

Interviewee: Andrea Lunsford [L]  
Interviewer: Ben Harley [H]  
Transcriber: Elizabeth McGhee Williams  
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### Transcript

H: All right. This is Ben Harley interviewing—

L: Andrea Lunsford.

H: —for the RSA oral histories project. So, Andrea, when did you first join RSA?

L: I joined RSA in 1972. So when the organization was founded in 1968, I had finished my master's degree, and I was teaching in Tampa, Florida, at a community college, and I didn't know anything about rhetoric. I had been discouraged from pursuing a PhD by my all-white male advisors who told me I should go home and have babies. So I'd gotten a job. I taught for a while at a high school in the day time and at a community college at night, and then I switched to the community college full-time. And one day in 1971, I got a free book from Oxford University Press called *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* by Edward P.J. Corbett—the second edition of that work. And I was teaching writing, but I didn't know anything about teaching writing 'cause all I'd ever done was to read British and American literature. I was pretty good at teaching reading, but not writing. And I read that book, and I just thought, "What a crock! I have been had!" Nobody had ever told me about any of this stuff. So I practically memorized the book. I got really mad at my old, white, male advisors. I decided I was going to try to go to graduate school where Professor Corbett was. And I also decided to try to apply to the 4Cs<sup>1</sup> conference. I don't know how I heard about it. But somehow I did, and I sent in a proposal, never thinking it would be accepted, but it was accepted. And my co-teacher, Beatrice Kunda, and I, and a young African-American woman in our classes named Cynthia Reese, went to Boston. We drove straight through from Tampa to Boston because we didn't have any money to stay overnight. And the 4Cs program was tiny—1972 in Boston—and that's the meeting where RSA was founded. That was the first meeting—first official meeting—of RSA. After it had kind of dwindled away after 1968, then they tried to make a comeback, and I didn't, of course, know any of this. At the 1972 4Cs, because it was also meeting at the same time that the Speech Communication Association of the Eastern States was meeting, so they all got together there. And they rekindled RSA, and of course I didn't know that. I didn't know Professor Corbett was at that meeting. I'd gave my little paper, and I got back in the car and drove all the way back to Tampa. But in the fall of that year, I went to Ohio State, where Professor Corbett was teaching, but there was no internet and no way to know what was going on. I just knew that he was there. I didn't get accepted right away. I was put on the waitlist. But finally, they let me in as a "mature" student, 'cause I'd been teaching for about 5 or 6 years. And I arrived in Columbus in the fall of 1972, and Professor Corbett was not teaching anything about rhetoric. [chuckles] He was teaching

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<sup>1</sup> Conference on College Composition and Communication.

eighteenth-century poetry about which I knew everything I wanted to know. I'd had a million courses on eighteenth-century literature—and the Bible as literature. That's what he was teaching. But one of the professors I had took me and said, "You want to meet Professor Corbett?" And I said, "Yes. I do." So he took me down the hall and introduced me to Ed. And by an unbelievable lucky break for me, Ed was just taking up editorship of the 3Cs journal,<sup>2</sup> and so he said, "Oh, you're interested in rhetoric? Would you like to be my assistant?" [laughing] I said, "Yes, please!" But I didn't know what I was getting in for. Anyway, that fall I joined RSA and have been a member ever since. But looking back, I was so hopelessly naive and just wanted to do nothing but study rhetoric. So I did, but it was all independent studies. I went to Professor Corbett every week, and I read from the Greeks all the way to Kenneth Burke and beyond. And then I learned the field of composition studies, really, by helping to edit the journal. So that's how I first became involved with RSA, and of course I've been involved ever since.

H: Can you tell me a little bit about the early days of the organization? What the scholarship was like? What the meetings and conferences were like?

[05:02]

L: Well I used to love to get the newsletter. I was in one of the retrospective panels earlier today where Janice Lauer and Richard Enos and some other people were talking about the first 25 years of RSA.<sup>3</sup> And Rich Enos mentioned the importance of the newsletter which served a huge bibliographical function. And in those days, again, we're talking when it was not possible to search for things like we can search for them today, and when libraries were not very accessible, unless it was your own library, and when scholarship on rhetoric was not gathered really anywhere in any systematic fashion. So the Rhetoric Society *Newsletter* took as one of its missions publishing bibliographies. And I would just wait for the copies to come. They were just magnificent bibliographies about many different subjects. In fact, I published a little piece in there about William Edmondstone Aytoun, a Scottish rhetorician whose papers I had been able to study when I was doing some work in Scotland. And so that was an early publication for me, but it was the idea that we could get access to work on rhetoric that we just wouldn't have had any other way to get. George Yoos and the work on the Rhetoric Society *Newsletter*, I thought, was tremendously important for our field. And then of course it morphed—I think it was in—when did it become the *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*? I should know that date. It might have been sometime in the late '70s.<sup>4</sup> I could look it up. I *will* look it up. But into, now, the robust scholarly journal that we have today, which I very much admire. I look forward to each issue, and I think Susan Jarratt has done a really amazing job as editor of *RSQ*. But scholarship in those early days, both on the composition side and the rhetoric side, was, to my mind, still pretty limited. I was all for the revival of classical rhetoric. I threw myself into that. I bought into the story of rhetoric as having begun in ancient Greece and moved onto Rome. I sort of just swallowed that

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<sup>2</sup> *College Composition and Communication*.

