

Running on Empty: Documenting the Oscillating Continuum from My Virtual Common Place

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To the north, I can see the George Washington Bridge and the Bronx landscape. To the east, I can trace flights in and out of JFK and LGA. Having unobstructed views on the 38th floor can be deceiving. It feels as though I am unrestricted as far as I can see. Yet the reality is that I am confined to a tiny one-bedroom apartment with windows that do not open. Since I share this space with my 14-year-old daughter, my bedroom is my workspace and sleepspace. I teach, grade, attend meetings, do research, socialize, and sleep all within this room (see Fig. 3.1). I occasionally leave the bedroom to cook in the kitchen and have meals while streaming shows in the living room on our TV-serving monitor. I sometimes do work in the living room, but since my daughter is attending school and doing work in the living room during the day, I try not to interrupt her space.



Figure 3.1. Picture of my bedroom/office.

My workspace needs to be set up strategically. I cannot place my desk chair where it should belong, since that will show my bed in the Zoom background. My almost decade-old laptop restricts me from blurring or changing into a virtual background, so I am obliged to find an angle that looks most professional at the expense of comfort. I squeeze my chair between the air conditioner and the side of the desk, which leaves my legs resting on the paper file cabinet and my left elbow on the humidifier. The angle cannot be shifted too far to the left to show the corner of my bed, nor too far to the right to show the humidifier. After adjusting the blinds to light up my left cheek, voila! my Zoom screen perfectly captures my face framed by an MCM dresser, Escher print, and globe.

The fact that my personal and workspaces are one also reflects that my identity as a writer is ever-present when I am awake. I do almost all of my communications in writing—emailing, texting, posting on blogs, etc. My MacBook tells me my screen time averages thirteen hours a day, which is proof that I am almost always with my laptop except when eating and sleeping. I happen to have a watch that tracks my movement, and it indicates that my “active time” for the conference dates were nine minutes on average daily. These technological gadgets are confirming what I suspected—I am tied to my laptop all day long. Since I cannot afford to have more physical space, I am spending almost all of my time in virtual space. So even before the virtual conference, my life has been virtual.

The week of Cs has been what I have been dreading and anticipating all along. I wanted to attend the Cs after glowing reviews of my colleagues, and finding out about the Documentarian role after the call for regular proposals was already closed. It sounded like an ideal way to get my feet wet. I also found out about the Research Network Forum, which seemed like a perfect way to share and get feedback on my research without participating in the traditional panel format. I wanted to learn from people who do similar research or practice, find out how others are doing innovative research, and expand my network in the field. Soon after I registered, however, I found out I had three conferences all lined up in the same week. As one of the leaders in the professional development workshop series for a group of over one hundred doctoral students, I had to organize and facilitate one of the workshops that week. Also as a member of the College Growth Mindset committee, I was invited to speak for the inaugural Growth Mindset showcase that week. Coincidentally, all of these events were taking place in the same week while I was teaching full-time, taking

the intensive Spanish course at Instituto Cervantes, and attending personnel and budget committee and department meetings. Yet I was eager to make the best out of the week.

Cheerful expectations about the jam-packed week aside, I had been feeling rather anxious and angry that week. I seldom get anxious or lose my temper. Even as I was confident and hopeful about what I wanted to accomplish that week, I was deeply disturbed by what I was seeing on the news—or that this was happening to the people I knew. My colleague living uptown was shoved on the street for no reason. A friend living a block away was ambushed by a maskless stranger while running a quick errand at the corner deli. Living in NYC for more than a decade, I was never really free from these types of unpleasant encounters: a guy with a machete choosing to stand in front of me with his fly open; a subway bum who jumped at me, leaving a bleeding scratch on my arm. While it was true that it was nothing new, the attacks reported on the news seemed to isolate Asian identity as more vulnerable than ever. I used to think that there could have been external factors at play: gender, time of day, location, etc. Yet when race was isolated as a target of hate, it felt much more intentional and powerful.

