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Embodiment, Relationality, and Constellation: A Cultural Rhetorics Story of Doctoral Writing

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Abstract: This essay offers cultural rhetorics as a methodological tool for re-imagining doctoral writing. We provide a range of stories-theories to constellate the varying steps of this re-imagined dissertation writing methodology and process. Specifically, we discuss origin stories; how and why we write in community, including the importance of honoring relations/hips and reciprocity as part of the research process; the necessity of a decolonial orientation to our work and the communities we engage with; and a reflection on the process as a whole, including our embodied experiences throughout the research and writing. We conclude by discussing how cultural rhetorics method/ologies can help scholars in any field reimagine the doctoral writing process as embodied, experiential, and personal.

This chapter may read and feel differently than much doctoral writing scholarship, largely because of our use of story as theory. Collectively, we decided

to organize this chapter around stories for two reasons. First, story serves as a tool to narrate our relationality with each other and explain how the six of us, as authors, are connected to this work. Second, as scholars trained in cultural rhetorics within writing and rhetoric studies, story acts as a methodology for re-imagining doctoral writing. By this we mean story acts as a generative tool to understand the embodied experiences of doing doctoral writing and maps the relational learning that happens in doctoral writing (see also Naomi, Chapter 9, this collection). Laura Micciche and Allison Carr (2011) explained that graduate students are frequently expected to learn, “through repeated exposure and an osmosis-like process,” how to write as scholars in the field (p. 485). Furthermore, as Marilee Brooks-Gillies et al. (2015) explained, the “invisibility of genre, voice, style, data presentation, active versus passive writing, structure, and epistemology in writing instruction often allow students to refrain from critically examining their presentation of information” (p. 2). Additionally, relationships developed via these repeated exposures to (often unexamined) models of writing in their disciplines are assumed to be central to teaching graduate students how to become doctoral writers. That is, even though it is assumed that doctoral writing happens in a vacuum and that writers are alone in producing scholarly writing, we know that the writing produced by doctoral writers is simultaneously influenced by their conversations and relationships with others: dissertation advisors, academic mentors, community participants, colleagues, and multiple other communities in which we reside (see Kelly et al., Chapter 10, this collection). The written product may be individually composed, but the process of writing is informed by the embodied relationships doctoral writers have with their education. Turning towards these layered embodied and relational stories, we narrate in this chapter what we call a cultural rhetorics re-imagination of doctoral writing.

We begin by providing an origin story for how and why we came together to compose this piece. Next, we explain cultural rhetorics as a methodological tool for re-imagining doctoral writing. We then provide stories dedicated to the varying steps of this re-imagined dissertation writing: getting started, writing in community, considering reciprocal research relationships, engaging in decoloniality, and reflecting on the process as a whole. We conclude by discussing how these stories can help scholars re-imagine doctoral writing as embodied, experiential, and personal.

Our Cultural Rhetorics Origin Story: Re-imagining Doctoral Writing

Before we discuss our cultural rhetorics re-imagination of doctoral writing, we need to share a bit about the impetus of this chapter, or what cultural

rhetoricians would recognize as “our origin story.” Origin stories are the experiences that go un-noted in many academic genres. Often, doctoral writers are trained not to share moments of research failure, of participant distrust, of academic burnout and the fueling of imposter syndrome. Yet, these are all experiences that we know happen in doctoral and postdoctoral work. Cultural rhetorics asks us to name these origin stories, acknowledging how all experiences shape our learning and writing. The origin of this chapter begins at Michigan State University, in the Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures, where Trixie chaired the other authors’ doctoral committees over a span of 13 years, supervising the research and writing of all of our dissertations. Trixie works and teaches in cultural rhetorics and queer rhetorics, which is part of what has united us in terms of our methods and topics of research—we all focus on communities that connect to our personal and/or political lives. Furthermore, we have all worked in the writing center that Trixie directs, a center that also enacts cultural rhetorics through its practices and policies. These relationships to Trixie, to each other, to communal spaces, all have affected how we imagined our doctoral research and writing. It is in this space and through the methodological lens of cultural rhetorics that we were able to re-imagine what doctoral writing could be and do in the American academic field known as rhetoric and composition as well as in the various fields our individual research interests intersect with.

Readers of this essay may ask what value cultural rhetorics can have for doctoral writing that is not personal, embodied, or based on lived experience. To those readers, we say that this is part of our argument. We use cultural rhetorics to point towards the ways in which institutional value disregards the personal and embodied. Even if doctoral writers argue that their dissertations have absolutely zero personal influence upon them, writers are attached to their dissertations due to the physicality of writing them. Often, though, we find there is a general scholarly dismissal of discussing embodiment by labeling embodiment as antithetical to rigorous scholarship:

Work about/on/with embodiment can sometimes be written off as self-absorbed—academic navel gazing. But this is a misstep because scholarship about/on/with embodiment works to continually remind readers, writers, researchers, and pedagogues that bodies matter to the paradigms, perspectives, relations, and decisions one has in a given situation. (Smith et al. 2017, p. 46)

Such a statement emphasizes that there is an embodied, affectual component in the writing process. As such, to not tend to that component is to not un-

derstand the processes that inform the doctoral writing that is formally produced. We use cultural rhetorics in this chapter, then, to call attention to how the teaching of doctoral writing often erodes tending to the personal, embodied, and relational processes that inform the very writing that is produced.

