



Accented and Silenced Voices

Ahmet Atay 

I guess we have to start from the beginning in this story to understand my relationship with the Central States Communication Association (CSCA). I was introduced to the CSCA a year before attending my very first CSCA conference. I spent the Spring of 2003 being the research assistant for Dr. Roberta Davilla, who was the First Vice President of the CSCA at the time. Since she was the program planner of the conference, she tasked me to proofread the program and cross-reference the presenters. I met so many scholars (whom now I call as my colleagues and friends) on paper before I had formally been introduced to them. Unfortunately, I did not attend the conference that year. It was 20 years ago in 2004 when I attended my very first CSCA conference and presented my work in Cleveland, Ohio, only 60 miles away from where I wrote these notes. Although I was intimidated by the scholars whose work I read in different classes, it was a welcoming environment. Being there felt right. As an international student, I felt I belonged.

Twenty years later I arrived at Grand Rapids, Michigan, as the President of the CSCA, the very first transnational President of an organization that I considered as my academic home for the last 2 decades. A lot has changed within those 20 years. The shy but academically curious young international student grew up and decided to run for the President of CSCA in 2019. Often people like me, who are accented, do not occupy these positions; hence, we do not see our reflections. We are often overlooked or considered as an underdog. It is not easy to make a space for ourselves in academia. As bell hooks (1994) reminds us, academic places are often not created for marginalized “others”: Black, Indigenous, BOPIC, scholars of color, queer, or accented. Those who find enough courage and perhaps enjoy some academic recognition and visibility either step up and step in to these positions or become mentors for others by opening doors that are tightly chained or brutally unwelcoming. Therefore, when I decided to run for the President position, I wanted to do it not only for the community that supported me and nurtured me, but I wanted to do it to empower the voices of historically marginalized voices, especially accented and queer ones. These ideas framed my time as the President of CSCA.

Ahmet Atay, College of Wooster

CONTACT: aatay@wooster.edu

Even though I see the CSCA as a homeplace and my CSCA family, colleagues, and friends as my extended family, I also know that like all families we also have our share of issues but I think the last several years the members of the Executive Committee, a number of ad-hoc committees, and new initiatives that are implemented are helping us to have informed and honest conversations and also finding solutions to some of our issues or concerns. I am deeply grateful for everyone who worked on these initiatives or engaged in these conversations. I know that we still have work to do but at least we started to make some meaningful progress.

When I left Grand Rapids and drove away from the city, I was content. I felt like I achieved what I set out to do. Of course, there is more to do and people after me will continue to engage those, but I have to say that I am proud of spotlighting the lives, stories, issues, and research of people who have sat on the sidelines, or their voices are not heard, or they did not have enough courage to narrate their stories. Our voices matter and the CSCA is stronger because of these eclectic, different, queer, and accented voices.

Just like my friends and the two CSCA Past-Presidents before me, I did not expect or envision to face challenges that forced and encouraged us to reimagine the spaces we occupy. The COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath impacted my time when I occupied different positions in the Executive Committee. As Dr. Alberto Gonzales pointed out, due to the circumstances, we paused the rotation of the officers for a year. That meant, as Dr. Debra Ford explained, she ended up planning two different conferences. This is also true for me as I planned two consecutive pre-conferences, virtual in 2021 and in-person in 2022. It is not accidental that both of these pre-conferences engaged with issues about diversity and equity. While the 2021 pre-conference, *Decolonizing the Discipline: Race, Ethnicity, and Postcoloniality in Communication Studies*, attracted about 100 participants, it helped us cultivate a discussion about decolonizing our own discipline. The 2022 pre-conference in Madison, *Diversity, Emotional Labor and Survival in Academia*, furthered our discussion by helping us to focus on academic labor and survival strategies in higher education. The purpose behind both of these pre-conferences was spotlighting issues around diversity and generating conversations with directions about positive and meaningful change. Working on these pre-conferences was a tremendous joy. I really hope the conversations we have had will find ways to intertwine with our future conferences and discussions.