Being in one of the lucky first groups of people to be fully vaccinated, I thought I would be finally free to take walks with my daughter in the park. However, I became more paranoid about the attacks than about the virus that was ravaging the world. Even with the protection of the vaccine, I felt defenseless in my haven of ten years, now with its back turned against me on the basis of xenophobia and fake news. I was staying indoors more than ever. I would not step outside of the apartment for days ... sometimes weeks. I took my Asian gynecologist's advice to get pepper sprays—she told me she ordered seventeen pepper sprays for herself and her daughter. My daughter and I practiced aiming the sprays after the instruction videos on YouTube. I almost cried when my close colleague teasingly asked why I was not exercising outdoors when it was so beautiful outside. The reality was that I had to shell out \$\$\$ to take the Uber to visit my brother's family in Jersey City because I was so afraid of what could happen in the subway. The *New Yorker* magazine cover with the Asian mother and daughter at a subway station was me. One day, my daughter and I decided to take a walk in the park to see Central Park in bloom. We used oversized caps and masks to erase our racial identifiers as much as possible. My daughter laughed at how ridiculous we looked all covered

up head to toe except our eyes. While we were laughing, we were also crying inside realizing all the trouble we were taking just to get some fresh air out of our nonventilated apartment.

I tried to shake off the anxiety by immersing myself in work. I signed up for the Cs orientation session to get a head start. Even the fact that there was a separate orientation for the conference was reassuring. The session turned out to be helpful. Nonetheless, I felt lost when I started poking around the virtual conference site. I think of myself as far from technologically challenged, but it took me a while to figure out the navigation. Perhaps it was because this was my first time attending a virtual conference. I did not know what to expect. I am not sure if I fully grasped the navigation until the end of the conference. I imagined myself seamlessly going in and out of the conference site like visiting an online shopping mall, but there was some trial and error before I understood how I could get from one place to another. All of this preconference navigation was not something I would normally do at traditional conferences. At most conferences, I would check out the map of the conference site in the conference program booklet to look up the location where I am presenting, but I wouldn't take a pre-tour of the conference site before the conference begins. So I was taking extra steps to make this conference experience work. I looked for some clues on the website. I came across the *C's the Day* challenge (Fig. 3.2). I carefully reviewed how the game worked. The participants would be getting points every time they visited certain parts of the conference site. I decided to use this game as a map for the conference. I started putting the high-score events into my calendar, such as the keynotes and the chair's address. Then I added the schedules for the ones I was involved in, then the ones that had interesting panel titles, and finally the ones with presenters I wanted to meet.

Once I got the knack of navigation, the doors were thrown open. I wanted to explore and see as much as I could of the conference and found out that I had unlimited access to all the sessions. I was eager to make the most out of this infinite privilege. At traditional conferences, I would typically attend three panels a day, perhaps four when I was really ambitious. Yet for this conference, I started stretching what I could do. I attended lots of sessions every day, sometimes up to ten sessions a day. I found it to be addicting. I found myself tuning into sessions while I was eating, taking a break from grading, even as I was unwinding after intense meetings.

The screenshot shows the website for the Conference on College Composition & Communication. The header includes the conference logo and name, a search bar, and navigation links for 'about', 'news', 'grants & awards', 'publications', 'conventions & meetings', 'governance & resolutions', and 'resources'. A secondary navigation bar contains 'Print', 'Enlarge Text', 'Reduce Text', and 'RSS'. The main content area is titled 'Cs the Day Gamification Event' and features a 'Like' button, a 'Share' button, and a 'Sign Up to see what your friends like.' button. Below this, there is a text block: 'Join us for some Cs the Day Gamification fun! While you are attending the 2021 CCCC Virtual Annual Convention you will be able to earn points throughout the platform and compete for great prizes!'. A section titled 'Cs the Day Event Challenges:' lists actions and their corresponding point values: 'Attend the Keynote Session' (150 points), 'Attend the Chair's Address' (100 points), 'Visit Sponsor Booths (3 per day max)' (100 points), 'Visit Exhibitor Booths (6 per day max)' (50 points), 'Visit Action Hub Booths (3 per day max)' (50 points), 'Attend Sessions (3 per day max)' (50 points), and 'Attendee Workshop Lounge (4 per day max)' (25 points). At the bottom, there is a note: 'Check the Cs the Day Event Leaderboard in the Action Hub throughout Convention to check on your point status.' The left sidebar contains various menu items such as 'Become a Member', 'Newcomers—learn more!', 'Join the Online Conversations', 'Read CCC Articles', 'Find a Position Statement', 'Learn about Committees', 'Read Studies in Writing & Rhetoric Books', 'Review Convention Programs', 'Find a Resolution', 'Browse Composition Books', and 'Learn about the 2022 Annual'.

