

Interviewee: Steven Mailloux [M]
Interviewer: Jennifer Juskiewicz [J]
Transcriber: Elizabeth McGhee Williams
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Transcript

J: This is Jennifer Juskiewicz interviewing Steven Mailloux. So, the first question:
When did you join RSA?

M: My first RSA meeting was 1994 in Norfolk. But I had heard of the RSA before that time [when I] was a graduate student in Ross Winterowd's Rhetoric, Linguistics, and Literature program. I sort of backed into "RLL," as it was called. We're talking about the mid-1970s—yes, that long ago—and I was interested in studying American literature [at] USC, University of Southern California, after graduating from Loyola University of Los Angeles. During that time, theory hit: continental philosophy being imported into the United States through English and comparative literature departments. When I [tried] to find out how to study theory along with American lit [at USC], I found that it wasn't possible to do so within the required history of criticism course that was being offered. Ross had established this new RLL program in which you could specialize in composition, linguistics, or literature. Most people went into it to specialize in composition, and I was teaching rhet/comp, but I was not really interested in pursuing that as my major area. So I went into Ross's office and said, "I would like to study theory, and is there any chance if I went into your program, I could do that?" He was very, very nice and welcoming, and so I was in the first cohort of the RLL program. But whereas everybody else was specializing in comp, I chose literature but got a lot of rhetoric and composition along the way, both in my teaching and in the courses that we were taking. The courses included some also taught in the speech communication department, which was right next door to the English department, and so I took courses or sat in on courses with Walt Fisher. I was getting Ross Winterowd from English, Walt Fisher and others who were doing theory: Stanley Fish was there for a year, and he was very influential. But it was mostly theory that I was interested in and how one could do cultural studies in American lit. The rhetoric was just kind of an extra thing that I was interested in, especially for my teaching, but not as a scholarly field. And I remember—I still remember—having in our mailbox the announcement of this new organization called the Rhetoric Society of America because Ross Winterowd was one of the founders of that society. On the announcement he wrote something like—it would be to all the people who were in RLL, and maybe other graduate students as well, but I know specifically for the RLL—he wrote, "Do you know about this new organization?" Stop. "If you do, are you a member?" Stop. "If not, why not?" I remember that very vividly, but I didn't become a member. My thing was what became literary theory, critical theory. I was interested in reader-response criticism and worked with Stanley Fish, wrote about Wolfgang Iser, Jonathan Culler, all of these people. Fish at that time was not really doing rhetoric, per se, explicitly. But it was Ross and the other people in the program—

Mike Feehan, Tim Crusius, and others—who were doing Kenneth Burke and theory. So I did get interested somewhat, I can see now. But I did not join RSA. Fast-forward—so that would be in the 70s—so all the way through the 80s as I became interested in my second [book project]. After my first, my dissertation, was published as *Interpretive Conventions* in '82, the proposal that I had for my next book, which got funded by the NEH,¹ was based on a certain theoretical perspective that I was becoming more and more skeptical about. [laughs] And I got this fellowship, got hired at the University of Miami. My first job was at Temple University. I got hired at the University of Miami, and they gave me the first semester off because of this NEH, and what I had proposed I no longer believed in. And so I like to say, “Rhetoric saved me.” So all of these courses that I’d taken and the interest I’d gotten then started developing, and I started working on what became cultural rhetoric study, rhetorical hermeneutics, and that’s where I started situating my work as not just US cultural studies and critical theory, but rhetoric. And I think that during the 80s, I’m not quite sure why, I never—I’m pretty sure I went to 4Cs² sometimes, and I was a regular member of MLA³—but I don’t think I went to RSA. But what I find in looking back at notes and my CV and stuff is the first time I went to RSA was to talk about sophistry and rhetorical pragmatism in 1994.

[06:42]

J: Who did you present with? Who were some of the people that you were seeing around you? Do you remember, early on?

M: Yeah. I know that Susan Jarratt, sophistry was really important. But I don’t really recall too much about those really early days or who I was working with. It was important—I mean, I had no memory of this until I looked back at this—but it was important to work on the history of rhetoric in relationship to sophistry because this allowed a way of historicizing theory for me. And the sophists were a good example of—one could talk about the sophists in relation to poststructuralism. And I remember Susan’s work. And I think Susan Jarratt would be one of the people that was important for me in seeing someone do theory, feminist theory and real solid history. I think I probably started also going to ISHR—International Society of the History of Rhetoric—during those years as well because that was another way to do history and theory. Victor Vitanza was using the term “the third sophistic,” and I remember being interested in that. Again, the combination of theory with rhetoric.