<sup>3</sup> I.e., session F15 at the 2018 RSA conference: "The RSA Fellows Remember: 50 Years in Retrospect, the First 25 Years."

<sup>4</sup> The *Newsletter* became *RSQ* in 1976.

wholesale. And it wasn't until the '80s that I started to question that particular narrative. So my early scholarship was about Alexander Bain, who was a very wonderful person to study, and I learned a lot by studying him and the other Scottish rhetoricians of the time. But I just looked around and saw other people doing really traditional scholarship in the history of rhetoric. And that's what we were doing. But on the composition side, people were really beginning to push because, I think, of the civil rights movement and the understanding that higher education had been held away from so many people for a long, long time. So there was the whole attempt to open up higher education to more people—to bring back or to *let in*—groups of people who had been excluded. And I really think about Mina Shaughnessy, I think about Geneva Smitherman, I think about many other people—Janet Emig, particularly—saying, “Students are important, and we need to think about not just white, male students who are at Harvard,” which a lot of scholarship had been done about those white male students at Harvard. But about all students. But these forces began to coalesce, I think, in our discipline. But composition, I think, was pushed further and faster to make changes to our discipline, whereas on the rhetoric side, I think we were a little slow. We were so busy trying to recover the classical tradition, which had been lost—for many, many, many reasons. One of them being the rise of writing, the power of writing, so as writing's cachet grew, rhetoric, with its emphasis on oratory and performance, went down. So there was a very important need to recover that classical tradition and to reinstate it. Really, we would like to have seen it at the heart of undergraduate and graduate education in the United States. I still would like to see that. So it took a while, then, to say, “Wait a minute, is this story of classical rhetoric that we've been telling ourselves for lo these many years—is that the only way to tell the story of rhetoric?” And then I think that women, women of color, men of color, started to really push on the boundaries. And then *now* we have so much wonderful work on—I went to the ASHR<sup>5</sup> panel yesterday, which is on diversity and rhetorical traditions, and there was wonderful panels on African rhetorics and Asian rhetorics, and I think we've come a long way in this 50 years.

[10:42]

H: Could you tell me, besides Professor Corbett, some of the key people you remember meeting and working [with] during those early years at RSA?

L: Well, Janice Lauer I met in those days. I met—I knew Ross Winterowd pretty well and James Kinneavy, who was a giant figure in our field. All these people were wonderful mentors—warm, kind, generous, ready to help at any turn. And Janet Emig, Mina Shaughnessy, who died in '77, I think, was a terrible loss. But at RSA, Richard Larson, Dick Young, Ed Corbett, Richard Lloyd-Jones—Jix Lloyd-Jones—these all white men. They were all white men. They couldn't help it. [laughs] But all of them were very generous to me. And Gary Tate from Texas<sup>6</sup>—another great important early helper. I also would like to point out, from the speech communication side—I was a graduate student at Ohio State in the '70s, and I was so lucky, again, that there was a robust group of rhetoricians in the speech comm department led by James Golden and

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<sup>5</sup> American Society for the History of Rhetoric.

<sup>6</sup> I.e., Texas Christian University.

Goodwin Berquist. And Golden and Berquist and Corbett worked together on a textbook.<sup>7</sup> Anyway, they were teaching courses in rhetoric, and they were instrumental in helping to build the whole speech comm side on RSA. The earliest board of directors of RSA I believe had four people from English but five from speech comm, and George Yoos from philosophy, and maybe there was one other person who wasn't from English or speech comm. But I think because I have been in English all my life I tend to maybe not say as much about the speech communication scholars as I should: Carroll Arnold, Henry Johnstone, founders of [*Philosophy & Rhetoric*]<sup>8</sup>—that journal. They were really very important at the time. And still.

H: Would you talk a little bit about some of the major events in your memories of RSA? Either things that stick out in your mind or maybe moments of shift?

L: I was at one of the early RSA meetings—the second one, I believe, that Charles Kneupper put together—that was the one where Ed Corbett delivered his “Where Are the Snows of Yesteryear?” talk, which was later published.<sup>8</sup> About the first 25 years on, he asked, “Where are we in terms of rhetorical scholarship?” So I remember that meeting vaguely. I remember going from paper to paper, and there was a lot of work there on classical rhetoric, which was of great interest to me. I was trying to remember if there was—I can't remember any women there except for Janice Lauer. Now there have to be other women, and I don't remember any people of color. Maybe there were. But that's a very early memory of mine. I also have a vivid memory of the ARS conference, which RSA was instrumental in bringing about, in 2003—that was the Alliance of Rhetoric Societies, and we met at Northwestern for several days. It was a semi-invited conference, but RSA spearheaded that effort to bring rhetoric societies and groups together, like the Kenneth Burke Society was represented, ASHR, ISHR,<sup>9</sup> RSA of course, and 4Cs, MLA<sup>10</sup>—groups that we thought all had rhetoricians in them that it would be so good if we could band together and work together to create more of a juggernaut, really, for establishing rhetoric as a discipline in its own right at universities. And I'm very disappointed that that effort didn't go much beyond 2003. So I don't know. Or every other year as RSA as far as we're concerned.

