

## Together, in Chicago

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As a consistent user of planners and as a collector of paper memorabilia, it was crushing to sit at the dining room table with markers, stickers, and an empty planner, having nothing to document during the most frightful days of the COVID-19 pandemic. There were no movie ticket stubs to paperclip to a page. There were no lunch plans to write into a washi-tape-decorated calendar box—an occasional balm to my sadness of not having obligations to plan was to make goals for the future ahead. Instead of creating a to-do calendar, I made long, numbered, and bulleted lists of all that I needed to do to get ready for life after quarantine.

Something I noticed, as the quarantine lifted, was that, like many people, I missed traveling and spending time with my family. I also regretted that I didn't have a chance to become more involved in my new career as a professor of rhetoric and composition because quarantine put a pause on all in-person conferences. During the days when I could not leave the house, I felt most frustrated that I did not know when I would be able to spend time with people again. I longed for connection. I didn't want to see or hear people, I wanted to share space, to touch them. In the days since the lifting of the pandemic quarantine, I have traveled some, spent more time with my sons who live in New Mexico, and attended in-person conferences in Louisville, Kentucky, Los Angeles, and Davis, California. The big conference trip for me in 2023 was to attend Cs in Chicago, and it checked all the boxes I'd listed during the days when all I could do was hope and plan. Cs offered the opportunity to travel, spend time with family, and be close to friends whom I hadn't seen in what felt like more than two years. At Cs, I blended my love for work and love for family by meeting my mother (Lori), sister (Kathy), and tia (Aurora) for a five-day trip.

The Windy City is a special place to my parents, sister, and me, in that we lived briefly in Cicero, Illinois, a town just outside Chicago, in 1978. Our three brothers stayed in El Paso, Texas, with family during this time, allowing my parents to get settled before they would join us. Life could be trying for our family—especially in the early days when

my parents raised five children on one income. Our youngest brother wasn't born until 1980. Chicago was beautiful, but we missed our brothers, extended family, and our southwest home. We returned to El Paso before our brothers ever came to Cicero. There were some consolations in the city, though, like *The Bozo Show* on Saturdays, delicious pizza, and Gerry Rafferty's "Baker Street" that played constantly on the popular radio station our dad tuned in to. My sister and I would sing in the backseat of our green Mercury Cougar, "But you know, he'll always keep movin'. You know he's never gonna stop movin'. 'Cause he's rollin', he's the rolling stone." For the rest of my life, this song has brought back memories of our sparsely furnished second-floor apartment, flashes of interactions with a friendly beat cop who seemed to look out for us while our dad worked nights as a police officer himself, and of an exciting swim in Lake Michigan that I likely would not take today for fear of hypothermia or pollution. The CCCC 2023 trip to Chicago marked a return for my mother, sister, and me after thirty-five years of reminiscing about the lake, the wind, and the tall buildings. As our Uber driver sped into Downtown from our airport pickup, I felt like I was in a dream that I'd had many times before of my sister and mom with me in a car, the lights of traffic whirring by us. Together, in Chicago.

#### THE CONFERENCE

All four of us—Lori, Aurora, Kathy, and I—arrived in Chicago on Tuesday, February 14, 2023. Mom and Kathy flew straight through from San Francisco, I arrived on a flight that started in Santa Barbara, California, and our tia Aurora came from Dallas, Texas. By the time we got checked into our room, it was time for dinner. We settled in for burgers and beers at Kitty O'Shea's in the hotel and remarked on the quiet all around us that I knew would soon change. The server mentioned the snow that was in the forecast for the week, which was news that made the four of us Southwesterners shiver.

As is the sensation that often happens with travel, particularly far from home, I felt that I was fully in conference mode by the time I boarded my flight. Many of the tasks I'd set aside to be done at the hotel, such as grading and the revising of chapters, slipped to the back of my mind. All my thoughts were devoted to the role I would have as a co-hostess in the relaxation room during the Feminist Workshop, on my first opportunity to serve as a respondent on the Job Market

Panel, put together by Laura Micciche, and on my panel presentation. This conference experience was starkly different from my attendance in 2022, when I took notes on my virtual role, participating via Zoom. As some of my final thoughts on the 2022 attendance, I had written

My locations during conference days included my car, home (dining room), and office on campus. One of the patterns I could see was that I was working intently to stay scheduled, but to no avail. It seemed that no matter where I was, something came up that distracted me from the task at hand. This ranged from a situation in a parking lot where someone was waiting for me to leave my parking space, although I was at work in it, to emergency meetings with students and faculty. Even though I have been a big proponent for online conferencing, I longed for the days when I was on site at the conference. I thought about the ways that being *at* the conference meant warm and fuzzies like seeing people and traveling, but also, being able to focus on panels, and know that I have dedicated time for conferencing. My university didn't give me days off for the conference, so being online meant balancing it all.

