

ASECS WOMEN'S CAUCUS 50th ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

Interview with Dr. Nicole Mansfield Wright, Associate Professor, University of Colorado, Boulder

By Shruti Jain

Jain: When did you become involved with the Women's Caucus, and what drew you to it? I imagine you were a grad student?

Wright: I suppose you can relate to that: becoming part of the process. One of the things that I found helpful when I was a graduate student was the easy on-ramp to becoming a member of the Women's Caucus. You just have to show up. It reminds me of the adage: 99% of success is just showing up. I was looking for a way to become more involved in this organization that was a big part of my acculturation to conferencing—to contribute as a graduate student. NEASECS, the Northeastern ASECS, was one of my first conferences, and that was a really positive experience. And then, within ASECS, I kept hearing about the Women's Caucus from different folks. I saw their calls for becoming involved, and then I saw the ASECS sign-up sheet. There was an opportunity to sign up for the luncheon.

One of my first memories from ASECS: I came into the Women's Caucus luncheon room really early, because I was thinking, “I have to be prepared. I have to be ready for this.” I was one of the only people in the room, and I was wondering where to sit, and I wasn't sure what the protocol was. Lisa Zunshine—she was a full professor and had published several well-known books—beckoned to me and said, “Come sit with me.” And we started talking, and it was amazing to be able to speak with someone whose work I admired. There was no hesitation on her part; there was no cliquishness. It was refreshing to have that opportunity. And that set a good precedent for my participation down the line.

Jain: Wow, that's kind of like me interviewing you for this and all of the conversations we've had in the past as I've read your work and gotten to know you.

What kind of role did the Women's Caucus play in ASECS at the time? I know the Women's Caucus is one of the oldest caucuses within ASECS, isn't it? And has that role changed in the years that you've been here?

Wright: My impression is that the Women's Caucus has become more mainstream within ASECS. One of the first places I observed that becoming manifest was at the Masquerade Ball that the Women's Caucus organized a few years ago. It wasn't limited to women or scholars working on women's writing. I saw folks from different demographics—beginning grad students to emeriti professors—all boogie down together. That's the moment when I thought: “This is not just part of ASECS. This influence is visible across ASECS.” And the Women's Caucus has had a very positive impact in making ASECS—“safe space” doesn't do justice to it. I feel that there's a more salubrious climate at ASECS now, if we're thinking about things like harassment, if we're thinking about things like access for differently abled folks. The Women's Caucus—our presence and advocacy—has made a significant difference in helping these spaces be accessible to and be navigable by all kinds of folks.

Jain: How do you think being a part of the Women's Caucus, and working with the Caucus for all these years, has impacted your scholarship or your teaching, or any other aspects of your career?

Wright: One prong involves my teaching. Back in the day, you'd see eighteenth-century studies syllabi for undergraduate and graduate levels, and in some, there would be a day set aside for women: this was when we were going to read women's fiction, or there would be one day set aside for, say, women and print culture. It was puzzling, because many female authors were prominent during the “long eighteenth” century.

One challenge that I remember embarking on was threading works throughout my syllabus in a way that reflected the eighteenth century holistically. Being part of panels and seeing the lists that are shared on social media and in other spaces has given me resources so I'm not just resorting to the usual materials. I'm bringing fresh, cutting-edge approaches to my students, and that has resonated with students. Students tell me that they appreciate that we're not just sequestering this history in one little hermetic package.

Jain: I suppose your roundtable (“Aggressive Regressions?: The Politics of Reenacting the Past”), which I was so fortunate to be a part of, was part of this holistic approach, right?

Wright: I was reading a lot, as I revised my introduction, about how reenactment studies is gendered. When I was first planning this panel, I would say I'm working on this topic, and some folks would assume the panel focused on the military. But reenactment studies is broader than that.

Jain: I was looking at the [blog that](#) the Women's Caucus has, and you do the members' interviews (“[Member Spotlight](#)”), right? What's that been like?

Wright: Well, my work for the Women's Caucus began even before I had a tenure-track position. In the early days, before I started what was then known as “Member of the Month” and then transitioned to “Member Spotlight,” it was a lot of nuts-and-bolts logistical work. We had this huge, sprawling—I think it was a Google Form or something—spreadsheet where we had to go through it and sort through all the members and contact many, many members to see whether their institutional addresses were still working, to see whether their contact information was current. And I remember thinking: “This is a grind.” But I also felt that there was a larger mission behind that grunt work and having solidarity with the other members working with me. A lot of the work I did at the time was with Jennifer Golightly (who was the Caucus's earlier Webmaster and did most of the foundational work to build the site online) and Emily Kugler (who also has been a terrific leader within the Caucus and one of its past presidents).

We were just trying to make our way through this morass, and Jennifer, especially, did so much heavy lifting to build something from minimal materials, if not from nothing. But at the same time, going through those entries line by line helped me get a sense of who was part of the Women's Caucus. I would go to these members' profiles, see where they were working now, and get a sense of their trajectory: someone who was once a grad student was now a faculty member or an independent scholar. It was a lot of seemingly logistical work, but it also helped me familiarize myself with the contours of who's in this membership. So we did plenty of building with that.

Ever since we've had that online platform, that's opened up a whole new dimension of space in which we can intervene. A shoutout to Vicki Barnett-Woods, the current Webmaster, who took up where Jennifer Golightly left off. She has put in the work so that the website has continued to evolve as a platform for the Caucus. I worked with Vicki and Emily as Vicki updated the website. More recently, Lisa Vandebossche has been a whiz at editing the Caucus newsletter.

We also did a lot of styling in terms of making the website something that members would return to. That's a real challenge: ramping up the stickiness of the website, making it a go-to resource. These days, I'm able to focus more on content. I also do things like taking the minutes for meetings. And we have a more frequent cadence for meetings now, which reflects that we're taking on more projects.