[15:38]

H: Speaking of institutional affiliations, would you speak a little bit about joining the American Council of Learned Societies?

L: Oh, wow. That was a huge effort. I have some notes actually in my room about what year we were finally admitted to the ACLS. So I just have to be very vague. But we—I think it was after 2003, but I think we worked on that at ARS, and certainly at RSA

<sup>7</sup> Likely a reference to *Essays on the Rhetoric of the Western World*.

<sup>8</sup> This was Corbett's keynote address at the 1986 RSA conference in Arlington, Texas. The full title of the talk was “Where are the Snows of Yesteryear? Has Rhetoric Come a Long Way in the Last Twenty-Five Years?” A version of the keynote is included in the collection *Selected Essays of Edward P.J. Corbett*, edited by Robert J. Connors.

<sup>9</sup> International Society for the History of Rhetoric.

<sup>10</sup> Modern Language Association.

meetings, to try to figure out how we could become a member of that august [chuckles] group. I was on a planning committee that worked toward that, but I didn't do the final draft. But it was years and years in the making, and finally to achieve that was quite, I think, a milestone in our career as an organization.

H: Can you speak a little as to why that was such a milestone for the organization?

L: Membership in ACLS is instrumental in terms of getting grants. So rhetoric was not recognized as a field of study on many grant applications. You couldn't apply for an NEH,<sup>11</sup> for instance, in rhetoric because there was no such category. But getting into the ACLS allowed us to become, in some ways, a category. So that was one very important, very practical thing. That if you wanted to apply for a fellowship or grant, the ACLS status of our society really helped.

H: You talked a little bit about how the organization has changed through the years. I was wondering if you might talk a little bit more about that and how do you think it's going to change in the future, looking forward?

L: I'm going to quote Kathleen Welch, who said something like this repeatedly. At one point, maybe in the late '80s, Kathleen said about RSA, "We are so white that we appear to be a blizzard." And I think that's still too true—that we are too white. And at this conference, I think, we've worked very hard at diversification and at attending to rhetorical traditions outside of the Greek and Roman so-called "Western" tradition. There are many panels that feature voices that wouldn't have been heard 25 years ago, wouldn't have been invited 25 years ago—not to mention 50 years ago. So while I think RSA has come a long way in that regard, *my* vision of rhetoric as the art, theory, and practice of ethical communication entails an inclusive view of rhetoric and rhetorical traditions. So the classical tradition in many ways has been exclusionary. It kept people out. And that I think we have got to continue to avoid, and I think we're trying hard to do that.

H: Is there anything else you'd like to add about kind of your memories of RSA or how you see it moving forward?

[19:36]

L: I'm going to say in my little talk tonight that I hope RSA would take up as part of its mission a striving for what I'm calling narrative justice. And I say that knowing full well how difficult that will be. But if you go back and look at the original mission statement of the RSA, it's—and this is 1968, in the midst of the civil rights movement, the culmination in many ways of everything just coming to such a tremendous head in 1968—these scholars got together and said that their mission would be to promulgate information about rhetoric and to sponsor panels. That was the mission. And that's not the mission that I want RSA to have. So it occurred to me a couple of years ago now, when I was on

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<sup>11</sup> National Endowment for the Humanities.

a panel about social justice—and of course, who’s not for social justice?—but it began to occur to me that our striving for social justice is foiled again and again because of stories that people are trapped in. Grand narratives, master narratives, or singular stories that people cannot get out of. And if you can’t—if you are so trapped by a story about you that you can’t get out of it, you will not get social justice. There’s no way for that to happen. So that’s how I came to this notion of narrative justice, of stories that are open, inclusive, inviting, playful even, and multiple. That they are not a single story: “All immigrants are animals and rapists.” That kind of a story will never allow for social justice. So that’s what I want. That’s what I want RSA to do. I want our mission to be about, first of all, interrogating our own story. What is the narrative that we are telling about rhetoric? Is it one that really encapsulates our highest and deepest values? And then to work on analyzing those singular stories, those master narratives, that are holding people hostage *and* to create other stories to displace those. So that’s my wish.

H: With the work that you’re seeing, this year in particular, are you seeing strides being made in that direction?

L: I think so. Yeah, I’ve been going to panels here where I think a lot of retelling of stories, remaking, reshaping, rejecting of those master narratives of those singular stories is going on. And that’s good, good work.

H: Thank you.

L: You’re welcome!