now but I think it's because it seems like the black vernacular is resistance, you know, to dominate oppressive culture but with Derrida, I don't know, he just seems like he's playing with our minds [laughter].

David: And also if you, I don't remember what excerpt from *The Signifying Monkey* you have in *The Rhetorical Tradition*, but if, and you may have this, but if you read the whole *Signifying Monkey*, there's this grid, you know, that talks about, okay, not the normal but the constructive way of looking at language as signifier, signified, a straight shot, right, okay, and we say that's signification. But with signifyin', notice he drops the g, we're saying that the oral tradition of African American culture is such that it's not about that direct meaning, but it's about the rhetorical play. So it's very much playing with your mind. For instance, one of the examples that Gates gives in the book, is, um, students who responded in one inner city years ago to a standardized test said basically because you didn't know what a cup and saucer were or you were stupid. So okay, you have this test of standard skills, I think they were about eighth grade if memory serves me, we're going to write this test of no particular skills. And on the first question, on the test of no particular skills, is who's buried in Grant's tomb? Who's buried in Grant's tomb? Your mama. Okay, your mama, so what does that mean? Well, it could mean they're actually trying to signify or play the dozens on your mother, but the deeper meaning, the more rhetorically-enriched meaning would be, these questions you raise on the standardized test really have no bearing on my literacy. I just dismiss the construction. So it's about the play, but it's not just about the play just like Derrida's not just about the play. Because what happens when we talk about logocentricism? What happens when we talk about logocentricism is we can lead and often do lead to a view of language and view of religion that is very oppressive. And the way, one of the ways, to attack that oppressiveness is to play with it, to deconstruct each word, each sentence in which it has its own potential for dismantling. That's a part of what we do in deconstruction. That's a part of what African Americans have always done. And again, please don't hear me say that it's exactly the same because it's not, but it's an attack, a critique of oppressive discourse. I love one of the lines in *Signifying Monkey*, I believe, there's, it might be in *Figures in Black*, where one particular white writer says of blacks, "Nigga, your group, your people, are not exigential," a hermeneutical term, right. To which Sterling Brown, the poet, replies, "Cracker, your group ain't metaphysical." You know, what trumps what? And there's also this kind of dialectic going on between the cultures, and Gates is aware of that. The problem becomes, though, and this is going to be the real difficult part, trying to think through how we get through all those murky waters towards an understanding of democracy, and temporary moments of community. Which I think, for one, not just me, but for one, Kenneth Burke tries to get us at. Not the truth, but temporary moments that we recognize as common ground.

Ruth: And Derrida, I feel like he eliminates that possibility.

David: Oh yeah. And understandably, which is why I guess there's some people who are really resistant to him, but I, I love the notion, even as someone, as I told you, who avowedly, even to some degree like Patricia Bizzell, I'm not nearly as smart as she is obviously. I'm avowedly a religious person, but I totally enjoy this interrogation of truth and looking at truth as a plurality, of looking at it as shifting sands, even as I go to church on Sunday.

Scott: Just so I understand what you're saying about rhetorical play is, you know emitting meaning, but sometimes the play in itself having or containing meaning, or truth if you want to look at it that way. I think that's very interesting.

David: And to be able to throw it out only to take it away. Because keep in mind, you know, it seems to me at least in my reading of Plato, one of the issues for Plato about speech is its ability to evaporate, its evanescence, right, it's going to be gone, and you can't retrieve it back. In some ways that's problematic, but it makes it a lot it a lot better than writing, of course he doesn't have it by text messaging, he has it by [indecipherable] permanently, you can't dialogue with it. Well, in African American rhetoric, a part of the idea is just, I'm throwing this out, but since you don't know exactly what I mean anyway, I'm going to bring it back. Zora Neale Hurston, making a statement, "You can read my words," in a sociological text she writes, right, because she was trained under Franz Boas, "You can read my words, but you can't read my mind." It's kind of like, I don't know, what we would say about any marginalized group. Their own code of linguistic signifiers, their own intend and, it's not just marginalized group, it's whenever you go to a linguistic community. You ever see like firemen talk, and you have no idea what they're talking about? Or lawyers talk? Or rhetoricians talk? [laughter] What are you guys talking about? Why don't you just read English, man? You're supposed to be part of the English department.

