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Angst, Agency, and Longing: On (Re)Turning to Our Virtual Profession

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It is Friday morning, March 8, 2022, a full day into the conference, or two days if you count the preconference workshops on Wednesday. The fatigue has already set in, and I wonder what I will accomplish today. Most Fridays are like this, especially when I think of getting back online on the very last day of my work week for a mandatory faculty meeting, one-on-one student conference, or, in this case, a presentation. I have been teaching all my New York University (NYU) courses online since mid-March 2020 when the COVID-19 global pandemic hit New York City and the official city-wide shutdown began. For some reason, I assumed that the 2022 Conference on College Composition and Communication Convention (Cs) would be different from the monotony and would not feel like an extension of my remote and distant life in a virtual fantasy that, at a fast pace, somewhat outdistanced my reality of being physically connected to anyone or anything. These days, turning on my flat-screen television seems to remedy the psychological malaise of being online. It is as if adding more technology is the "gateway drug" to relieving technological anxieties—the fear of being on(line) when you are not tuned in or mentally present. Consuming the latest reality television show, at least, informs me that the live action world is still as ridiculous as I remember and is not folded into a neat square pattern of sometimes repetitious virtual civility attempting to stand in the place of real-life, face-to-face angst and human bonding.

In the weeks leading up to the 2022 CCCC Convention, I began to reflect on how I ended up at this particular place in my professional life. I attended my first Conference on College Composition and Communication Convention in 2006, with the theme of "Composition in the Center Spaces: Building Community, Culture, and Coalitions," and chaired the "Critical Theories for Questioning and Building Community" panel. I was in the second year of a dual doctoral program in rhetoric and composition, and Teaching English to

Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), at a state university in western Pennsylvania, about fifty miles outside of Pittsburgh. I did not have enough money in the way of funding to stay in the conference hotel in Chicago or any hotel. I received some research monies from my graduate school, which allowed me to pay for my conference registration fee and my round-trip ticket from the Pittsburgh International Airport to Chicago by way of Chicago Midway International Airport. Although financially strapped, I was excited to attend my first Cs. I stayed with my aunt in the Southside of Chi-town, taking the commuter train in the evenings and mornings back and forth to the conference hotel at the Palmer House Hilton in downtown Chicago. Having come off another doctoral program, which I failed to complete, but from which I received a master of arts in linguistics, I felt as though I was finally becoming a professional and starting to belong. This second attempt at a PhD, however, was not without some physical scars, mental angst, psychological trauma, and emotional baggage, having sacrificed my former self to be carved up into a unique professional identity that was now somewhat fragmented—a displaced Southern Black woman in a small northeastern Pennsylvania town studying English as a Second Language with classmates from all over the world, including Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, South Korea, and China. However, what began as a less familiar and unexpected journey, unbeknownst to me, became the path toward a new career.

It is Wednesday morning, March 6, 2022, and I am still nervous about my on-demand video presentation, "Why C.A.R.E. Matters: Building Community through Access, Respect, and Engagement," for Cs. I have already submitted it, but I hope my message is transparent and my meaning is clear: Will my target audience of educators, researchers, scholars, and experts in my field appreciate what I have to say? Teaching writing courses online for nearly two years, including two summers teaching NYC rising high school juniors and seniors, meant making thousands of videos and Zoom recordings. However, I am still wary of this disconnected, discombobulated hyperspace in which we try to forge connections with other human beings we will never meet or interact with face to face. As I have considered my recent two-year stint in remote instruction, I have thought about how I have attempted to build virtual communities online and what this means. I was dealing with what I considered the "perfect storm." I had been teaching first-year and advanced writing courses to international English as a Second

Language (ESL) undergraduate engineering students with different backgrounds, languages, and academic and linguistic abilities, during a global pandemic while contemplating how to deal with the effects of remote instruction and virtual learning while negotiating different time zones, often seven to thirteen hours apart. I wondered how remote education would impact belonging and how I could offer an inclusive teaching environment in this space. Further, I was curious about how virtual learning would impact *my* teaching of writing.