Revisiting those notes reminded me of the difficulties I had with balancing my work and home life that were compounded by working at home throughout the pandemic quarantine. When we returned to teaching on campus in 2022, it was once again difficult to find balance between home and work. Events like conferences were somehow given less importance by administrators who figured that faculty would figure out the best way to teach, fulfill service requirements on campus, and dedicate time to home responsibilities while attending conferences. Even though I could feel the stress of my situation when reading my notes, it was hard for me to imagine the feelings I had while attending the 2022 CCCC online. I couldn't feel the actual pull of attending the conference online because I was in the conference hotel, able to give attention to my roles at the conference. Of course, this was only my first evening in Chicago and the euphoria of traveling, being in Chicago, and at the conference was still fresh.

Holding a space for retreat and relaxation away from the conference during the Feminist Workshop contributed to my early conference feelings of bliss. Andrea McCrary and I got to hold a full room open for conference attendees to retreat during the Feminist Workshop.

Andrea and I told stories, got to know each other, and commented on how good it was to be together again with old and new friends. The relaxation room wasn't visited by many conference attendees, likely because it was in the basement of the hotel, but we didn't mind. We were happy to be conferencing face-to-face, to have space for rest, and to be reconnecting with people we'd missed. There were moments during the conference when being with people felt like a gift that was too much of an ask, as if the other shoe was going to drop and I would realize all wasn't as grand as I had anticipated or was feeling at the time. In retrospect I am filled with gratitude that the other shoe did not drop, and all went relatively well.

#### MY TIME IN CHICAGO

The surveys I completed while at the conference ended up feeling like a much-needed journal of my time in the hotel. On April 15, I wrote,

I'm in my hotel room this morning and it's beautiful and cold out. I can see a building in front of me, and a man in the window across from my building is working on his laptop. I am not sure if he is a conference-goer but he is working feverishly on something. My room is quiet with my travel buddies asleep.

In some ways I felt that I was writing a captain's log that would survive hundreds of years after I had left this earth and my ship was found capsized on a forgotten island. The initial experience of documenting my time was romantic and glamorous as I kept track of every restaurant and meal we ate. The writing and tracking were practices reminiscent of my COVID-19 lists filled with plans for travel. I didn't want one detail to go undocumented. In the exhilaration of being at the conference and the shunning of my academic responsibilities tied to home, I also seemed to forget or put aside my bodily limitations as a woman with a chronic autoimmune disease. On the first night of the trip, Kathy and I ran downstairs from our room to the lobby café at nearly midnight in our pajamas in search of a snack. Time was not important to me, nor were my dietary limitations. I chose to forget that my body relies on sleep, certain foods, and tight schedules that uphold rest and activity if I intend to function at my best. From the time I got on the plane in Santa Barbara, I had been moving non-stop, eating and drinking without concern for the way my body would react. In my morning response to survey questions for April 16, I wrote,

I am sick, having drank something that triggered a food intolerance so I'm drinking hot tea and water with hopes of getting back in control in time to participate in the day.

Unfortunately, feeling sick has me worried about how the day will go. Thus far, I have missed the Opening Session and a panel on Hopeful Feminisms. I am pushing myself to rebound in time for a session on Handcrafted Rhetorics. Having attended the Documentarian Meet and Greet last night, I am excited about all that the conference offers. Kathy and I sat in the hotel bar among other Documentarians, met new people, had a few drinks, and "felt" like we were in Chicago. There was a tremendous amount of hustle and bustle around us in the bar and outside the windows.

