

Interviewee: Carolyn Miller [M]
Interviewer: Peter Simonson [S]
Transcriber: Elizabeth McGhee Williams
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Transcript

S: I'm Peter Simonson interviewing Carolyn R. Miller on May 30th? [checks date] 31st, 2018. So Carolyn, when did you first join RSA?

M: Well, you know, I don't really remember. [laughs] It must have been in the late 80s because I think I was elected to the board in '92, so I must have been a member before then. [laughs] But that's as close as I can date it. I don't recall my initial involvement with RSA; for some reason, it does not stand out.¹

S: Do you remember when you first heard about the organization?

M: No, I don't. [laughs] It was probably from Michael Halloran, my dissertation director. I had finished in '84. As my mentor, I think I was still sort of relying on him to negotiate the landscape—the organizational/intellectual landscape. Because I felt myself connected both to the English department world and the communication department world. I was a member both of NCA²—or SCA³ as it was then, probably—and the 4Cs.⁴ I remember RSA, you know, must have been very small and not particularly influential at the time. I don't know, I may have gotten involved through one of the early—well, I don't know. Alright, I'm totally free-associating here. Michael Halloran was conference director for the '92 conference in Minneapolis, which was the first one outside Arlington. I never went to any of the Arlington ones. But I did go to that one so that might have been my first introduction—in which case I got elected to the board right away somehow. And I don't know how that would've happened. [laughs]

S: Welcome to the association! [chuckles]

M: Right, right. [laughs] “We need you—we're desperate!”

S: How would you describe the organization when you first joined it?

M: Well, small and I guess I'd say inconspicuous in the general landscape of both publication and conference sponsorship. I'm also now trying to remember the date of my first publication in *RSQ* which was probably around '88.⁵ So I must've heard about it by then. [laughs] Again, I don't have that date right at the tip of my fingertips. I should've

¹ After a subsequent check, Miller reports that she had a straight run of issues of *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* since at least 1976, so she must have joined while in graduate school.

² National Communication Association.

³ Speech Communication Association, which changed its name to NCA in 1997.

⁴ Conference on College Composition and Communication.

⁵ Miller's “Aristotle's ‘Special Topics’ in Rhetorical Practice and Pedagogy” was included in issue 17.1 of *RSQ*, published in late 1987.

looked that kind of thing up. I don't know why I submitted there exactly. It was a piece on Aristotle's special *topoi*, and it was clearly not appropriate for 3Cs,⁶ and I didn't think I could get it into *QJS*,⁷ so that seemed to be the place to go, I guess. Again, I can't recuperate any of that. I might have some stuff in my files about that submission but not in my brain. Sorry!

[both chuckle]

S: Not at all. So that first conference, when you say "inconspicuous," do you mean inconspicuous sort of nationally and institutionally?

M: Yeah, yeah. It was just not a particularly important venue, I think, for anyone. Those of us interested centrally in rhetoric I think were still sort of trying to find a place, find a way. And there were people like Mike Leff, for example, who would show up at 4Cs, not every time but occasionally. And a few of us from 4Cs would show up at NCA. So we were all trying to find out, you know, "Where's the rhetoric going on?" And because I had no colleagues in my own department in rhetorical studies—there were a few in the comm department at NC State (I should say that I was in the English department). Again, we were all just exploring and trying to find each other and find out, "Where's the conversation going to happen?"

[05:08]

S: Can you remember that first conference you went to? What that was like? You said it was small. Do you have any memories that stand out?

M: No, I really don't. [laughs] I'd have to go back to my CV to even remember what paper I gave there.⁸ It might have been the one that I ultimately published in *RSQ*. I'd have to check. I didn't do my homework for this interview, obviously. I'm sorry.

S: [laughs] No, it's—

M: Had I known the questions I might have reread my CV.

S: Do you remember what RSA was doing when you first joined? What its project or goals were? Or the sense of the organization?

