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Transcript of

“Lifting as We Climb: The Coalition of Women Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition 25 Years and Beyond”

Alexandra Hidalgo

LIZ TASKER: Welcome to the Coalition of Women Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition annual Wednesday night session. The Coalition has been in existence for 25 years and I think the first session was ... [clapping] ... Yay! And the first session at the CCCC was what year? Does anybody know?

JACQUELINE JOYCE-ROYSTER: 1994.

LIZ TASKER: 1994.

### **Founding the Coalition**

KATHLEEN WELCH: The Coalition was founded in July 1989 after I had a four-hour telephone conversation with a professor of Women Studies and she was also... also she was a professor in the medical school at the University of South Carolina. Women were having a very hard time getting tenure no matter what... what they did. We had that initial constitution and that was co-written by the original five executive board members—Winifred Bryan Horner, C. Jan Swearingen, Nan Johnson, Marjorie Currie Woods, and I—and we sat in a room just like this one. These meetings were intense and went on across a number of conferences.

ANDREA LUNSFORD: My earliest memories of the Coalition are sitting around a room—Win Horner was there, Nan Johnson was there, Kathleen Welch was there—and we really had several concerns. One is that we wanted more involvement of women in doing research about women in history of Writing and Rhetoric. We wanted to bring more women into the conference, who were doing that kind of work, and we also wanted to find a way to mentor young women coming into the profession. So we had a jumble of interests that we really hadn't sorted out. We just wanted more about women. More about women. More about women.

JACQUELINE JOYCE-ROYSTER: I was Chair of 4Cs. We had finally kind of gotten some things organized enough to say, “We should have an organization,” and in my Program Chair year, I put the group on the program.

KATHLEEN WELCH: They were using up women in Comp Rhet to do tons of service, so they'd use you up in the probationary years and then they would fire you.

ANDREA LUNSFORD: We went out and had dinners, sat around together late at night just talking about our dreams. We... most of us had a little bit of trouble coming into the profession. We were often the only women in our departments, we were the only women in meetings, and we'd been through a lot, and so it was kind of a time to share. We were banding together and we wanted to... We wanted younger women coming into the profession to have ... to see that there are women ahead of them who were there to support them. The National Association of Colored Women has for their motto "Lifting as We Climb," and I think we had that... that spirit among us. We wanted... We wanted to look to the future by lifting as we climb, but we also wanted to look to the past and try to recover women whose work had been lost and to generate and inspire research about and for women.

### **Supporting the Coalition's Members**

KATHLEEN WELCH: When I set up the mission of the organization, the mission... There were two missions: scholarship on women in Composition and Rhetoric and then political action committees, political action work. The latter turned into the mentoring tables, and because I'm a 70s second-wave feminist, I wanted political action now. So Win and I did the political action—now the mentoring table—on how to get tenure. It was always packed and there were always one or two women who were on the brink of getting fired. And then Win and I, we would meet with those women separately, and we'd say, "You've got to do dah dah dah. Have you done this? And you've got to check in with us." And we got them... We really were able to help a number of them.

JOYCE MIDDLETON: I enjoyed the days of being in the small-group mentoring. The small... being in small groups. To be able to discuss with a small number of women what they were facing. It was really a confirming presence for me, a place for being able to link up with people nationally, with women nationally.

KATHLEEN WELCH: I founded the Coalition because I needed to meet women like Winifred Bryan Horner. I needed to meet Andrea Lunsford. I had met Jacqueline Jones Royster in the winter of 1990 in the bathroom, the women's faculty bathroom on the third floor of Denney Hall at Ohio State University. So I got to meet her there, but then it's always, "How can I get more meetings with Jackie Royster?" So that part of the Coalition is central, so that a brand-new person, a brand-new M.A. student, can come to the Coalition and meet Jackie Royster, and meet Joyce Middleton, and meet Barb L'Eplattenier.

JOYCE MIDDLETON: People like Kathleen Welch, I just have to put her top... at the top of the list. She reached out to me. She cited my work.

SUZANNE BORDELON: You know when you're a grad student and you're trying to situate your work, they're mainly just voices and articles and you don't really have a

sense of who the person is behind those articles, so sometimes that can be more of an artificial process. But when you actually go to the Coalition meetings and see the people and have the opportunity to talk to them and maybe email them further if you have questions about their research, it makes it much more real.

ANDREA LUNSFORD: How to frame a dissertation, how to complete a dissertation, how to make the transition from graduate student to faculty member—those have always been at the heart of our mentoring activities, but now that we have gained a little bit more financial stability, we're able to offer a little bit of financial help to graduate students, a little bit of travel and research.