Since my first Cs, I have always been interested in what it means to build community. This notion took on another level of urgency during remote instruction since physical spaces between learners and their instructor were private and personal. We were all trying to create a place and carve out an IRL (in real life) location that allowed us to engage with one another and make our online existence more meaningful. Sometimes, I was privy to their hidden linguistic and literary ecosystems when having online one-on-one conferences with students. They spoke to me from apartment bathrooms for privacy, dorm rooms to avoid face-to-face encounters, or a COVID-19 quarantine camp in a foreign country where no video was allowed. The 2022 all-virtual Cs brought forth this idea regarding promoting inclusivity while negotiating diversity in a multifaceted landscape. None of us had any idea where we were individually and physically at times, what we were trying to mediate in our daily lives by way of required activities or responsibilities, and how we were transforming our own sacred linguistic and literary ecologies into workable modules to coexist in this shared spatial-like cocoon to attend this year's conference.

Being in one central place—"locked" into a specific location—to teach, hold meetings, attend lectures, or watch presentations is one aspect of virtual space that denies the very concept of freedom that the metaverse was supposed to give us. Although one is free to simultaneously move around, collaborate, or commiserate in several digital environments, to be together, in doing so, *in situ*, means to remain stagnant in our realities. For example, suppose I am teaching a class on Zoom. In that case, my students and I can visit our online university library databases, use an internet search engine, work on a Google document, and later watch a YouTube video. But in doing so, as individuals, synchronously meant we remain under very tightly controlled physical constraints, ensuring our Wi-Fi connections are secure, our laptops are plugged in, restrooms are available, and our audio is not

interrupted by a flood of noise pollution, urban or otherwise. We always need to be physically comfortable as well.

Attending the 2022 all-virtual Cs made this dichotomization of virtual freedom versus physical prison a true nightmare. At this time, I was doing virtual tutoring in the university writing center and teaching remotely; once I added my online conference attendance, it meant being within a tiny area of square footage most of the day. I sat on my red leather couch, with the TV on mute, my foldable desk at the ready, with my laptop and cell phone constantly plugged into my multi-adaptable charger. I barely took 100 steps between my bathroom, couch, front door, and kitchen to stay connected and tuned into the CCCC online site and teach, work, and live. And psychologically, this experience became overwhelming as I began to feel imprisoned in virtual space and IRL. And I sought to escape it. By Thursday evening, March 7, 2022, the first full day of the conference, I felt drained and withdrew from my plans to attend several other online conference events. Conceivably, I could have relocated to my on-campus office or found a nice, quiet spot with good food, clean restrooms, and power outlets somewhere in my large, metropolitan city. However, I had not carefully planned to attend the conference virtually in the same way I had meticulously set out to teach remotely. I realized the "freedom" to use technology to inhabit different spaces and places also meant constantly lugging around all this technology and reconstructing any carefully crafted literary and linguistic ecosystems in new environments. And as we know, those changes cannot be conducted randomly or overnight.

Before the 2022 CCCC Convention, the last conference I attended was the 2012 Thomas R. Watson Conference on Rhetoric and Composition at the University of Louisville. At this point, I was physically unwell and had taken paid medical leave from my job at a large public university in the Midwest. Because I was less than 200 miles away from the conference, I decided to take a Greyhound bus. I was working full time contractually at a large public university located several states away from my doctoral institution and dissertation advisor, but I was in a position that granted me health insurance and retirement. Also, I was working with renowned scholars who were in applied linguistics. I was in the dissertation writing phase of my doctoral program, which meant that, with a full-time job and an institutional graduate research grant, I could afford to stay at the conference hotel

and pay the registration fees. For my presentation, "Race, Identity, and Composition: Valuing Visibility in the Academy," I focused my discussion on the idea of minorities in higher education situating themselves as apparent agents of diversity and inclusion and allowing this stance, or unmasking, to be both beneficial to them and their departments instead of being negatively attributed as mandated service, obligated to deal with problems related to equity and belonging because of their perceived cultural identities. I feel it is impossible to hide in my skin as a Black woman, often in primarily White spaces.

