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Talking Back: Senior Scholars and Their Colleagues Deliberate the Past, Present, and Future of Writing Studies

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Talking Back: Senior Scholars and Their Colleagues Deliberate the Past, Present, and Future of Writing Studies

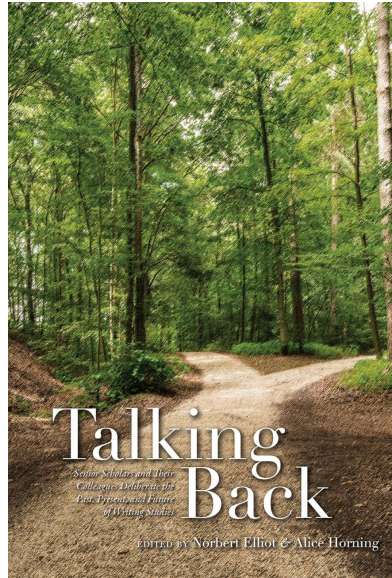
**Edited by Norbert Elliot
and Alice S. Horning**

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Imagine the reunion tour, getting the band back together to create new music, while playing some of the old favorites. Perhaps the rumors are true: the band suggests this is their final performance—the very last time anyone will see them on stage. *Talking Back: Senior Scholars and Their Colleagues Deliberate the Past, Present, and Future of Writing Studies* is a collection of essays, edited by Norbert Elliot and Alice S. Horning, that feels like that much-anticipated last show. The senior scholars who have contributed so significantly to the



field of writing studies harmonize with early and mid-career scholars to present the familiar tones we are used to, along with the voices of rising artists who will continue their legacies. The overarching purpose of the book is “to document a reflective vision of senior colleagues, approaching or passing the age of retirement, on the ways their unique programs of research have influenced our discipline and to spark the imagination of their successors in charting future directions for writing studies in which difference, not homogeneity, is the aim” (6). The editors and contributors achieve their purpose in this collection.

Situated in life-span writing, aging, and seniority, the text is a thorough compilation of discussions within writing studies by some of the most respected scholars in the field. The authors ask the following: “‘What are the influences—intellectual, social, emotional, physical, even spiritual—that affect a scholar’s development over time,’ in addition to ‘how do we address the tension between continuity and change in a scholar’s life, in a discipline, in schools and universities, and in society?’” (140). And yet, what makes this text more than one lengthy, ultimately unanswerable rhetorical question—and unlike any other text we might find in our field—is the conversational, autobiographical genre employed by the contributors. The chapters are organized with two to three authors per chapter, with the senior scholar speaking first and the new or mid-career scholar responding back.

Compiling chapters with past and present voices functions to facilitate conversations among like-minded scholars, teachers, and administrators. As such, I can imagine musicians working in similar genres sitting on a festival stage, ruminating about the past, pontificating about the present, and musing about the future. Ruth Ray Karpen, riffing on Mary Catherine Bateson, professes that one of the most significant aspects of the collection is that not only are two or more “generations of writing scholars looking forward and backward together, but the senior scholars are demonstrating a variety of ways to spend one’s ‘second maturity’ in academe” (5). Yet, much like a music festival with fifty-one line-ups, this text is organized such that readers can camp out, attend the shows in order, or leave and return at a later time. So, while the text is carefully and thoughtfully organized, as a reader, I felt like I could, in fact, read in chunks, pulling out one of the relevant twenty-two chapters, and revisiting sections that most grabbed my attention and spurred my curiosity. As a method of intentional design, the editors requested William Marcellino, a professor of text-based analytics and behavioral science, review the book’s linguistic, cultural, and substantive patterns to pinpoint recurring themes, activities, and structures by which to organize it (10). Thus, within the book, as within our broader field, there are four Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) categories represented: 1) General Writing; 2) Creative Writing; 3) Professional, Technical, Business, and Scientific Writing; 4) Rhetoric and Composition (7). Furthermore, readers can expect eight curated themes throughout the text: capability, deliberation, generativity, identity, language, legacy, origin, and seniority. As a reader, I would add the themes of civility, community, empowerment, and growth to the list.