LIZ TASKER: We have mentoring tables for going up for full professor, balancing-professional-and-personal-life mentoring tables. We have: how to put together an edited collection, how to do a single-author book manuscript.

ANDREA LUNSFORD: The Coalition members look out for one another, so that if there is an award to be given—a prize—we are more likely, I think, than perhaps some other members of the profession to nominate women.

NANCY MYERS: I am honored to both present the Winifred Bryan Horner Book Award for this year, and to pay tribute to Win Horner for whom the award is named. This year's Winifred Bryan Horner Book Award is for a book published either in 2012 or 2013. I would like to thank Kate Adams, Lisa Mastrangelo, and Hui Wu for acting as judges in this difficult competition. This year's award goes to Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch for their co-authored *Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literary Studies*, which was published in 2012 by Southern Illinois University Press. I congratulate them on such invaluable scholarship and hope you will again too [clapping].

ANDREA LUNSFORD: Well, in terms of my own work, the Coalition has inspired me to connect feminism to everything that I do. When I started my work on collaboration with Lisa Ede, and that's been a life-long 30-year, 35-year project, we were not particularly thinking of collaboration as a feminist project, but work on the Coalition has helped me see that everything is a feminist project, and so Lisa and I really... we came at our work on collaboration in a new way and wrote many articles about collaboration and collaborative practices from a feminist point of view that I think not only enriched and deepened but made our work much more useful to other people.

JACQUELINE JOYCE-ROYSTER: I think that having a community of people who are expert in what you're expert in gives you a thinking platform, gives you a way of saying, "Let's see how this flies. Let's get some feedback on this idea or that idea."

LIZ TASKER: Friendships that I've made, and staying in touch, and support amongst women working in the same profession as I am and who understand the pressures of, you know, being a working mother and a scholar and having to deal with lots and lots of service.

ANDREA LUNSFORD: Personally it's just been a joy, a complete joy to have these long-standing friendships. I've been in the profession a lot longer than 25 years, but these 25 years have been the best, especially rich and bountiful because of the associations with the Coalition.

LIZ TASKER: I want to announce that in October of 2015 we'll be having the next Feminisms and Rhetorics Conference and that will be at Arizona State University and will be hosted by Shirley Rose and Maureen Goggin and the theme is "Women's Ways of Making It" [clapping].

SUZANNE BORDELON: The Stanford Conference was really... really a nice opportunity because it's smaller and it was comfortable and just a great setting to be able to talk with people about their research after or during the conference that you don't get at some of the bigger conferences, where you can barely negotiate the program.

### **The Coalition's Main Successes**

LIZ TASKER: I think one of the most recent successes that the Coalition has had is the transformation of *Peitho* from an online newsletter to an online peer-reviewed journal.

SUZANNE BORDELON: Having the journal—and you can be a reviewer for the journal—it helps you to get aware of what's going on in the field. And just the opportunity to read the journal and to publish for it, I think that provides a real outlet, a needed outlet for scholars.

BARBARA L'EPLATTENIER: I found it unethical to take publications from untenured assistant professors who were working for tenure for the newsletter. Right? Like I had many, many conversations with people who said, "You know, I would like to publish this." And I said, "Well, where are you in your career?" and they told me and I said, "You know, this is really interesting, but you need to go to journal X, Y, and Z because that's going to get you more bang for your buck." And this, you know, helped the perception that the Coalition is a very insular group, because when you can't draw from the body of research coming from untenured assistant professors, you're really, really missing out. So this is huge, that we can now say to people, "Please—and I beg you as a former editor—please submit to *Peitho*. It's a good place to publish and it's peer-reviewed, so it will count."

ANDREA LUNSFORD: I think I would say that our most recent great success was gaining non-profit status. That has taken years and years.

BARBARA L'EPLATTENIER: Donations are now tax-deductible. Before it was hooked onto the treasurer's bank account, and when I was treasurer, I was always like "Ooh... Jamaica" [laughter]. OK? We can give grants. OK? Yes, we're all archivists. Right? What does it take to get to the archives? It takes money. Right? We can give you money

now. I'm not saying we're gonna, but we could [laughter]. OK? More importantly? We can get grants.

JACQUELINE JOYCE-ROYSTER: I return to the fact that we're still here as the greatest success. We have been doing programs at 4Cs since my convention in 1994. I think that's amazing. We have been doing these biannual conferences for all these decades now. Two decades worth of conferences. And we have done good work. I don't see that there's anything more important than that.