In what follows, we define cultural rhetorics as a methodology. We focus on methodology as we reflect on Kate Pantelides' (2017) suggestion for "graduate students to use methodology sections as starting points for conversation with faculty" to ease the anxiety and "significant pain" that is often experienced with doctoral writing (p. 210). Taking up this suggestion, we discuss what a cultural rhetorics methodology is in order to re-imagine how we may better prepare future doctoral writers, doctoral mentors, committee chairs, and tutors of doctoral writers. This re-imagination may help us in better attending to the formal written products expected of doctoral writing by better understanding the everyday, messy, and embodied relational experiences that complicate the production of doctoral writing.

Cultural Rhetorics as Method/ologie/s

This collaborative essay uses cultural rhetorics method/ologie/s, practices, and theoretical frames in order to illustrate the argument we are making. We challenge the traditional humanities-based model of writing lengthy, text-only dissertations focused on secondary sources or primary texts such as novels (Welch et al., 2002; Pantelides, 2015). In addition, as teachers and researchers who have all worked in writing centers, we challenge one-size-fits-all models of dissertation writing processes and dissertation support. We focus instead on individuals—their writing processes, writing goals and purposes, disciplinary requirements and expectations, communities, and embodied experiences.

We see cultural rhetorics as a methodology "that recognizes and honors the cultural specificity of all rhetorical practices/productions," which includes an "understanding of the material bodies engaged in rhetorical practices" (Bratta & Powell, 2016). Consequently, we pay attention to the embodied experiences of both being and guiding doctoral writers. We also build from what we see as four pillars of cultural rhetorics practice: story as theory; engagement with decoloniality and decolonial practices; constellative practices as a way to build community and understanding; and the practice of relationality or honoring our relatives in practice, which often includes acts and attitudes of reciprocity (Bratta & Powell, 2016; Powell et al. 2014). We use the tenets of relationality and reciprocity to explore our experiences of planning, writing, and revising dissertation projects that use cultural rhetorics method/ologie/s and lenses to

explore various communities and phenomena; we also explore the embodied experiences of being in the doctoral writing moment as well as what was taken from this moment into first jobs and becoming doctoral advisors ourselves. While each section is a telling of selected stories-theories, often they reflect similar themes of experience for all of us. We want to illuminate how each of us individually experienced our dissertation writing practices, but we also acknowledge how those practices were similar because they all reflected cultural rhetorics values of relationality and reciprocity.

Doreen Starke-Meyerring (2014) issued a challenge to those invested in doctoral education:

Help students understand why they find themselves in the situations they do; how research writing works to produce particular kinds of knowledge; what politics are involved; and how writing groups might work to push that knowledge work as well as the sedimented knowledge systems doctoral scholars are entering. (p. 78)

To answer this call and to embody a cultural rhetorics method of community theorizing, we drafted a series of questions for each other to help us frame our storytelling and conversations (see Appendix). We then worked from this set of stories-theories to constellate our experiences and identify patterns as well as takeaways. We found, for example, that the process was/is important to all of us, maybe even more important than the dissertation itself. Similarly, the relationships built, maintained, and lost with communities and individuals are a part of this research and writing process. As Marilee Brooks-Gillies and colleagues (2020) explained, doctoral writing is about learning and performing the literacies and expectations of the field and about developing scholarly identities. For us, this meant resisting traditional modes of writing and developing our identities as cultural rhetorics scholars. Enacting cultural rhetorics method/ologie/s is always about the practice, because communities are built through practices.

In what follows, we discuss the pillars of cultural rhetorics in the context of doctoral writing processes and include author stories¹ to illustrate the experiences of composing formal pieces of writing. We do this to call attention

1 Many authors would choose to italicize stories in the text, but we do not in order to emphasize that they are indeed part of the theoretical and analytical text we are presenting. We do identify storytellers/theorizers in order to acknowledge individual experience. When we move from individual story to collective analysis, we provide an additional space with asterisks to indicate this movement.

to how we might re-imagine our pedagogical approach—whether through peer mentoring, advising, or chairing—to doctoral writing projects.

