

Introduction

Bump Halbritter, Julie Lindquist, and Bree Straayer

THE DOCUMENTARIAN PROJECT: FROM OPPORTUNITY TO CRISIS TO OPPORTUNITY

When we began the Documentarian project in 2020, we started with a question: What *is* a Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) conference experience—specifically, to those members of our community for whom it is designed? Now, five years later, and after working with Documentarians and their stories, we’re still learning the answer—or rather, answers—to that question. And, perhaps more importantly, we’re discovering further questions very much worth pursuing—about our organization, our profession, and our working lives.

The Tales you’ll encounter in this book will give you access to diverse perspectives not only on how the CCCC conference might be experienced, but also on what it’s like to be a participant (in a given professional role) in our field. In their afterwords to this collection, two leaders of the organization, speaking from their roles as CCCC Program Chairs, reflect on what they’ve learned from the range of conference experiences—some virtual, and some in-person—rendered in these Tales. 2023 Program Chair Frankie Condon is provoked, and therefore provokes us, to (re)consider not only the function of our conference, but also our conduct as professionals, asking, “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?” Not unrelatedly, 2024 Program Chair Jen Sano-Franchini invites us to consider what the Tales have to teach us from the perspective of those who think (as she does) about user experience, indicating that she found herself “reading these tales as user experience (UX) narratives that speak to the form, structure, and feelings associated with large academic conferences, and CCCC in particular, as well as with academia as an industry and line of work.” Taken together, these reflections on the Documentarian Tales included here invite us to consider, in particular, who the conference serves, what forms this service can take, and how CCCC can best accomplish them. They also call us to reflect, by way of the collected Tales, the historical moment we’re

in—and our responsibilities to it—with respect to our field of practice and higher education more generally.

At its heart, the Documentarian project—a bespoke initiative for professionals in writing studies of the Conference on College Composition and Communication—is a method for helping its participants to learn from their experiences and to teach the rest of us. It invites Documentarians to name and attribute meaning to their experiences by eliciting the materials for stories that *might* be told—that is, by inviting them to name their expectations prior to an experience, and then by directing their attention during that experience via a set of prompts that ask them to document what they have observed or experienced. It supplies participants with a means for archiving the products of their documentation so that they might become available and productive for later reflection.

Now (2024) in its fifth year, the Documentarian role was created in 2019 as a new option for participation for attendees at the 2020 CCCC Convention in Milwaukee (and we know how the story of CCCC in Milwaukee ended). But the Documentarian project began, really, as an idea some ten years prior to its planned launch in March of 2020. Its immediate inspiration was the First-Year Writing Curriculum (developed by Bump and Julie, and created in its initial form by Nancy DeJoy, all of whom served as WPAs) at Michigan State University. That curriculum asks students to narrate experiences (of learning, of cultural participation, of coming to understand the literacies of their chosen or projected disciplines and/or professions), and to document, archive, and reflect on their learning as writers. The storytelling orientation of that curriculum, along with the writing experience at its center, the “Experiential Learning Documentary” (see Halbritter and Lindquist, “Witness Learning”) drew inspiration from a prior research project Bump and Julie had designed and undertaken, the Literacy-Corps Michigan Project, which sought to enlist diverse research participants in the project of co-constructing experiences relevant to their educational histories and literacies via facilitated and documented stories of past, present, and future selves (see Halbritter and Lindquist, “Time, Lives, and Videotape”).

When Julie became Program Chair for the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 2019, she carried this idea of a reflective practice grounded in documented experiences into her conference planning, and, with her collaborators Bump Halbritter

and then-graduate assistant and co-planner Bree Straayer, created and planned a new program role for the 2020 Convention: CCCC Documentarian, a non-speaking (and non-space-dependent) role that has persisted at the conference in years since. Julie, Bump, and Bree imagined that the role could be a form of conference participation that would allow diverse conference-goers not only to learn from their conference experiences and to find points of access into a professional community, but also to help conference organizers (and those working within the field of writing studies) to learn from the stories of those diverse experiences.

The written products of those who chose to participate in the Documentarian role—"Documentarian Tales"—would be collected and published in a living digital archive via the MSU Cube. A subset of the narratives (chosen for their potential to surface less-visible, and represent a range of, experiences) submitted by CCCC 2020 Documentarians would appear in an edited (print, open-access) collection published by NCTE/SWR, originally to be named *Recollections from Our Common Place*. As we wrote in the introduction to the eventual collection *Recollections from an Uncommon Time: 4C20 Documentarian Tales*, our goal all along with the Documentarians project has been to surface a story of our field of practice via the stories of individuals working within it. Originally, when we conceived the project entitled *Recollections from a Common Place*, the experience of the conference itself was the means for this larger view of who we are as a community of professional practitioners, and how we do our work. (2)

When the 2020 Convention in Milwaukee was canceled just weeks prior to the event in deference to declaration by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020, that COVID-19 was, indeed, a global pandemic, we found ourselves first lamenting, and then reinventing, the idea for the CCCC Documentarian opportunity and planned collection of Tales. As we wrote in the introduction to the reconceived and renamed 2020 collection,

When the 2020 conference was canceled, one of the things we felt as a loss was the new Documentarian piece. How would we document an experience that ... wasn't? When the three of us (Julie, Bree, and Bump) met for our planning meeting immediately following the decision to cancel CCCC 2020, we began commiserating about the loss of the Documentarian

opportunity: [B]ut we quickly realized that the project did not *have* to be lost—that it could be just as relevant, in some of the same ways, but also, perhaps, in different ones, in this time of COVID-19 and the profound, wide-scale disruptions to our everyday working lives. (3)

We didn't know what the reinvented Documentarian project would produce, but we predicted that these Tales of professional (and everyday) life under lockdown would have things to teach us about the commonplaces of our profession. It produced exactly that result, and it even opened a window into the underlife (and also, perhaps, the unconscious) of the field of writing studies.