→Well, what do you think is the most important thing for Ph.D. students in rhetoric and composition to be thinking about today? How would you want to direct our study?

Wow. Well, first of all, it'd be scary since I've never taught Ph.D. students. I will, when you see me again, if you see me again, I will have had my wonderful experience at Arizona State as a visiting professor. Man, that's, that's a really difficult one. I think, just as a partial answer, though, um, having a way, and you guys are getting this because you're getting a lot of theory. Having a way that gets you enough theory that you feel comfortable enough to critique everything, including what you're learning, including the theorists. Because, again, I think that's part of the point that not only Houston Baker makes, but people like bell hooks makes. Okay, if some of this theory ends up being used to perpetuate the status quo, then what good is it? Partly trying to answer the question, it seems to me that I would want Ph.D. students, yeah, get loaded up with this theory so they know the language, but also be suspicious of it. And be suspicious of it not only as it conflicts with their own experience, but as it conflicts with the ultimate agenda of social justice. Because if it doesn't get us there, then what is the point really? I heard, for instance, a friend of mine talk about, you know, the only person dealing with race theory in profound ways is Judith Butler. I have a problem with that, not because Judith Butler's not brilliant. Judith Butler's white. So to some degree

you're telling me that there's nobody's who's black or a person of color is sophisticated enough to engage that. You know, I don't know if anyone would say this, but the most sophisticated person who does feminist, black feminist studies is Michael [indecipherable], Michael [indecipherable] does do that, black feminist studies, but Michael [indecipherable]'s a brother, know what I mean? So it's kind of like, the most sophisticated, and it goes on and on. I'm not saying that her work is not stellar or that I would ever hope to achieve something as sophisticated as she, but what do we do with the experiential? What do we do with the people like Elaine Richardson who are trying to ask questions about, okay, how do we take what we know about social construction and the construction of racial identity and apply it to classrooms? So it may sound like a cop out, but I would be interested in some of the practical dimensions related to social justice and educational reform.

→ So in light of that, is that the direction you see the field going in? More towards this, kind of, beyond the university, so to speak, social activism?

In some ways yes, in some ways no. I mean, again this will sound very evasive but that's what we do as professors, but it really depends on what day you ask me. I'm really excited about some of the stuff I see CCCCs trying to do. I'm not always as excited about RSA. You know, even though I find myself being more involved with the Rhetoric Society of America, I find myself being more involved with them, and the dialogue, the meaningful dialogue they're having, for instance, partly through people like Steve Mailloux if you know his work, the dialogue they're having because people like Steve Mailloux about the legitimacy of having dialogue between so-called communication rhetoricians and so-called English rhetoricians. If haven't looked at his book, Mailloux's *Disciplinary Identities*, which is a wonderful book to look at, because he's not only talking about the history of speech communication and English and literature and how those dialogue with each other and have been in a set of contests with each other, but he also talks about that implication of how we read the field. He's very interested in reading events through rhetorical hermeneutics. What are the arguments, narratives and tropes we should appropriate? But yeah, I'm fairly positive because I'm a fairly positive person, but I just don't want us to become people who are in the proverbial elitist tower just talking about this stuff because I don't think that's what our history, what CCCCs was started in '49, tells us to be. It tells us to be a lot more progressive, and I know those are buzz words, progressive, liberal and all those things are moving targets, I know that, but for lack of a better term at this point, I want us to continue down that path.

Partly like I said with RSA, but the CCCCs not as much. Like I said I'm a little bit excited with some of the stuff, about the CCCCs, but I'm not as excited about the CCCCs as I am about the WPA for example.

