

# Introduction: Feminist Imperatives and the Rhetoricity of Work

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This Cluster Conversation responds to an exigence crystallized by the pandemic: the simultaneously material and rhetorical nature of work, including the settings and material contexts in which it occurs, the values we assign to it, the ways our mind-bodies are conditioned by it, and the possibilities for how it might be otherwise.

In the last four years, COVID has enlivened recent debates over compensation, working conditions, and status accorded to food workers, public school teachers, early childhood educators, and numerous others whose work has been labeled “front line.” It has allegedly yielded a “Great Resignation” as well as countless debates about the efficacy of remote work and a flourishing of entrepreneurial activity. Very quickly, the conditions under which many of us work, as well as the ways we approach and are valued for our work, have been transformed, often within technological frameworks the contours of which we are still learning. This Cluster responds to this tumultuous era of work by revisiting and introducing new methods, approaches, and questions related to the rhetoricity of work. It builds on past scholarship, much of which attended to historical configurations of work’s rhetoricity (see Gold and Enoch’s *Women at Work*, Enoch’s *Domestic Occupations*, and Smith’s *Utopian Genderscapes*, among many others), offering inroads into more contemporary investigations of work-related rhetorics. While not all these essays take up the context of work vis-à-vis the COVID-19 pandemic specifically, all of them attend to working contexts that might broadly be considered contemporary.

As scholars and editors, the increased public attention to rhetorics of work during COVID-19 challenged us to consider how our existing frameworks were or were not equal to the task of making sense of the shifting workscapes around us. Our collaboration in this area began with our 2015 article in *Peitho*, which called for more attention to work-related rhetorics in (feminist) rhetorical studies. Planning and leading an RSA Summer Institute workshop in 2023 gave us the opportunity to reflect on the body of work-related research that has grown, and that we ourselves have participated in, since then. As we've seen, there has indeed been increased scholarship in this area—yet we see a particular need for rhetoricians to attend not only to rhetorics at play within specific occupations, but also to the collective mechanisms through which work is valued, devalued, made visible, obscured, celebrated, misremembered, recognized, and/or erased. In this introduction, we first provide background on the workshop as the genesis for this Cluster before describing three promising avenues for future scholarship that coalesced in our collaboration with the contributors to this Cluster.

## The Workshop

In planning our workshop, we wanted to revisit our 2015 *Peitho* article, which called for more research in the gendering of work. In that article, we gestured toward the three topoi of duty, education, and technology as frequently implicated in efforts “to naturalize, disturb, or otherwise resituate what constitutes ‘women’s work’” (203). Eight years later, we wondered: how did these topoi hold up as useful and capacious descriptors for the rhetorical gendering of work? To what extent was “gendering” still central to our inquiry? What other topoi were scholars identifying, both in historical contexts and in our volatile contemporary moment? And what other methods, questions, and approaches were they bringing to their scholarship on work, both within and beyond rhetorical studies?

To support our thinking and discussion, we gathered a range of readings including scholarship on women’s work in rhetorical studies (Gold and Enoch, Smith, Buchanan, and Applegarth, Hallenbeck, and Redeker Milbourne); popular nonfiction on women’s work (Goldin, Williams); material theoretical approaches (Cresswell, Sharma, Jeon); and neoliberal feminisms and work cultures (Cech; Federici; Gill, Kelan, and Scharff). Our conversations and the subsequent work of the contributors helped us to reflect both on where our understanding of gendered rhetorics of work has been and where it is going.

With the help of our nine workshop participants, we recognized that our original topoi—and perhaps topoi in general—invite a tacit orientation toward studying specific occupations and workplaces, rather than toward examining broader, more culturally pervasive discourses about work that exceed occupational boundaries, and that have proven particularly relevant in this “post” COVID moment of reflection and transformation. Additionally, we noted a dearth of scholarship exploring working conditions outside colleges and universities, relative to that within. We encouraged

workshop participants to contribute scholarship to our cluster conversation that might both address these gaps and reveal additional avenues for future feminist research in work-related rhetorics.

