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Seeking Shelter in the Eye: What We Can Get out of the Storm

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Another tranquil day at home, just like the other 60 days before it. I sit down on a mat on the patio, set the countdown for 35 minutes, and start to read for pleasure. The cat curls up at my feet, purring gently. The daily reading signifies the end of a working day. It's also the time of the day when I can observe the change of seasons, meditate, and connect to my inner self.

Two months into the outbreak of COVID-19 in the United States, I begin to appreciate, more and more, the fact that I have a safe place to live, a fridge stuffed with food, and above all, an orderly life in the midst of crumbling world orders. Having come a long way to combat anxiety and fear, I can finally set out to tell my COVID-19 story. But



Figure 3.1. The view from my patio.

I hope that this narrative can go beyond merely reconstructing a difficult experience. I hope to contribute to the discussion of rebuilding “normality” by bringing in my perspectives as a Chinese national, doctoral student, writing teacher, and member of the CCCC community.

The spring 2020 semester began with a looming presence of the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, China. In mid-January, I began to hear about a spreading disease, which was then considered local and regional, from major Chinese media and from friends and families in China. On January 19, while the number of confirmed cases was still small (around 170), many people started to wear masks to avoid contracting and spreading the virus. Four days later, on January 23, the epicenter, Wuhan, was locked down, and a nationwide “stay-at-home” order was issued and enforced with no exceptions. The drastic measures took me by surprise, as I did not fully understand the scale of the problem we were going to face.

Meanwhile, I was busy adjusting to a new schedule, new teachers, and new students as the spring semester unfolded. The sunshine in Arizona was just as bright and joyful as always. The outbreak of COVID-19 became a popular, gap-filling topic before each class session. My American classmates asked curiously about the situation, expressing empathy and condolences. Among the Chinese community, however, we talked with great concerns. One of my friends at Arizona State University (ASU), Emily (pseudonym), is from a city next to Wuhan. Both of her parents work at a local hospital. She shared with me first-hand information about the epidemic that involved not only statistics but also acute suffering and pain of the people in China.

In my first-year composition classrooms, however, I did not talk too much about COVID-19 with my students. The first time I addressed the issue was in late January when the first case at ASU was confirmed. I wanted to bring the potential risks to students’ attention, but I did not want to make a fuss out of it, partially because I still considered the epidemic to be a regional problem. The Chinese community on campus, my students included, acted quickly and precautiously. Several of my students wore masks to class and even kept them on throughout the entire 75 minutes. At around the same time, a petition for closing down the school was launched and gained favor among the student population. The incident ended with a message from the ASU President on February 13, in which he assured us that the current risk level was low and that all school activities would continue as

usual. Although I started to hear more and more conversations about the coronavirus on different occasions, the tone and attitude did not change much. The most frequent comment I heard was that, as you might imagine, “it’s just a flu.”

I remembered things started to go downhill on March 9, the last Friday before spring break. While I was looking forward to the upcoming CCCC conference, my mailbox was bombarded by countless new messages about travel restrictions, conference cancellations, and transition to online teaching. In less than a week, I witnessed with tremendous sadness that much of my hard work was drowned in the tectonic changes that have shaken the foundation of normality.

But it was not only my life that has been affected; it was millions of people who live in this country. While I tried to “build a fortress” around my little two-bedroom apartment by following the “stay-at-home” order, the world outside seemed to be falling apart and whirling up at the same time. For more than two months, the confirmed cases and death toll in the US have been on the rise with few signs of slowing down. Meanwhile, the tensions between different racial groups, social classes, and generations have built up through hashtagged coinages on social media (e.g., “#BoomerRemover” and “#KungFlu”), through hate-provoking tabloid articles based on hearsay, through armed protests in the name of freedom, and even through outright name-calling at the daily White House briefings.

What upset me most was the manipulated hate toward the Chinese community. On March 16, Donald Trump used the term “Chinese virus” for the first time in his tweet and kept doing so many times on different occasions. This has aroused intense emotional responses among Chinese communities, both in the US and in China. We felt disappointment, outrage, helplessness, and, above all, fear. In my daily log for the Documentarian project, I noted on March 17:

I have great fear these days. Trump just openly used “Chinese virus” on Twitter, which is really hard to believe. I understand that the existence of nationalism and racialism is as long as human history. I just couldn’t believe that the head of a nation (and supposedly the greatest nation of the planet) would openly support racism and xenophobia in such a conscious, unmistakable, and brazen way. My fear is that the American citizens might be instigated by such discourses and start to attack, verbally and

physically, the Chinese. I am, obviously, at the center of attack. We are already seeing such attacks happening all around the globe. The fear is so great that I had to avoid all people when I was jogging around the blocks.