I spent a great deal of time to conceptualize the 2023 CSCA conference. Since I knew that I only got one shot at this important responsibility, I wanted to choose a conference theme that focused on silenced voices. Hence, *Intersections, Transitions, and Silenced Voices* came about. I wanted the theme to allow us to reflect on the current status of our discipline but also encourage discussions about how to be more inclusive. I wanted to empower historically marginalized scholars and spotlight their voices. Although Dr. Tiffany Wang, the Executive Director of CSCA, and I spent several days and weeks planning this conference, it was a great joy to witness so many rich conversations, exciting panels, and interactions among people. At the 2023 conference, I stepped into the role of the CSCA President. I had big shoes to fill because of the work the past Presidents completed, especially the work that Alberto Gonzalez and Debra Ford were engaged in. Since I had good mentors, stepping in to this role was not daunting. However, I knew that I wanted to do the best work I could because although I wanted to make my CSCA family proud, I wanted my accented, immigrant, queer, and historically marginalized colleagues and friends prouder.

Although I completed several important tasks during my presidency, I could not make those happen without my wonderful colleagues in the Executive Committee. We named the new editor, Dr. Sandra

Faulker, as the new editor of the CSCA's flagship journal, *Communication Studies*. I am excited about the vision of our editor and what Dr. Faulker will bring to the journal. We also named Dr. Sarah Baker Bailey as the Inaugural Creative Director of the CSCA. We are excited about the creation of this position for various reasons. After all we live in a highly mediated and visual culture and as CSCA we need to visually craft our mission and story to our own members but also attract new ones. We believe that the creation of this new position will help us to achieve this goal. During my presidency, we also named the next CSCA Executive Director. Dr. Debra Ford graciously agreed to perform the role and continue to do the amazing work of Tiffany Wang and the work of our other former Executive Directors. We are truly excited about Deb Ford's new position.

As part of the President's responsibilities, I performed the planner task of the CSCA's Undergraduate Honors conference. Students across the region applied and were competitively reviewed by several reviewers. I am grateful for their work because often we forget our instrumental reviewers are for our organizations and conferences. Although reviewers perform such crucial tasks, the task is often overlooked in our academic culture. I want to extend my gratitude to those who not only reviewed for our Undergraduate Honors conference but also reviewed for our Interest Groups and Caucuses. Our undergraduate presenters made us proud and they truly shined during their presentations. I also want to take a moment to recognize our faculty mentors and thank them for encouraging our undergraduate students to attend CSCS and other conferences.

Although these are visible tasks that I performed during my presidency, there was also behind-the-scenes or invisible labor that I performed. I am mentioning this not to spotlight myself but instead I want to recognize that several of us, especially those of us who are part of historically marginalized communities, step into the role of mentors or perform tasks and duties that not many recognize or do not know. The invisible work matters, and it is important that we make it visible, so our work is acknowledged and valued. As part of this work, I carried so many conversations with so many of our members about so many things that we individually or collectively care about. We are part of supportive academic family, and these conversations, or invisible work that we perform, matter for not only the continuation of the organization, but also for creating a supportive and productive environment. These conversations are also instrumental to achieve a meaningful change in which we cultivate a community where diversity is valued, people with accented voices are not forgotten, and other marginalized scholars find a home and achieve a sense of belonging, and finally, be part of our community.

Before I conclude my remarks, I want to acknowledge the work and support of my colleagues in the Executive Committee. Thank you for serving. I want to thank Deb and Al for their mentorship and friendship. I appreciate your support. Finally, I want to thank Tiffany who has been my champion and friend and who has supported me during every step of my journey. Thank you.

It is true that my role as the President of the CSCA is completed, and I will always be a supportive member of our CSCA community. I hope the work that we started or carried on will not be halted. I hope that the momentum that we caught in meaningfully engaging with the inclusion, diversity, equity, and access work will continue. I hope that the work of the marginalized voices is still part of the heart of the CSCA. I hope that we will continue to value queer and trans lives, and the work of our LGBTQIA+ scholars. I hope that we will continue to acknowledge the hard work of international scholars and their labor in our field and organization. I hope that we will still make the CSCA a home for accented and marginalized scholars. Your work matters. Your scholarship matters. You are seen and heard.

To conclude, I want to thank all of you for allow me to dream, follow my academic dreams, and actualizing them with me. And for those of you who have been afraid of dreaming in academia, keep dreaming because your dreams could come true. We are here to support you. And for me, I will continue to chase my academic dreams, regardless of how big or small they are. I know that enough of you will stand by me, with me, and carry on our academic dreams together.

Reference

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.