The authors of the five essays included here—all participants in the RSA workshop last spring—provide models for what future scholarship within work-related rhetorics might look like. Here, by way of introducing their excellent work, we describe three themes that emerged from their efforts. Each, we believe, warrants further exploration by researchers interested in work-related rhetorics.

### **Intersectionality**

One theme that emerged from our Cluster is the need for more explicit commitments to the intersectional analysis of work-related rhetorics. Such a commitment is essential not only to decoding the complex negotiations through which different forms of work are valued at particular moments in time, but also to addressing contemporary issues of access, advancement, and even disciplinary or occupational knowledge-making practices that have very real effects on people's lives. The need to consciously seek and craft intersectional approaches was underscored, in our workshop, by observing that even recent popular scholarship on the gender wage gap limits its scope to the wages of college-educated men and women, a group that constitutes less than half of the U.S. population (Goldin 5). Both Lillian Campbell's and Kristina Bowers's essays engage with these concerns, each offering innovative methodologies to demonstrate how processes of exclusion and devaluation operate through work-related rhetorics.

Kristina Bowers brings a much-needed disability studies-informed perspective to discussions of work-related rhetorics, scrutinizing the neoliberal rhetoric of Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) for its equation of work with citizenship and disability with the inability to work. Indeed, disability and work are intimately linked, as Alison Kafer demonstrates in her qualification of the disability studies mantra that becoming disabled is "only a matter of time": "Of course, disability is more fundamental, more inevitable, for some than others: the work that one does and the places one lives have a huge impact on whether one becomes disabled sooner or later, as do one's race and class positions" (26). Bowers' contribution examines the policies and procedures through which individuals apply for SSDI from the perspective of individuals suffering from Long COVID, a wide-ranging disease that does not conform to the ableist rehabilitation/cure telos through which the SSDI operates. Drawing from Annemarie Mol's multiple ontologies theory and praxiographic method, Bowers traces the construction of Long COVID—and disability more broadly—through the arduous and ongoing process required to apply for disability in the United States. The resulting analysis "reveal[s] how material, embodied experiences of disability... interact with social discourses and neoliberal institutional practices that label people 'disabled'" (Bowers, this issue). In keeping with our interest in expansive (rather than occupation-specific) work-related rhetorics, Bowers encourages us to consider how disabled people are constructed as inadequate

citizens through dominant, neoliberal work-related rhetorics. Future scholarship might examine how other documents and bureaucratic processes reinforce, complicate, or challenge this construction, or how they otherwise shape disabled people's experiences with work.

Meanwhile, Lillian Campbell's essay examines how class and race inflect work-related rhetorics, situating her analysis in the health professions. Campbell draws from interviews with Black and biracial women working as tele-observers in a virtual intensive care unit (VICU) to demonstrate how their expertise is often dismissed and devalued by their more-credentialed hospital colleagues. Campbell demonstrates how these tele-observers rhetorically navigate the "difficult position of having extensive patient knowledge that helped them to recognize subtle problems alongside communication challenges and workplace structures that limited their ability to act on that knowledge." More broadly, Campbell's article interrogates a long-standing scholarly fascination with high-prestige, masculine-identified jobs as objects of analysis within feminist scholarship on work. "Feminist rhetoricians have long been interested in women and health work, but—just as our attention has historically been skewed toward North American white women—we have consistently focused on higher-status professional discourses in health care, especially the experiences of physicians" (Campbell, this issue). As Campbell argues, overlooking the contributions and knowledge-making practices of entry-level workers in woman-dominated professions deprives us of valuable tools for addressing social and systemic inequities, such as the unequal maternal health outcomes for Black women in childbirth.

