

Assembling the Conference Experience: A Quasi-Materialist's Reflection

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Perhaps like many scholars reading this narrative, I considered myself an avid conference-goer before the Great Shutdown. Conferencing was always a core part of my academic career, a professional responsibility of some sort. For me, going to the CCCC Convention was an effective way to learn about trends in the field, pick up new methods of teaching and research, and share my own practices with other interested attendees. However, prior to virtual conferences, I have paid little attention to factors other than the content of the conference (i.e., what's going to happen, who's making it happen) that would make the conference experience *the experience* that I desired. I used to only focus on the conference content when negotiating my own engagement. Needless to say, the recent pandemic has changed my modus operandi. Admittedly, after participating in the 2021 virtual CCCC, I decided it wasn't the kind of experience I wanted, and so I opted out of the 2022 virtual conference—making it the first time that I skipped the CCCC Convention since my first attendance in 2014.

In retrospect, I assumed it was the screen fatigue we all got from prolonged online meetings, or the confusion and frustration caused by new technological interfaces used for an online conference, or other stress-inducing activities (like having to video-record myself in a talking-head presentation) that had deterred me from doing yet another virtual conference. Frankly, yes, those were all contributing factors. Yet, through the exercises of reflection required by the 2023 CCCC Documentarian role, I have discovered even more ontological conditions that may well have shaped the conference experience for me. This narrative is an attempt to revisit some of these conditions (hence a “quasi” reflection) based on the thoughts and feelings I documented when conferencing in Chicago. Reflecting intentionally, while reorienting to an in-person conference, has heightened my attention to the things, people, and places/spaces that make up *the experience*.

MATERIALITY AND MEMORY

When I began writing this entry, it was just the day after our doctoral program's annual May Seminar—a multi-day, onsite conference for online PhD students. I was tired but mostly refreshed after seeing many of my students who I usually only interacted with on screen. More important, I was animated by a keynote presentation that was given by a founding faculty member of the Texas Tech online PhD program in technical communication and rhetoric, namely Joyce Locke Carter, who also happened to be a former CCCC Chair. Carter's talk covered our program's origin story and highlighted the crucial function of material resources in inventing and maintaining the program. Carter reminded faculty members and students at the Seminar that what we do, and *the things we use to do them*, can have a great influence on the outcomes of our actions. Consequently and readily, I am steered toward a materialist mindset as I reflect on my 2023 CCCC experience.

Memory and materiality share an affective relationship. In writing about the part personal memory plays in social construction of food decisions, Nick J. Fox and Pam Alldred draw from a new materialist perspective to propose, "When human bodies are assembled in a present event, memory traces of past events are materially affective, entering into the 'affect economy' of the present" (25). As such, I presume that conference attendees carried with them individual memories of the conference or associated events that could be emotionally manifested in material forms—the anxiety felt when setting up a laptop for a workshop presentation in a hotel meeting room where one has never been in, the anticipation of the long-awaited Chair's Address in the grandiose main ballroom and the prospect of sitting next to someone new during the opening session and having to make small talk, the excitement in seeing an old friend, the joy of a hug, the pleasure of moving around and trying local food, a new city, etc.

I have recorded some of these materialized feelings when completing the Documentarian surveys in Chicago. The in-person conference did allow me to pay closer attention to my personal memories with CCCC and the material expectations I have to relive those experiences.

Simultaneously, the Documentarian surveys have encouraged me to make those feelings and expectations explicit. For instance, in my entry for a survey on the first conference day, I wrote:

Thursday, February 16 (Evening): I am sitting at the small desk in my room at Congress Plaza Hotel. I am hearing a humming

noise from the air conditioner, and the distinctive sounds from my own typing as the room is quiet.

And the next day, I noted:

Friday, February 17 (Morning): I am in a big ballroom set up for the ChatGPT special session. It's a bit chilly for me. The white tablecloths are somewhat awkward looking to me for an event like this. People are chit-chatting around me. The lighting in the room is warm and not too bright.