I care about students and minority faculty having equal access to resources, including mentorship. I care about students and faculty being respected for their ideas and expertise. And I know firsthand the value of creating spaces of inclusivity that foster belonging and bring about innovation because individuals feel that what they bring based on their experiences adds to the whole. In my on-demand prerecorded video for the 2022 Cs, I define and describe those parameters that open borders to collaboration instead of closing them. To me, *access* is bringing in as many as possible. *Diversity* means incorporating a range of lived experiences. And *belonging* means having a sense of place whereby an individual feels that they are a part of something greater than themselves and that their contribution adds value to the group or larger community.

I outlined these concepts within the confines of building engaged communities in cyberspace via remote instruction. But, truly understanding what they bring to learning is to present inclusivity as situated contexts that encourage and allow for voluntary participation with and without direct oversight and supervision. In this way, I feel that the all-virtual Cs included different ways for participants to engage in online activities. As attendees, we were given instructions for logging in and participating. Then, the rest of our involvement was left to our agency. I think it is also essential to create opportunities, online or otherwise, for voluntary participation. Individuals are given space to collaborate; this involves people working together to create a new product. For example, in the advanced writing for engineers, a research-based pilot course I taught at my university during the 2022 spring semester, I put my students in groups and asked them to work together to create a new team contract, construct a project proposal outline, and develop a script and storyboard for a multimodal project. And, of course, they had to collaborate to complete the final multimodal

presentation. What kept them engaged was a sense of shared duty from the planning stage to production. Also, they had carefully defined roles with responsibilities that they had agreed upon from the beginning of the assignment. I had set up the context for learning but understood that inclusivity meant allowing them to provide an atmosphere that encouraged participation due to a sense of belonging.

In my online essay, "Diversity is Trash," I noted that most all contexts in which we found ourselves could be complex and multifaceted. There are always "differences between individuals, usually related to experience, background, or representation," regardless of whether they are acknowledged (Thomas). This actuation, in fact, is the misnomer: we do not have to create diversity, or make it "more," make it "better," or "increase" it. As individuals, what we want is to simply exist. We want to belong, "to be accepted and included based on who we are and how we choose to identify ourselves" (Thomas). I describe this type of belonging as bringing peace, self affirmation, positivity, lightheartedness, i.e., without political motivation, and welcoming.

Belongingness predisposes a climate of inclusivity in feeling as though "folks are glad you are in their midst and [whereby] you are welcomed and appreciated by … those you care for, respect, and … admire" (Thomas). This type of community not only includes shared goals but values that are explored collaboratively; most important, "no one is left out, demoralized, talked down to, or condescended" (Thomas). No pressure is put on a select few to invent or innovate. When I call diversity "trash," I mean to say that we have used the term so generically in higher education that it has lost its valuation. To me, diversity, in this sense, becomes a "trash bin" for social equity, a one-dimensional isolated response to all the qualifiers that do not seem to belong or fit within the mainstream curriculum or societal standard and, therefore, must be questioned. Historically, individuals and contexts—entities defined as "diverse"—are meant to be cast out, relegated to the sides, abandoned, abused, neglected, and possibly thrown away. So, I believe in redefining diversity for our modern era, thinking "of it as a place and space where we belong, are respected, contribute something positive, encourage others, and are included precisely because of our uniqueness" (Thomas). Such an inclusive climate values and "accepts how others want to represent themselves—valuing diversity in those individuals' multi-faceted [individual] histories and complex life stories" (Thomas). I am asking us to be *human* again, to

appreciate what this means apart from differences associated with flattened hierarchical representations of Self that seem to matter the most, as capital, in a need to "sell" who we are.