Figure 3.2. Screenshot of the C's the Day challenge on the conference website.

If there was a prize for maximizing time during the conference, I think I may have won it. I did not waste a minute—I was attending meetings while eating and took the laptop to the bathroom with me during bathroom breaks. I was glad that I could watch unlimited sessions on-demand without time constraints. And it was great to get reassurance of what I suspected from other panelists and colleagues.

However, while there were infinite opportunities to watch on-demand sessions, that also made me feel trapped in the sea of conversations. I could not realistically watch *all* the sessions available, but I felt like I had to since I had the access to them. It was not until the last day that I gave up on attending every session available. Running non-stop for four consecutive days, I did see a “reward”—I saw myself ranking at the top thirty out of all the conference participants on the *C's the Day* leaderboard (Fig. 3.3). I would have never attempted to attend so many sessions without that game, and I was driven by a sort of competitive spirit and desire to do everything.

And the sessions were certainly worth the energy. But I regretted how I let myself get into the unhealthy addictive aspect of the game and did not allow myself to pause and recharge. As much as I felt invigorated by the new ideas from the sessions, I was also pressuring myself to the extreme and not even allowing myself to feel tired. I was in dire need of a mental cooldown in my hectic schedule.

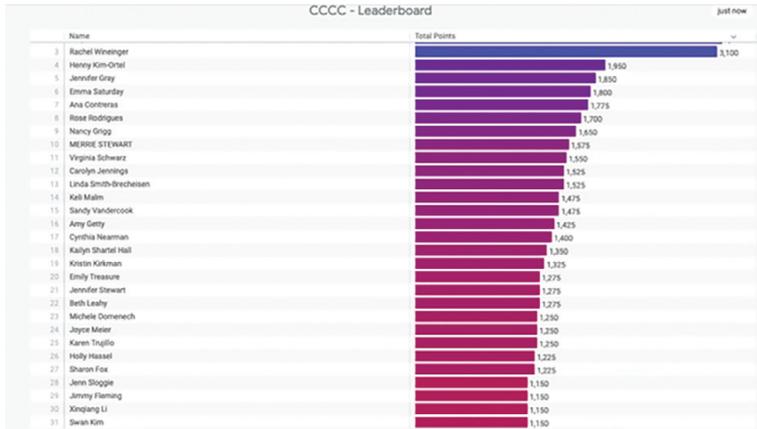


Figure 3.3. Screenshot of the Leaderboard for C's the Day.

Nevertheless, it was liberating to have the freedom to choose whichever session I wanted through a simple click, and on demand. I no longer had to sleuth to find out where the “back door” of the panel room was so that I would not interrupt someone in the middle of the presentation. There was no embarrassment in arriving at a session late or leaving a session in the middle of it if I did not find it engaging. Most people spoke while sharing their screens, so it was much easier to grasp the information. I liked how the speakers on Zoom were highlighted, which allowed me to better focus on the presentations without distractions. Many of the live panels had prerecorded presentations followed by live Q&As. I wondered if there was a reason why the participants were not seen. I could see why the speakers were the only ones seen when they were speaking, but I would have liked to see participants asking the questions live, with their faces. I had no idea how many participants were joining the sessions live, nor who they were. Yet typing my questions on the chat saved me from trying to guess the “right” time to ask the question. So I was participating in almost all of the live Q&A sessions and enjoying the thrill of being answered by the presenters.