Looking back at these responses, I am most taken aback by how much the things around me got written into my documentations. From ambient sounds to room temperature and lighting, I cared (perhaps too much) about the physical environment around me as I chronicled my conference experience.

While I have previously created Twitter threads with trivial photographs of CCCC hotel carpets (check out hashtags like #4c18carpets and #4c16carpets), the above environmental conditions were seldom at the forefront of my evaluation of a conference. I begin to wonder now why the color of tablecloths at a session or people's chit-chatting mattered to my conference experience. Quite likely, I was associating the environments of the 2023 CCCC with particular memories I had of the conference. I might be basing it off of a mental script and image(s) of the conference—ones informed by my very first or second CCCC conference attendance. These *mental models*, as user experience and technical communication scholars call them, can serve as cognitive guides for navigating current as well as future events.

Memories and materiality also add corporeal effects to an experience; as the tablecloths reflected the warm chandelier lights onto my sleep-deprived face on a Friday morning, and the chatter of the people around drowned my own inner head voice, I was reminded of the difference between an onsite conference versus a virtual meeting where I could easily turn off the computer's audio or video, or both. Being at the conference, my experience was an assemblage of the interfaces and interactions of people and things that made up the conference.

PRESENCE AND PARTICIPATION

Just as memory and materiality manifest the experience of conferencing, presence promotes participation across various levels at the

CCCC Convention. For me, the most apparent contrast between an online conference and an in-person experience is the awareness of others when engaging with the conference program. Bodies, movements, and conversations can be markers of participation at a conference. In my evening entry on the first day, I documented where I had been, whom I had spoken to, and what I had done:

Thursday, February 16 (Evening): I spent some time with folks at the Social Justice at the Conference (SJAC) table. I attended the digital praxis poster (DPP) presentations. I went to a pre-scheduled meeting with some researchers. I went to some sessions I did not think I was going to go to, but I just followed my body-mind. Later in the evening, I went to dinner with friends (and had really good conversations), and then karaoke with more (new) friends from the conference.

Reexamining this response from a distance, I recognize my third-grader-diary-like entry reported a series of events that were made possible by the presence and company of others. At the SJAC table, I met and held conversations with people I had not met before; at the DPP presentations, I made it a point to visit a colleague from another institution whose work I admire; and as for the sessions I ended up attending even though I did not mark them on my calendar, they were due to names and topics I stumbled upon while flipping through the conference program booklet. These encounters were possible largely because people were present—physically, intellectually, cordially.

And speaking of convivial presence, I was most pleased about the opportunities to share meals and leisure time with colleagues with activities like talking, eating, and singing (don't mind us!) as part of the conference experience. These activities were not central to the CCCC Convention, of course, but they were possible—and desirable—because the people who were present formed congenial relationships that complemented the professional exchanges among one another during the conference.

Additionally, individual presence can have substantial impacts on communities. Strange or unfamiliar individual bodies present in a certain space at a select time can affect the routines of the local people and their ways of life. This realization certainly reminds me of Asao Inoue's 2019 CCCC Chair's Address, where Inoue urged conference attendees to think critically and carefully about the impact of their embodied

presence on social and racial injustices, control and agency, and life and livelihood of themselves but more importantly others around them. I noted in one of my Documentarian survey entries about ways in which I physically occupy spaces in a place I don't reside. Responding to a prompt about what I had planned for the day and how my plans might determine my movement, I wrote:

Friday, February 17 (Morning): I will be mostly around the conference hotel today and some restaurants for meals. I will be in the presence of other CCCC goers and I occupy spaces that are typically used by local residents (and a lot of Columbia College Chicago students nearby).

In that response, I was trying to stay attuned to how an influx of out-of-state visitors (give or take 1,000+ CCCC attendees) could cause changes to the downtown Chicago area. Were we an inconvenience to the locals? Were we expected (since the area *is* already a tourists' hotspot)?