What we didn't predict in 2020 was that the Documentarian practice, as it was taken up by CCCC Documentarians writing alone, and yet together, during the early days of COVID-19 lockdown, would become a kind of provisional community constituted by the common experience of Documentarianing during the days of what would have been the 2020 conference. As we learned, there can be a felt connection and sense of common purpose in the experience of writing alone, together.

Even as catastrophic damage to public health, along with social unrest motivated by the irrefutable inequalities revealed by the pandemic, exploded around the globe (See Table 1 of the "Introduction" to the 2020 Documentarian Tales collection, 11–13), Tales in the 2020 collection describe a world around us that had become infinitely smaller, seemingly overnight. We went into lockdown. We did far more than shelter in place: we worked there; we taught our classes there; we attended our meetings there; we learned how to cut our own hair (or not) there; we lived there; we adapted (or not) there; we witnessed the events of the world around us by way of our screens there; we sheltered alone or with our immediate family members and/or partners; we sanitized our groceries there; we found new ways to connect with those from whom we had become isolated there. No matter the size of the spaces we called home, they all became smaller—or rather, they all felt smaller because we now stuffed each and every aspect of our lives into those spaces.

And then, little by little, things began to change. First came the assurances that COVID-19 was an airborne virus, so we kept wearing our masks, but we stopped sanitizing every surface with which we

came into contact. Then came the vaccines, and slowly we set about returning to a life among others. Then came year two—a year of reintegration filled with new and often hotly contested expectations and protocols for how we could safely (if not always, or even often, peacefully) be together. The 2021 CCCC Convention was being planned for Spokane: the call for proposals had been published, and submissions had been reviewed, and invitations to claim a place on the 2021 Convention Program had been sent and received. In late fall of 2020, however, the spread of COVID-19 continued to menace communities around the globe. As it had become clear that the threat of COVID-19 had persisted, CCCC Program Chair Holly Hassel and the CCCC leadership team were again faced with a decision: to go ahead with the planned in-person Convention, or to reinvent it as the (first-ever) virtual conference experience. The program, which had already been planned, had to be reduced, and participants notified: some of those who had been accepted for the 2021 program learned that, given the limitations of the online platform, they could not—after all—be accommodated. And, yet, to accommodate anyone at all, CCCC 2021 convened virtually.

On the national front, year three saw us now anticipating and repeating actions that had been reactions in the prior year. We were now in season three of *M*A*S*H*: we knew the characters, we anticipated the plotlines; we expected to hear a laugh track; we understood the presence of a fully functioning still in the tent of the lead surgeons; we no longer batted an eye at Klinger's sartorial selections; we had come to expect an operating room with a mud floor. *Triage* had become *de rigueur*.

And we were growing increasingly weary of it all. Many of us felt that the boundaries between our professional and personal lives that had been obliterated by the pandemic remained obliterated even as the pandemic had loosened its deadly grip on us. We were, after all, contracting and surviving COVID-19. We now lived with COVID-19 as a fact *of* life, not so much as a threat *to* life. And yet, we were still Zooming, and Hi-Flexing, and working remotely. As had been the case in 2021, the 2022 Convention, originally planned to take place in Chicago, had to be redesigned as an online experience. This time, however, CCCC leadership were aware in an earlier moment that the conference would be a virtual one: CCCC 2022 was the first-ever CCCC Convention that was realized as a fully virtual conference,

and participants expected, and were prepared, to participate in that modality. As presenters and attendees in 2022, we were “at the conference” as we were teaching our classes and attending our meetings and carrying out each and every one of our usual professional and personal tasks. We didn’t go away to a conference; we squeezed a conference into our workweek.

By 2023, the immediate threat of COVID began to abate as an effect of widespread vaccination. CCCC leadership planned a return to in-person conferencing, and the Convention was to be held at the original site of the 2022 event, in Chicago. Attendees tentatively ventured out into conference spaces, albeit wearing masks and seeking shelter in hotel rooms. The Convention was back, in a way that felt both celebratory, on one hand, and sadder and wiser, on the other.

THE DOCUMENTARIAN PROCESS: FROM DAILY SURVEYS TO DOCUMENTARIAN TALES

Whether Documentarians were working to document and reflect on their experiences at home (as was the case for the 2020 collection), participating in a virtual conference, or attending an in-person conference, they did so by way of a daily set of prompts, delivered to them via email in the form of Google surveys (see Fig. I.1). These prompts asked Documentarians to “preflect” (to prepare to reflect) on their plans and expectations prior to the experience, to record their surroundings and review their plans first thing in the morning, reflect on these plans and report on their experience in an evening, and then, in the week following the conference, to return to their archived survey responses to reflect on the experience from a later point of view, and to look across their writings via their responses to the preflective and twice-daily surveys to identify themes and patterns.