Yeah, um, so, I think that maybe, to give a more concrete answer, the field is in some ways moving in the right direction though a little slowly. And maybe we just need to move faster. 'Cause I think even the kinds of questions that maybe I would, what are some of the kinds of issues that graduate students, if you don't mind me flipping it, what are some of the issues that graduate students are interested in, because this is going to help me because I have graduate students next semester, what are some of the kinds of interests that you as Ph.D. students have?

Ruth: Well, my interests are generally pedagogically oriented, I mean, I'm really interested in putting into practice, our theory, into practice in the classroom, and, um, some of the things that have been bothering me lately... like [I was] reading in CCCs, there was an article in the, in the, maybe the June issue that talked about the erasure of language, I think it was Susan Peck McDonald, and there was another article, oh Richard Fulkerson's review of the discipline, I think that was 2005, but it seems like I keep running into these big name people who are talking about teaching composition as style and form, and it seems to me we should have moved beyond that by now. And so that's one of the things I'm thinking about and wondering, when you say we're moving slowly is that, is that kind of the thing you're thinking of?

David: That could be. I think, you know I'm glad I listened to what you were saying because I anticipated you going down the road of how valuable is that discussion anyway if it's too abstract for the college composition classroom, which is what I'm always concerned with. So you're partly talking about that, but you're actually talking about just style and form. Does it seem kind of 1950-ish to you?

Ruth: Well, it seems like, with um, so much theory and, critical pedagogy seems to me to, to make a lot more sense, to be thinking how language operates in society in order to be, and how it works to construct us as well as our...

David: So part of your concern is you don't see a sufficient number of articles in CCCs doing that?

Ruth: It just seems like there are some big names in the field who are still resisting the idea that this is what composition should be about.

David: I absolutely agree.

Ruth: And, um, they want to concentrate on language without any ideology, and I think we should understand that we can't.

David: They're current-traditionalists in sheep's clothing. I get what you're saying. And you know, I try to keep up, like you guys, I try to keep up with all of the journals, and I do see articles like that, but then, that's why I thought you were talking about Keith Miller, but I like when people like Keith Miller look at all of these documents as not only constructed, you know when I say documents I mean essays and things we read, artifacts we read, but as living, that you can't read the "Letter from the Birmingham Jail" and come up with, Keith doesn't use the word deconstruction, but you can't come up with this rather static meaning, and Keith does, Keith Miller does have an article on King, actually the "I Have a Dream" speech in the *Rhetoric Review*, the most, the latest *Rhetoric Review*, that's worth looking at. But I mean that's a part of his point, our problem is to try to, even as rhetoricians, to confine what's going on to a moment. That's really difficult to do because you have to do a certain amount of historical contextualizing, but what does that mean beyond that is the harder problem. Good stuff. What about the rest of you, what do you see as some of the struggles?

Scott: Um, well the...

David: What you would look for as Ph.D. student? What you are looking for?

Scott: At the moment, see I come from a creative writing background, so this is my first real experience with rhetoric, and my interests are actually with the social, analyzing how we use language beyond the classroom, especially from a cultural point of view, specifically I did some work for, I wrote for the hurricane relief effort in Louisiana, and so I'm looking at how language was used in the recovery effort, and disaster rhetoric as a whole. I guess where I am right now is I'm trying right now to get a hold of, as you were saying earlier, kind of getting all of the theorists down, understanding them and digesting them so I can think of them more critically. I'm moving in that direction.