Getting Started: The Personal is Always Present When We Write

Preparing to write a cultural rhetorics dissertation requires an emotional component that is not always a part of other writing processes. A cultural rhetorics dissertation often involves aspects of the writer's personal story, sometimes requiring writers to dissect parts of their own positionality (see also Fa'avae, Chapter 8, this collection; Naomi, Chapter 9, this collection). Identities that we carry with us are conflicting and complicated, causing our bodies to search for ways to embrace them or to hide or modify them. This process can be a point of additional struggle for many people who fall outside of the traditional white, cisgender, heteronormative identity markers. Devika Chawla (2007) described how her family's identification with physical displacement could not be separated from her own academic identity, so she embraced both in her work; she noted,

I am a palpable presence in every essay that I have written because position, self, and identity (of the researcher and the participants) are, for me, recursive components of scholarly research. To be apart from what I do is alien to me. (p. 17)

Likewise, scholars such as Gloria Anzaldúa (2007), bell hooks (2015), and Judith Halberstam (1998) have written about how their multiple identities and voices have not always fit into the world and also how their writing and work cannot be separated from those identities and voices. According to hooks (2015), this experience requires the “radical standpoint, perspective, and position” of the politics of location, and she explained that enjoying her work alongside that of critical theory is only possible “because one transgresses, moves ‘out of one’s place.’ For many of us, that movement requires pushing against oppressive boundaries set by race, sex, and class domination” (p. 203). This pushing results in crucial choices: Do we align and identify with the traditional heteronormative, colonizing ways that might be “right,” or do we stand with the oppressed, the marginalized, and the struggling in order to make aware the experiences, and the knowledges, of others, or ourselves, in these positions?

How, indeed, do we push against the narratives of the straight and narrow to hear the stories, to practice the ways, to acknowledge the bodies of those outside? In many ways, this is a physical choice as much as a mental choice.

We must choose which place to stand, which place to position our material bodies, and, therefore, which stories our bodies tell and which voice(s) we use to tell those stories as we write.

A Story from Elise

I didn't know what my dissertation would be about when I began my Ph.D. I figured it would be something queer and multimodal, but I didn't know what that would look like. It wasn't until I worked on my comprehensive exams that it began to fall into place. The question I worked to answer was, "How can multimodality support queer and feminist rhetorics?" I know multimodal composing can and does support queer and feminist rhetorics, but I learned through my research the ways in which the concept of multimodality falls short. In particular, I began coming across works of indigenous and cultural rhetorics scholars who were clearly engaging multimodality in feminist and queer ways but who weren't using the term "multimodality." Instead, the work "spoke" for itself, and I started thinking about multimodality in terms of "making." I wondered what affordances come from thinking of multimodality in terms of making, especially for queer communities. I actually drew quite heavily from Maria Novotny's (2017) dissertation for building a framework around cultural rhetorics' considerations of making and for thinking about engaging with a community about their making practices. This is where the dissertation writing started for me.

A Story from Rachel

I came into my Ph.D. program with a huge sense of unbelonging. Despite my years of experience in the field, when I finally got into my doctoral program, I felt like I'd somehow slipped in unnoticed, gotten pulled in through some weird academic nepotism, and utterly fooled everyone around me. This was only compounded by the fact that I was taking classes after more than a decade since previously being a student and feeling very much "out-scholared" by my classmates. During my first semester colloquium class, I was listening to Malea Powell talk about time management and, if I'm honest, zoning out, living in my own head, but I snapped to attention when I heard her say, "Perfectionism is a tool of the patriarchy." At that moment, all my research ideas clicked. I'd been chasing an idea I had of a "perfect" Ph.D. student that didn't exist, and, in doing so, I'd been feeding my feelings to the academic "patriarchy" and getting feelings of imposter syndrome back. Not long after this, I started to see the intersections of imposter syndrome, emotions, and

embodiments, and I quickly decided to run my ideas by my committee chair, Trixie, to see if they held steam. By February of my second semester in my first year, I had my committee completely formed and my dissertation topic pretty much planned out. I found that the more I kept articulating my ideas to friends and colleagues, the more I liked them and felt confident in them.

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For the authors of this chapter, our dissertations are closely connected to our own personal histories and experiences and are built upon the personal histories and experiences of others. We all drew from our specific positionalities and encounters with the world. For instance, Rachel's scholarship draws on her embodied experiences as a woman who feels intense imposter syndrome in the academy. Elise's queer and cultural rhetorics framework draws from her lived experience as a bisexual woman trying to build queer community in and outside of the academy.

For most of us, our initial process of planning our dissertations began with assuming our communities had developed cultural practices over time through storying and through making, practices that could teach us something about those communities, ourselves, and our discipline. In essence, as Powell et al. (2014) argued, "All cultural practices are built, shaped, and dismantled based on the encounters people have with one another within and across particular systems of shared belief" (So, What Is Cultural Rhetorics? section, para. 4). We were interested in the shared belief of the communities with which we chose to engage—woman writing program administrators for Rachel and members of the activist organization the Lesbian Avengers for Elise, for example. We approached our work with the understanding that "the project of cultural rhetorics is, generally, to emphasize rhetorics as always-already cultural and cultures as persistently rhetorical. In practice, cultural rhetorics scholars investigate and understand meaning-making as it is situated in specific cultural communities" (Powell et al. 2014). As our dissertations developed, we worked to follow our participants' lead, and we found that our personal connections to our writing was heavily influenced by our relationships with those communities.

