

Description for Kinder Institute Books-in-Progress Symposium, March 7, 2018

Linda C. McClain, *The Rhetoric of Bigotry: Controversies over Marriage and Civil Rights* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming)

Who is a bigot? What do people mean when they enlist the rhetoric of bigotry? Charges, denials, and countercharges of bigotry seem increasingly frequent in the United States. People turn to the language of bigotry in a diverse range of legal, political, and social controversies, from clashes over marriage equality and the evident tension between religious liberty and free speech and antidiscrimination laws, to debates over removing Confederate statues from public spaces, to immigration policy. Growing political polarization suggests the high stakes over who is a bigot. Bigotry, this book argues, is a fraught and contested term. The rhetoric of bigotry poses puzzles that deserve attention. Renouncing—and denouncing—bigotry in all its forms seems to be a shared political value with a long history, but identifying those forms is more controversial. People often disagree over *who* is a bigot and *what*, exactly, makes a belief, attitude, or action bigoted. Is it possible to label or brand someone as a bigot without using the word itself? When is the label bigotry necessary to express moral censure? When is it needlessly provocative, effectively stopping conversation? This book shows that past and present controversies about marriage – interracial, interfaith, and same-sex – and about civil rights laws – both the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 and state public accommodations law – are illuminating windows into questions raised by the vexed rhetoric of bigotry. Such controversies also reveal the complex relationship between bigotry and conscience.