David: And please understand that I'm not saying you get to the point where it's like, "Man, first thing I got to do is, first thing is, I'm going to knock him off his throne." I'm not saying, I'm just saying my students, they're dismissive before they even understand these theorists. And who really understands Kenneth Burke, right? Who really understands Derrida? They're dismissive before they understand a person, so I'm not really talking about that, but there has to be a certain amount, and this is not my phrase, hermeneutical suspicion from, in terms of your experience, in terms of your community, linguistic community, your discursive community, there has to be a certain hermeneutical suspicion. And I would hope that, I'm sure you all don't, we wouldn't feel like, I have to abandon everything I've ever believed about language because of Kenneth Burke or because of Derrida, or everything I've ever believed about religion. That's why I [indecipherable] people like Pat Bizzell, not because I'm religious, but because Pat Bizzell is so deep, Cornell West too, ain't nobody going to question him about being [indecipherable], say that to her face, it's easy to say that behind her back, or Cornell West, "He ain't deep." Yeah, talk to Cornell about not being deep. And so I mean, I think they are examples of true intellectuals, public intellectuals as well as academics, who are able to feel really comfortable saying there is a space for my own discursive community, for my own existential experience, as long as that doesn't become something that's lorded over other people, and doesn't become a norm, I mean for instance, the biggest challenge some of my students have, many of whom are very fundamentally religious, is understanding how I can claim to be a deeply religious person yet support gay marriage. How can that? I say it's public, this conviction I have about morality is private. And there's a lot of people at my church who are like, man, if we could, you know, cut you off we could do it, but you can't because that's not the way the [indecipherable] works. Yeah, if we could just excommunicate you, man, we'd do it. And I say, okay brother, you go on to hell and I'll meet you there [laughter]. That's the biggest challenge, but it's that way with our vision of democracy and patriotism. Democracy in part is such slippery, elusive term to get a hold of, because it doesn't even mean the same thing for us in any given moment, right? So to say this is democracy, we can talk about ideals, and that's probably part of the problem because the ideals, as someone said, become ordeals because we've never dealt with the real deal, right? We've never begun to praise/trace certain things at the moments we need to. If democracy arises out of, out of these disruptions in the hegemonic order, do they not? Whether it's the Civil Rights movement or protests against Iraq. That's really what democracy is supposed to be about, but other people don't look at it as democracy, including sometimes, and this is fascinating to me, African Americans during the Civil Rights movement in Birmingham, who in large numbers were against Martin Luther King. So you say, how does that work? They're not experiencing democracy en masse, so someone comes to try to represent that by, as I say, disrupting the hegemonic order, and you're not

supportive of it? It took, a lot of things, but a lot of things, it took water hoses and dogs on little children to turn some prominent people, black people in Birmingham around in favor of the Civil Rights movement. So I say that to say this: we don't really know what democracy is, so if we don't know what it is, can we take some, some level of uncomfortable ease in, and I use that oxymoron deliberately, in knowing that we don't have a complete answer, that we'll always be wrestling with permutations of what democracy is because some people are not comfortable with that. "Democracy is this..."

Ruth: And that's partly, partly a result of the evolution of language and, we're always in the process of constructing our ideas about everything, right?

David: It's kind of like writing theory. We talk about all this stuff about process, we've been talking at least since 1978 with Janet Emig's work if not before. We talk all this stuff about process, but what do we bring? Product. So that's, it's being kind of a, a metaphor for the way we look at language in general, right? We talk about all the terms like democracy, we're really sophisticated, and we look at these different theorists [indecipherable] but that's not what we're looking for. We're looking for a product that helps us solve our problems right now. A definitive determination of what democracy is now, so we'll solve all our problems now.

Scott: Good luck finding that.

David: That's what I'm saying. I mean, because Steve Mailloux talks about this in one of his speeches from RSA, how that, um, he got into this big argument with this newspaper guy who was criticizing him about being elusive. And Steve jokes at first, "Of course, I'm elusive. I'm a professor of critical theory." But how impractical that seems, even though Steve's goals are the goals we talked about earlier, achieving social justice, right? But how do you unpack that for a popular culture audience, in a way where they can embrace it? "Well, yeah, democracy is this, but it's not that, it is this, but it's not that, and maybe it is, but maybe it isn't." You can't present that to people on CNN. It just doesn't work. And so I think that's part of the struggle.

