
Reviewed by Cantice Greene, Clayton State University

As part of the NCTE centennial celebration, editors conceived of a project that would encapsulate the years of advocacy and agitation that have described the work of SIGs and caucuses within NCTE and CCCC through the last fifty years. Listening to our Elders is the product of that conception. The book is organized by caucuses and accompanied by an online companion that houses interviews and archival artifacts recording position and policy statements that have changed the way we view and do composition in the contemporary university.

Opening with a focus on the American Indian Caucus, the first chapter features two interviews, one with Malea Powell titled “We Wanted to Have an Open and Welcoming Space” and the other with Joyce Rain Anderson titled “Work to Be Done.” As a pioneer caucus organizer, Powell highlights the accomplishments of her caucus and the uncomfortable moments as well, such as when the caucus was invited to an event where Indian sports logos made the members feel disrespected. In the following section still on the American Indian Caucus, Anderson introduces the metaphor of the gadfly saying, “Caucuses are meant to be the gadfly” “to ‘pester and bite’ to make change” (24).

The metaphor of the gadfly reappears in the interview with James Hill of the Black Caucus. He recalled that his caucus often supported many other caucuses within NCTE. He also noted that Black Caucus members often ascended to hold leadership positions within NCTE. Dr. Marianna W. Davis, the lead founder of the Black Caucus, was his central mentor. The mission of the Black Caucus, he said, was to “pave a pathway for African-Americans to gain visibility and become productive members and leaders in the organizations” (49). Hill’s interview and the account given by Powell and Anderson recount the willingness of some caucuses to work together. This thread reoccurred in many interviews throughout the book.

An interview with Jeffrey Paul Chan highlights his brief work with the NCTE and the Asian/Asian-American Caucus. As a graduate student he was invited to attend a week long workshop of the 1970 Textbook Review Committee to review contemporary anthologies that represented the American literary canon. Chan noted that his job was simple since after a week all he and his colleague Frank Chin could report was that “nothing represents Asian American experience, not even the Asian experience” (39). But their critique didn’t stop there; it culminated in a position paper about that lack of representation, an essay titled “Racist Love.” After such an experience in
the NCTE, Chan did note that many of the suggestions to make culturally sensitive writing curricula have been incorporated in the teaching of English and American Literature.

The chapter capturing the work and mission of the Committee on Disability Issues in College Composition featured an email transcript from a discussion on the DS-RHET Listserv from 2010. In this dialogue the issues of cost and containment surfaced as reasons why the CCCC was slow to incorporate suggested access measures to make their conferences and events more inclusive. The title of this chapter, “I Simply Gave up Trying to Present at CCCC...” is the sentiment of Patricia Dunn who recounted that early on her proposals on learning disabilities were rejected.

The chapter on the Language Policy Committee featuring an interview with Geneva Smitherman is a mix of Black history, Black activism and the Black Movement of the 60's and 70's; it offers an insider view that has all the action and subtlety of a blaxploitation film from the same time. Smitherman’s work in NCTE was a natural extension of her work in the Black Movement and it was connected to her experiences growing up black and traversing the university as a linguist and advocate of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) at a time when AAVE or Black English (BE) was not embraced. Many know that Smitherman’s *Talkin’ and Testifyin’* was written in AAVE. The feat of that authoring accomplishment should be inspiring to anyone who recognizes how difficult it is to write for an academic audience in vernacular language. One of the many successes of her work highlighted in this lengthy chapter was her leadership in crafting the “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” policy statement. In her interview with Austin Jackson and Bonnie Williams she chronicles the steps that led to the interest in and adoption of that statement.

The Latino/a Caucus chapter, “Chicana Trailblazer in NCTE/CCCC,” features a conversation with Corlota Cárdenas Dwyer. Dwyer helped form the caucus that was originally titled Chicano Teachers of English or (CTE) in 1968. Dwyer left higher education in 1982 after being denied tenure from the University of Texas at Austin, but she continued to lead presentations on the teaching of Chicano Literature in all-day workshops before NCTE conventions. She went on to organize an anthology of Chicano Literature, *Chicano Voices*, published by Houghton Mifflin. Ironically, the University of Texas at Austin recently welcomed her archival papers, placing them in their Benson Latin American Library. Victor Villanueva was also interviewed as one of the trailblazing members of the Latino/a Caucus. His fondest memory was of the year he was Chair of the CCCCs. He remembered the Spanish theme and Puerto Rican cultural displays of the conference as the highlight of his career because, as he put it, “our ways were up front, on Main Street” (143).

In some of the interviews, the cultural activists revealed their agitation that they hadn’t done enough or that the main goals of the group had not yet been realized. The interview with Louise Dunlap, a founder of the Progressive Caucus, was one that exuded this agitation. The title of the
chapter “Combating Institutional Neutrality” is a telling foreshadowing of that dissatisfaction. The interview captured her sentiments this way, “I’ve been centrally concerned with how academic thinking tends to drift toward the neutral. I call this trend ‘neutral writing’ or ‘neutral thinking’—a kind of neutrality that refuses to take a position on things” (149). Despite these neutral tendencies, the interview reveals that one of the caucus’s biggest accomplishments was to lend support to striking hotel workers at the Hyatt Hotel in New Orleans. Activism such as this characterized the short history of the Progressive Caucus that lasted from 1982-1992.

The chapter on the Queer Caucus brought some of the most memorable stories about cultural misunderstanding and cultural harmonizing. Louie Crew brought his humor and good memory to the transcript. His founding of the Queer Caucus emerged from his suggestion that NCTE do a special issue on gay and lesbian issues in 1973. Once he was asked to co-edit the project, his call for papers attracted many of the people who would later serve with him in the caucus. The chapter is titled “Renaming Curiosity/Resisting Ignorance” and the power of naming is a theme that reverberates in the many name changes of the caucus. The names include the Committee on Lesbian and Gay Male Concerns in the English Profession, the Lesbian and Gay Male Caucus, the Lesbian and Gay Professional Caucus, and finally the Queer Caucus. Just as others did, Crew noted the impact of the caucus on what was to be published in textbooks and the books that became the theory books behind teaching writing.

The exchange between William Thelin and Pamela Roeper in the chapter on the Working Class Culture and Pedagogy SIG and Bring-A-Book was one of the liveliest because of the adversarial dynamic. The problem of the working conditions of adjunct instructors is still not satisfactorily addressed within the discipline, and the question of how to best empower or approach a class of working class students is still debated. Roeper named “adjuncts who have spouses who earn good livings…” as those who “impede progress in many ways in the fight for adjunct rights” (177). Although she acknowledged the divisiveness of the statement, her comment and others scattered throughout the book seemed to marginalize conservative thought and traditional middle class lifestyles. Later in the chapter, Thelin admitted feeling that the SIG never really met its potential, yet he acknowledged the Bring-A-Book-Project as successful. Over 3650 books were distributed to eight community literacy resources, a follow-up essay by Bill Macauley revealed.

Overall, the collection of interviews is a powerful historical account of activism in composition from the inception of the field until now. The book’s neat organization by caucus or SIG makes it easy to sift through if a reader is interested in one particular group’s origin. While you won’t find pedagogy spelled-out in these pages, you will find examples of teamwork within the field that has led to academic excellence and longevity.

Morrow, GA