J: So then one of the key features for RSA for you was the way it mixed theory and rhetoric?

M: That was one of the things. It was also [the opportunity to] see old graduate student friends. But, perhaps most important, ISHR and RSA were two of the conferences where I consistently went to the sessions. Partly because the whole reason that I got into being a professor in the first place was that it was the only job I could think of where

¹ National Endowment for the Humanities.

² Conference on College Composition and Communication.

³ Modern Language Association.

I could be a perpetual student. And RSA and ISHR have provided opportunities not only for networking, seeing people that I'm interested in, but actually going to sessions on something entirely different and seeing where the conversation is. As I say to my graduate students, "If you want to enter into publishing, you need to know where the conversation is." So that's been consistent. It's true today, of going to RSA and learning new things.

J: So if, when you look back—and I know you said you had to consult your notes—

M: Yeah.

J: —but when you look back on your time in RSA, at any point, are there any particular moments or memories that stand out to you?

[09:56]

M: Yeah, there are a couple. One is—let's see, it was 2000 when Carolyn Miller became editor of *RSQ*. I think I joined the editorial board of *RSQ* at that point. She asked me, for one of her inaugural issues, to do something on [disciplinary histories]—I don't know if she said apply rhetorical hermeneutics to the history of the disciplines of speech communication, English, and composition—but I was interested in identity formation and the performance of identity. I was working on racial identities in cultural studies and the performance of race and developed a notion of identity as [interpreted being: how you] interpret yourself, how others interpret you, and how you interpret yourself through how others interpret you. I had applied it to [the academic career of] William S. Scarborough, the first African-American member of the MLA. I was interested in the way that he self-identified as an African American but also as a classicist. And there were times, as a member of the American [Philological] Association, that he would say, at least in his memoirs, that he was respected for what he did in classics and his racial identity was secondary to his professional identity [when he gave his papers]. But when he went to the hotel to get a room, it was very different. So I was interested in the power of disciplinary identities, and Carolyn gave me this opportunity to write about that. And I did a kind of history of the fragmentation of rhetoric in the twentieth century, and she published that in her inaugural issue.⁴ There were some responses from both sides [i.e., English and speech communication] about how I didn't get it right. [laughs] The conjunctions of those [articles and responses] on disciplinary identities eventually [led to] a book⁵ in which I responded to some of the critiques from these disciplines. Here [at RSA meetings] you have people from communication studies and composition that you wouldn't [usually] get at the same conference. But at RSA, you do.

⁴ Mailloux's article "Disciplinary Identities: On the Rhetorical Paths between English and Communication Studies" appeared in issue 30.2 of *RSQ*. It helped inaugurate a series of *RSQ* articles published under the heading of "Rhetorical Paths in English and Communication Studies."

⁵ I.e., *Disciplinary Identities: Rhetorical Paths of English, Speech, and Composition*, published in 2006 by the Modern Language Association.