In so doing, Documentarians were recording expectations, plans, and strategies; plans followed and reinvented; emergent opportunities; surprises and serendipitous moments; scenic details; forms of access (moments and places of inclusion/exclusion); affective responses to experiences and emotional states—all in preparation for reflection and sense-making in a later moment.

To facilitate the process of reflecting on documented experiences, Bump, Julie, and Bree collected keywords, shared excerpts from survey responses, and reflected emerging themes back to the Documentarians in the form of lists and visual representations (see Fig. I.2).

Documentarian Morning Daily Survey

Dear Documentarians:

In the following survey, you'll be asked to respond to some questions asking you to "reflect" on your day.

These questions are intended to serve YOU in your own reflective process (that is, to help you articulate your plans and expectations for the day) and to help you build an archive for later reference.

We thank you, again, for your contributions as a CCCC 2024 Documentarian!

CCCC 2024 Documentarian Team

documentarianscccc@gmail.com [Switch account](#)

🔒 Not shared

Describe the scene around you right now. Where are you now, as you complete this survey? What do you see and hear around you? What other sensory inputs are there?

Your answer

How are you feeling now, as you look forward to your day? Excited? Apprehensive? Hopeful? Anxious? Uncertain?

Your answer

What do you hope will happen today? What are you looking forward to doing? What do you hope to avoid?

Your answer

Figure I.1. Excerpt from morning daily survey.



Figure I.2. Word clouds from 2021, 2022, and 2023 Tales.

Finally, Julie, Bump, and Bree created a Call for Papers that identified some possible narrative directions for Documentarian Tales, and supplied a kind of heuristic designed to help Documentarians move from the narrative data of survey responses to, well, a story. Even so, *how* the authors moved from survey responses to story—that is, how they enlisted their narrative data from surveys as a “rough draft” of a story, and to what extent the authors built their stories around texts generated via surveys in an earlier moment, varied considerably from Tale to Tale. In our “Introduction” to the 2020 collection, we wrote:

We find, in reading these collected Documentarian Tales (ELDs), that there is a diverse range of ways acts of documentation show up in the finished narratives: some make specific reference to survey texts—jottings of the moment—and some are more mediated, operating at a greater remove from the original acts of documentation that informed them. We suspect that, were the authors collected here to return to the writing produced by the

original surveys *now*, rather different stories would emerge from reflections on those same survey responses. (20)

This remains true for the current collection, *Recollections from Our Common Places*. Some Tales more directly reference daily survey responses; others seem to position these archived pieces further behind what emerges as the crafted Tale. That is to say, some Documentarians treated the survey responses as data not only to be collected and interpreted, but also directly referenced them in their resulting Tales, while others used them primarily as meaning-making heuristics that worked “behind the scenes” of the finished Tales themselves.

THE WIDER LANDSCAPE: PRECARIETY AND BELONGING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

What we learn from the Tales in the 2021–2023 Documentarians collection can only be considered in the context of trends and disruptions in the conduct of higher education during those years. In the 2020 Introduction to *Recollections from an Uncommon Time*, we wrote:

Since we put out the call, and since the time during which 4C20 was scheduled to happen, much has happened—and continues to happen—in the world. When we put out the revised CFP in early spring 2020, the over-determining national event was the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. By the beginning of summer 2020, we were witnessing a historic shift in the national conversation about race relations. (10)

And in fact, many of the 2020 authors addressed those events—the national and global predicament of the pandemic, and the increasingly urgent need for racial redress following the murder of George Floyd. These Tales, situated as they are in the bounded time and place of a professional convention, focus on other things—but even as they are about conference experiences in particular, they are also about external forces very much present in the wider context of higher education.

How could it be otherwise?

If these Tales have taught us anything about reflection, it is that reflections are, each and all, about people—persons—who are coming to know a specific set of events by way of all of the other events of their lives. The authors of these Tales are learning on the fringe of what they know: of what they have experienced prior to the events under consideration, of what they experienced during the events, of what they

have experienced and what has occurred to them since the events, and of what they expect may yet follow from these events. In other words, conferences, such as CCCC, don't just happen; they happen with, for, and by way of persons who participate in them for a host of reasons that are situated within the larger contexts of their professional and personal lives.

How could it be otherwise?

QUESTIONING WHERE AND HOW WE BELONG

An overdetermining professional context of these three conference years (2021–23) was virtual participation: its effects, affordances, and liabilities. And while 2023 was *not* held virtually, Chicago's conference stood very much in contrast to the preceding two virtual conferences and the canceled 2020 conference. It had been four years since there had been an in-person conference. That absence emerges as the most present determiner for 2021–23. In each of these sets of Tales, authors consider where they *are*—physically and metaphysically. These Tales duck, weave, dance with, and face head on the realities of the terms of conference participation. In 2021 and 2022, these authors span space and time to commune with others while sitting in their kitchens and home offices and on-campus workspaces. They lament the loss of physical movement, the novelty of new places, and encountering familiar, three-dimensional faces and the rest of their corporeal counterparts. The 2023 Tales celebrate the return of these losses from 2020, 2021, and 2022 even as they regret the new losses: e.g., no longer being able to, instantly, pop in and out of virtual presentation rooms and being able to attend prerecorded sessions at their leisure. The 2023 Documentarians reveled in convening in Chicago even as they carved out alone time to recover from sensory overload.