The editors and authors imagined their audience to be three-fold: writing studies students, scholars and teachers, and individuals across disciplines who are drawn to seniority studies. Due to the range of topics discussed, I feel certain this text would be an invaluable resource in a doctoral-level rhetoric and composition course. I began my doctoral program in rhetoric and composition in 2007, when many of the senior scholars in this edited collection were in their prime. That being said, the most senior contributors in the text worked in the profession even a decade before I was born (for example, John C. Brereton who “looks back over a fifty-year career teaching writing” and William Condon who “began administering writing programs in the late 1970s”) (141). All of these seasoned scholars reflect on the historical developments that have shaped the field, the present state of writing studies, and the future challenges and opportunities facing the discipline.

Martha A. Townsend’s chapter, “Valuing New Approaches for Tenure and Promotion for WAC/WID Scholar/Administrators” resonated the most with me. Townsend is currently a professor emerita, so her contribution to the book is an absolute gift to readers because she is writing outside of the demands of any publishing requirement. While most of the chapters are grounded in reflection, Townsend boldly calls our profession to action, suggesting that “It is time for departments, programs, and institutions to examine this literature, rethink policies, and evaluate WAC/WID WPAs in ways appropriate for their scholarly/administrative work” (326). Townsend is bold in her chapter, and I suspect that the tone of resilience, justice, and urgency derives from her thirty-year career and the liberty she now has absent of the publish or perish mentality under which she labored.

Despite her prolific presence in writing studies, Townsend outlines her struggles and unseen labor as a WPA—especially with regard to tenure and promotion policies and practices. She reveals the harsh reality of her tenure and promotion processes in which her “department did not support either bid” for associate or full professor (328). Townsend’s bid for full professor “spanned sixteen months, including fifteen separate votes (eleven of which were negative) and seven appeal hearings. The final three levels of evaluation (campus, provost, and chancellor) initially garnered negative votes but were overturned on appeal—and those are the votes that secured” her promotion to the full professor (328). Here we are, ten years later after her 2013 appeal, still making the same arguments in the field. In fact, although my PhD in rhetoric and composition was heavily grounded in WPA coursework and training, I have chosen to take a back seat in terms of this work at my institution because of the workload expectations, service requirements, and the institution’s drive to transition to an R1 institution. I fear that the work for WPAs and WAC administrators has a long road ahead, but Townsend’s chapter provides clear and tangible advice to those who are seeking tenure and promotion (330).

My greatest takeaway in the book comes from Judy Buchanan and Richard Sterling’s chapter, “Learning from the National Writing Project as a Kindergarten-University Partnership.” Buchanan and Sterling reflect on the professional development and community-engaged lessons they learned from the National Writing Project through the principle that “teachers of writing must write” (77). This dictum is at the core of my professional identity and reminds me of why I entered this field: my love of writing and desire to teach other people how to love writing. I also found Doug Hesse’s (who, ironically, chaired my dissertation director’s dissertation, as we are here to reflect on lineage) visual timeline of dissertations of WPA executive board members from 1976–2002 incredibly valuable. The timeline is the first graphic I have encountered that offers a lateral unfolding of the trajectory of writing studies.

Overall, this edited collection speaks softly to those who have done their time, and boldly to those entering the field. I sensed a melancholy tone from some of the senior scholars, as they are maturing into their next phase of life—be it in a classroom or in retirement. And yet, as someone who is only ten years into my tenure-track position, I found myself gripped by the responses—as though my peers are calling me to action. Hugh Burns exhorts his successors to recognize that “our scholarship is far from done” (91). In “Framing and Facing Histories of Rhetoric and Composition” Cinthia Gannett calls us to “see that our living archives, their collected papers, and their micro-histories hold the messiness and specificity of the last fifty years; they need to be preserved, honored, and accessed, or they will be lost to future generations who want to understand this period in human terms” (148). There will never be another collection in our field like this, nor could there be. I feel so thankful for this curation of voices before the voices become echoes.

Works Cited

Bateson, Mary Catherine. *Composing a Further Life: The Age of Active Wisdom*. Vintage Books, 2010.