### **The Coalition's Greatest Challenges**

ANDREA LUNSFORD: We need to expand our... our membership. Our intent and our goal has been from the beginning and continues to be inclusion and bringing everyone in, but we haven't been as good at actually doing that as our intentions would suggest, and so I'm hoping that in the next few years we can do quite a lot to expand the membership of the Coalition and to bring in people from every imaginable walk of life, and, you know, we need more men who are feminists.

JACQUELINE JOYCE-ROYSTER: Well, I think the failures around anything that's known for its gendering—so the Coalition of Women Scholars in the History of Rhetoric, our Feminisms and Rhetorics Conference—is that sometimes it's hard to get people to see that they have stakes in that, whether they are women or not. You don't have to be female to take on the values, principles, and practices of feminisms and rhetoric. And I think that there's lots of work to do yet on trying to... to convince all of us that gender is a part of a human enterprise, just as race is a part of a human enterprise, just as sexuality is a part of a human enterprise, just as geographical location is a part of a human enterprise. And all of those things are important to all of us, not to the people who just happen to be paying attention through those specific lenses. Now, I don't think we were especially successful at that, but that may be the most important work that we do, in the sense of understanding what it means to be human.

JOYCE MIDDLETON: Mostly I'm concerned about the lack of diversity. There was more interest in it years, years, many, many years ago when I was involved and there's less and less now, and my tendency is to just not participate anymore.

KATHLEEN WELCH: There's just a whole racism, unconscious racism, in excluding so many women of color.

JOYCE MIDDLETON: Maybe we could structure something so that more panels would include people of difference. bell hooks was right when she talked about—even though a lot of people were angry with her—but she really thinks that marking people in terms of difference is a very important thing, and I do too. So that... because otherwise you see whiteness take over, and we're just living that out right now. For example, there's no small-group meeting on the Coalition in diversity any more. There's none. This is not a place for me. It's not as inviting as it used to be to women of color.

## **The Future of the Coalition**

JACQUELINE JOYCE-ROYSTER: When I think about the future of the Coalition and what goals it should establish or what direction it should take, I am very comfortable with leaving that in the hands of the people who are coming into the profession. Not in my hands.

BARBARA L'EPLATTENIER: How do we counter the old boys' network that seems to develop no matter who is part of the network? Right? There's always an in crowd. How do you open up that in crowd? OK? How do we recognize and support young scholars who may have found us on their own? And how, finally, do we actually harness the positive aspects of growth and official organizations and the positive aspects of being a small, unofficial group?

JOYCE MIDDLETON: Once you see whiteness taking over that takes me back to the 70s [laughs] when women of color were really... I mean Alice Walker is famous for that, for saying white women have a very different agenda from women of color and defining womanist in response to feminist, so that's a real issue that's been with women's... with a feminist group for a long time.

SHIRLEY WILSON LOGAN: My hope is that we continue to draw on our own experiences to consider ways to reach wider audiences through our research practices and by providing public information about the accomplishments of historical women in Rhetoric and Composition, but even more increasingly important that we involve all women—ordinary women, contemporary women—in rhetorical action for social change. We now have a variety of means of disseminating information and organizing for action through social media. We must develop even more panels on opening sources to women in the transnational community.

LIZ TASKER: One direction that the Coalition needs to take in the future is the direction of multimedia and technology and exploiting all of those tools that we have at our fingertips to better get our message out to people around the world.

ANDREA LUNSFORD: I would like the Coalition to be able to help form a new public idea about women in Rhetoric and Writing. It's one thing to stay within the academy. It's another thing to affect what the general public thinks about this coalescence of interests that we have. Our work goes beyond the academy. It reaches out into communities. We need more media attention on these issues. We need to find ways to make films, to make documentaries, to do podcasts, and to get into the Twitter... Twitter... Twittersphere and try to carve out a new public understanding of the role women can play in furthering education, furthering democracy, furthering the goals of freedom, and liberation, and voices for everyone.

**A film by**  
**ALEXANDRA HIDALGO**

**With**

SUZANNE BORDELON  
BARB L'EPLATTENIER  
SHIRLEY WILSON LOGAN  
ANDREA LUNSFORD  
JOYCE MIDDLETON  
NANCY MYERS  
JACQUELINE JONES ROYSTER  
LIZ TASKER-DAVIS  
KATHLEEN WELCH

**And**

THE MEMBERS OF THE  
COALITION OF WOMEN SCHOLARS  
IN THE HISTORY OF RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION

Photos courtesy of Jenn Fishman, Lynee Lewis Gaillet,  
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