In none of these three years did authors express feeling settled—fully present in the spaces where they found themselves. How could they? How could we—any of us? These years were infused with participatory precarity: Where did we need to be? What were the terms of our participation? How could we be there on *those* terms? What/where else did we need to be prior, following, simultaneously? Who else needed us? How on earth could we do any of it, let alone all of it?

Consequently, the Tales from 2021–23 begin to cluster around a theme of belonging—of questioning where and how each author could identify as being fully present—fully realized within so much professional

and personal simultaneity. Where, in all of the everything, was the conference? Where, in all of the everything, *wasn't* the conference?

PRECARITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: SYSTEMIC IMPOSTER SYNDROME

A sense of belonging seems to be a perfect subject for personal reflection. After all, a sense of belonging is a *sense*, something that is the purview of an individual. Who is to say if it is right or wrong? The only person to say anything about it, in fact, is the person whose sense of belonging is in question: i.e., the person saying something about it.

And yet, the question remains, why are so many people sharing concerns about belonging? How can such a thing be “common”? These authors certainly have a few things in common: they each volunteered to serve as Documentarians; they each had completed or were in the process of completing graduate degrees at the times of their reflective writings; and they each had some experience with seeking employment in higher education. The authors of these Documentarian Tales brought all of those experiences with them to the conferences they attended. They were not merely reflecting on their conference experiences, but also on *their* experiences of the conferences they attended: not only what happened, but also what motivated them to go, how their attendance fit into their larger professional and personal goals, how they balanced their other personal and professional duties, how they justified this particular use of their time and attention within the larger contexts of their lives, and how confident they were in the validity of the decisions they were making and the goals that were motivating those decisions.

What we have noticed in our reading of these Tales from 2021–23 is that conference participation was not the *only* sense of precarity shaping the Documentarians’ reflections. Another overdetermining professional context of these three conference years was precarity within the context of higher education itself. From responses to COVID-19 to dwindling enrollments (see, for example, National Student Clearinghouse; Marcus; Binkley; Blake; Conley; Lohman and Wilkinson) to faculty and staff “burnout” and turnover (see, for example, Boyd; “Why Do Faculty Leave or Stay?”; Kyaw; Fried; Zahneis; Bichsel et al.) to dwindling availability of tenure-line jobs (see, for example, Stein; Berlinerblau) to marked increases in mental health concerns among ... seemingly everyone—students, staff, faculty (see, for example,

“Higher Education Is Struggling”; Mininsohn) to the precarious state of higher education in general (see, for example, Mallach; “Higher Education Is Struggling”; Brink; Rosenberg), the working conditions that were shaping both the conference experiences of Documentarians and their reflections about those conference experiences in 2021–23 were anything but stable.

How could it be otherwise?

Academics are often quick to name what seems to be a condition common among academics: imposter syndrome. It’s so common, in each of our own experiences, that we each have had our mentors discuss and attempt to console our feelings of self-doubt as imposter syndrome, the inevitable by-product of seeking, earning, and professionally exercising a terminal degree (PhD or MFA). “Ah, that’s just imposter syndrome. We all experience that.” We, ourselves, have found ourselves saying the same to students and faculty we have mentored. Imposter syndrome, in such uses, seems to serve as a catch-all for feelings of being underprepared and unaccomplished in spite of ample evidence to the contrary. As such, it seems, also, to suggest that imposter syndrome is a personal affectation to address.

The National Institutes of Health’s National Library of Medicine (NIHNLM) describes imposter syndrome as “a behavioral health phenomenon described as self-doubt of intellect, skills, or accomplishments among high-achieving individuals. These individuals cannot internalize their success and subsequently experience pervasive feelings of self-doubt, anxiety, depression, and/or apprehension of being exposed as a fraud in their work, despite verifiable and objective evidence of their successfulness” (Huecker et al.). According to the NIHNLNLM, anxiety, depression, burnout, and low self-esteem are among the symptoms commonly associated with imposter syndrome.

Sound familiar?

These same symptoms are among those discussed in literature about staff and faculty resignations and turnover—especially faculty and staff “burnout.” It’s not hard to see how (1) changing employment opportunities for those graduating with terminal degrees and (2) changing job expectations for veteran professionals in higher education due to faculty and staff attrition can result in feelings of burnout and a compromised sense of belonging. And those feelings are surfacing as being consequential. According to the *CUPA-HR 2023 Higher Education Employee Retention Survey*:

Job satisfaction/well-being is the strongest predictor of retention by far. Although employees are most likely to *say* they're looking for other opportunities to receive a pay increase, it turns out that receiving recognition for one's contributions, *being valued by others at work, and having a sense of belonging are far more important than fair pay in predicting whether employees will look for other job opportunities.* (Bichsel et al., emphasis added)

What we see emerging across these Documentarian Tales is a picture of a kind of systemic imposter syndrome: a cocktail of environmental conditions within the profession that make it not unlikely that individuals within the system will find themselves feeling symptoms of imposter syndrome—that they will long for and search for a sense of belonging in a professional scene where evidence of success and accomplishment (e.g., earning a terminal degree at a research institution and earning a faculty position in an increasingly competitive job market) is increasingly distributed among evidence to the contrary (e.g., the loss of tenure-line, research positions, and increased duties at work due to unmitigated attrition within the workforce).

