

## KEY CONCEPT STATEMENT

### Coalition: A Meditation

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Coalition. When we look at this word, the first in the title of our organization, the Coalition of Women Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition (CWSHRC), we fix on “co.” The “co” in “coalition” is key to us because it invokes more than one: in it we hear doubling and redoubling along with the reverberations of other key words beginning with “co”: collaboration, coordination, cooperation. So “coalition,” with its connotations, seems pretty dead on for the ongoing work of the CWSHRC.

But why, more precisely? Why choose this particular word to capture the guiding vision of our group? Why not “collective” or “alliance” or “association” or “organization”? While any of these words might have been chosen, none of them signifies in precisely the way that “coalition” does. For starters, “coalition” denotes a group of distinct individuals who come together to cooperate in joint action toward a mutual goal (or set of goals)—not forever, but for however long it takes. In the case of CWSHRC, individual scholars work to coalesce across differences in academic rank and standing (including students), institutional type, research agendas, teaching interests, and cultural/ethnic backgrounds. The individual interests, concerns, and values at the table are disparate, ranging from those who focus on feminist historical recovery work and those who enact feminist research principles in composition studies to those who perform feminist pedagogy and engage in global collaborations—and much more. (Early on, in fact, it took a vote to decide whether to include both rhetoric and composition in the title of the organization.) But as Toni Morrison admonishes, “the difference was all the difference there was” (qtd. in Bhabba and Farred 36).

Crucial to the formation of the group was a desire to move beyond the perceived patriarchal (hierarchical and competitive) structures of our disciplines and professional organizations and the masculinist practices that had long guided them. In spite of differences among participants (who ranged widely in age, came from public and private, two-year and four-year colleges, and professed a range of interests, from a narrow focus on writing processes, for example, to rhetoric as an overarching art and theory in ancient Greece), the goal of resisting hierarchies through nurturing research by and about women—and supporting the women doing that research at every step of their

careers—has helped bridge those differences to allow for strategic action. Such action has resulted in continued resistance to “a” rhetorical history or “the” set of composition practices, and a unified—while still complex—sense of who “we” are.

“We” are many different people, coalescing across our individual agendas and biases to contribute our physical and emotional energy, our thinking, our research, our money, and our time to develop the potential of our field and our members—their teaching, speaking, writing, researching, and mentoring talents. As in any coalition, we do not always agree: we have differed, over the years, on how best to strike a balance between “composition” and “rhetoric” in our title, with some members lamenting a perceived turn in the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) away from rhetoric and especially the history of rhetoric and others applauding that turn. But whenever possible, we aim to use our disagreements heuristically, as rhetorical invention for deliberating on our next steps. Taking inspiration from Sojourner Truth, we are “keeping the thing going while things are stirring” (110). And that has meant, for the Coalition, careful attention and mindfulness to how we structure our programs, to who is invited to speak at these meetings, and to how we represent ourselves on the website and now in our journal, *Peitho*.

Now that our Coalition is 25 years old and well established within CCCC, what might we aim for in the next 25? We expect serendipity will continue to play a role in the direction the Coalition takes: we think particularly of the current moment when many of our members are making strong international connections, traveling and speaking and teaching and leading workshops in countries from Sweden to South Africa, from Chile to China, and many places in between. Might these occasions help us to strengthen the international or global focus of the Coalition? In fact, might they lead to an International Coalition of Women Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition? While such a goal is exciting and worthy, it is also one the current Coalition should pursue with caution, mindful once again of the importance of difference and of listening long and hard to those with whom we wish to join causes.

One step the Coalition can take toward such a goal, however, presents itself immediately: focus in the next years on inclusiveness at home. In spite of their differences, the women who started the Coalition were almost without exception white and predominantly middle class. Given the fact that members were resisting the strongly masculinist (and white) tradition of rhetoric, we shouldn’t and didn’t ignore the irony of the situation. As a result, the Coalition has more members of color than it did originally—but the group is still far too pale. So an immediate goal of the Coalition should be to ask what about its practices and procedures are less than inviting to scholars and teachers of color and to devise strategies for honoring greater inclusivity and building

a Coalition that better represents the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity within the United States.

The next 25 years will offer both challenges and opportunities for the Coalition. Here's hoping that the group will seize kairotic moments as they arise and keep the central goals of supporting research by, about, and for women and mentoring young scholars squarely in its sights. The "co" in "coalition" will continue to underscore these aims.

So: coalition. Strategic, often temporary and shifting, valuing "togetherness in difference" (to use Lu Ming Mao's powerful phrase), and devoted to action. A most fitting word to launch the Coalition of Women Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition. And a fitting word to make another very bold move, when the time is right and just, to launch an *International* Coalition of Women Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition. What might such a group be capable of doing to foster transnational and cross-cultural understanding and to develop a rhetoric of peace, social justice, and inclusivity? Surely such a goal is worthy of the Coalition's next 25 years.

## Works Cited

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