## Community: Acknowledging Our Histories and That Our Research Is Personal for Us and Our Participants

Taking a cultural rhetorics approach in our work means that we have to be very deliberate about acknowledging where our approaches and tools come from. For instance, cultural rhetorics has roots in Indigenous, Latinx, and



decolonial rhetorics—among others. As scholars who are not Indigenous or Latinx, it is fundamental for us to acknowledge these foundations and carry them forward properly and respectfully. For all of us, this led to some personal doubt because of our awareness of the implications and responsibilities of our work for our research participants and those who might learn from our work. As we worked to enact methods of care in the/our own communities with whom we were working, the responsibility of that work could be painful at times. In this section, we share individual experiences of personal doubt faced through our writing process and community engagement.

### A Story from Elise

By the time I interviewed my first participant, I was 14 weeks pregnant. I didn't look pregnant, and I never said I was, but each day after my interviews and archival research in New York City, I would take the subway back to my friend's apartment and nap, drink milkshakes, and barf. My body had its own needs, and they had nothing to do with the Lesbian Avengers.

My final interview was over the phone, and it was a little more than three weeks after my baby, Lane, was born. In that interview, a participant asked me how I identified, and I was honest. I was relieved for at least one participant to know I was bisexual—it's not a secret, but I wonder how they might feel to know I'm married to a man. Would they tell me the same things? It was never supposed to be a secret, but I felt incredibly strange about telling them my relationship status and about my pregnancy and baby. In many ways, I have lately been feeling the least queer I ever have. I fit into so many heteronormative stereotypes as a mother and wife. I'm so far from a lesbian activist, it's embarrassing.

My life experience, as it drifts further from the queer activists I work with in my dissertation, has left me doubting whether my positionality gets in the way of the work I do. I just recently sent a chapter to my participants, admitting to them that I had a baby, which is why my writing was coming to them so slowly. One of my participants congratulated me. The other two didn't acknowledge it. In some ways, I was relieved; some of the Lesbian Avengers had children (one of my participants included), and perhaps they don't see children as antithetical to queer positionality as I sometimes do.

What I have learned from my cultural rhetorics orientation to this dissertation is that writing is always relational, even as (and perhaps especially when) our relationships seem strained and distant. I am constantly thinking about my relationship to and with my research participants: how I relate to them, how they see me or trust me, whether or not I am doing their lives

justice as I record their stories. If I weren't thinking about these insecurities, I'm not sure I would be doing cultural rhetorics.

## A Story from Matt

Growing up as a gay kid in an overwhelmingly white small town in Indiana in the 1980s meant that I was acutely aware of not being like other boys and pretty much nothing else.<sup>2</sup> It didn't occur to me that I was also white, (lower) middle class, able-bodied, and (bodily/height/weight/stature) male because everyone else was also many of these things. Being these things wasn't something that stood out. But being an effeminate/gay/"sensitive" boy was something I couldn't escape. So, by the time I went to college and entered early adulthood, I absolutely felt like I inhabited a minoritized body. I worried about my safety. Being judged. Verbally assaulted or worse, physically harmed for being gay or perceived as "not manly enough." It wasn't until I began to travel and expand my friend and acquaintance group and to get to know folks of other racial, ethnic, dis/ability, religion/faith, gender identity, etc. backgrounds that I began to realize that I did really indeed have privilege based on having a white, male, middle-class body. So much of my late 20s through my 30s and now 40s has been about owning and acknowledging that privilege. In fact, with the opening up/out of the queer/LGBTQIA world, being a gay, white, middle-class male has never seemed more "run-of-the-mill." And yet, often, I do still think about how I will be perceived or treated or judged.

This is where I am now as a researcher and writer and advisor to new doctoral writers. I try to find balance but also embrace the messiness. Intersectionality and constellatedness are really messy and complex. It's not just about one-dimensionally claiming, "I'm in a minority too! I'm oppressed!" but it's also not the "oppression Olympics" where we all compare notes and try to figure out what bodies have been the most marginalized. It's about saying, here are the intersections and here are the places we connect and the other places where we have to learn and teach each other. But as my mentors in my graduate work taught me, all I could do was be transparent in my approach and in my words, acknowledging the scholars and work from which I draw. This approach has served me well all these years, and I try to

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2 The house style for the WAC Clearinghouse is to follow the general (although still emerging) guidance regarding capitalization of proper nouns related to racial and ethnic groups provided by the American Psychological Association (<https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language/racial-ethnic-minorities>). The authors of this chapter have rejected this approach, noting that they view not capitalizing white as "an anti-racist move against white supremacy" (personal communication with Trixie Smith, June 2, 2021).

pass it on in my mentorship. Even if it means the uncomfortable moments of admitting I have so much to learn.