Were we contributing to local businesses? Or were we simply invisible to the local residents? Having no empirical data to even begin to answer any of these questions, my guess is that our collective presence does make a difference in the community's well-being. Conferencing is, thus, more than just individuals participating in a designated program; rather, our collective presence has dynamic imprints or impressions on the host community.

While presence promotes participation, it can also externalize non-participation. I'd be remiss to disregard the antipode of being present—i.e., being non-interactive at (or after) a conference.

Truly, it may not come across as nuance to many seasoned conferencegoers that there are no rules on participation in events at a conference. Unless attendance is used to earn certain professional development credits (I know some institutions do that), CCCC Convention attendees can usually choose for themselves what to take part in and what to skip. Having people around may motivate attendees to join sessions, like when I followed my spontaneous (body-mind) instinct to attend sessions that were not written to my plan on Thursday the 16th, but it is an individual's decision to negotiate how energy would or should be spent at the conference. The presence of self among others in corporeal reality amplifies my awareness of the surroundings. I am more observant of my own movements when there are others

around me. While at the conference hotel, I was actively making decisions about when and how I would conserve my strength by not doing things with people.

Leaving Chicago first thing in the morning on Saturday, I wrote in the airport:

Saturday, February 19 (Morning): I expect to see a lot of faces today—passengers in transit, service members, airport cleaners, etc. *I don't expect to spend time with anyone today.*

My expectation for interaction was independent from the environment of presence. Even as presence demands participation, I realize the importance of choice—choosing to engage or disengage from activities. A conference *experience* should, as such, be a matter of personal agency, albeit assembled with material effects and scripts from memories.

SPACES AND PLACES

As it's been alluded to earlier when considering how conferencegoers occupy local places, I acknowledge the effects of bodies on spaces that host the bodies. Vice versa, a new materialist perspective would also consider the perceived subjectivity of place and space on human actants. Space refers to the physical dimensions and characteristics of the environment, while place encompasses the meanings and values that individuals and communities attach to specific locations. Given this understanding, locations (i.e., downtown Chicago) and surrounding areas for activities (e.g., restaurants, gyms) can afford or limit individual movements and actions.

Given the specific prompts on plans, activities, and movements in the Documentarian surveys, my responses yielded space- and place-based reflections such as this entry on the official first day of the CCCC Convention:

Thursday, February 16 (Morning): I will be in the conference hotel mostly. I will also be going to restaurants and bars.

In that reflection, I knew my activities would be bound by the physical places and social spaces in which the convention occurs. My plans for the day were guided by *where* I'd be or go, ahead of *whom* I would interact with. Social theory, such as the relational framework forwarded by sociologist John Urry, has it that “places are about relationships,

about the placings of materials and the system of difference they perform” (74). The places and spaces at or in which my engagement with the conference occurs—like the ballroom where I observed the award ceremony and congratulated winners of various CCCC accolades, or the exhibition hall where I learned about numerous academic presses and publishers, or the hotel bar where I met the Documentarian project facilitators and enjoyed a free beer, or the close-by Asian restaurants where I enjoyed meals with company and shared memorable conversations—all facilitated my social encounters and ultimately shaped my participation at the conference.

Sitting with the responses I’ve made through the Documentarian surveys, I found the affective association I made with spaces I spent individual time with, like the gym:

Friday, February 17 (Morning): I felt most comfortable when I was in the hotel gym by myself. Generally, I feel comfortable around people in the conference hotel. I was able to move around comfortably.

While the survey prompt, “Where do you expect to feel comfortable? Where not?,” would seemingly land itself on a place/space-based reaction, my response connected feelings with movement in time. Although psychologists like Christopher L. Heavey, Russell T. Hulburt, and Noelle L. Lefforge have attempted to organize the phenomenology of feelings in a systematic way, my experience of the spatial and locational apprehension was rather more an amalgamation of personal autonomy and unexpected, visceral return to given circumstances. Where I go and what I do could yield different experiences across time. Even though I wrote on Friday the 17th that I felt most comfortable when I was in the hotel gym, I was later disgusted by a weird smell in the same gym the next morning, making it most certainly an uncomfortable experience during my time at the conference.