I was pleasantly surprised by how much I was enjoying the on-demand sessions and the entirely prerecorded presentations. I could pause if I wanted to or even go back to a point if I wanted to take note of something. I could increase the volume if the speaker was speaking softly and even have the transcriptions on to follow the texts with my

eyes while listening to it. The PDF transcripts of some sessions made the conference very accessible. Many speakers were willing to share Google Doc links of their presentations. Even though I was separated from the speakers by time and space, I felt as though I was making a closer connection with the speakers than when I used to be the anonymous audience at panels. This could have been due to how the conference was set up but also how I was attending the conference. I was participating in professional duties from my most personal space—I spent most of the day in the bedroom corner but ended up watching some on-demand sessions lying down on my bed. Yet the best part about the on-demand sessions was that I could control when I wanted to attend the sessions and did not have to worry about which session to attend when there were multiple interesting sessions competing at the same time. In the past, I sometimes had to calculate when someone would be speaking and split my time between different panels if I really wanted to attend multiple sessions taking place at the same time. With the on-demand sessions, I no longer had to have this dilemma. I wondered if this could be reproduced in some kind of way in the future even if the conferences return to the traditional format.

Besides attending the panels, I ended up visiting all of the publisher and sponsor booths and other organizations, which is something I rarely do at traditional conferences. Nonetheless, I did not find most of these visits engaging. Some of these booths had someone waiting on the site or made it easy for me to reach out to the organizers. And I did watch the videos, read through the available documents, and enter raffles, but I did not feel like taking another step to get involved. For instance, even though I visited the publisher booths daily, I did not end up purchasing any books. I usually purchase a lot of books at conferences because I am drawn by the discounts and the ease of picking them up on the spot. Even though there were samples available online and the publishers sent me sample ebook copies, I do not think they quite matched the experience of talking to a person at the booth and flipping through the books physically. Strangely, I did not miss face-to-face interaction with humans, but I did miss the hard copy books.

I think I generally followed what I planned out even though my plans were impromptu. I started off thinking I would go with the usual flow of my schedule and see where I can fit the Cs. I did end up going to many more sessions than regular conferences, and I do not think I fully realized this potential at the beginning. I really liked the ease

of visiting a session and was generally impressed with the quality of presentations, which is not always the case with conferences. I was happy that I was able to present, meet interesting new people, and get the pulse of the field of composition and rhetoric. I visited as many sessions as I could, and after a prolonged departmental meeting and lengthy exchanges about the future of my course with the department chair, I was Zoom fatigued at the end of the day. Friday was particularly brutal: I (1) organized a university-side professional workshop for 100-plus doctoral students; (2) presented my work to a college showcase; (3) attended talks by Roxane Gay and Vershawn Young; (4) watched a number of on-demand sessions; and (5) attended a number of prerecorded sessions with live Q&As. As excited as I was about all of the materials covered at the Cs, I could not separate myself from the usual duties I needed to do in a regular semester. I thought about how I would usually take a break from usual duties when I am away for a conference. I would arrange something for my classes, not attend meetings, and definitely not present at different functions. Yet I did not drop anything from what I usually do for this virtual conference. I took up more just because I thought I could. This left me with serious Zoom fatigue at the end of the day.

I found that so many of the sessions were discussing antiracist pedagogy (or maybe I chose to attend the ones with these themes), but at the same time, I felt how those ideals were so distant from my own reality. I was glad so many people were discussing diversity and inclusion at the conference, but then I thought about how these discussions are brought up and handled in real life. As one of the few faculty of color in my department, I am usually one of the first to bring up these issues and also often the one asked to lead these initiatives without support. I found the conference sessions to be very proactive about adopting progressive strategies, but I somehow felt embarrassed about how my own institution and program are outdated even when my students probably are in need of these progressive pedagogies more than any others. The disconnect between what should be done and what is done was so wide that I could not even fathom where to start. It led me to question whether these ideals are something only the privileged can afford.