### **Work-as-identity**

Additionally, rhetoricians are well-poised to draw attention to the consequences of boundary work between personal and professional lives and spheres. As Claudia Goldin explains, "women have increasingly been planning to have long-term, highly remunerative, and fulfilling careers—sustained achievement that becomes embedded as part of an individual's identity" (6). Additionally, more workers have joined the so-called "gig" economy or have pursued influencer or brand work, which commodifies and monetizes identity in seemingly unprecedented ways. Feminist rhetoricians have long explored the fusing of work and identity in the home, and the rhetorical creep as domestic rhetorics accompany women into the workplace (see, for instance, Gold and Enoch), but contemporary rhetorical constructions of work-as-identity pervade other domains. For example, the idea that it's not work if you love it, long a bastion of rhetorics of women's domestic work, has spread outward into a number of other domains, most notably particular forms of white-collar work.

In her contribution, Ashley Hay explores social media content creation, a form of labor that is only intermittently recognized as work in broader public discourse. Asking how "femininity and postfeminist sensibilities... extend beyond cisgender female bodies," Hay examines how sex working content creator Repairman67 rhetorically positions his content creation as a natural ex-

pression of his identity. This pretense of content creation as more expressive than creative is common across social media, but Repairman67's sex work adds an additional angle to this positioning insofar as he must evade restrictions for illicit content while also directing followers off-app to more lucrative revenue streams. As Hay explains: "The changing demands of the attention economy drive creators to create fluid and responsive textual and paratextual content for both their viewers and the platforms upon which they operate." Hay thus theorizes Repairman67's content creation as an "excessive" form of labor entailing "emotional and entrepreneurial" work, clarifying that "it is not sex that Repairman67's viewers are consuming, but his entire technosexual identity." Feminist rhetoricians might do well to investigate the possibility that boundaries between work and identity are increasingly blurry for other professions as well, with particular attention to the fact that the association of the work we do with who we are creates opportunities for exploitation. Indeed, the idea that having passion for one's work offsets lower pay or inflexible working conditions often functions as what Erin Cech terms a form of "choicewashing," where "the cultural framing of processes that are systematically classed, racialized, and/or gendered as the benign result of deliberate individual choices within equitably functioning and opportunity-rich social contexts" (166).

Similarly, Kelsey Alexander's analysis of the recent emergence of the so-called "anti-work" movement and backlash on Reddit engages with neoliberalism, a notion closely tied to work-as-identity. As Foucault explains, neoliberalism involves the extension of economic thinking into "a whole domain previously thought to be non-economic," such that identity takes the form of *homo economicus*, who is, fundamentally, "an entrepreneur of himself" (219, 226). Alexander situates the anti-work movement as a critique of a neoliberal ethos grounded in the U.S. Protestant work ethic, the belief "that hard work pays off both spiritually and literally" (Alexander, this issue). Through an analysis of the subreddit *r/antiwork*, Alexander shows how this critique became more urgent under the conditions of the pandemic, when, in the face of widespread shortages and lack of support, workers were expected to forge ahead in service to production and commerce under the auspices of "essential" work. Alexander's contribution encourages scholars to attend closely to digital platforms like Reddit, which, though "often dismissed for their magnification of hive-minded, and at times hateful" communication, "are fast becoming the best locations to track how digital communities (re)act towards the precarious nature of our times." In general, her essay suggests the potential of research avenues that historicize and interrogate pervasive work-related discourses, such as the positioning of work-as-identity, that resonate beyond specific industries, professions, and workplaces.

## **Temporality**

Time and temporality emerged as a theme across our workshop readings. Claudia Goldin's diagnosis of the gender wage gap as a result of "greedy work" in U.S. contexts focused in large part on temporal dynamics. As Goldin explains, greedy work rewards couples for "specializing," such that one partner (often, in heterosexual couples, the man) is on call at work, and the

other at home. As a result, “the individual who puts in overtime, weekend time, or evening time will earn a lot more—so much more that, even on an hourly basis, the person is earning more” (Goldin 9). On a larger scale, Sarah Sharma highlights how broader narratives about time—such as narratives depicting the COVID-19 “moment” in terms of urgency and temporariness—support unsustainable and inequitable labor relations. “Too often the belief that we are living in a dangerously sped-up culture makes the demand for the labor of others justifiable as a systemic need ‘in these fast-paced times’ rather than the structurally excessive privilege that it is” (Sharma 19). Thus, a final promising avenue for future research might involve temporal erasures, distortions, or minimizations related to different forms of work, particularly those that are tied to identity and care for others rooted in love. Although time has been explored in several feminist rhetorical examinations of work (see, for instance, Jack’s “Acts of Institution” or Enoch’s “There’s No Place Like the Childcare Center”), it remains a promising avenue for feminist scholars interested in work-related rhetorics.