Tony: Um, I talked to you a little bit about some of the things I'm studying, and it brings me to that question too, I mean, some of the things that I'm, um, I guess interested in right now is writing center work, like I talked to you about, and, um, argumentation in the classroom, but it, I am coming from, actually coming from a conservative background, and admittedly right wing, is really fascinating to me to look at the history of our politics in America. Going back to the Enlightenment and what it meant back then to be liberal, which really is something I would have been according to that definition of it, you know at different times.

David: Classical liberalism, yeah.

Tony: And so the conception, I think of liberalism was a very open-minded type of thinking and debate and everything. I just, I think that's really interesting. I think that's something I'd be interested to study, but I wouldn't quite know how to study it either, looking at the ways that both religion and social groups in general, how all of these social groups, people with completely different ideologies, can come together, live together and be happy. I mean, it's, it's a big question.

David: It's a big question, and it's a messy question, right? Have you looked at, have any of you looked at, Cornell West's *Democracy Matters*? It's kind of interesting, even though it's like all over the place. I mean, he's been severely criticized for that book in terms of its cohesiveness or lack thereof. But I think he tries to wrestle with the evolution of what it means to have, as you say, a group of very different people with a varied agendas coming together and what that vision was like, to what extent it has been achieved because, he deals with moments. What moments do we see us achieving this even in, watch this, the articulation of it? Because remember we talked about the difference between the founders' vision of democracy – you know that's what the "I Have a Dream" speech is about: "I have a dream that one day this nation will live out the full meaning of its creed. We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men get ? (47.50). Okay, so you're saying this vision needs to be enacted that the founding fathers had. In essence that's what this is getting at, among other things. What West does is say okay let's find moments like the "I Have a Dream Speech" in literature, in history, and in religious culture, where there were moments where we were almost there in articulating what democracy is because if we get to those moments, then we might move toward actually achieving it. You know, because I did say you're right; a part of the problem is the terminology. For instance, I don't know if you've looked at "Racism without Racists" by Eduardo Bonilla Silva. Because he talks a little about the evolution of what liberalism means....He's trying to say is, a part of our problem in this setting (? 49.30) is define liberalism too narrowly, and because we have defined liberalism too narrowly, we don't realize the people we now call liberal can be racist too. That's the part of the problem he's getting at....Some people would say it's a product of local centrism or this platonic dualism; we tend to be either/or people. It's like "I know all Republicans are racist." "Well, how do you know that, darlin'?" "Well...because all Democrats are not" I meant, that's how they do it, right, something like that? Well, no, it's more complicated than that. And not just in terms of that very limited discussion he has on the evolution of liberalism as a word... but just the idea that color blindness can be not only dogma but pedagogy. When we're teaching somebody about something that doesn't actually exist we're doing some very commanding language. "You must be colorblind. That hasn't really done anything for black people, but you must be colorblind." You know, that kind of thing, so, yeah, that's a wonderful piece to look at. But then there are other people that you were telling me about, theorists that I haven't really looked at on liberalism. I would love for you guys to email me some of the books you're reading too.

Tony: Patricia Roberts Miller is the author of a book that I've been reading, and, um, she actually draws on a theorist named Arendt. I can't remember her first name but [the last name is] Arendt. I think she's in her fifties and really an advocate for conflict, really an advocate for people arguing with each other.

David: Kind of like what you get out of the Enlightenment, which was so but they didn't want to argue with others who didn't have that notion that knowledge was constructed the way Europeans said it was constructed, which is problematic, right? The whole savage civilization binary. Not n'tot becoming a kind of metaphor for the inferiority of the people of color; not just black people but anyone who didn't subscribe to their visions of what arts and sciences were. But I'd love to have that reference, I mean the other references you guys have mentioned, I'd love to take a look at them.