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Cultural rhetorics method/ologie/s require us to check in with ourselves alongside our participants. It also requires a conscious recognition of the individuals and communities we are constellating knowledge with—those we talk to, research with, read throughout the process. Again, we come back to the four pillars of cultural rhetorics and our use of them as approaches to re-imagining doctoral writing as we constellate thoughts about our research communities with ideas of relationality and reciprocity as well as decoloniality. As noted, we use these terms and practices rooted in Indigenous paradigms to acknowledge where and on what we build and also to acknowledge that they aren't just metaphors, but that they are actual making practices instrumental to the way we do cultural rhetorics research and writing,³ acknowledging that we are working with real human beings who may both celebrate and suffer the material consequences of our research and storytelling.

Relationality and Reciprocity: Honoring People and Their Stories, or Showing That We Care

In his chapter titled “Relational Accountability,” Shawn Wilson (2008) explained that how we conduct our research, what method/ologie/s we use, determines how we uphold our relational accountability: “We are accountable to ourselves, the community, our environment or cosmos as a whole, and also to the idea or topics we are researching. We have all of these relationships that we need to uphold” (p. 106). Andrea Riley-Mukavetz (2014) further explained:

Through an indigenous research paradigm, respect, reciprocity, and accountability are not just things to do to be ethical, but a way to cultivate and maintain the relationships we form with people, spaces, land, and the universe. Clearly, to enact relationality and relational accountability is personal and communal. (p. 113)

Thus, there is no singular definition or picture of reciprocity to point to. For the writers and mentors in this essay, this meant listening carefully to the needs of participants, brainstorming through possible actions and/or

³ For more on cultural rhetorics ideas of making and making practices, please see Andréa Davis (2011), Qwo-Li Driskill (2010), and Malea Powell (2002).

products, and following through with intended outcomes. We hope, however, that examples from our work will illustrate instances of reciprocity in or through our projects and interactions with each other and with our communities.

We see reciprocity as anchored in care: care for each other; care for our participants and communities; care for our audiences; and in the instance of doctoral writing, care for our committees and colleagues. Trixie, for example, talked with writers about their personal processes and needs as they researched and wrote. How often did they need to meet? What kind of feedback did they need at particular stages? Did they want to share chunks of writing or fully formed chapters? These processes were different across writers and stages. She also worked to care for the stories and participants that were being shared with her.

A Story from Trixie

I often read and viewed raw data and helped my doctoral writers to talk/think/code through the data and to make connections across participants as well as texts. I was experiencing much more of the story than appears in the final product. I also helped doctoral writers to think through how or what to give (back) to their communities as an act of reciprocity. As a cultural rhetorics scholar, as a mentor, as a human, it was important to maintain respect for these storied gifts—from both my students and their participants.

I know that the doctoral writers I work with practice care and reciprocity with me. I remember, for example, many instances of Matt and another grad student coming over to my house to meet about their work. They would take turns playing with or caring for my foster children while I met with the other about their research. They also gave me much-needed adult company when I was overwhelmed with the needs of new children.

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This sense of care, respect, and accountability with each other as advisor and writer is magnified and expanded through the relationship(s) with communities and research participants. The cultural rhetorics lens makes us all acutely aware of our own positionality and the possible impacts of our work for all involved. We want to be respectful of and accountable to our participant communities while also being respectful and accountable to our disciplinary field(s) and readers. Seeking input from participants at every stage of the research process means they have multiple opportunities to revise their

stories, disagree with our framing of their stories, and both give and retract their consent,<sup>4</sup> possibly even withdrawing completely.

We also see reciprocity as attuned to the ever-changing needs of our participants as well as ourselves, the researchers. Attunement represents the contemplative principle of research because listening requires a subsequent process: contemplation about what is heard and then a formulation of a response. We cannot know, for example, how to stretch in the context of a research project unless we are attuned (to other bodies, to systems, to other researchers, etc.). Attunement is closely connected to elasticity because being attuned speaks to trust; slow research “is a long uneven process, and it develops within the context of carefully cultivated relationships of trust between researchers and participants” (Lindquist, 2012, p. 649). So, in many ways, attunement provides opportunities for researchers to listen and contemplate moments that are hard to predict in doctoral writing—the need for patience, or knowing when to stop, start, or hold off on a project.

Contemplating holding off on a project, when connected to doctoral writing, can be scary. Maria remembers a time when her dissertation almost came to a halt because of a participant’s concerns.