My day will be at the mercy of my body. Fatigue, body aches, tummy aches, and headache are not what I hoped for, so I will manage my time around what I think my body can handle. I am looking forward to intentionally going to the cafe to get something healthy to eat, to eating in the hotel restaurant (the healthy buffet), and to getting to my first session in the early afternoon. Overall, I am telling myself to not stress and to "go with it" whatever comes my way. I will be improvisational to emergent situations, looking forward to seeing Kristi Prins from CPP. Oh, we went out for pizza at Aurelio's last night and it was so good—too good. I may never want California pizza again.

By afternoon, Kathy and I did make it to the Handcrafted Rhetorics panel discussion and we did see Kristi Prins. We ate all three meals at the hotel, and got the gift of snow. My body aches and nausea finally lifted after a few hours of rest and doubling up on medication. Of the many gifts our time in Chicago brought, there were the dreams that came true that I'd never imagined, such as running into the arms of Felicita Arzu-Carmichael at the elevators, after having not seen her since our PhD program at New Mexico State University. I got to kiss Lauren Rosenberg's cheeks in the lobby of the hotel, forgetting about COVID-19 and only seeing a face that I missed. Without embarrassment, I looked for and found Ada Hubrig to tell them how much I appreciate and admire their work.

By the time the snow came in the evening, Mom, our tia, Kathy, and I bundled up and made our way to the front of the hotel to play.

We told other conferencegoers about our rare experiences with snow, and they too celebrated the snow with us. Our tia wrote her name and our uncle's name side by side in the white dust like a schoolgirl, our mother looked up and caught snow on her tongue in the most childlike manner, while my sister and I tried to make snowballs but mostly twirled, laughed, and took video and photos to send and post to social media. Kathy and I got to experience the Chicago winter we had missed as children, having returned to El Paso in early fall of 1978. In my end-of-day notes, I wrote the words: eating, learning, talking, playing, and sistering.

When we were all finally home from the conference, I marveled at the word cloud put together from the collection of Documentarian surveys that boasted the most frequently used words used by the 2023 Documentarians. The words “family” and “time” were the most popular words used in the 2023 Documentarian surveys, with “family” being used most at the beginning of the conference, and “time” at the end. By our third day in Chicago, we had most definitely eaten delicious food, learned during panels, stayed up late into the night talking in bed to the light of our smartphones, played in the snow, honored each other in the roles of sister—my mother and her sister, me and my sister. We made up for lost time, while simultaneously going back in time to redo what was left undone when we left Cicero in a rush that our father never explained.

Fulfilling this winter memory with fun seemed to take care of a hole that was missing in my memory, somehow making it easier to return to California with the feeling of having taken care of weighty business, or as if I had found a treasured item I'd long since accepted as being lost.

The five days in Chicago were more lovely and heartening than I'd expected but, as we neared the last two days of the trip, I knew there was so much I needed to do at home and work.

#### RESPONSIBILITIES AND COMPETITION FOR MY ATTENTION

In-person conference attendance is about many things for me. It's about presenting, but also about sitting in the role of student once again, learning from the presenters in chosen panels. Being on location at a conference is also about meeting new people, eating food that nourishes the soul, seeing the sights in the conference city, and reconnecting with the people who inform my scholarship and my heart, and

a combination of all the above. My Retention, Tenure, and Promotion packet provides me a list of the teaching, service, and research I must do to be promoted at my university. The actual enactment of fulfilling those responsibilities can be endearing or not, as the individual decides they will face each requirement on their own terms. For me, research begins in the classroom and is grown and fed through the interactions I get from online meetings, but mostly from the brief and long discussions held at in-person conferences.

Many of the networking connections made at conferences are never revisited, but some are. I have found that it is the connections I make with people that get attention once the conference is over, that are lasting. It was difficult to make connections when conferencing via Zoom, as somehow, when clicking the red “LEAVE MEETING” button on the bottom of the right-hand side of the screen, it is not only the technological connection with the conference that is severed but also the emotional connection that only feels real when logged into meetings.

Once I had given my presentation with my panel on the morning of the seventeenth, it was time to give my full attention to the grading that waited for me and to chapter revisions I had put off. I had to make time to sit at my computer and work, even if it was for a few minutes. The balance I had struggled to find when attending Cs online in 2022 was completely off, as I was 95 percent in conference mode and not focused on calling my sons, touching base with our father who was back in New Mexico, or checking on my partner as often as I might otherwise. Remarkably, I was not interested in checking out of conference mode in some sort of stubborn resistance that gave me control over this time that I cherished and had looked forward to for so long.