Given the emerging picture of the precarities of higher education, how could it be otherwise?

TALES OF CCCC 2021–2023: SHIFTS IN MODALITIES OF ATTENDANCE, TERMS OF BELONGING

With each year unfolding distinct contexts and modalities of attendance, we decided to place the tales in chronological order as the societal shifts played a role not only in the conference experience but also in writers' personal and work lives. Whereas the 2020 tales felt more global and existential, this collection of tales has a different affective valence. As the effects of COVID lingered on into years, at times, the Tales carry an air of weariness. As the writers wrestle with precarity, their stories emerge as “nervous” artifacts of that experience.

The collection of Tales from 2020–2023 represents an arc of modalities of attendance and experiences from shelter in place and a canceled conference to two years of online conferencing to 2023's return to in-person conferencing in Chicago. Each year brought new experiences as the modalities of attendance and dynamics changed. In 2021 and 2022, writers talk about dynamics of attending an online conference while also navigating being physically set in their home spaces with all the domestic and professional attending needs still present. With the

in-person conference in 2023, the Tales describe not only moments of returning but also the first-time experiences of being face to face in a collective field gathering.

We saw many themes, both distinctive and common, across the Tales. Some of the shared themes that emerged as the years progressed discussed modalities of attendance, accessibility, cultural identity, professional identity, and belonging. Each Tale, in one way or another, addressed complexities in experiences of modality, and how the online or in-person experience shifted their expectations or surprised them. With modality shifts, the idea of accessibility takes on interesting dimensions, with some writers finding the online experience more suited to their lives and the return to in-person bringing new access dynamics in the wake of COVID-19. Writers discuss the ways their cultural and professional identities overdetermine their experience, with some wrestling with feelings of precarity as graduate students or new faculty.

Perhaps, in and across all the themes, one concept that emerges in various forms again and again is the idea of belonging—as we have identified above. The writers of these Tales wonder if and how they belong in the field. They look for indicators that they are a part of a whole within conference moments. With the conference’s and field’s attention to inclusion, these narratives become acutely vital to pay attention to and learn from. How does—how *should*—the field address crises of belonging? What does it mean not just to be included but also to *belong*—to *feel* a sense of belonging—within a group of people, an organization, a whole?

As you read through these Tales, you will find that the shifts in modalities of attendance bring new discussions, but also the Tales across years surface shared themes across the years. You can read them in the order they appear in the book, or you can sample the Tales thematically throughout the years. Below, we offer brief descriptions of each Tale to help you further navigate through the book. We do so with hope that a general sense of the landscape of the collection will help you to direct the path of your reading accordingly.

THE 2021–2023 TALES

2021

In “Learning Stewardship,” **Adrienne Jankens** reflects on not only the online conference experience but also the overall state of life

and education as people grow weary of the longevity of COVID-19 dynamics. She notes:

[I]n the spring of 2021, my best-laid plans for preserving time for myself, my scholarship, and my family, were noticeably falling apart. Something about a shift from the 2020 lockdown state (all family, all the time) to a return to the regular pace of academic life (but at home) highlighted where there were cracks in my careful curation of distributed time, talent, and treasures. I could sense where sand was falling through the hourglass faster than I expected, where the supports I thought I had in place were weakening, and where I did not have my attention always on where it was most needed.

Jankens's Tale reveals ways the pandemic causes us to question our curated lives and subsequently to reimagine and reconfigure the priorities in that curation between work and family life.

In "Toward an Academic Made Whole: Navigating the Work-Life Balance in Times of Crisis," **Joel Bergholtz** addresses the difficulties of balancing personal commitments as a graduate student during the virtual conference. He writes:

In this digitally mediated academy, it is easier to take on more tasks while balancing academic commitments—to say "yes" when my partner invites me to her family reunion. Before the pandemic, I wouldn't have had to make this decision. I would have been in a different city, trying new foods covered by a travel grant (thanks, University!), filling out my *C's the Day* booklet, attending a wide variety of presentations, and fanboying my favorite scholars.

At the same time, using his conference experiences as a lens to engage with larger questions of work-life balance in the field and academia generally, he asks, "Do I lack the necessary discipline to stay afloat in the academy, or does the academy demand too much of me?" His exploration asks us to attend to questions about how we maintain our commitments to the academy even at the cost of personal experiences.

In "Running on Empty: Documenting the Oscillating Continuum from My Virtual Common Place," **Swan Kim** considers the affordances of an online conference in relation to the limitations of her physical space: "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.” In describing her commitment to attending up to ten virtual conference sessions a day while having to contort her body to accommodate the limitations of her physical Zoom space, Kim’s Tale points to ongoing tensions between virtual and physical worlds in scenes of work.