Tony: Yeah, I can definitely pass that on to you. One example she gives, she talks a little about totalitarianism, and one example she gives is people who follow Hitler and how they were able to rationalize it and actually feel like they were doing something good because they were doing something good, following the leader of their nation, which a lot of people see as a good thing.

David: Powerful.

Tony: Yeah, and they were able to dismiss some of the outrageous things they had to do, with that kind of mentality, basically without thinking about what they're doing. I don't want to simplify the situation too much because I don't really know too much about it, but that's one of the reasons that she advocates for conflict and arguing or always questioning powers and obstructions, basically. So it's real fascinating.

David: Which again, we'll talk about this later, I'm not absolutely sure what democracy is so I'll do it like a collage of things and within that image of a collage of things, questioning, but primarily questioning the status quo. This notion of America, love it or leave it, to me, is anti-democratic. Whatever democracy is, this love it or leave it is anti-democratic if by that you mean don't question it. Whatever democracy is, as a part of it is this perpetual, eternal, questioning spirit that points to the status quo where you're looking for things to question, because again, I think that's very Jeffersonian, in my reading of Jefferson. I mean I haven't read a lot of Jefferson but I've read enough to know that's a part of what he's getting at. At least in "Notes on the State of Virginia." So, yeah, we've got to pull this out. Of course he doesn't interrogate himself because he's caught in this same presumptions about patriarchal and racial hegemony that his culture is. And that's the other thing I do in that article on Blair and try to say well okay, not that we're excusing this stuff but understand it was unusual when people during this time didn't think this way.

Scott: Right

David: It's really easy to sweep past it, you know what I'm saying? I mean, blacks were culturally inferior – who didn't think that way? Well, there were some Europeans who didn't and I talk about one, a novelist, in that article on Blair in particular, but just because some people didn't, didn't mean that that wasn't mainstream white thinking. The majority of people North and South, got to a point after 1964 for example in which the majority of Americans were against the civil rights movement. You got their civil rights act passed, we're starting to see riots, enough is enough, that quickly. So you know, people now would look back and say well no, that wasn't enough, well now because no matter whether we're Republicans or Democrats or Independents, all of us have marched with King, right? I mean, it's that kind of mentality "of course we believe that stuff" no we didn't. "Of course we embraced that" no we didn't. Left side and right side, Martin Luther King was just as critical of the Republicans as he was of the Democrats. He was critical of everybody because that's what, as West would say, a prophetic individual does, he does or she does, interrogates the status quo.

Ruth: Jesus was pretty radical in that way.

David: Yeah, we'll talk more about that today, so is it okay to mention Jesus?

Ruth: It's okay with me (laughs).

David: Yeah, okay, you know, I don't really care because I'm just visiting here so I can say what I want to say (more laughter from all), but you have to kind of hear a little bit about what's going on with Jesus to see what's going on with the civil rights movement, which reminds me...I was a Lily Fellow at Samford University at Birmingham (that's where I fell in love with doing some of this research on the civil rights movement). There were some scholars there who had gone to a similar kind of series of seminar lectures on the civil rights movement and, you're gonna love this, where they talked about the civil rights movement for a whole month and did not mention the black church once.

Scott: Wow.

David: Is that nuts?

Ruth: Yeah

Scott: I don't know how you can separate it.

David: Yeah, I mean, I don't know how you can do it. It's not even about somebody being a fundamentalist or completely embracing everything that the Baptists embrace or whatever, but is there a core, and this is a part of what West was getting at, is there a core of democratic ideals that one can excavate from the practice of prophetic religion. That's really the question, right? You know, because you can say, "well, I don't really believe in the Bible," and okay, man, that's not your thing. I understand. Okay. Do your thing; don't believe in the Bible. But is there a core of democratic ideals that you can excavate in terms of prophetic religion? And that's really a big part in my mind of what the civil rights movement was about. Because there's still a debate about what King really believed. Some scholars say that he didn't believe in the Virgin birth or the bodily resurrection of Jesus, but that many of the ideals articulated in scripture were such that you had to believe them. Others say no, he didn't believe when he was at theological school but later he came to believe, I don't know which. I just know that you hear the powerful resonances of prophetic religion of the black church when you hear King talk. That's all I know. Do you guys have any other questions.