My notes reveal that my conference mode is very tightly tied to the conference program, accentuated with plans to see the conference city, and to eat at recommended restaurants or the local eateries found by chance. Conferencing in person means coffee, tea, and stopping people in lines while they wait to buy a muffin to tell them how happy you are to see them, to ask how they have been, and to find out what they are doing. The responsibilities at my university, the laundry or packing mess I’d made at home were in my head, thousands of miles away. While I did find the time to get some grading done, worked on some chapter revisions, and texted and called my beloved family, I was in Chicago—body, mind, and spirit. All of me was in Chicago and at

Cs and I didn't want that experience bothered because I knew this trip would end and the rest of my responsibilities would be waiting for me.

#### GOING HOME

The cold, the draw to family, and longing for the warmth of the Southwest were some of the reasons my parents decided to leave Cicero. Our neighborhood was predominantly inhabited by people of Italian descent in the late 1970s with us as the outliers, second generation Mexican Americans. We didn't know the word *nepantla* then but knew the sensation of not totally belonging (Anzaldúa). My bilingual parents were white-passing enough to keep our neighbors wondering about the origins of our last name, Tellez. My father's job in law enforcement placed him and us in a precarious position. The Statistical Summary 1978 report published by the Chicago Police Department stated, "Major crimes in Chicago were reduced 6.6% in 1978," but police and resident activity in our neighborhood revealed otherwise. My family had these two significant reasons to be marginalized in the neighborhood—my father's occupation and our ethnicity. And although we didn't have the words for it, we could feel the gravity of what it meant to be the other, not from Cicero, "ni de aquí, ni de allá"—"neither from here nor there." The decision to return to El Paso, Texas, was an easy one for my parents. It was nearly winter in Chicago when we packed our car to travel back to El Paso, and I suspect they were not looking forward to the winter weather or what it might mean to raise children in rapidly changing Cicero.

The day before leaving the conference, Mom, Kathy, Tia Aurora, and I got out into the city. We walked a mile or so before becoming discouraged by the cold from the remaining snow and, of course, the freezing wind. Intent on finding Chicago-style hotdogs, we took an Uber to Portillo's Chicago. The dining experience exceeded our expectations. With my mind already reconnecting me with home, I had two slices of their famous chocolate cake packaged to sustain the flight to Los Angeles—a gift for my partner. I deleted Whova, the conference app, from my smartphone as a way of breaking my connection with the conference program, and transferred names and emails to my physically written journal where I'd kept notes from the panels I'd attended. In a box I'd drawn in my journal labeled, "To-Do CCCC 2024," I wrote reminders to myself to volunteer to read James Berlin Award applications again, as well as to read first-round conference proposals for 2024. Before bed, I wrote three ideas for conference proposals of

my own for 2024, none of which I used when applying, although all centered on feminist rhetorical resilience (Flynn, Sotirin, and Brady).

With afternoon flights, Mom, Tia Aurora, Kathy, and I left for the airport at the same time. We were satisfied with our exhaustion, but ready to return to our lives in California and Texas. We had done some anticipated and some unexpected things in Chicago—work, learn, teach, connect, document, remember, and play. Without realizing until we were at the end of the trip, we fulfilled promises that we'd made for years that we'd spend time together. For Mom, Kathy, and me, we at last got to leave Chicago together under different circumstances, better even, and on our terms. This time, we wanted to leave Chicago to return to our lives for different reasons than when we left in 1978.

Our willing return to our lives was a reassuring reminder of how far we had come since we left the first time around as individuals, as a family, and as Chicanas who work too hard sometimes to break the inevitability of regret that generations of women before us could not avoid. I got to show my mom, tia, and sister some of the work I do and am so proud of, and I got to introduce them to the work being done in my field, most of which also brings me great joy.

As the Uber pulled into the temporary lane for departures at O'Hare International, I sang in my head, "When you wake up, it's a new mornin'. The sun is shinin', it's a new mornin'. You're goin', you're goin' home," from the final lines of "Baker Street" (Rafferty). I smiled at what this song means to me. I was softened by the realization of how much can change in thirty-five years since being in one place and returning. I was also moved by the difference from one year of virtually meeting at a conference, to being able to hold the hands of a dear, respected friend and colleague while saying, "It is so good to see you!" when what you really mean is "It is so good to touch you!"

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