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Transcript of

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

Patricia Bizzell and K.J. Rawson

Caption: K.J. Rawson and Pat Bizzell, College of the Holy Cross

KJR: I'm K.J. Rawson.

PB: And I'm Pat Bizzell.

KJR: And we are here to talk about feminist rhetoric.

Title Slide: Coalition of Who? Regendering Scholarly Community in the History of Rhetoric

Audio: ProleteR, "It Don't Mean a Thing."

Caption: May 19th, 2014

KJR: Our idea for this was actually just to have a conversation and to talk a little bit as an established scholar in the field and as an emerging scholar in the field and just kind of share our different perspectives on feminist rhetoric.

PB: And the Coalition's anniversary sort of gave us the occasion to do this, for me to kind of look back to the beginning years of the Coalition and accept the journal's invitation with K.J. to think about what it might need to be going forward, if it might need to change, how it needed to change.

Audio: ProleteR, "It Don't Mean a Thing."

Title Slide: The Early Years of the Coalition

PB: In 1992, I got a letter from Kathleen Welch telling me that she and several other people—Win Horner of blessed memory, Jan Swearingen, Nan Johnson, and Marjorie Curry Woods—had been talking for a couple of years about the need to start an organization for, as they framed it, women scholars in the history of rhetoric and

composition. So in '92 they decided they would pull this organization together, give it a name. They had the first board meeting at the '92 4Cs in Kathy Welch's hotel room and I was there. I don't remember who all else was there. I have the letter that tells me who else was invited; I can't remember if all those people showed up. But, it was a good crowd. And we had a special session at Cs that year. By the following year, we were able to have our first large meeting. So, '92 was the first board meeting at Cs, '93 was the first actual meeting of the Coalition where people presented papers and the call for that meeting, which I of course still have [laughter], is very interesting to look at the language 'cause in talking about the agenda for the conversation that would happen, and I think although there were going to be at that meeting three scholarly papers presented, most of the meeting was to be dedicated to conversation among the assembled multitudes and in talking about the conversation the word "strategies" comes up several times, which is very interesting. Strategies for enacting careers in rhetoric and composition. Strategies for women graduate students, beginning assistant professors, and others on how to publish, get tenure, and learn the discourse of power. So, when we talked about this before, K.J., I told you that my inchoate recollection of the Coalition's founding is that it was very political in feel and when I look at these old documents I get that feeling even more strongly. There was a sense of people whom the world perceives as women felt embattled in the academy, felt that they were not sufficiently respected, they faced obstacles in their professional advancement that men didn't face and they wanted to kind of get together and support each other.

KJR: So I just want to parse out this point a little bit more though.

PB: Yeah sure, go ahead.

KJR: The distinction between whether the Coalition was for women scholars working on any topic versus being a Coalition for scholars who were working on women rhetors or feminist rhetorics more broadly. Your take on that?

PB: Well, that's a good question. I mean, the full title of the organization is Coalition of Women Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition, so it was field specific except the field is interdisciplinary so included historians, philosophers, classicists, etc. I think explicitly the word feminist wasn't used with the sense that there were women who were doing work that we were interested in who might not want to call themselves feminists for one reason or another. For example, you may remember, this doesn't seem to be done much anymore, but once upon a time black feminists preferred to call themselves womanists [photo of Alice Walker]. At least some of them did. They didn't like the term feminist because they felt it was too white oriented. So, I think there was a sense that the Coalition avoided the word feminist in its founding sort of self-presentation because it was felt that that would be exclusionary of some women. But whether they ever really envisioned men being members, I don't think so. So they were thinking about

inclusion versus exclusion, antagonizing, they were thinking about that, but the sort of big tent for women didn't seem problematic at that time. And did it make a difference? Yeah, there was a lot of work that was done in the decade immediately following the founding of the Coalition that hadn't been done before.

Cut sequence: Images of book covers shown with “It Don't Mean a Thing” clip.