## A Story from Maria

As a graduate student trying to practice reciprocity, I frequently shared drafts of my dissertation chapters with my participants to ensure that the way in which I was representing their infertility stories was accurate and respected what they were willing to share. Yet, as I was finishing my dissertation and preparing my job market materials, which included writing that related to my participants, I realized that I should share those materials with my participants, too. So, in the fall of 2016, I sent out an email to all three participants explaining the way in which I would be sharing their stories for the academic job market. Naively, I thought each participant would warmly write back, “This is great!” However, no such responses were ever returned. In fact, one participant—Meg—had deep concerns, writing that she had no knowledge that I would be using her story beyond my dissertation chapter.

Meg’s response caught me off guard. Never did I anticipate how angry and frustrated she would feel by my act of sharing academic job materials. I thought my reliance on cultural rhetorics methodology would ensure that I was doing ethical research. Feeling overwhelmed and like I had failed in practicing cultural rhetorics, I turned to Trixie for help. Talking with Trixie, I

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4 For more on cultural rhetorics and queer approaches to consent, see the work of Kathleen Livingston (2015).

realized that practicing reciprocity in a research project may change over time and require different practices for different participants. For example, I explained to Trixie that throughout the writing of my dissertation, Meg's identity with infertility changed and evolved. She also became more protective over her story. My intention in sharing the job market materials with her was to ensure she felt protected. Yet, such an intention was clearly misunderstood and was not experienced as practicing reciprocity.

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Maria's experience was a research lesson that we often don't write about in our formal doctoral pieces. Today, Maria is a faculty member who mentors graduate students. She also teaches courses about research methodologies and advises graduate dissertations. In these moments, she finds herself talking about Meg as a way to make her own moments of learning visible to her graduate students. Too often, we do not make these research lessons apparent in our publications and in our conference presentations. Yet, we believe that re-imagining doctoral writing processes requires us to attune ourselves to the stories we do not tell in our research. We must ask why we often don't write about the processes that went wrong in our work. Why must we always write about the successes? How may we better prepare doctoral writers when we write about what goes wrong in our research? Asking these questions may lead us towards new insight into what it means to be a doctoral writer.

Decoloniality: Checking Our Privilege, or Acknowledging Our Embodied Experiences and the Land on Which We Research and Write

Actively working from a position or orientation of decoloniality, or anti-coloniality, is a large part of a cultural rhetorics methodology, particularly for white scholars working on Indigenous land.⁵ To actively and radically resist

5 We understand that many would say we are using decolonial(ity) as metaphor here (Tuck & Yang, 2012), which is why we want to label our method as a decolonial orientation. We support Indigenous and ally work towards land redress and recognitions of sovereignty and work against token claims of decolonialism that are meant to assuage settler-colonial guilt and white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018). Following Indigenous scholars such as Malea Powell (2002), Andrea Riley-Mukavetz (2014), and Qwo-Li Driskill (2010), we assert that paying attention to actual bodies in the academy and in the world (Indigenous and other) is one method of changing our orientation towards individuals and communities, particularly in our research and writing, and, thus, one way of beginning to right historical wrongs.

notions of coloniality—in our publishing practices, in our data-gathering practices, and in our subject matter—means that we, as academics already possessing many privileges, continuously examine those privileges and use them to break apart colonized/r notions in our academic embodiment. As Qwo-Li Driskill (2015) explained, “Decolonial skillshares work to ensure that the information and knowledge generated through scholarship do not remain within the academy or only disseminated through academic circles” (p. 64), and decolonial practice (and pedagogy/methodology) becomes a way for allies to “link arms together” (p. 59) as well as a method for healing trauma, maintaining cultural memory, and sharing knowledge.

For Katie and Rachel, one way we’ve attempted to enact decolonial practice is to focus our dissertations on bodies—physical and emotional—and the stories and sometimes new identities that emerge from those bodies. Maureen Johnson and colleagues (2015) argued that rhetoric and bodies cannot be separated and that we must consider physical, material bodies in meaning making; they noted that

the physical body carries meaning through discourse about or by a body. But embodiment theories suggest that meaning can be articulated beyond language. All bodies do rhetoric through texture, shape, color, consistency, movement, and function. Embodiment encourages a methodological approach that addresses the reflexive acknowledgement of the researcher from feminist traditions and conveys an awareness or consciousness about how bodies—our own and others’—figure in our work. (p. 39)

To illustrate this point, each author takes moments to explain the ways their own bodies—marked by size, age, infertility, and so on—affect their work. Their bodies help to create their identities because their bodies make meaning and hold signifying power. Our material bodies tell stories and they let people know—they signify—the otherwise hidden links we might carry to particular groups, be those linguistic, cultural, or historical, among others (Johnson et al., 2015). Johnson et al. (2015) created a definition of how embodiment practices “encourage complex relationships among past, present, and future, as well as across multiple identifications” (p. 42). The ways we inhabit our bodies in spaces and times—our embodiments—create our identities. Embodied knowledge influences embodied rhetorics to create “the purposeful effort by an author to represent aspects of embodiment within the text he or she is shaping” and acknowledge how those circumstances “affect how he or she understands the world” (Knoblauch, 2012, p. 58). Though A. Abby

Knoblauch (2012) used embodied rhetoric to explain only the ways authors must incorporate bodies in their writing, we would argue also that embodied rhetoric moves outside of the literal text on the page to consider all the ways individuals and communities compose meaning.