M: I think it was just trying to stay alive, in an important sense. I remember there was a kind of a big debate about moving the conference away from Arlington⁹ because Chuck

⁶ The journal *College Composition and Communication*.

⁷ *Quarterly Journal of Speech*.

⁸ Miller's CV lists her 1992 RSA presentation as "Reading Darwin, Reading Nature, or, on the *Ethos* of Historical Science," co-presented with S. Michael Halloran.

⁹ I.e., at The University of Texas at Arlington, which had a doctoral track in rhetoric within its English program. The RSA summer conferences were held there in 1984, 1986, 1988, and 1990. See S. Michael Halloran's "The Growth of the Rhetoric Society of America: An Anecdotal History," published in issue 48.3 of *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*.

Kneupper had sponsored these first four just sort of on their own. And I don't know how the RSA connection was made. I think it was just sort of done in the name of RSA. There wasn't an apparatus in the organization to really set up a conference, so I think Kneupper just said, "I'm gonna do this [laughs] and call it RSA." And so after he died, then what happens? And I think at that point, the organization decided, "Yeah, let's keep this up, and let's not make it an Arlington thing." Whoever interviews Michael Halloran this afternoon—he will certainly remember all of that better than I because he chaired that [1992] conference as incoming president. But again, I think it was just a matter of, it was all very casual, very low budget, very just sort of making it up as we go along.

S: And so that was the 90s that you first became active?

M: Yeah, yeah. Late 80s, early 90s.

S: Was there any sense at that time that cultural studies was on the horizon?

M: I don't think so. I think the only person who had that kind of an inkling was a guy named Walter Beale at UNC Greensboro who wrote an article saying something—

[sound of door opening and closing in background]

M: —I think the title was something like "Rhetorical Studies is Cultural Studies."¹⁰ But I don't think anyone else was really paying attention to cultural studies at that time.

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

M: Okay. Well, somehow it became less inconspicuous. [laughs] Certainly in my intellectual life, it became, over time, the primary organization with which I identify, to which I have some kind of loyalty, and that was a very gradual process. Part of it had to do with my service on the board and as president. I chaired the '96 conference in Tucson. So I would have been president from '96 to '98, and then I was past president. So once you get on the board you have, like, a decade's worth of service ahead of you and that got me involved and invested.

I think if I can make any claim to having made a difference in the organization—it wasn't that we really had an agenda when I was president. I saw my job as simply keeping the thing going. We didn't take any major initiatives that I recall, except that I was interested in bringing more NCA members in. I knew a lot of rhetorical studies was going on in communication departments because my sort of boundary-straddling positionality, and I just thought, "Where are the NCA people?" Because most of the people on the board when I served on the board were from English departments. I think there were a couple who weren't—Mike Leff probably being the major exception. And my one claim to fame is I got Jerry Hauser interested. I think I was on the nominating committee that

¹⁰ Beale's "Rhetoric in the Vortex of Cultural Studies" was included in the 1992 RSA conference's proceedings collection, edited by Arthur Walzer.

nominated him for the board. And once he got involved, you know, whoosh! He knew how to take an organization and run with it. He got very invested in it.

The theme for the Tucson conference was the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of *The Prospect of Rhetoric*, the NCA developmental rhetoric program. And the keynote speakers were Ed Black and Lloyd Bitzer.¹¹ Rich Enos had suggested this as a possible theme to me because he had noticed this was the twenty-fifth anniversary of the 1971 publication. And I thought, “This is perfect because this is a theme that will draw in NCA rhetoricians”—it should—and the keynote speakers, again, being from the NCA side of things should attract more submissions. And I’ve never done the data to see how the membership changed over time, how many NCA rhetoric people we actually drew to Tucson, but I know there were more than there had been in the past. So I think that was at least part of—the beginning of a turning point in the organization where we became more ecumenical and more bi-departmental, if you will. Although it’s always been part of the [RSA] constitution and always been part of the—I went back and read the first constitution, which makes specific allowances that, if I can remember this correctly, the top two vote-getters from English will be elected, the top two vote-getters from communication will be elected, and then top [vote-getters] from sort of every other discipline that might be represented, and then there was some other way of filling it out. But there was a very deliberate strategy in the first constitution to embed a kind of ecumenicalism within the structure. It didn’t seem to take very well, and I think that early constitution was ignored as much as it was followed. In part because, as a young bootstrap organization, I think there were some years when nothing happened. In the early 70s and mid-70s, I don’t think RSA really did much of anything. So there was a lot of floundering in the early years.