In “CCCC 2021: Storytelling and Surprises,” **Jennifer Marlow** shares her perspective on the affordances of an online conference for introverted persons. She describes her experience:

In-person conferences always cause so much anxiety for me because I’m socially awkward. I’ve always known that I’m a quiet introvert who needs tons of alone time and in general avoids interactions with other humans, but this whole pandemic has made this all the more clear to me. As someone with extreme social anxiety, the virtual conference experience ended up being a nearly perfect one in some ways.

Her Tale calls readers to reflect on the ways we consider the experiences of introverted persons as we engage in larger conferences, both virtual and in-person.

Victoria L. Braegger, in “Reflective Writing and Pedagogy: Processing Loss and Grief During 4C21,” shares her reflections on the ways grief intertwines with her work in her experience of the 2021 virtual conference. Braegger writes, “I was not confronting my grief, but when I look at the things I created during the period and my reflections from 4C21, it is clear I was sitting in my grief the entire time, processing and reflecting on loss and considering what moving forward would look like.” Braegger’s essay concludes with a reflection on how her grief has informed her teaching and her relationship to students: “Centering compassion and transparency within my pedagogy costs me nothing but may make a difference for the student whose grief outlived the days given to them by the institution.”

In “CCCC 2021: My Academic Rite of Passage,” **Thir Budhathoki** shares his experience as an international student attending the (virtual) conference for the first time. He reflects on the ways the conference is a means for indicating or creating belonging for the field, “a sense of assurance that I too was doing the same things as others, and they mattered to the field.” As a Scholars for the Dream Award winner, he says of the presentation ceremony, “Sitting among the first-time presenters

selected for the award, learning about each other's works, and being recognized for the work I was doing gave me the much-needed sense of belongingness I had long been looking for." Budhathoki's work illuminates questions of how to find belonging and what moments in the field bring about the assurance and feeling of belonging.

Analeigh Horton's Tale, "Dear Analeigh," addresses navigating a virtual conference while also experiencing a response to trauma. She observes:

I will still be carrying my burdens and some other obligation will step in to take CCCC's place and I'll feel guilty all over again about not working hard enough. Stress, at least for me, is riddled with a bunch of emotions. I am constantly bouncing back and forth between throwing myself into my work, panicking, staring at the ceiling, and fielding the next crisis.

Her work reveals the surprising ways the impact of trauma affects our work and our sense of self.

In "The New Harriet Tubmans of the Same Beloved Underground Railroad: Notes for Future Essays Needed in the Present," **Shelagh Patterson** puts the idea of Barthes's punctum to work in exploring her shifting former, present, and future selves. Her essay disturbs commonplaces about the movement of time, inviting us to consider that, in the act of reflection just as in the arc of history, time does not behave in a linear fashion. Patterson writes that the problem with linear time is revealed by the fact of Jim Crow, which code of state-sanctioned violence functioned as "a way to write to horrors of slavery into the functions of our democracy." Patterson situates her Documentarian practice in 2021 within this understanding of temporal difficulty: "When I reflect on my surveys from April 2021, I am looking at a future self—but I would say the self in the surveys from April 2021 is in a different dimension because of the punctum of state violence."

2022

Jennifer Grouling's "Neurodiversity, New Networks, and Conference Commonplaces" describes a timeline of conference experience from 2020 to 2022. Grouling describes the affordances of online attendance for neurodivergent persons and the dynamics of returning to an in-person world. She writes, "Yet, I now found myself split between my confident online self and an anxious, awkward, in-person self. And I

found myself continually inundated with messages, like the one from the president of my university, telling me my face-to-face self was the real one, that this life was the ‘normal’ one.” Grouling’s Tale asks us to question our assumptions about normalcy and to look at the ways diverse perspectives might define and experience “normal.”

In “Angst, Agency, and Longing: On (Re)Turning to Our Virtual Profession,” **Kimberly Thomas** takes up the idea of belonging after a time away from the field and returning by way of participation in the virtual conference. She writes:

In attending the all-virtual 2022 CCCC Convention, 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.

Her work, like others in this collection, asks us to consider what factors may contribute to (or work against) a sense of belonging in the field, and how these are related to diversity and inclusion.

Nitya Pandey, in “Recollections: The Experience of Documentation as a Form of Evidence for Reflective Practice,” uses the framework of Gibbs’s reflective cycle to structure her observations from the 2022 online conference. She notes:

I enjoyed attending [the conference] from the comfort of my home where I got the information, but I did not have to plan an expensive trip to a new city. Nonetheless, I missed the chance to actually meet people and socialize with like-minded individuals from the field and spend time networking and conversing about life, academics, and everything else. And finally, as someone who loves to travel, I missed the opportunity to visit a new city.

Pandey’s Tale explores both the affordances and limitations of online conferencing while also offering readers an opportunity to engage with the reflective practices she herself uses.

