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## The Words to Speak: The American Indian Caucus at CCCC

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- Every day is a reenactment of the creation story. We emerge from dense unspeakable stuff, through the shimmering power of dreaming stuff.—Joy Harjo "A Postcolonial Tale"

This is a story. Or it is a story among the many stories. At the 2000 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) in Minneapolis, George Googleye, a tribal elder from Leech Lake, opened our caucus with a pipe ceremony, and specific prayers were offered for the members. Often we begin our caucuses with words from our elders, a talking circle or poem or just words spoken from the heart. Chairs always form the circle. In the past, Malea read from Joy Harjo's book *Map to the Next World*, or we have asked our Indian poets to offer one of their poems. Cynde Yahola-Hill, Dawn Karima Pettigrew, and Qwo-Li Driskill have all read their poems to begin our talk. While listed on the program as business meetings, the American Indian Caucus always begins with the business of being Indian. That way, we and our allies are reminded always that "there is work to be done" (Driskill).

As I read Heather Bruce's "Peace-Building in Indian Country: "Indian Education for All," I am struck by the efforts of the Montana Writing Project (MWP) to help implement "Indian Education for All" (IEFA) and not surprised by the resistance. The director of the Montana writing project who has authored that paper says she realized the need for MWP "to travel outside of our university comfort zone and meet



Indian people in their communities where the risk of discomfort was ours, not theirs, to bear" (12) to begin peace-building. We only wish there were more who "realized the need." She describes how she learned about the uneasy relationship between Indians and the academy, and she experienced anti-Indian racism of non-Natives who resented "being asked to consider the need for understanding, reconciliation, taking responsibility for Native American issues of concern" (24). Throughout, she and the Montana Writing Project continue to take responsibility through understanding complex histories that have not treated everyone fairly, engaging in collaboration, recognizing non-Native privilege, challenging herself and others, and working at efforts in peace-building. Much of what she encountered is familiar to Indian peoples.

In 1997 at the Conference for College Composition and Communication, a small group of American Indian scholars and non-Indians doing scholarship in American Indian studies were called together in an ad hoc fashion by Malea Powell and Scott Lyons to discuss forming a caucus. These founding members saw a pressing need to make American Indian scholars more visible at this annual conference, a need to advance the scholarship within the larger field of composition/rhetoric, and a need to gather with other Indian people for support. The last is especially important because, as the author of "Peace-Building" notes "that the university can be an alien place for many Indians" (12), American Indian scholars often feel isolated within their individual institutions. As Cherokee scholar Ginny Carney has commented on our uncomfortable place in academia, "native students/teachers continue to be muted in the academy. . . and the ways we as Indian scholars are often forced to deal with cultural insults, identity questions," would be cause for legal action if director that other people of color (email 1999). Before this first meeting, some of our founding members had been meeting with other caucuses at CCCC, such as the Black Caucus and Latino/a Caucus, in order to have some kind of space to be heard; those affiliations are still strong. Yet, as more



Indian scholars started coming to Cs, a need arose to have our own space. However, it is problematic that all SIGs/caucuses have the same assigned meeting time so we are not able to attend more than one SIG/caucus.

Over the years, we've had stops and starts in getting to be recognized as a caucus, but then recognition is not a new concept for Indian peoples. For the first couple years, we needed to submit a proposal which included justifying our organization every year to be on the program. Malea Powell and I took turns with this task until we were finally included as an "official" caucus, which finally happened in 2002.<sup>1</sup> We began working on formalizing some aspects of the caucus, including creating a mission statement. It took us most of a year of emails to find language that we agreed opened our caucus to important issues for Indian peoples. The statement reads as follows:

The American Indian Caucus supports the teaching and research of indigenous literature, rhetoric, and literacy, with a specific interest in promoting Native sovereignty, indigenous intellectual traditions, and positive and truthful public representations of Native peoples.

More recently, Resa Crane Bizzaro has taken on the position of president and the three of us are the continuous contacts for the American Indian Caucus. We have had some difficulty in establishing a protocol for electing officers in part because we feel it is important to have Native presence in the leadership roles. Too often, Native American groups have formed in other organizations which then become led by non-Natives who make decisions for the Native peoples. Given the long history of those associations, we decided to keep at least one leadership position for a Native person, and given the constant presence of Malea, Resa, and I, we know at least one of us will be present for our annual meeting. More recently, there have been others who have helped in keeping us in contact. Jim Ottery kept a web page



for us for a few years; Steve Brandon took on the list serv; and Angela Haas and Qwo-Li Driskill started our blog. That said, we strongly believe in allies, those who speak and work with us.

One such alliance was important in getting the Tribal College Fellowships approved in 2003. At our 2001 caucus meeting a discussion started by Mia Kalish ensued about how to encourage better representation from tribal colleges. Scott Lyons then took on a leadership role in pushing CCCC to grant travel scholarships for those teaching in tribal colleges. Lyons drafted a proposal and the members of the caucus helped revise it. At the 2003 business meeting of CCCC, the Tribal College Initiative was passed. Since then, about 10 tribal college faculty have been funded to attend CCCC. Caucus members have chaired the selection committee each year.