[13:12]

S: So was Michael Halloran NCA-affiliated like you?

M: Yes. His department—the department I got my degree from—was a department of language, literature, and communication. The degree was a degree in communication and rhetoric, so it was not a traditional English department, and it had humanists of a variety of stripes: American studies, linguistics, technical communication, rhetorical studies. Michael really was the only one [i.e., rhetorician] at the time, and his degree was from the same department, so he was not—[laughs] I probably shouldn’t say it this way, but I was going to say he was not polluted by being a member of an English department, and therefore I did not inherit—you know, I was employed by an English department and went back to being employed by an English department, but I was sort of inoculated, I think, with comm studies during my PhD work and started attending NCA and the Eastern Communication Association, some of the regionals as well.

S: As far as you know, were Michael and you the first NCA-affiliated presidents of RSA?

¹¹ Bitzer and Black were the coeditors of 1971’s *The Prospect of Rhetoric: The Report of the National Developmental Project*, a project sponsored by the Speech Communication Association.

M: [pause] I think so, yes. I think so. Now, the first president who was a communication studies *department* member was Jerry Hauser, and I can't remember the date on that. That was in the early 2000s, I guess. Oh, and Fred Antczak was in a department of rhetoric. He preceded Jerry.¹² And then Michael, not from an English department. I think all of the other presidents were from English.

S: You mentioned coming into RSA being your primary intellectual home as a prominent memory. Are there other memories that stood out, maybe after that point?

[15:32]

M: Well, the conference continued to grow in size and importance, and then the institutes were instituted. I attended not all of them but most of them, so maintained a kind of annual commitment to attending. [pauses] I'm going to just kind of complicate the story a little bit here. [chuckles] One of the other important venues for many of us in English rhetorical studies had been the Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition. The summer conference, which—and again I don't have the dates on that—but they ran that annually for quite a few years and then they, I guess they just sort of wore their faculty out trying to do that, and I think they went to a biannual or themed kind of thing.¹³ And so RSA kind of picked up when Penn State dropped off as a summer conference where rhetoricians gathered in a smaller, less formal venue than you get at the big major disciplinary conferences. So I think that was another way in which RSA became important to quite a number of us, was with the falling off of the Penn State conference. Other specific memories? Well, service as the editor of *RSQ*. That was a huge job! [laughs] Boy, I'm not sure what to say about that. I think, you know, I agreed to do it in part because of my commitment to the organization, in part because of Greg Clark, whom I succeeded, twisted my arm, talking me into it saying, "It's not that hard." [laughs] But again, it gave me a real inside view of what are people thinking about? What are they working on? Where does the field think it's going? And how do we as a discipline manage our intellectual work and help each other with our intellectual work and mentor the young? And I think this is an experience that every editor has, just to be amazed at the generosity of reviewers in working with submissions and cultivating them, curating them, if you will. [laughs] Just sort of watching the dynamics of the interaction. There again, when I chose reviewers, I tried very hard to always choose one reviewer from English and one from comm studies to try to ensure that the approach and the way that a problem or issue is pitched and the way it develops can speak to rhetoricians with both kinds of training and both kinds of interest to try to integrate and knit together those somewhat disparate communities.

S: How have you seen that particular nexus, between the communication side and the English side, evolve within the organization?

¹² Hauser was president of RSA from 2002 – 2003, and Antczak from 2000 – 2001.