So that is just one memory. When David Zarefsky took over as—let’s see, when would that have been?—when he took over as president, he asked me to give the keynote at one of the RSAs.⁶ And so I gave the keynote, and I still remember speaking before the large audience we have for these keynotes. I started off with a clip from *West Wing* that included the president criticizing a priest’s interpretation of St. Paul in his homily, and the president ended by saying, “All hacks off the stage, right now. That’s a national security order.” After that clip, I said, “I realize that it is somewhat dangerous to begin with the imperative ‘all hacks off the stage,’ but there you go,” and went on to talk about the role of rhetoric [today]. So that was a memorable moment: doing the keynote for RSA. And then I was one of the four speakers when RSA was the main sponsor of ARS, the Alliance of Rhetoric Societies. I gave a paper called “Places in Time: The Inns,” i-n-n-s, “and Outhouses of Rhetoric.” This, you know, brought together a lot of people from RSA meetings and members of the association to this great conference that we had in September of 2003 at Northwestern. And so I still remember giving that talk. And Jim Aune responding to it, and his line [chuckles] was something like, “It’s always difficult—it’s a challenge to respond to a paper by Steve Mailloux. He always says niceness to power.” [laughs] This nice little double-edged compliment/critique. And there was definitely some truth there, and then he went on to give a great talk.⁷ And Mike Leff [chaired our session]. Mike had been really instrumental for me, another important person in ISHR and RSA, because he helped me to cross the disciplinary [divide]. I just always thought that since I did rhetoric it’s going to be really easy going to the National Communication Association, or I guess then it was called Speech Communication [Association], and it was like going to [a foreign land]. I didn’t know the acronyms, I didn’t know the key people, I didn’t get the jokes. And so it was an interesting example of something that you think is going to be real easy: “They do rhetoric, I do rhetoric,” you know. But the disciplinary identities and histories were very different. RSA brings those different disciplines together. In fact, what I’ve found over the years at RSA is that I can’t always tell when I’m talking to somebody what disciplinary training they’ve had because we’re sharing a certain interdisciplinary ground and a membership in a society that sees itself as interdisciplinary.

[16:57]

J: So bearing that in mind, how do you think that RSA has changed over time?

M: [...] My relation to RSA in terms of what’s changed has to do with things that are very important, but not in terms of ideas. It’s in terms of how large it is now, how there are people, younger people, that I don’t recognize. But so much of it is the same for me because many of the people, even though some are retiring, have been here[...] [There are people who have] passed away—Ross Winterowd, Wayne Booth, others—that no longer are on the stage. But there are many that continue to be in the same scene, and

⁶ Zarefsky served as president of RSA from 2006-2007. Mailloux’s keynote, “One Size Doesn’t Fit All: The Contingent Universality of Rhetoric,” was part of the 2006 conference and was published in *Sizing Up Rhetoric*, edited by Zarefsky and Elizabeth Benacka and published in 2008 by Waveland Press.

⁷ In 2006, Mailloux’s and Aune’s talks were published in issue 92.1 of *Quarterly Journal of Speech*.

that's a kind of continuity for me. Certainly the interdisciplinary, crossdisciplinary, even transdisciplinary discussions that have gone on have always been there. Certainly the topics that we discuss have changed. The theoretical terrain certainly has changed.

J: How?

[19:48]

M: Well, theory—remember I've been around for a really long time—theory hit when I was in graduate school in the 70s and then evolved by the time I went to Syracuse University, where we changed the curriculum in the 80s from literature-centered to one organized around critical theory and cultural studies. You know, this was—not that we were national news—but curriculum reform because of theory and cultural critique was national news, about changing the curriculum, expanding the canon, redefining what counts as basic Western knowledge, expanding it to a more global [perspective], all these things informed by theory. Theory was something that everybody had to know about. It was the cutting edge of thought. That lasted through the 80s into the 90s. I left Syracuse [in 1991], after we successfully changed the curriculum, going to UC Irvine—basically one of the centers, so to speak—a decentered center of theory, where people like Jacques Derrida, Hillis Miller, Murray Krieger, were my colleagues, Wolfgang Iser, who I'd written about in my dissertation. I was really the first person that they hired that was at least a fellow traveler with rhetoric and composition, and it really was a big deal for UCI faculty, who saw composition as a service, not a scholarly field. And so they hired me as a kind of bridge person between rhetoric and composition, taught by lecturers and contingent faculty, and the rest of the department who were into literature, cultural studies, and theory. So there I was able to bring to bear rhetoric in a way, with support of surprising people that I didn't necessarily expect—Hillis Miller was a big supporter. So at that point, high theory was something you needed to know something about no matter your field—even if it was only to be able to fight against people that were theory-heads. You needed to know it. So at that point, theory across rhetorical studies was also really a big deal, and that just is no longer the case. It's not that theory doesn't make a difference anymore within the RSA, but it's not within the general university landscape seen as the cutting edge. Now, particular theories have developed. But now one can't assume that people will see theory, especially poststructuralist versions of it, as the “what you need to engage when you're doing your work.” Specific theories, though, influenced by that—the new materialisms, certain kinds of feminisms, certain kinds of ecological criticisms, certainly digital media theoretical frameworks—are all influenced by all of this [past theory]. But those are all individual theoretical perspectives—as pervasive as they are, again across disciplines—but it's not the same power that theory once had. So that's been a change in RSA—but it's not just RSA, it's more the larger intellectual landscape.