Jain: Ever since I entered higher education, I've heard about the crisis of the humanities, and it seems like many of the current challenges of higher education, whether for teaching or scholarship, are ones we haven't seen before. How do you think these challenges will impact women's labor in academia?

Wright: That's a good follow-up question to pin onto the previous one, because one of the things that I've been thinking about is women's invisible labor. Research shows that women are more likely to be asked to take on service tasks, but they're also more likely to say yes to these tasks. There's a great book called [*The No Club*](#); female business professors share their research: they've done many studies on the dynamics of how women's labor is continually not taken seriously, but also has often been crucial to building institutions.

One of my concerns related to your question involves AI, which is bringing about major changes in higher education. A lot of startup energy is being directed without enough women in the room. If you think of the key leaders at the top of, say, Anthropic, OpenAI—I believe there was at least one woman who was previously involved in a prominent role in OpenAI, but from what I'm seeing in the news, it's mostly male leadership. Another problem that you've likely heard of is that these algorithms are trained on real-world materials, so they're taking up real-world biases, both towards people of color, but also towards women. And it's primarily female researchers who are tracking those developments. I can send you some of the work I've been

reading. That's going to be our next challenge. So, we may have taken care of some previous concerns, but there are new challenges on the horizon.

Jain: Yeah. A big part of all of these changes that are happening in academia is also the rise of adjunctification, right? That impacts women's labor in so many ways, and I wonder if you have thoughts about how the Women's Caucus would respond to something like that moving forward.

Wright: Yes, and one thing that has been a more sobering part of my involvement in ASECS has been seeing some really talented rising junior scholars not be able to stay in the field because of the contracting market. And I'm thinking of folks I worked with who were on my panels—who won prizes from ASECS and elsewhere—and just because of structural conditions, they weren't able to stay. And here's where I think—especially those of us who are privileged enough to have jobs—that it's our responsibility to speak up, in the spaces that we can now be in, for adjunct participation.

One thing that I found disturbing, but where I also see a role for us, is I've been in spaces where I've argued for adjuncts becoming part of a committee—not at my university, but in external organizations I've been a member of—and sometimes folks are resistant to that. I think it's just because sometimes people are more comfortable working with those with whom they already have worked, right? I don't think it's necessarily sinister, but it can be a cumulative effect where this committee, we don't have an adjunct join; and this committee, we're not bringing those insights on board; or this special issue, you're not invited. And so it's incumbent on us to bring in the perspectives of members who are contingent faculty or are independent scholars. When I assemble my panels, I'll reach out proactively to recruit folks who are junior scholars, independent scholars, or have contingent positions. Sometimes, they have so much service and teaching that they don't have time to seek opportunities and come to us, so I think we have to actively invite them into these spaces. And you might say that's a one-off solution, but if a critical mass of colleagues were doing that, more perspectives and voices would become visible within our spaces. At the level of our institutions, something else I've been trying to support is when I see opportunities to say, okay, we can do this specific thing to make their material conditions better. I think that's essential, too.

Jain: Yeah, it's such a tightrope to walk. I guess we want to make sure that we don't increase the labor of people who are in contingent positions.

Wright: Yes, yes.

Jain: What are some projects you are working on or looking forward to working on?

Wright: One project, which just was published, is an article on what I'm calling the trope of the White "savage," which appeared during a later segment of the "long eighteenth" century. It's rare that you go on Google Scholar and there are no hits for a title, or only a smattering. And what was startling to me is that I found a few of these works that had been neglected by scholars. In particular, I was examining a pamphlet that described a trial, and the bottom line was that this free Black sailor had been punished based on a false claim made against him aboard a ship. He had been beaten and tortured for a while by the ship's captain and first mate, and he gave moving testimony about what he suffered.

When I first read that document, one pattern that I started tracking involved reversals of certain stereotypes that have often been loaded onto people of color, going back centuries. The sailor's implicit argument seemed to be that punishing people in this way and engaging in this treatment—this is real savagery. And then I connected that with bits of discourse scholars have noticed going back to Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, about how slavery degrades those who are the enslavers. And then I also connected it with an overlooked novel called *The System* by Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, and she uses that trope, again, of the White savage. I think—especially for connecting it to some of the eighteenth-century legacy we see today, where who counts as civilized and who counts as disposable is still contested in the conversations that are playing out across our politics—it's salutary to have reminders of where that type of characterization originated or was developed and evolved.

Jain: Congratulations on the publication. Where did this come out?

Wright: Thank you. It just came out in the *European Journal of English Studies*: “‘Savage’ Masters: Dehumanisation as a Strategy to Challenge White Legal Authority before the 1833 Slavery Abolition Act.” I’ll be presenting some of my work from that article at ASECS.

Jain: Awesome. And are there things that you are looking forward to working on now that this is out?

Wright: Yes, definitely. I’m working on my second book, which takes as its springboard my first book, [Defending Privilege](#). As you know, one of the things that I examined towards the end of my first book is the eighteenth-century legacy that we see threading through to today. I’m thinking about where we see the eighteenth-century legacy showing up: how we’re handling and bequeathing this legacy to the next generation. I’m excited about the work I’m doing for that.

I also have some article-length projects in progress. For example, one of the pieces I recently completed involves exploring the recasting of slavery as a choice—this notion that slavery was a condition that enslaved people chose, or, at least, that they didn’t object to being enslaved. [“Freedom and the Domain of Choice: Misinformation, Slavery, and Conflicting Narratives of ‘Voluntary Choice’ in the British West Indies”] is forthcoming in [Law, Narrative, Narratology](#), out later this year from New York University Press.]