¹³ In personal communication with Miller, Jack Selzer, who was on the Penn State English faculty during this period, confirms that the first conference was in 1982 and the last annual conference in 1995; after that, the conferences ran on a biennial basis from 1997 to 2011.

[19:54]

M: Well, I think it's been terrifically important. The ARS¹⁴ powwow that happened at Northwestern—the date is going to escape me here—that Mike Leff and Andrea Lunsford put together, I think that was another very important venue at a time when RSA was trying to figure out its position in the map of rhetoric organizations. I think it kind of wanted to be the premier rhetoric organization but couldn't just say so. [laughs] But I think out of that confabulation, if you will, grew the realization on the part of everybody that this was the natural role for RSA. I know that—who was it that said this? It might have been Jerry Hauser, it might have been Mike Leff, that some of their [comm studies] colleagues hadn't believed it would work, hadn't believed that they really would find anything of interest in talking to English rhetoricians but discovered in that meeting that they did and that the conversation was worth having. I think it was at that point that some of the comm studies rhetoricians realized that there was something outside of NCA that would be worth their while. And so the involvement of NCA rhetoricians began to grow, and I think that that has made rhetorical studies as we know it now much richer and much more diverse and just has made the conversations much more interesting and productive, to have these fields speaking to each other on a regular basis and have the journal deliberately try to address both communities.

S: Do you have a sense of the doxa in English departments at the time of the ARS with regard to comm?

M: Well, a lot of the conversations that I heard, and occasionally continue to hear, is that there is still real turf issues within individual institutions: “Those people won't collaborate” or “They think they own this, we think we own—”, “We can't get the conversation started,” “They're just not cooperative.” And yet when you get outside what so often seems like the zero-sum game that happens in any individual university, when you get outside of that in a venue like RSA, then I think the conversations can happen and people are willing to talk. One can only hope that it will trickle back down into the universities as institutions, and I know that the work that Roxanne Mountford and Bill Keith are doing is very much in this vein.¹⁵ I think each battle in each institution has to be different as to whether that cooperation can happen and, if so, how. Because institutional power structures and personalities vary so much. And whatever happens—this is one of the things I've learned in my old age—nothing is permanent. You get a new dean, you get a new provost, you get a different kind of university budgeting process, and the whole thing could blow up, whatever you've constructed.

S: With that in mind—

[both laugh]

¹⁴ The Alliance of Rhetoric Societies, which met in 2003.

¹⁵ See, for example, William Keith and Roxanne Mountford's "The Mt. Oread Manifesto on Rhetorical Education 2013," published in 2014 in volume 44.1 of *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*.

S: —and looking toward the future, how do you think RSA is going to continue to develop in years to come?

M: Well, I hope it can continue to serve as this sort of outside reference point—again, a transdepartmental forum where institutional politics can be superseded. And perhaps some of the real work that we have to do both intellectually and politically is to figure out how to make the achievements that we have in RSA transportable into institutional contexts. And that's a real tough assignment because it means changing institutional structures one by one, and those structures, especially English departments, are just so old and hoary they're really hard to dislodge. And when you *do* dislodge them, as has happened in some cases—like University of Kentucky, University of Iowa has sort of the between-department program or department, University of Texas has one¹⁶—those can be, especially in their early years, very vulnerable, very unstable.

[26:03]

S: What are your hopes for the organization's future?

M: You know, keep on keeping on! [laughs] I don't know whether I would hope for it to supersede NCA or the 4Cs. I think that's kind of unrealistic and maybe not even desirable. And I guess I'm not much of a visionary. I think what we're doing now is extremely valuable and very productive, and I don't know if we could do better. Higher education is changing, though, nationally and even internationally. Where it goes in the next decade, what things will look like in terms of state funding and public support, is kind of scary. And whether RSA can get out ahead of that process and secure a foothold in whatever the new dispensation looks like—that may be the biggest challenge. But I sure don't know how to do that. That's why I'm retired. [laughs]

S: I'm going to double back and ask one question that wasn't on the list. As I look at the early founders of RSA, I see a lot of guys.

