

Afterword

Kindness and Kith

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The Documentarian narratives in this collection have carried me back to my own experience of the 2022 Convention and, still more so, to the flurry, the excitement, and the hope of the months after that conference as, with an extraordinary collaborative of volunteers and staff, the 2023 Convention was planned. In 2022, I was struggling my way out of a cold and deep pandemic depression. Separated not only from friends and colleagues, but also by a closed international border that kept me from two of my three children and them from me and from their home. Those months of worry, loneliness, and loss came near to breaking me.

When the land borders between Canada and the United States opened once more, and as the 2022 Convention approached, I was determined to see my daughter Lucy and my dear friend Jennifer, come hell or high water. I packed my car and drove from Waterloo, Ontario, to Potsdam, New York, where Lucy was a student and Jen a faculty member at SUNY Potsdam. I stayed at Jen's home, deep in the woods of upstate New York, where snow still lay thick on the ground. I spent hours talking, talking, talking the way old friends do, snuggling her dog, and sneaking out for visits to her chickens, donkey, and sheep. I held my daughter every chance I got, reveling in the pleasure of her presence: her smile, the smell of her hair, her wit, and her wisdom. Frankly, I sandwiched the conference in between love-ins with my beloved people, caring much less about attending sessions than on the joy of reunion. What duties I needed to perform at the conference I undertook at the Potsdam public library. Jen had booked us a room with reliable Wi-Fi. In between sessions and tasks, we perused books about gardening and foraging in upstate New York.

This is what I learned from COVID: I don't know that I will ever again depart easily from family, friends, or colleagues. The recurring nightmares of separation, suffering, and loss with which I have contended since I was a child can, in fact, come true. And so, the 2022 conference concluded, I drove away from my daughter and my friend heartsore at the leaving and reaching for gratitude. I had held my

daughter in my arms. I had broken bread with my friend. I needed to be grateful. At home, once more, the work on CCCC 2023 kicked into high gear. I poured myself into writing the call-for-proposals, willing my vision and my writing to both represent lovingly and well the yearning for affiliative relationship, for camaraderie, and solidarity for which friends and colleagues across the organization called and which I, too, felt deeply.

Very often I find myself stretched uncomfortably between the social norms of professional institutions (like the university) and organizations (like CCCC) and the pressing human needs of folks whose lives those institutions and organizations impact for good or ill. I am struck by the propensity of such entities to abstract the value of human—and humane—relations from the material conditions and lived experiences of workers, students, staff, or members. To the extent that those relations can be said to possess exchange value for the institution or organization, that value is extolled and credit for that value claimed by the institution or organization. The impact of such a practice, I think, is the continual thinning of human and humane relations as casual insouciance is encouraged under the heading of “professionalism.”

As the 2023 conference cycle swung into action, with proposals and first and second round reviews, with negotiations and frustrations over conference space and time and accessibility, and all the myriad organizing tasks, missteps, failures, and triumphs, I worried. Like every professional organization I know of, CCCC has journeyed in just such a way, leaving in its wake too many ignored, belittled, marginalized, uncared-for folks: students, teachers, and scholars who slipped unnoticed and uncelebrated through sessions and awards ceremonies and social gatherings. Could we be and do something else, something quite different altogether? Could we care differently and more for one another? Could we create and learn to sustain an organization and a conference grounded in kindness? Could we, together, learn to recognize and promote as scholarly and pedagogical practice simultaneously critical and compassionate intellectual engagement with one another? Could we learn with and for one another on the go, as it were, staying, supporting, assisting? Getting fierce when ferocity is called for without abandoning one another or stomping off in a fury when caught out in failure? I wanted—I still want—to try.

The accounts of conference experiences over the last three years produced by the Documentarians catalog themes of conference experience

that we should attend to carefully, for there are longstanding themes in experience well-articulated here as well as qualities of experience long overlooked that we all need to learn from and about if we are to create increasingly inclusive and caring conferences. Karen Tellez-Chaires, for example, writes of CCCC 2023 as an opportunity to travel with family and commune with friends after years apart, combining her love of her people and her work. She also notes the ways that the demands of work and the need for respite continue to contend throughout the conference, documenting the need for self-care as well as for the being-with and touching of one another that the pandemic denied to us for so long.

I was particularly moved by Quang Ly's account of the conference and their observation that imposter syndrome often lingers long after graduate school. This is certainly an experience I share, and, like Quang Ly, I have struggled over the years to find my way and my place within both the CCCC Convention and the organization. And yet, they note, even through the excitement, trepidation, and angst of finding a place and people to belong with, the conference does support the opportunity to learn from colleagues and friends, to hear constructive criticism and so expand perspectives and hone ideas.

One of the great challenges for program chairs of conferences like CCCC is to think carefully and critically about whether or how one's own experiences and ways of being might not be generalizable or serve the needs and interests of other folks. Nitya Pandey and Jennifer Grouling both wrote tenderly and powerfully about their need and preference for virtual conference attendance. Pandey's chronicle should remind us of all the comfort and well-being of home that no conference hotel, however filled with friends old and new, can provide. Grouling writes:

While others frequently articulated their struggles with the pandemic life, with online teaching, virtual conferences, and Zoom fatigue, I had found a sense of confidence and self, an energy and productivity that I had never had before. I mourned (and still mourn) that 2021 may be the only year in which I am allowed to function in that virtual environment that clicked with my brain so well.

Her words caught me up, made me stop and think. In a certain way, I, too, found "confidence," "energy," and "productivity" when all the

working world was virtual. And yet, although I find commonality, I recognize significant differences as well. I can and do choose to work in person when the option is available. I recognize that I move through a world designed for my ease and not for the ease or well-being of those who are neurodivergent. I do not mourn the return to that world as Grouling does. This means, I think, that I and other neurotypical readers have a special obligation to think more, think harder, do better at allying with neurodivergent colleagues and friends to ensure that the CCCC conference and the organization hold space and time and opportunity for them to thrive in greater ease.

I'm ever so grateful to all the Documentarians whose writings are collected in this volume. Their work has affirmed for me the importance of human and humane relationship to the thriving of CCCC members, conference attenders and presenters, to those who are able and take pleasure in gathering together, and to those who are safer and happier participating from their homeplaces. The work of the Documentarians makes me want to keep wondering but also to do more and better to create and sustain a CCCC that serves the profession well by centering the health, happiness, and well-being as we study, teach, write, and learn—together.