In “There Is Something to Be Said for Asynchronicity,” **Emily Plummer Catena** shares her experiences with the virtual conference, highlighting concepts and experiences of time and accessibility. She

notes: “Through my asynchronous attendance, I felt less pressure to ‘perform’ networking, and a positive impact is that I have had and continue to have a conference experience that is much extended, that has given me time to revisit and reconsider anew ideas that were already new.” Catena’s Tale asks us to consider the ways diverse experiences offer affordances for learning in online spaces.

2023

In “Among My People: Trying to Pierce the Veil of the Writing Studies Discourse Community,” **Quang Ly** explores questions of belonging and effects of imposter syndrome at the conference via the lens of discourse communities. He describes:

What I did not count on happening, however, was the imposter feeling lingering long after I finished my program and had already entered the profession. My foot was in the door, but my body had not made it through. I was in, but somehow, I felt out. Though Swales had identified several criteria that make up a discourse community, I would argue that another criterion is necessary: a feeling of belongingness.

His Tale asks readers to consider ways scholars find belonging and ways to work through imposter syndrome occasioned by conference experiences.

In “Assembling the Conference Experience: A Quasi-Materialist’s Reflection,” **Jason Tham** considers the role of embodiment, materiality, and memory in conference experiences. Tham contrasts online experiences of years prior with the physical return to the conference in 2023, noting:

The surroundings and ambiance contribute to the overall atmosphere and shape the nature of my engagement. Through this introspection, I gain 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.

Tham’s Tale asks us to consider the role our physical selves play in our day-to-day experiences, and calls us to consider the affordances and limitations of online connecting, engagement, and learning.

In the collection's only collaboratively authored essay, "Documenting a Documentarian Friendship," **Adrienne Jankens and Jennifer Grouling** write together about their in-person conference and Documentarian experiences. Jankens and Grouling explore belonging from a more senior scholarly perspective, considering the ways the conference has changed and might yet continue to change. Jankens speaks for both authors in writing:

I hope that conferences, with the spoken emphasis on inclusivity, which includes a lot of different things, but it seems like the point should be giving younger scholars in the field an opportunity to talk about their ideas or talk with other people [A]nd the only way that can happen is if the people who are reading their proposals are open to hearing new things and new ideas. That's a good shift.

This Tale by Jankens and Grouling encourages established scholars to make room for and welcome newer scholars to the field.

Karen R. Tellez-Chaires's Tale, "Together, in Chicago," offers an optimistic perspective on returning to an in-person conference after years of virtual conferencing. She writes:

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 about reconnecting with the people who inform my scholarship and my heart, and a combination of all the above.

Tellez-Chaires's story weaves together experiences of family, home, and conference participation to illustrate how time and relational connections influence our academic work—and more important, our lived experiences of work.

Afterwords

In "Kindness and Kith," 2023 CCCC Program Chair **Frankie Condon** reflects, through the particulars of her experience, on the importance of human relationships at a time, in the years following the pandemic, when the world of professional academics was embarking on what would become something of an existential crisis. In recalling her experience of

pandemic-related isolation from family even as she carried out her leadership responsibilities for CCCC, Condon writes, “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.” She goes on to remark that she is “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.” Motivated by the disruptions of 2020 and the years to follow, Condon invites us to consider what our professional spaces really are, what they do, and whom they serve: “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.”

In “Making Academic Conferencing Meaningful across Modalities: Lessons from Documentarians,” **Jennifer Sano-Franchini** similarly invites us, as members of the CCCC community, to consider—and to reimagine—what CCCC, as an example of an academic conference—should do for its constituents. In her dual roles as CCCC Program Chair (2024) and as a scholar of digital rhetoric and technical communication, Sano-Franchini found herself “reading these tales as user experience (UX) narratives that speak to the form, structure, and feelings associated with large academic conferences, and Cs in particular, as well as with academia as an industry and line of work.” From this perspective, Sano-Franchini takes up questions of shifting modalities and technological engagements with respect to conference planning and experiences, and invites to us to consider other, more existential questions:

What do large academic conferences like CCCC do and enable for attendees, in all of its iterations? What are the values that inform and shape them? How might these values be fraught and informed by inequitable power structures? What aspects of traditional in-person academic conferences do attendees feel are important to maintain?

**LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD: FUTURES FOR
THE DOCUMENTARIAN PRACTICE**

Recollections from Our Common Places will be the last of the Documentarian collections published by NCTE/SWR from the products of

Documentarian surveys at the CCCC Convention. And yet, we hope to turn its powerful method of creating narratives of individual experience within a community of practice to inquiries into other sites and scenes of practice. For us so far, it has served both as a form of professional participation and also as a curriculum for reflective writing. As such, it is a means for learning about the embodied experiences of less visible members of a community over a bounded period of time. We imagine that the Documentarian practice will continue to be useful not only within the field of writing studies but also in other locations, at other times, and for other purposes. As it began as a reflective practice to support students' learning in a FYW curriculum (Halbritter and Lindquist, "Witness Learning"), we imagine that it might be useful to other writing teachers as a way to make their students' learning visible, and to shift the objects of assessment from written performances to ongoing learning. At MSU, it has served us well in this regard.

We hope you enjoy the Tales collected in this volume, and that they invite you to reflect on your own experiences and your position as a member of the CCCC community and field of writing studies. We hope, as well, that you find your own ways to put the Documentarian practice to work in your own teaching, your own institution, and in your own life.