Ideally, diversity and inclusion issues should be integrated into the core of our mission, but the reality is that there are so many other emergencies to be taken care of that these issues stay on the back

burner. Budget cuts, austerity plans, low enrollment, retention, etc. There are always pressing issues to be taken care of before we can discuss inclusive practices for our students.

Yet I was really inspired by these discussions at the conference and continued to follow up with what I was introduced to. After the conference, I ordered the books by Aja Martinez and Staci Perryman-Clark. I was able to finish these books and other articles I was recommended by the panelists after the conference. I wanted to share these interesting ideas with my colleagues, so I volunteered to lead an antiracist pedagogy group over the summer. Overall, I was pleasantly surprised with the unexpected rewards of the conference. I do hope some advantages of the virtual format can be preserved in some way in future Cs. If the conference were to continue in any kind of virtual format, I would really like to see more networking lounges or informal spaces to meet other people. The networking lounges were a very informal but somewhat structured way to meet other people at the conference. I was able to talk to some very well-known scholars this way, which would have never happened at a real conference. I would probably be too shy to schmooze my way to be near these people and strike up a conversation.

As I noted earlier, I had no boundaries between my work and my personal life for being confined in front of my laptop at the corner of the bedroom for a presentable background. I was juggling multiple jobs during the conference (teaching, meetings, conference organizing, conference presentation, etc.). I had many Zoom sessions, emails, and phone calls, as well as texts. I communicated with my students, colleagues, other conference attendees, customer service representative, and my child's cello teacher. Since my daughter was doing her virtual classes in the living room, I stayed mostly in the corner of a bedroom facing the hamper and Jellycat dolls on the bed I share with my daughter. Even though I mainly occupied the bedroom space and my daughter was usually in the living room space, I could hear my her participating in discussions for school, practicing the piano and cello, and helping her friend edit some kind of text over Zoom. So even if the spaces were demarcated for each of us, the sounds were shared over these spaces. Once when I was holding a synchronous class on Zoom, my students asked me about my background music.

Looking back, I appreciate that I was able to attend the Cs this year, and I learned so much all in the span of a few days. On the other hand, I was burned out after an intense week. Even though I did not

step out of the apartment for the entire week, I was exhausted from all the virtual activities. Even after finishing my workday online, my day continued through the same laptop screen. I Zoomed with my husband in Korea, texted with my best friend in Korea who just lost her father-in-law, and typed my survey responses to this project with my fingers reeking of the Philly cheesesteak I had ordered for dinner. And an arm-length away, my daughter was finishing up her homework by the desk. It was fulfilling to successfully complete what I set out to do for the week, but at the same time I do not want to live through another week like this. This is similar to what I have been experiencing since we started to work at home through the pandemic. There were definitely positives—no need to commute, making connections with people without necessarily interacting with them in person, and accelerating my productivity. But there were also drawbacks I never wanted—losing boundaries between work and life and losing time to recharge and recover.

The only thing that was close to recharging and recovering happened to be this project. While participating in the *C's the Day* really pumped me up for the conference, I think participating as a Documentarian also pushed me to fully explore the conference and forced me to stop and reflect on what I was doing. I really appreciated the opportunity to write a reflective journal through the conference dates. It was like a ritual—calming like a meditation session. The writings felt like a yoga or meditation session (while I do not enjoy either in real life). I loved how I had this metacognitive lens thinking and writing about my experience as I was experiencing it. Of course, I often do this in my head, but it was such a gratifying experience to actually put them in writing. The checkbox-style questions in the surveys became stale quickly, though. I found myself checking them off automatically with little thinking. At first, the surveys seemed like an add-on to an already busy week, but I found myself thinking about what I would write in these surveys and looking forward to these morning and evening sessions that framed my day as the conference progressed. When they tell you to empty your mind and just focus on breathing during meditation sessions, that is usually when my mind is the busiest. Yet as a Documentarian, I was told to make my mind busy about how I have been busy, which turned out to have a more meditative effect than I ever imagined.