While the caucuses are given space by NCTE/CCCC on the program and a room to meet in each year, they are not truly an official group within the NCTE structure. Unlike some special interest groups and other kinds of affiliates, caucuses are not provided with any amenities from NCTE/CCCC. They exist solely on their own, and each caucus structure is a little different from the rest. Among the purposes they serve are to bring awareness to the needs of the groups they serve, to act as a gadfly, so to speak. In January 2007, representatives of the Asian/Asian American Caucus, the American Indian Caucus, the Black Caucus and the Latino/a Caucus were invited by the administrators of NCTE/CCCC to a two-day meeting in Alexandria, VA to discuss formalizing the structure of the caucuses within the organization. There were two intense days of meetings. The administrators felt strongly about having a more formal organizational relationship with these particular caucuses. Most of us were resistant to being somewhat absorbed into the structure as it would defeat our purpose to act as groups which stir things up. In some ways the organizers were disappointed, but there were many points which they listened to, and we were able to demonstrate how the organization has much



to do in terms of how people of color are treated within it. As a result, the various caucuses are presenting a series of cross-caucus panels on racism at the 2009 conference in San Francisco. This collaboration is, we hope, the beginning of more such cross-caucus presentations.

At past conferences we have been in collaboration with other groups on an individual basis. One of the larger collaborations was with the Language Diversity Workshop for two years. In 2005, the workshop was troublesome because while presenting with my Indian colleagues about language reclamation, we felt we were not heard by some of other folks of color, but we were attacked for looking/being "white." The initial comment came from one young man, but he soon had others joining him, while our work on American Indian languages, the focus of the workshop, was buried under the antagonism which was the result. In my 2006 presentation, I issued a public apology to Angela Haas and Qwo Li Driskill because as the elder of the group, I could not control what was going on, and I let them down. Angela and Qwo Li are two amazing Indian scholars who at the time were graduate students from Michigan State. The 2005 workshop is an example of the realities faced by Indians in the academy and elsewhere. Rather than language diversity issues, identity politics became the focal point during our part of the presentation. While we often expect an "attack" from a mainstream audience, we were surprised by the response from scholars of color, thinking perhaps we were in a kind of "safe house." Earlier in the session, an African American man spoke of his Irish grandmother, and no one questioned him because having a white ancestor, for multiple reasons, is common knowledge for a black person. But why is it different for Indian peoples? Why are Indian peoples of mixed heritage always having to "prove" their Indianness to others? Part of the answer is in the continued effort to erase Indians, and/or in the mainstream consciousness of keeping the Indian as monolithic stereotype.



Indian peoples have always had an identity imposed upon them. They have been recorded in history as savage and barbarous, uncivilized, romantic and noble, as warriors and fierce and so on. Today, the stereotype of the Indian is still so pervasive that one must “look” a certain way to be Indian: long straight, dark hair, beads, serious face, brown eyes, to name a few. I always think of the movie *Smoke Signals* when Victor was telling Thomas how to be a real Indian. Victor says, “you can’t have that stupid smile on your face all the time, Thomas; you have to be serious like you just came back from hunting buffalo.” And Thomas says, “but Victor, our people catch salmon.” Victor looks at him and says, “Come on, Thomas, would you ever hear of a movie called ‘Dancing with Salmon’?” (Eyre, *Smoke Signals*) In the film spoofs on many mainstream images of Indians abound, but many times only Indian peoples get them. Disney, cartoons, westerns and other movies and Indian mascots make it difficult to move beyond such universal portrayal of Indian peoples. Or it is more “authentic” to have an Indian movie by Kevin Costner be the defining image of Indian people? All these images are what we are up against. That means while trying to establish Indian scholarship at venues such as CCCC, we find the challenges to who can speak as Indian are ever-present. Within our own communities, we know who we are. However, Indian people find themselves vigilant when stepping outside their communities. The call of our relations is strong: accept responsibility for who you are. Craig Womack puts it this way:

But who I am isn’t really the question, is it? What matters is the people, survival, continuance, protection of our Nations, and sovereignty. We must find ways to write about such issues in our stories and poems in a way that makes our people themselves want to read what we have to say. There aren’t easy answers, but we do have to keep posing the questions, searching, realizing we all have a long way to go. (“Howling at the Moon” 49).



The Language Diversity Workshop we went back to in 2006 was inviting, and this time we were heard. All had significant things to say to one another and, thus, we learned from one another. As the Montana Writing Project director comments over and over, we learn “to become resilient, to become resilient” (27). In 2008, we decided to start our own workshop on teaching Indigenous rhetorics. Thanks to the work of Rose Gubele, we will be doing our second workshop in 2009.

Each year CCCC is a different place: sometimes it’s inviting and sometimes the American Indian Caucus feels invisible. Some past chairs have worked with us, asking for our input on speakers and sessions; others have not done so. Our constant issue has been with the scheduling of panels. The few panels on Indigenous scholarship seem always to be scheduled against each other. Two years in a row, the Native person selected as Scholar for the Dream has been scheduled on the last day of the conference in the last sessions. Once again, we feel pushed to the edges. Invisible. However, we voice ourselves at the Convention Concerns meeting, and find our allies among the folks running the show. We may not get all we want, but we will still speak and tell our stories. And while there is “work to be done,” we can hold each other up while we keep at it.

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