PB: And, this work was done by women. And it really wasn't done by men. There's no particular reason for that to be the case except interest and care to learn about this. And that was something that sort of made us women feel we needed a professional organization to support each other and reassure each other in the face of an academic establishment that was largely male, to kind of convince ourselves and help each other convince them that this work was valuable, it was publishable, it was tenurable, it was promotable. [First page of Patricia Bizzell's article, “Feminist Methods of Research in the History of Rhetoric: What Difference Do they Make?”] The difference that this work made, in the long run, I would say, is that it put gender and sexuality on the agenda for rhetoric studies. All dimensions of gender and sexuality, which had never been anything that was addressed in traditional rhetoric except in very conventional ways.

KJR: It's so interesting to hear this history because when I really started to enter the field as a graduate student in 2005, I met it and I met feminist rhetoric as a fully formed sub-discipline, right?

PB: Right.

KJR: And it felt to me as legitimate and as mature as any other part of the field to me. So, it's just interesting to hear this backstory, which doesn't predate it by that much.

PB: No it doesn't.

KJR: Right, that this kind of advocacy was so critical and as you point out, still is. But, that my perception has been, has almost always been, that, of course...it's there.

PB: It's there.

KJR: Why wouldn't it be there?

PB: Why wouldn't it be there? Exactly.

Title Slide: Transgender Studies and Rhetoric

PB: So I've been talking a lot this afternoon about what feminist rhetoric brought to the study of rhetoric in the early days. And I'm hoping you can help me understand what transgender studies will bring to the study of rhetoric. New materials, new theoretical approaches...what do you envision? What's out there? What's coming?

KJR: Well I think that there are a few ways to think about what trans studies has to offer. And in some ways I imagine it following in similar footsteps to what feminist rhetoric has put out there as a model of success. And the first of those steps may be to start identifying where transgender rhetoric is being produced, what it looks like, who's producing it...

PB: Finding it.

KJR: ...how is it working. Yeah, exactly, finding it. Identifying it. Doing that recovery work of pulling it out and saying, "here it is. Let's look at this! This is interesting and important." And then I also think, and this is where my scholarship has more often focused is that there is a interesting theoretical lens that transgender studies offers and can help us to start to think about what transgender rhetoric might look like. And part of that is to think about gender in more complex and nuanced ways, the ways that gender kind of moves and changes the way that we communicate with each other, the way that our bodies are not just constructed but make meaning...in society and interpersonally.

PB: Right. Also, the sort of primordial insight of feminist work in every discipline was that the biologically female and the socially performed role were separated. Were not inherently genetically related to each other. And if that's true, then what? You know? Then, a woman can be...let them be sea captains if they will. Right? Someone who's biologically female can...so that's separating that from what society says, "oh you're that then you must be that." But transgender work obviously complicates that because in that sort of primordial insight there's an assumption that the biologically female is some kind of stable category.

KJR: Right. Yeah, and I think that it's important to know that it's not just in play because of technological advances in surgery. Right? It's not just that we can construct our bodies in different ways now, which is certainly true and that's part of the equation. But also that we're starting to see, and I'm thinking of Anne Fausto-Sterling's work, that there is a multiplicity of sex. We cannot even identify two sexes and if we try to do that we're ignoring the nuance and the complexity that exists. And so I think that that's helping us to see that even what we've identified as two sexes has never been just two sexes.

PB: Right.

KJR: So even the transsexual experience of transitioning from a sex to another sex is a constructed experience, right? And that is societally dictated in the same way that masculinity and femininity has been separated.

PB: The idea that there has to be a transition.

KJR: Exactly.

PB: Going from point A to point B.

KJR: Right. And that there is a point, you know, there is only a point A and only a point B. And I think that is probably the most significant way that transgender studies interrupts feminist theory and feminist frameworks in a way that really changes the conversation and redirects the conversation. And I think that's something that hasn't really been taken up in the field of rhetoric yet and I think it is incredibly important because I think it will push feminist rhetoric to think even more about, so what does gender mean if we now have destabilized not just masculinity and femininity, but man and woman, male and female?

PB: Right. Because transgender work just seems so rich it brings really dynamic new ideas to work on gender and sexuality in rhetoric, I think. Yeah, and I think that's something that people don't know much about. Certainly I would put myself in that category of ignorant people.

KJR: You know more everyday. [laughing]

PB: [laughing] I know more everyday.