J: So how do you think RSA is going to continue to change moving ahead?

[24:36]

M: I know this particular conference that we've had this weekend has made me think a little bit differently about what that might mean. Two things in particular, and one is a little embarrassing. [laughs] When David Zarefsky and Greg—I think it was Greg Clark, at least, it was a couple of people—brought up RSA as [currently] an umbrella group, that showed me, because I'm no longer on the board, and maybe I've been a little negligent about going over the last couple of years to business sessions and things like that, I hadn't thought of it that way because I was part of the ARS, and there was a lot of nervousness about what they said: the poaching [of members from other societies]. And RSA kind of stepped back from it. And so ARS was seen as the alliance of all the rhetoric societies; RSA was just one. But then as David said, they weren't planning on having any more conferences of ARS, as important as that conference was. And it was a great conference, very memorable to me, as I said. But I see in retrospect that it is that RSA kind of took over the umbrella thing. But I just didn't notice it. [laughs] Even though people like Mike Leff said, "Let's have some representation of RSA at the MLA"—the Modern Language Association. So there was a session we did right after ARS that was "ARS Revisited."⁸ So I guess then RSA saw itself, at least the leadership, saw it more as this umbrella group, and I now see, "Yeah, that's what I've been part of, but I didn't quite realize it." And when I think about it, that's why ISHR has been having its seminar [at RSA]. So I'm a little embarrassed that I didn't quite realize that about RSA. [laughs] So that's one important thing. The other thing is that there has been some talk about possible ways that the rhetoric societies, or RSA, or other kinds of associations of learned societies might be able to comment on the current media, political scene of hyperpartisan politics. There have been some meetings of people talking about that here, so I've come away thinking that that might be something I will be participating in through RSA. And then [there's] the relationship of rhetoric and religion. I think that's going to be something that, in the future, RSA's going to be a great site for. I've gone to a couple of sessions on that [topic] during the weekend, and so I'm hoping, since that's where my [current] work is right now—working on Kenneth Burke, critical theory, and Jesuit rhetoric—I'm hoping that [discussion is] going to continue. [RSA is] a great venue for that to happen because it's also interdisciplinary, crossdisciplinary, transdisciplinary.

J: So what are your hopes for the organization's future? Is it to—

[28:42]

M: Yeah, I think my hopes are it would continue to be a [multidisciplinary] site with even more disciplines. I wish there were more anthropologists, political scientists, psychologists, sociologists and [more in] philosophy and literature, that were coming to RSA, that we could be even more multidisciplinary, so more kinds of talks. I think that RSA is really open to that, and one of the great places where those kinds of discussions can take place. I hope that RSA continues to figure out various publishing venues for its

⁸ The December 2003 MLA session was actually called "Rhetorical Allies: Literature, Communication, and Composition – An Alliance of Rhetoric Societies Update." Sponsored by the MLA Division on the History and Theory of Rhetoric and Composition, the session included papers by Mailloux, Leff, and Jarratt.

members. So that the RSA Series in Transdisciplinary Rhetoric,⁹ where I published my last book, *Rhetoric's Pragmatism*, those kinds of opportunities in transdisciplinarity—and some of the books that have come out of that series, I really feel honored to be part of it—I hope that continues. I hope that the initiatives that some people are talking about of RSA possibly leading the way, or at least being a big participant, in some kind of public statement, some kind of intervention in contemporary politics, using our rhetorical expertise both theoretically and practically. I'm always going to want to hope that theory of various kinds continues. That's something I'm nostalgic about, but I think that it also continues to have [relevance]—new materialisms, for example—some of which I'm very [pauses] not opposed to but skeptical of, have a critique of. But having a dialogue on something like humanism, or rhetorical humanism, beyond posthumanism. This is the place where we can have that dialogue, and that sense of possibility for the future is what I hope continues both theoretically and practically. So I'm hoping that I'll be able to go to a few more of these RSAs and feel that I can continue as a student as well as some kind of contributor to the ongoing conversation.

J: Excellent. Well, thank you so much.

M: [Thank you].

⁹ A book series published by Penn State University Press.