Ashley Beardsley’s article offers a compelling consideration of work’s gendered and temporal resonances, asking: how is the compression of time, like the demarcation of space, implicated in the gendering and devaluation of domestic labor? “Focusing on the role of time in rendering women’s work less visible,” Beardsley argues that “omitting time spent laboring over a meal conceals labor that most often falls on women.” Beardsley’s chronotopic analysis of Rachael Ray’s TV show, *30-Minute Meals*, and cookbook, *Just In Time!*, reveals how an emphasis on time-saving cooking techniques both naturalizes women’s responsibility for providing their families with delicious, nutritious meals and compresses the time required to actually prepare said meals, from meal-planning to clean-up. Using an embodied, materialist methodology grounded in strategic contemplation, Beardsley experiments with Ray’s recipes in her own kitchen, tracking her time commitment in doing so. Beardsley’s article extends research by scholars such as Smith and Enoch, who have each examined the historical erasure of domestic labor through spatial representations and demarcations. She also provides an illustration of political scientist Valerie Bryson’s claim that women’s domestic work “cannot be captured by simply measuring the hours that women’s caring responsibilities appear to involve” (134). Indeed, as Bryson explains, women not only give their own time, but also “make time” for others: “much of women’s work in the home involves generating time for family members by coordinating their activities with the external timetables of schools, dentists, transport and other households” (133). Beardsley demonstrates that the gendering of work remains alive and well, even as the means by which it is accomplished have evolved, and she makes a strong case for continued examination of temporal rhetorics in the study of gender and work.

## Conclusion

We hope that these and other themes that run through the five essays included in this Cluster Conversation, are generative for scholars interested in pursuing projects in the burgeon-

ing area of work-related rhetorics. Intersectionality, temporality, and constructions of work-as-identity each build upon existing research while at the same time productively addressing oversights and gaps in our assumptions about gender and the rhetoricity of work.

This volatile moment—in which forces as diverse as gig economies, remote work, and artificial intelligence are all simultaneously transforming workplaces, and in which Americans’ understanding of the aims and purposes of higher education is becoming increasingly vocational and profit-driven—invites rhetoricians’ critical and imaginative attention to the question of *work*. We would be wise to examine how these rapid changes are playing out both in specific occupational contexts and in broader cultural currents, such as in work’s perceived relationship to identity, citizenship, and education or training.

As we undertake this research, we must be vigilant about the mechanisms through which work is erased, distorted, or rendered invisible—which, we note, remains a constant thread in this research area and one of the primary characteristics of work’s rhetoricity, as well as its gendering. However, not all of the essays included in this Cluster Conversation engage explicitly with gender. This reflects our commitment to recognizing that work’s rhetoricity exceeds its complicity in processes of gendering, and that feminist scholarship is capacious enough, both in its aims and its methods, to attend to the embeddedness of work in a wide range of unequal power relations. For example, our workshop left us convinced that one potent aspect of the rhetoricity of contemporary work is its participation in the “neoliberalization of contemporary culture” (Gill, Kelan, and Scharff 227). We must interrogate the neoliberal structures that pervade contemporary discourses of work such as those that Bowers and Alexander explore, and we would do equally well to investigate (and historicize) emergent counter-discourses such as those of the anti-work movement. Such examinations indeed deepen rather than distract from our feminist commitments, signaling a recognition that, in the words of feminist theorist and activist Silvia Federici, “‘women’s history’ is ‘class history’” (14).

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