

Coalition of Who? Regendering Scholarly Community in the History of Rhetoric

Patricia Bizzell and K.J. Rawson

Abstract: *This 20-minute video captures our conversation about issues regarding feminist and transgender rhetorics that we believe are crucial to the Coalition's future. Here we ask: Should the organization continue to provide spaces for people the world sees as women? Should it acknowledge that biological gender has become a fluid category, just as femininity did for feminists of Pat's generation? Should the organization redefine its mission to include anyone who self-identifies as feminist? Is "feminist" even the right word to use? In sum, our conversation explores how the wide-ranging scholarly work on women, feminism, and gender produced throughout the past few decades might impact the purpose and future of the Coalition.*

Keywords: *transgender rhetorics, women's rhetorics, feminists and feminism, queer theory*



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Perhaps best regarded as an extended thought experiment, this 20-minute video captures our conversation about issues we believe are crucial to the Coalition's future. This introduction offers some brief background to better contextualize how we, a founding member of the Coalition (Patricia Bizzell) and a rising young scholar (K.J. Rawson), came to be sitting together on May 19th,

2014 to discuss the Coalition of Women Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition.

When Pat Bizzell came to Holy Cross in 1978, no courses on literature by women were being offered. She taught the first course, and she also redesigned a traditional rhetoric course to include material on rhetorics of white women and men and women of color. Her colleagues showed little interest in intersections among literature, rhetoric, gender, and sexuality. Thus for Bizzell, the creation of the Coalition of Women Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition in 1989, which provided easy access to like-minded researchers, was a long time coming. She was a founding member of the Coalition and remains committed to its prosperity.

Over the years, the faculty and the curriculum in the Holy Cross English Department diversified, and though queer theory was taught, it was not taught by Pat. She knew little about transgender rhetorics until what she remembers as a landmark moment in her thinking: when she read K.J. Rawson's essay in the collection he co-edited with Eileen Schell, *Rhetorica in Motion*. When K.J. became Pat's colleague in 2012, Pat looked for opportunities to learn from the younger scholar. And when the anniversary of *Peitho* approached, she realized this might be an opportunity to share her learning experience with others. Pat wanted to testify to K.J. about the importance that work and work spaces still defined as "women's" retained for her. At the same time, she wanted to learn more about how to honor the Coalition's tradition of inclusion. Could the Coalition widen its tent to welcome transgender experiences at large, and to include people who are male-identified, whether cis- or trans-?

At the same time, K.J. realized that he had little awareness of the situation of struggle that gave rise to the Coalition. In his graduate education, feminist work seemed firmly entrenched, mainstream, even old school—certainly not the kind of work that needed a protected space. He was keen to learn more about the context within which the Coalition was founded. Although he had never perceived the Coalition as welcoming the kind of research on transgender rhetorics that engages his scholarship, there were no other spaces in the field that readily lent themselves to scholarly community on this topic. Could the Coalition widen its circle of inclusion to provide an intellectual and mentoring community for scholars like K.J.? In light of the goals and purposes of the organization, would such a move even be desirable?

We didn't want to engage these issues via typical academic agonistic argument. We wanted to experience and record a scholarly yet informal conversation directed by theoretical conversations that are crucial to the center of the field. Should the organization continue to provide those safe spaces for people the world sees as women? Should it acknowledge that biological gender has become a fluid category, just as femininity did for feminists of Pat's

generation? Should the organization redefine its mission to include anyone who self-identifies as feminist? Is “feminist” even the right word to use for the scholarly and political agendas that still inspire passion in long-time Coalition members, if attracting new and diverse scholars is desired?

Without providing answers to these questions, we place them on the table in productive dialogue. Our aim is not to make an argument to point the Coalition in any particular direction, but rather to model the kinds of serious collaborative conversations that we hope can move the Coalition forward.

About the Authors

Patricia Bizzell has taught academic writing at the College of the Holy Cross since 1978, where she has also directed a writing-across-the-curriculum program and trained writing tutors. Her book *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present* earned the National Council of Teachers of English Outstanding Book Award in 1992. Bizzell's scholarship and service to the profession won her the Exemplar Award from the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 2008. Among her current interests are global English literatures, translingual approaches to teaching English, and rhetoric and religion. A 1975 Ph.D. in English literature from Rutgers, Bizzell received a Masters in Jewish Studies from Hebrew College in 2013. Now a Distinguished Professor of English at Holy Cross, Bizzell is spending the 2015-16 academic year as the Cardin Professor of Humanities at Loyola University Maryland.

K.J. Rawson is an Assistant Professor of English at the College of the Holy Cross. With Eileen E. Schell, he co-edited *Rhetorica in Motion: Feminist Rhetorical Methods and Methodologies* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010) and his scholarship has appeared in *Archivaria*, *Enculturation*, *Present Tense*, *QED*, and several edited collections. He recently began work on the *Digital Transgender Archive*, an online digital repository of transgender-related historical materials.