A Story from Katie

When I was working on my dissertation, I remember someone making the comment that work about personal trauma (e.g., “a therapy dissertation”) was less rigorous/valid than more traditional topics of scholarship. Yet cultural rhetorics makes space for work that is deeply personal and sees it as part of the decolonial process. As Anzaldúa (2007) explained, when people are turned into objects—or distanced from themselves—there is space for violence. The personal is valid and valued because it is part of what makes a community. The personal lives in the body. As scholars working with personal topics and communities, we all experience this work differently. Writing my dissertation gave me space to examine my own biases around acceptable bodies and beauty and to search out other opinions. I was able to gather a group of theorists who helped me understand and explain why conventional beauty norms are rooted in colonialism and perpetuated on and through bodies. I was able to write back to my former self (and my ex-husband) and explain to them why and how our ideas were harmful.

This process of recognizing, undoing, and creating something new took a lot out of me emotionally. Many of the experiences that contributed to my interest in beauty norms were traumatic. Writing the dissertation was like stretching a muscle that hadn't been used in a long time. That growth, though, has stayed with me long after the dissertation and has been a big part of who I am as a teacher, scholar, and human today.

A Story from Rachel

When I was beginning to think of my research trajectory and plan out my comprehensive exams, my mother suddenly passed away. While I'd not yet begun writing my dissertation at that time, I knew I was going to be writing about emotions and bodies in academia. When I returned to school after her funeral, I was surprised to notice that my mother's passing and my subsequent grief affected everything about my research. Not only did my emotions feel forever altered, but also my physical body didn't cooperate with me anymore. When I tried to tell myself I should be writing or reading, my body rebelled with extreme exhaustion and crying. However, part of my own self-preserva-

tion during this time was to acknowledge what my body needed, sometimes to just get through the day. Looking back, I realize that this acknowledgment was a decolonial practice. I was actively working to deconstruct the narrative around me of a “grieving graduate student” by publicly, and bodily, embracing my grief and openly writing about it.

Post-Process: Reflecting on the Doctoral Writing Process, or How We (Have) Move(d) Forward

Next, we share stories from some of us in various posts beyond the dissertation writing stage who are now in positions to reflect on this moment and share our experiences. We re-examine our own embodied experiences both in and after the writing process moment, holding on to the lessons we have brought into our professional careers.

A Story from Maria

After defending the dissertation, I found that the most learning and significance I experienced was not in the findings of my data but in the methodological wrestlings that emerged in completing my dissertation. While I expected particular findings to emerge, I did not expect to have issues with the writing of the dissertation. For instance, how to represent my research subjects became a contested issue. How to ethically tell their stories, ensuring they felt accurately represented. How to ensure my methods did not evoke a sense of recurring trauma for each of my participants as they recounted episodes of reproductive loss. All of these instances felt more pressing to discuss than the actual data findings. Many assume that the Institutional Review Board process mitigates these ethical conundrums. But the reality is, when working with human participants, research gets messy. As such, when I mentor students—whether undergraduate or graduate—I meet with them regularly to talk about the research process just as much (if not more than) the actual writing. Often in writing studies, we emphasize the writing process over product. I'd like to offer the idea that research is just as much of a process, yielding unpredicted and generative moments of learning.

A Story from Matt

When writing my dissertation, and really almost all my graduate-level writing, I used cultural rhetorics ideas of constellatedness—patchworks of my own experiences and identities. Already, completing a dissertation seemed

like such a high-stakes activity, so deviating off of prescribed ideas of form and content seemed inadvisable. But also, as a queer person, such deviation seemed necessary to survive, to breathe, and to be myself. I had a dissertation chair and mentor(s) who gave me that space. When I graduated and went into a tenure track position, I began advising other graduate students (especially Ph.D. students). I approached my own writing and projects (for my tenure plan) and their writing (seminar work, dissertations, etc.) in the same queer, space-taking way I'd seen that suggested "living dangerously" in terms of breaking out of prescriptive, current-traditionalist molds was not only desirable but was necessary with cultural rhetorics method/ology/s. Cultural rhetorics teaches us that failure (beings outside of "normal/normativity") is human (Powell et al., 2014, p. 20-21), but being queer also teaches us that failure is even desirable. The embracing of failure is what allows creative space . . . theoretically, epistemologically, methodologically (Ahmed, 2006, p. 25). So yeah, I braced myself for a failure that never came and for failures that already always were. Queer folks brace themselves for a harsh world, where just being queer is already a failure (see further queer conceptualisations of failure in Ingram, Chapter 13, this collection). My experience post-graduate writing is a continuation of that same approach: It will be a mess. It will sometimes (often) fail. That is the way in which you will most vividly and cathartically grow into who you were seeking to become on the journey.