As a student of rhetoric and composition, I understand that Trump's rhetorical move was politically intended to divert our attention away from the current turmoil; but as a Chinese national, I could not help but feel like living on the brink of collision. The feeling got augmented every time I had to step out of my little "comfort zone" for grocery shopping, especially in March and April when wearing masks was not yet mandatory (or even considered necessary). Buying shampoo at the CVS felt like shady business when you had to weigh the "side-effects" of wearing a mask against the risk of not wearing one. I did not remember how many times I had to storm in and out of a shop because I got too much unwanted attention from wearing a mask. Fortunately, I have never been openly assaulted or attacked in public, but stories of such were far from scarce. In a video filmed and published by one of my Chinese friends who lived and studied in Spain, she was called "Coronavirus" by total strangers on the street in Madrid. On Facebook, my Japanese American professor at ASU shared her story of being shunned in public spaces. Racial division, I felt almost for the first time, exists beyond sensational news headlines. It is real, and it is happening around me.

The feeling of anxiety and distress was exacerbated by the pressure of being a second-year doctoral student. My nonimmigrant F-1 visa puts me in a dire predicament. Going back home would be safer and better for my well-being since things in China were gradually returning to normal. But in doing so, I will have to face the risk of not being able to come back in fall. Weighing the losses and gains, I decided that staying put, for now, was probably my best bet; I decided to seek shelter in the eye of the storm.

Starting a quarantine life was not too hard at first, given that I have a place to stay and enough savings to get by. The challenging part, as I soon realized, was to deal with the amount of extra time that otherwise would have been spent on commuting, having lunch-break conversations, waiting in lines at the Starbucks, and hanging out with friends. In the absence of distractions, any negative thoughts, however trivial, were magnified and prolonged into a state of mind. This was

aggravated by the fact that physical environment plays a vital part in managing cognitive load. Being constrained to a relatively small space for a long time is likely to result in fatigue and a short attention span. At times, I found myself picking up the phone more and more frequently. The act of checking news and updates became almost unconscious and impulsive. Counterintuitively, the extra time was not at all a blessing, but a lure to vicious circles that drained most of my energy.

To pull myself from the downward spiral, the first thing I did was to push social distancing even further. Instead of keeping pace with the fast-changing world, I chose to focus on my small universe. I believed what I needed most at that time was a tiny bit of control over my life, mind, and feelings. I have, therefore, set daily, weekly, and monthly goals to validate any accomplishment, taking into account even non-academic stuff, such as reading novels, doing water-color paintings and yoga, and trying out new dishes. I have also designed a detailed working schedule, of which I was not a big fan before the pandemic. I had always considered them restricting and inflexible to changes. But in a time of uncertainties, knowing that I need to do certain things at a certain time was a huge relief. Apart from telling myself what to do, I have also set rules of what not to do. On top of the list was spending too much time on social media, especially on reading comments that vent malevolence on Chinese people. The decision to keep myself away from social media sounded contradictory to the idea of staying connected online, but what if the virtual space is an even more split version of reality?

The next thing that I did to restore order was to begin reaching out to people that I know, especially my fellows at ASU. Their presence assured me that the world has not become a totally unfamiliar place after all. The English Department, to which I am affiliated, has done a fantastic job of bringing us together. Among its various efforts, I benefited most from the four weekly Zoom meetings: Coffee Hour on Mondays, Teacher Talk on Tuesdays, Happy Hour on Thursdays, and Flash Talks on Fridays. For me, joining these sessions had more to do with seeing old faces and exchanging greetings; the one-hour-long participation was a symbol of being part of a greater whole.

I also had great concerns for my students, as most of them are from China as well. In a way, I considered them more vulnerable because they are younger, newer to this country, and probably have few social connections. With the writing classes being moved online, I had no

idea where they were, how they were doing, and whether they were able to cope with various difficulties. To understand their situation and emotional state, I conducted a quick survey on Canvas and held one-on-one conferences during the second week of online teaching. Quite to my surprise, most students said they were doing well in managing the workload and pressure and that they felt calm and motivated. To those who did experience hardship, I told them about my own situation and how I managed to survive. I could feel that students appreciated how I approached them as a friend and an equally troubled human being. Several of them even asked about my plan for the summer and sought advice on traveling back to China. Originally, the point of having one-on-one conferences was to send a message that we were in this together, but in the end, I was deeply touched by their courage and commitment, which, in turn, became a great source of power for me. Providing emotional support to students has reciprocal benefits for the teacher, and it is the crisis that has helped me to see such remedial effects.

At the time I put these words down in May, countries and states are struggling to go back to normal. There are signs of things turning for the better, although more in a sociological sense. In fact, the “stay-at-home” order in Arizona has recently expired, and businesses are planning to reopen gradually. I have also witnessed the initial panic fading into more conscious thinking about what we are dealing with. The pandemic, of course, is never just a highly contagious disease. As Peter Baker nicely summarized in a *Guardian* article, “disasters and emergencies do not just throw light on the world as it is. They also rip open the fabric of normality. Through the hole that opens up, we glimpse possibilities of other worlds” (para. 8). I hesitate to see the pandemic as an “opportunity” in the usually positive sense, because I wish that we would learn our lesson in a less traumatic and devastating way. But a crisis of this scale forces us to detach ourselves from the daily messiness and to reassess the status quo.