Happy Documentarianing!

WORKS CITED

- Halbritter, Bump, and Julie Lindquist. "Time, Lives, and Videotape: Operationalizing Discovery in Scenes of Literacy Sponsorship." *College English*, vol. 75, no. 2, 2012, pp. 171–98.
- Huecker, Martin R., et al. "Imposter Phenomenon." *PubMed*, StatPearls Publishing, 31 July 2023, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36251839/>.
- . "Witness Learning: Building Relationships between Present, Future, and Former Selves." *Writing for Engagement: Responsive Practice for Social Action*, edited by Mary Sheridan et al., Lexington P, 2018, pp. 43–59.
- Lindquist, Julie, Bree Straayer, and Bump Halbritter, editors. *Recollections from an Uncommon Time: 4C20 Documentarian Tales*. National Council of Teachers of English/The WAC Clearinghouse, 2023. waclearinghouse.org/books/swr/documentarian/.

WORKS CONSULTED

- Berg, B., et al. *Current Term Enrollment Estimates: Spring 2023*. National Student Clearinghouse Research Center., May 2023, pp. 1–20, nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/CTEE_Report_Spring_2023.pdf.

- Berlinerblau, Jacques. "They've Been Scheming to Cut Tenure for Years. It's Happening." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1 Feb. 2023, www.chronicle.com/article/theyve-been-scheming-to-cut-tenure-for-years-its-happening.
- Bichsel, Jacqueline, et al. "The CUPA-HR 2023 Higher Education Employee Retention Survey." *CUPA-HR*, College and University Professional Association for Human Resources, Sept. 2023, www.cupahr.org/surveys/research-briefs/higher-ed-employee-retention-survey-findings-september-2023/.
- Binkley, Collin, and Associated Press. "The Labor Shortage Is Pushing American Colleges into Crisis, with the Plunge in Enrollment the Worst Ever Recorded." *Fortune*, 9 Mar. 2023, fortune.com/2023/03/09/american-skipping-college-huge-numbers-pandemic-turned-them-off-education/.
- Blake, Jessica. "Doubts about Value Are Deterring College Enrollment." *Inside Higher Ed*, 13 Mar. 2023, www.insidehighered.com/news/students/retention/2024/03/13/doubts-about-value-are-deterring-college-enrollment.
- Boyd, Aila. "When Faculty Burnout Leads to Turnover." *Volt*, 9 Jan. 2023, volvedu.com/education-administration/when-faculty-burnout-leads-to-turnover/.
- Brink, Meghan. "Public Opinion on Value of Higher Ed Remains Mixed." *Inside Higher Ed*, 12 July 2022, www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/07/12/most-americans-skeptical-value-college-degree.
- Conley, Jordan. "US College Enrollment Decline—2024 Facts & Figures." *College Transitions*, 22 Apr. 2024, www.collegetransitions.com/blog/college-enrollment-decline/.
- Fried, Michael. "The Great Resignation and Higher Education Employees." *Ithaca S+R*, 7 Feb. 2023, sr.ithaka.org/blog/the-great-resignation-and-higher-education-employees/.
- Kyaw, Arrman. "Survey: Voluntary Turnover in Higher Ed Workforce Increasing." *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education*, 14 Sept. 2023, www.diverseeducation.com/faculty-staff/article/15634308/survey-voluntary-turnover-in-higher-ed-workforce-increasing.
- Lohman, Isabel, and Mike Wilkinson. "Michigan College Enrollment Decline among Worst in the Nation." *Bridge Michigan: Bridge Michigan's Nonpartisan, Nonprofit News Source*, May 2023, www.mybib.com/#/projects/8qPKzv/citations/new/article_magazine.
- Mallach, Alan. "Higher Education on the Edge." *U.S. News and World Report*, 29 Feb. 2024, www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2024-02-29/higher-education-on-the-edge.
- Marcus, Jon. "How Higher Education Lost Its Shine." *The Hechinger Report*, 10 Aug. 2022, hechingerreport.org/how-higher-education-lost-its-shine/.

- Mininsohn, Sarah. "College Student Mental Health Statistics - 2024." *College Transitions*, 23 Jan. 2024, www.collegetransitions.com/blog/college-students-mental-health-statistics/.
- Rosenberg, Brian. "Higher Ed's Ruinous Resistance to Change." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 27 Sept. 2023, www.chronicle.com/article/higher-eds-ruinous-resistance-to-change.
- Stein, Marc. "The End of Faculty Tenure." *Inside Higher Ed*, 24 Apr. 2022, www.insidehighered.com/views/2022/04/25/declining-tenure-density-alarming-opinion#.
- "Why Do Faculty Leave or Stay?: COACHE Faculty Retention and Exit Survey Highlights Top Factors." *The Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education*, 28 May 2023, coache.gse.harvard.edu/blog/why-do-faculty-leave-or-stay-coache-faculty-retention-and-exit-survey-highlights-top.
- Zahneis, Megan. "Higher Ed's Work-Force-Retention Problems Aren't Going Away." *Chronicle.com*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 14 Sept. 2023, www.chronicle.com/article/higher-eds-work-force-retention-problems-arent-going-away.