M: Yeah, yeah!

S: I should've double-checked this, but were you the first woman president of the organization?

M: No. No, I was not. I think I was the second.¹⁷ Kathleen Welch preceded me. And Jan Swearingen succeeded me, so there were three women in a row, interestingly enough. That probably is a generational thing. The early presidents—well, Ed Corbett was

¹⁶ I.e., the University of Kentucky's Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Studies; the University of Iowa's Department of Rhetoric; and The University of Texas at Austin's Department of Rhetoric and Writing.

¹⁷ According to information available on the history page of RSA's website (rhetoricsociety.org), Winifred Horner was the first female president, serving 1988–89, and Janice Lauer was the first woman to serve on the board, elected in 1978 (with the exception of a student member, Dorothy Guinn, in 1977).

president for a decade, I guess. [laughs] And I think that was when the organization went into abeyance. It really wasn't operating according to its constitution there for a while. I guess it probably goes back to the Arlington conferences, which I think, in retrospect, might be seen as resuscitating the organization—just now as we talk about it, I'm thinking this way—which then inspired the continuation after Kneupper's death. And then that got more people to join, particularly from English departments. And that was my generation. And rhetoricians in English departments by and large were women, and so that sort of brought the generation of women into it after this founding generation—the Richard Youngs, the Ross Winterowds, the Henry Johnstones. I don't know who all else was in that founding generation. But there just—there weren't women in either department at that point, full professors. So I think that is, to a large extent, both generational and departmental because of the heavy involvement of English departments, at least in that sort of middle period.

S: Can you reflect a little on what that was like for you at that point in your career, entering an organization that was shifting a little bit?

[30:02]

M: Well, I didn't know that it was shifting because I really was not much aware of its past. It didn't have a sense of itself as having a tradition because it had sort of had gone into abeyance for a while. It started for me with that '92 conference, I think—sort of *de novo*. It wasn't until later that I became aware that, "Oh, there was this previous generation that really got it started." So I was quite nonplussed to be elected to the board. I hadn't even been aware I was a candidate. I was just sort of—Rich Enos called me up and said, "Congratulations, you've been elected!" I thought, "What?" [laughs] It kind of came out of nowhere, my involvement in the organization in that way. And then when I was elected president, I just sort of did my best to follow in the footsteps of my predecessor, and the big work was planning the conference, and that's where I saw that maybe I could do something that would make a bit of a statement.

S: And that was the 25 year—

M: Yeah, that was the choice of the theme and the keynote presenters. I'm not sure I can say much else about that. Again, this was a long time ago.

[both laugh]

S: Is there anything else you'd like to say or remember?

M: [pause] Let me just put this on the table. I'm not sure how important it is. But when I was serving on the board—in virtue of my editorship [of *RSQ*], 'cause I don't think I was elected to the board a second time, but I know I was serving on the board when Jerry Hauser invented the retreat and when David Zarefsky was president the first time—that's when I saw how a meeting ought to be run. David Zarefsky knows how to run a meeting. [chuckles] He knows how to get things done. He knows how not to waste time.

He knows how to have an agenda and follow it through and yet to let people have their say, to hear points of view. I was just terrifically impressed by the leadership particularly of David and then of Jerry Hauser. And I think in part that comes from communication department training. One of the things I learned to be envious of in my communication department colleagues is most of them had had some kind of forensics training. I had zero experience of extemporaneous public speaking, of debate, of just, again, running a meeting as something that one can learn how to do. In English departments, we don't do that. We don't do it well. So our models are bad. [laughs] So the different kind of training that academics receive in their undergraduate and graduate degrees I think makes a difference, so I learned to respect that.

S: Thanks so much for your time. That was really wonderful.

M: Again, I'm appalled at the holes in my memory here, and I can go look up the details if anyone really wants to know. [laughs] But that's not what oral histories are about, I guess.

[both laugh]

S: Thanks, Carolyn.

M: Sure.