Scott: I feel like we've probably...

Ruth: Worn you out?

David: You know, Kathi said, "they're going to tear you up tonight." And I said, "well, they can go ahead because, like I told you, I'm gonna be so sleepy I'll say, "So what you're really saying is that Black sovereignty is militant, you're supporting ..."

Ruth: Well, I do want to ask you one more question.

David: Yeah, go ahead.

Ruth: I've been reading a book lately called *Composing Critical Pedagogies* by Amy Lee. It's one of the few books I've found that actually talks about actually enacting that kind of pedagogy in the classroom and I just wondered if you had any scholarly sources, books or articles, that you think are especially good that relate to that kind of stuff.

David: There's tons of stuff. Again, I don't know if you've read any Elaine Richardson's stuff. You've got to get her *African American Literacies* because she actually gives you examples, and even her *Hip Hop Literacies*, that's her latest book, but *African American Literacies* is a wonderful example. Um, bell hooks has an article that I always get the title mixed up, but it's been anthologized all over the place, when I was a young soldier in the Revolution, something to that effect, and what she does is give examples of people like June Jordan and what they do in the classroom to first of all talk about the legitimacy of multiple literacies. For example, June Jordan has this cool thing according to bell hooks where she takes this passage from *The Color Purple* and she has her kids translate it into standard American English, and it's hilarious. I don't know if you've ever done it.

Scott: No.

David: You can take any piece, and you're creative writing, you would love this, you can take any piece of dialect poetry or prose fiction and have them translate it into standard American English ... and then a light bulb comes on – oh, it's about functionality! Right? So that's in terms of the linguistic variety. But then when you talk about people like Elaine Richardson, she's one of the people doing a lot of work now on the kinds of issues you're talking about, kind of equipping people for a critical democracy, and what those lesson plans look like. As a matter of fact, she's one of the few people who's gotten away with doing that. Another person who's doing that in terms of African American rhetoric is Adam Banks.

Ruth: Oh, I've seen his name.

David: *Race, Rhetoric, and Technology*?

Ruth: Okay.

David: That book has blown up, as the kids say. He's a young man so I say "Dawg, it's blown up!"... Take a look at his, because he talks about how the lack of access in terms of technology is pretty much a kind of a microcosm of larger inequities that have gone on historically in terms of race and textual equality, so he's a really good person to take a look at, and then his writing is just flawless, beautiful...His book is put out by NCTE, a special series they have on literacy. But he's great, and you're talking about an awesome speaker. I've seen that dude get a standing ovation at an academic conference in like 30 seconds. I went "Wooooow, he's really, really good" So a good person to know, and no matter who calls him he seems to always have time for them...

Ruth: Well, thank you.

Tony: Yes, thanks.

Scott: Yes, we want to thank you so much for your time; it's been great.

David: Well, also, if you can send me some of the sources you're looking at... The cool thing about this, and you guys have already found this out, is you never catch up. I said, I'm not a criminal, obviously, but I almost wish that I were in prison just for a year so I could do the Malcolm X thing...Malcolm X got to read a whole lot. He didn't have a graduate degree or even an undergraduate, but he got to read through a whole library. I don't know if that's ever going to happen to me! So you read what you can. Graduate students are cool to have because you guys are not just going to read what's on your list. You're gonna explore other stuff. That's why, whenever I hear about people who have graduate students, I'm so jealous. So I'll get to see next year if I like it, because Kathi said, "Yeah, you may like it or you may hate it. That's why some people don't do graduate schools." Anyway, I enjoyed it very much!