PB: I mean I'll never forget reading your essay at the end of the collection [shows *Rhetorica in Motion*], which sort of undoes all of the other essays in the book. [laughter] Like everybody else is sort of blithely talking about women without putting it in quotation marks or anything and we get to K.J.'s essay and he goes, "whoa, what are you talking about this category of woman? What does that even mean?" [laughter]

KJR: Yeah...

PB: BAM! That was kind of a bombshell.

KJR: It's a difficult move to make, right?

PB: You bet.

KJR: ...because it undercuts a lot of important work. And that's certainly not the intention, right? But it's...

PB: I don't think it undercuts it. I think it can be perceived as undercutting it. I don't think it undercuts it because we should understand that intellectual history unfolds over time. I mean that's like faulting some 19th century guy for not using gender-inclusive language [image of Ralph Waldo Emerson]. He might still have something useful to say even though he didn't do that. Things change.

KJR: Yeah, and to me the point is not to say, "oh, we're having this untroubled one-to-one relationship between women producing rhetoric and men producing rhetoric in this

way.” But instead, okay now, knowing what we know now, knowing what transgender studies is bringing to the table in terms of shifting our framework, how does that change the way that we move forward?

PB: Right. That’s the question to be asked, I think.

KJR: How does that trouble the category of woman altogether? And if that category is successfully troubled, how can a coalition of women scholars, for example... what happens, then, to a coalition of women scholars? Can that become stabilized when we’ve destabilized woman?

Title slide: Coalition of... Women Scholars?

PB: Yeah, well, I think the obvious answer to that is no, unless the organization defines itself, you know, reaffirms its original political agenda for people who are experiencing certain kinds of oppression for very specific reasons and woman then becomes defined as those people who are experiencing that kind of oppression.

KJR: Right.

PB: Partly what’s at issue here is the extent to which the organization wants to define itself as for women or for feminists. And going back and looking at this prior history made me feel that, and I could give other examples... I mean, there’s Louise Phelps’ collection *Women’s Experience in Rhetoric in Composition* [shows book cover] was deliberately not called feminist experience. The organization has to decide which way it wants to go at this point, maybe. And if we think of feminist work... if we think of feminist work in the sense that Royster and Kirsch [shows book cover] are now talking about it, which is very broadly conceived, then that certainly opens the door to anyone, to any body who wants to be included. But, as I said, if there’s a place for, as you put it, a protected space for women, that’s something different. So that’s the kind of identity crisis, maybe, that the organization has right now. So I’m going to pose this and just kind of leave it there and let you take things in another direction. But on the one hand, who could be against more inclusion, right? I mean, how can you stand against inclusion? And it seems theoretically more defensible, it’s more interesting, it’s revitalizing the organization, but at the same time, I personally feel, you know, a certain nostalgia for women’s spaces. For wanting there to be some, still some protected women’s spaces in the academy and in my own life, too, for that matter.

KJR: Well, and as a feminist I recognize the need for those spaces and I want to be 100% certain that I’m not infringing on those spaces in any way, right?

PB: Right.

KJR: That's always been really important to me. But as I am sure many people can understand, women's-only spaces have a very odd relationship with transgender folks.

PB: Of course.

KJR: And you can see this happening at places like the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival [shows Camp Trans 2011 image] or women's colleges, right? How do you define woman?

PB: Right.

KJR: Where does that definition land? And as soon as an organization has to do that, it really requires a politic, right. An articulated politic of this is how we define woman. And once you do that, it's difficult to get into that, to get to the spirit of inclusiveness that it sounds like the coalition has always been seeking.

PB: I think so. I really do think so and I think that's why they want to [coughs], excuse me, use this anniversary as an occasion for sort of rethinking the definition. And you're making me think of another implication of coalition, which is a joining of somewhat disparate forces. That it implies a multiplicity, which is probably good for kinds of issues we've been raising. If it is a coalition, then the tent's flaps are already sort of open, even if there hasn't been a welcome mat put out, yet. [laughs]

KJR: Well, and sounds like, from your digging back through your historical trove that that has been the case from day one.

PB: Yeah.

KJR: That there's always been an attempt to establish the tent, but to kind of keep it open and to keep a look out as to where's the most important coalitional partners going to be here.

PB: Yeah. Yeah, exactly.

KJR: Not just the most obvious.