I became a CCCC Scholars for the Dream conference travel grant recipient in 2007. I combined monies from this grant and my graduate school, allowing me to immerse myself in the experience fully. In our panel, "(Un)Masking 'Identity': Cross-Cultural Reflections on Lived Experience," consisting of classmates from my doctoral program, I presented "Private Experiences Made Public: Reflecting on Cross-Cultural Racial and Ethnic Identity Construction." At that time, I was beginning to see how my international and domestic ESL students' identities were shaped by their interpretation of their lived experiences; it seemed that context played a role in how they perceived themselves. I could relate to this idea of my identity as a "Black, Southern woman" being shaped by the interpretation of my lived experience as a *Black*, *Southern* woman, the meaning of which is entirely dependent on context. In truth, after this attendance, I stopped coming to CCCC altogether. I applied each year after the 2007 CCCC, but after several proposal rejections in the following years, I gave up attempting to return. Financially, it was also proving difficult to manage and justify such an expensive endeavor. In the next years, I took on several contractual, non-tenure-track, low-paying jobs with no research funding in order to complete my dissertation. By 2009, I was completing an English Language fellowship in Malawi administered by Georgetown University and funded by the US Department of State. A year or two later, I was accepted to a Research Network Forum at Cs, but I ultimately decided not to attend. In all, I attended the Thomas R. Watson Conference on Rhetoric and Composition more times than I attended Cs. After receiving my PhD, there began a nine-year gap between attending my next conference.

Not attending Cs and other professional rhetoric and composition conferences over almost a decade caused me to feel a longing for the camaraderie I felt when interacting with other scholars face to face. The lack of networking made publishing difficult as I was moving around every few years, holding low-paying, non-tenure-track positions at institutions in different states, positions that were void of faculty mentoring and institutional financial support for research that would have helped me to advance my work. I got tired of applying for many jobs, going on online or on-campus interviews, resulting in only

one-year contracts, and hoping for reappointment, knowing there would not be a promotion. With these contractual appointments, every year, I applied and interviewed at several institutions to make sure I could move to another institution in case I lost my job. After not receiving a second reappointment in my postdoctoral instructional assistant professor position, I moved back home to South Carolina. I accepted a part-time adjunct position, sometimes teaching up to five classes a semester at a local college, relying on Obamacare for insurance coverage, and began with subbing for an instructor two semesters in a row who had to take medical leave. I managed to make my monthly student loan payments and lived with my family to survive. However, what seemed to be the "end" of my career changed my outlook on teaching and my profession. I enjoyed teaching a wide range of students, from charter high schools to two-year degree and transfer students and older adult learners. There was a great deal of difference in literacy levels and academic preparedness. At this time, I began to think of writing and academic literacy as preprofessional training.

In attending the all-virtual 2022 Cs, I felt this lack of belonging to my field, my profession. I thought about the disconnectedness of being unable to engage more with scholars face-to-face—being able to mingle in the hallways and courtyards with experts or have impromptu calls and responses during lively presentations and seeing old graduate school classmates and friends from previous conferences, reconnecting, reevaluating, and reconsidering. However, my inability to feel more included in this professional space was not due to the mode of the interface but based on a culmination of circumstances that left me somewhat neglectful and nostalgic for the situations that had brought me here. I want to *belong*. I want the work that I do to matter. I said in my dissertation almost a decade ago that "I am more than the sum of my parts"—I believe this statement to be accurate, even though the parts are just as important.

I wanted to return to Cs because I had a unique experience to share, something that had been shaping me as a rhetoric and composition instructor and scholar for over two years. It is important to have *something* to say. And perhaps for nine years, I did not have the words for it. I did not own the vocabulary, agency, consciousness, and consistent mental acuity of having a stable teaching position with health care, benefits, faculty mentoring, opportunities for advancement or promotion, and research funding that would allow me to speak in a way

that truly represented who I am. In this vein, I will concede that the lack of belonging I felt during the 2022 Cs was probably due to the psychological implications of living through a global pandemic for so long and attempting to reconnect in ways, i.e., virtually, that have left us disconnected.

The truth is that I am here. My voice is heard. And I know that belonging also includes making space for others to feel included. And so, I've done my work.

WORK CITED

Thomas, Kimberly. "Diversity is Trash." ILLUMINATION, 3 Aug. 2022, *Medium*, medium.com/illumination/diversity-is-trash-27baccc54f91