In that same response I also noted my feeling of comfort with movements. Expectedly, a flagship conference such as the CCCC Convention that demands a great deal of physical movement can be challenging to a lot of people. I am reminded of the volunteers at the convention’s Access and Accessibility resource table who gave out information about accessibility and recommendations to attendees about ensuring accessibility for everyone. I am thankful for their time and contribution. Although it seems like we have come a long way to

provide access to all CCCC Convention attendees, the effort needs to be maintained and updated according to ongoing research.

Even as I was able to move around comfortably during the convention, I noticed numerous physical barriers and spatial challenges that could hinder attendees from a desired conference experience. Unlike the visible roadblocks for structural constructions around the conference location, some of these place- or space-based constraints were not easily noticeable, like the heavy doors by the conference hotel entrance that were difficult to use (partially due to the wind resistance in Chicago but mainly because they were old). For someone who couldn't use the revolving doors as an alternative to these heavy doors, simply getting in and out of the conference hotel could be an immense challenge.

The relationships between space, place, and embodied movements are intricate and intertwined. Together, these elements can create a dynamic interplay—embodied movements are influenced by the spatial attributes of a place, shaping how individuals navigate and interact within it. At the same time, individuals' movements in a place can also transform and redefine the spatial dynamics, influencing the perception and *experience* of space. This interrelationship highlights the interactions between the body, its movements, and the environment, revealing how our physical engagement with space and place shapes our sense of belonging, identity, and understanding of the world around us. In other words, the spaces and places that make up the CCCC Convention directly affect my bodily movements and make up a major part of my conference experience.

CODA: ALL THINGS EMBODIED AND EXPERIENCED

In this reflection, I've explored my personal experience with a return to an in-person conference, delving into the factors that contribute to the *conference experience*, as I've initially probed.

Evidently, my involvement as a Documentarian for the 2023 CCCC Convention has compelled me to contemplate the fundamental conditions that influenced my own experience. I've come to recognize the significance of materiality and memory in shaping my conference encounters. The physical environment and tangible elements contributed to the overall experience. Moreover, my presence and interactions with fellow attendees played a vital role in fostering participation and engagement. I acknowledge the impact of my presence on the host community and the value of personal agency in determining how I

engaged with conference activities. Additionally, the spaces and places where conferences take place significantly influenced my experiences and interactions. The surroundings and ambiance contributed to the overall atmosphere and shaped the nature of my engagement. Through this introspection, I have gained a profound appreciation for the multifaceted aspects that *assemble* a conference experience, extending beyond mere content. I recognize the importance of considering the material, social, and personal elements intertwined within the conference realm.

It's worth reiterating—embodiment plays a significant role in shaping the in-person conference experience. When attending an in-person conference, my physical presence and bodily experiences become integral to how I engage with the event. How I occupy a space, listen to others, and make conversations all contribute to building connections, establishing rapport, and fostering meaningful relationships. These physical interactions create a sense of shared presence. Being physically present allows me to engage with the conference environment through my senses. I can see the vibrant displays, hear the buzz of conversations and presentations, and even smell the coffee in the break area. The physical layout of the conference venue influences the dynamics of the event. Navigating through different spaces, such as meeting rooms, exhibition areas, and informal gathering spaces, offers opportunities for chance encounters and serendipitous connections.

Collectively, the intertwining elements of materiality, memory, personal agency, and physical presence contribute to a rich and multifaceted engagement that goes beyond the mere transmission of information or fostering connections, thus ultimately *assembling* the overall conference experience. This narrative has attempted to shed light on these ontological conditions, which I hope to be somewhat insightful. I am also grateful for the opportunity to contribute to documenting this event. The Documentarian role has not only allowed me to capture the essence of my own conference experience but has also provided a unique vantage point to inspect this experience reflectively.

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