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What did we learn from our doctoral writing? It's messy. There will be failure. Failure is both the foundation and the journey, and the journey changes you. Community is vital to this journey, but being yourself and going inside yourself to figure out what and who you're becoming is related to that ability to seek outwardly. This knowledge also carries you into the future as you relate these lessons to your own students and the new communities you become a part of.

## Conclusion: Insights, or Re-imagining Doctoral Writing via Cultural Rhetorics

We have offered a series of short vignettes to illustrate the various stages and processes of learning how to become doctoral writers—and eventually, scholarly writers. Such stories are rarely told and shared, perpetuating a narrative that the doctoral student must already be a master writer. As scholars in writing studies, we know this narrative is false. We know writing is a process, that

it takes time to master the genres of one's discipline and to figure out how to discuss and make coherent one's scholarly findings in a synthesized text.

Our stories are therefore process-focused, offering insight into how we learned and how we mentor doctoral writing. Elise and Rachel's origin stories contextualize how to navigate life experiences while being consumed by the ominous pursuit of the dissertation. Being transparent about the uncontrollable moments of life led the two of them to form a relationship that continues today and offers a unique experience of doctoral peer-mentoring. We know from writing center scholarship that peer mentoring around writing assists students in practicing the language of talking about writing. Such a practice is rarely emphasized in doctoral writing. Yet, peer mentoring in community through the writing process is an invaluable and often understated practice that can continue throughout one's scholarly trajectory. For instance, Maria and Katie began talking with each other about their respective writing processes during the dissertation phase. Today, as scholars in their field, they continue to talk together as they approach book and journal projects.

In this sense, cultural rhetorics engages in the practice of community-building. While this occurs through the relationships between doctoral writers, it also happens with the communities we study. Elise's story about how to be transparent about her own positionality with the Lesbian Avengers is one such example of what community-building looks like in practice. Similarly, Matt's story emphasizes why transparency is essential to the communities we work with and offers an embodied model for demonstrating transparency to his own graduate students.

In practicing transparency, relationality and reciprocity emerge. Trixie and Maria's stories both touch on the need to train doctoral writers to examine what reciprocity means in relationship to their projects. For doctoral writers who work with communities and seek for their findings to have relevance in those communities, we must acknowledge that the actual dissertation may not be the by-product that has the most meaning. Instead, an alternative piece of composing may be a more valued product for the communities we work with. We see such a takeaway as a decolonial orientation to doctoral writing and one that has meaning across disciplines, especially as institutions seek to renew the public's investment in higher education. Cultural rhetorics helps us learn the practices that create the ethical relationship, the methods of listening, and the wrestling with how to represent these communities in our writing and what sorts of writing products will be of value to those communities. We see adapting a cultural rhetorics approach—whatever discipline one may identify with—as a valuable place to begin re-imagining doctoral writing.

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## Appendix. Guiding Questions for Talking Circles

- Describe your process for planning/researching/writing your dissertation. What types of interactions did you have with your chair, your committee, your colleagues during this process (as part of this process)?

- How is your work indicative of Cultural Rhetorics? How did you enact Cultural Rhetorics methods/methodologies in your work and process?
- What did you predict about how you approach the dissertation process? What were the results of those predictions? Or, in other words, when did embodied moments alter your predictions? At what phase of the dissertation cycle?
- Whom did you speak with, consult with during the dissertation process? Why those people? In other words, who were the relations you depended on?
- If you define your dissertation as engaging in embodied rhetorics, why is this? Are you developing a theory about embodied rhetorics? Citing embodied rhetoricians? Working with bodies? In other words, how do we come to define our dissertations as involving embodied rhetorics?
- Did you feel as if your dissertation took a risk? Why is that? When did it feel risky—in the design, the writing, the disclosure? How did you measure that risk? Who mentored you as you took the risk? How was the risk “read” on the market?
- For those who have completed their dissertations, how have you used your dissertation for future writings/scholarship? What shape has that re-writing taken?
- Question for Trixie: What is your philosophy for advising dissertators? In what ways (if any) do you see your background in queer, feminist, embodied, or cultural rhetorics informing how you choose to advise?
- What was the most difficult part of writing your dissertation? OR/ AND do you think the most difficult part of writing the dissertation was internal (i.e., getting in your head, procrastination, etc.) or external (big life events, hectic schedules, etc.)? How were these difficulties embodied?
- Who did you feel were the key stakeholders in your writing throughout your Ph.D. process? How did those stakeholders change or get replaced over the years?
- What were your pains and pleasures of dissertation writing?
- In what ways was dissertation writing physical labor? Emotional labor?
- What guidance did you get at the beginning of the dissertation writing process from your stakeholders?
- In what ways did you find the dissertation writing process more isolating or community-building?