This was precisely what the CCCC community was trying to achieve collectively. In documenting their daily activities, chores, and feelings, many have taken the chance to reflect upon their roles as a teacher and/or administrator, the work-life balance, previous working experiences, routines, plans, and values. Several of us have revealed a shattered reality in the disguise of normality: PhD students paying too little attention to self-care, essential workers being undervalued

for the important work they do, reflective practices being pushed to the corner by a heavy workload. As I skimmed through the survey responses, a sense of responsibility and pride emerged. I realized that I could indeed contribute to social development and make an impact through writing, publishing, joining the conversation, and making my voice heard. As much as I love my work and profession, I had never felt what I do was lifesaving or game-changing. Not being able to see the immediate impact made me question how useful and worthy my work really is. But the Documentarian project gave me a new perspective of looking at my role in the world. As I may continue to feel vulnerable as a foreigner and racial minority, I can now scoop up the courage to think about what makes me scared in the first place, apart from the disease itself. I am also in a better position to voice my concerns and complaints and to expect that, together, we could right the wrongs, as an anonymous respondent wrote: “Recording, documenting, and revisiting are critical to making sense of our work—so that when we return to ‘normal,’ it won’t be the same old normal.”

One of the fastest failing “normalities” that I see here is the way that public discourses are produced and received these days. Over the past two months, I was constantly overwhelmed by the amount of information that spewed with each swipe of the phone. Yet, amongst the sea of information, I wonder how much we can genuinely trust and share. Having access to both the Chinese and English media puts me at a unique nexus of opposing viewpoints and ideologies. It also gives me a jarring feeling to see the vicious accusation of China downplaying the severity of the disease when all I heard from the Chinese media in January and February was how dangerous it was. The point here is not to defend my country, but to urge caution against angry posts shouting, “blow China down to the ground.” In a time of crisis, when accurate information and cooperation are most needed, we are unfortunately seeing disinformation and hate comments that aim to drive us apart. Alarming, today’s political discourses are increasingly replete with post-truth rhetoric, to a degree where the public feel so vulnerable and powerless that they eventually give up their right to know. As Lee McIntyre, the author of *Post-Truth*, summarized, “the tricky part is not to explain ignorance, lying, cynicism, indifference, political spin, or even delusion. We have lived with these for centuries. Rather, what seems new in the post-truth era is a challenge not just to the idea of knowing reality but to the existence of reality itself” (10).

It is this nihilistic thinking about reality that we need to guard against. As a citizen and writing teacher, I wonder what I can do to fight against the sense of powerlessness. Now I have an easier time dealing with racist remarks and behaviors, ungrounded claims, and inciting languages, knowing that they are on the agenda of creating “different versions of realities.” But understanding this is far from enough. Increasingly, I felt the responsibility of helping students to actively engage with public discourses has shifted to the shoulder of writing teachers.

In my classroom, one thing that falls short is the emphasis on fact-checking practices. Although I have urged students to use reliable sources, preferably those from academic journals, I did not give them a set of criteria to evaluate the validity of sources. In fact, I have noticed, every now and then, that some sources cited by the students looked suspicious. Regrettably, I did not go deeper into checking reliability or having a conversation with them. This is partly due to time constraints. But oftentimes, I question whether I know more about a specific topic than my students. Isn't the information that I receive on topics outside my field of study also from news and social media? Yes. Have I ever read an academic article on global warming? No. While the idea of becoming an expert by reading a couple of online articles is illusional, I do believe we can help students become more aware of how they collect, process, and produce knowledge. Although I have adopted a process-based approach in teaching first-year composition, the feedback that I give to each draft is still oriented toward the final product. I have never asked students to explain how they start a project, where they find the information, why they choose to cite a specific article, whether they would do it differently outside of the course, etc. There is, perhaps, a growing urgency to help our students understand how information is produced, distributed, and received in today's world, and the students' role in that cycle.

I remembered that two months ago, in a line at Fry's checkout counter, I overheard a woman behind me saying in a joking tone that “this (pandemic) is not an apocalypse.” But I think it resembles an apocalypse in the sense that an apocalypse “is not a real end, but a rupture, a break, a divide that separates two different states” (Blanuša 228). The tearing down of an old state, covered with death and blood, is bluntly displayed before our eyes. As a member of the introspective Cs community, I am proud to see that we did not choose to look away

but tried to build a new, better state out of reminiscences. As I write and rewrite this narrative, things keep changing rapidly. Recently, I have started to hear more discussions about a “post-COVID” era. In places where this word is used, there is a mix of anticipation and concern. Yet I remain positive and hopeful about a “post-COVID” world, because, as Rebecca Solnit pointed out, “When a storm subsides, the air is washed clean of whatever particulate matter has been obscuring the view, and you can often see farther and more sharply than at any other time. When this storm clears, we may, as do people who have survived a serious illness or accident, see where we were and where we should go in a new light” (para. 16).

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