PB: But, again, coalition is a political term. Even association would be more academic.

KJR: Right.

PB: Right? So, just to riff on that a little bit. It goes back to what I was saying before. It's a little more in your face to be a coalition it seems to me somehow.

KJR: Yeah, because there's the power in numbers that's implied in that.

PB: Yeah. So, on the one hand, to the extent that being in the world as a woman still puts you in a position of being opposed in certain ways, and needing to legitimate what you're doing more so than people doing other kinds of study, there's a reason for the organization to be a women's organization. But, to the extent that its broader impact and, you know, ultimately more important impact, which is to just put gender and sexuality on the agenda for rhetoric studies generally, if that's what the organization is doing, then not only should it no longer be a women's organization, it would be better if it were not. It would be better if it were clear that however you live in the world, however you see yourself or society sees you in terms of gender, if you were interested in doing this work you belong in this organization. Because there's probably still a battle to be fought, ongoing, to convince the larger academy that the work is worthy and legitimate. In any case, you'd be with people who are interested in what you're doing, so that never hurts, right?

KJR: Right, intellectual community.

PB: Birds of a feather.

Title slide: Envoi

PB: Well, you know, it's an unusual organization, isn't it, because it's an organization of women and there are very few professional organizations like that. And if the political motive for having it is reduced, it's not gone in my opinion and I think you would agree with me about that, but if the political motive for having a safe space in which to strategize and support women is reduced, then the organization can consider what's the trade-off involved. We have two goods here, really, I think. The good of being a space for women and the good of being more inclusive and enriching our scholarship with a bigger tent. It might be time for the organization to take the risk. Or, maybe, diversify its own activities so that, say at a Coalition meeting, since they've now become much larger and there are more different kinds of things going on, there could still be places for senior and junior women to get together, if that's what you want to talk about, go to that table, you know? [laughter] That table will be the space for...you know what I'm saying?

KJR: Yeah.

PB: It's like workshops where there are different topics at different tables. I mean that might be a way for the coalition to continue to perform some of these strategic functions that it's always had while not closing itself off from cutting edge scholarship, which would be a crazy thing to do. Any scholarly organization that does that will die.

KJR: Well, and I think it might unnecessarily cut off some good intellectual cross-pollination.

PB: Absolutely.

KJR: But I think, again, like I'm kind of wary about pushing...I would be wary personally in pushing the Coalition in that direction. One, because I haven't been actively involved, of course.

PB: And that's kind of a catch-22 situation, isn't it? [laughter]

KJR: But also out of respect, right?

PB: Oh, sure, I get that.

KJR: Because, like, if there is a reason for that continuing space...I mean, certainly it could be affirmed as a transgender-inclusive space, right? [shows trans-inclusive sign] So trans folks who identify as women, if they want to be welcomed into that space I think that would be fantastic.

PB: If that hasn't already been done it certainly should be done.

KJR: Yeah, and I mean, again, it may not be articulated overtly, but that's the kind of thing...and this is actually, I think, a good lesson from transgender studies more broadly, but also transgender communities in particular, right, is that the overt and explicit invitation for inclusion is important when you're in a hostile culture more broadly.

PB: Yeah, that's a really good point. That's a good point. Listen up, *Peitho* editors. [laughter]

KJR: Directly opening up the door and saying, we do welcome the participation and collaboration of, you know, these groups. I think that speaks loudly to potential membership.

PB: Well, and if this piece has value it should be shown in what we've taught each other about these issues. I don't think we're resolving anything. We're certainly not making a recommendation to the Coalition about its future but we've tried to enact the value of the conversations. And I hope we've done that successfully. I certainly feel like I had the ideal partner to do that.

KJR: Yeah, as did I. I think it's really a model of multi-generational scholarship really coming to bear on each other and right, and to try to keep pushing things forward, but also recognizing that it's not just the new scholarship trying to revise the old, but really that it's always kind of dynamic in its interaction. And that's what excites me about it.

PB: Yeah, that's what's really good about it. So it isn't always about, it isn't always the anxiety of influence or killing the father or killing the older generation. It can be collaborative.

KJR: Generative.

PB: Yeah, absolutely.

KJR: Great, well thank you.

PB: Thank you.

Credits

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