

Navigating the PhD, and Everything Else, in a Pandemic: A Storied Reflection on Precarity, Affect, and Resilience

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As late as March 7, 2020, I was still looking forward to attending the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Convention. The cancellation of other conferences and the growing seriousness of the coronavirus pandemic in the United States, and elsewhere, hinted at a possible cancellation, but I continued to plan for my trip. This was going to be my first CCCC, so I was willing to take some chances. On March 12, 2020, a day after my university migrated online, I received an email about the cancellation of the conference. While I understood the rationale for the decision and anticipated it, I was still unprepared for the disappointment I felt. In 2018, I was supposed to co-present (with Stephen K. Dadugblor) a paper on the rhetoric of Mabel Dove, a pioneer West African feminist on a panel titled “Embodiment, Intercultural Meaning-Making, and Transformation.” Unfortunately, I could not attend the conference due to pecuniary factors.

As an international student, there is always the possibility that I will return to my home country once I complete the PhD, which could affect the frequency with which I attend future conferences. Consequently, besides being excited about presenting my paper, “Chronotopes, Postcolonial Hybridity, and the West/Non-West Divide: Finding Commonplaces in Comparative Rhetorical Scholarship,” I also planned to fully experience the conference since this was my final doctoral year. I believed the Documentarian role would not only make me accountable to my conference goals, it would also help me navigate my conference engagements as a first-time attendee. Post-conference, the role would provide a structure for reflecting on my first CCCC. Obviously, the cancellation of the conference drastically transformed the Documentarian role, and I ended up chronicling my experiences, over the three-day conference period, while stuck at home. I came to

learn over those three days that while the pandemic had disrupted my routine, many of my experiences were familiar and, in fact, highlighted patterns in my doctoral journey regarding my work/life practices and their affective dimensions. The effects of routines, scheduling, mobility and engagements (with people and news, for example) form an “archive of feeling,” to cite Cvetkovich, that reflect my status as an international student trying to be resilient in a moment of crisis.

ON (NOT) MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

I had defended my dissertation and was revising it for final submission by the end of the spring semester. I had also begun my optional practical training (OPT) and working as a consultant for twenty hours per week at the Michigan Tech Multiliteracies Center. I tutored for ten hours. The remaining ten hours were designated for writing center research. With the lock-down in place, coaching sessions were being held online. Because I tutored on Mondays and Tuesdays, I did not expect any engagements with students when I documented my experiences from Wednesday, March 25 to Saturday, March 28. I also provide content support services to my graduate school. This role has tended to be occasional, and because I had not received any assignments in the weeks prior to the documentation, I had no responsibilities for this role during this period. In addition to my work on the dissertation and my responsibilities as a writing center consultant, I was also applying for jobs, fellowships, and internships. But as the excerpt from March 25, 2020 indicates, these were not my only responsibilities. Activities such as filing taxes and cooking dinner—seemingly unrelated to my doctoral responsibilities—were a critical part of my routine.

Prompt: What do you hope to accomplish today?

Response: File my taxes; send feedback to a colleague . . . send a student feedback for a project submitted to the writing center; complete one or two applications; meet with a professor about a project we are collaborating on; do some work on my dissertation; spend one/two hours researching/preparing some content for a project; fill survey for CCCC Documentarian role; cook dinner. (Daily Entry—Morning, Wednesday, March 25, 2020)

Dinner is a crucial ritual in my house that took on new significance during the lockdown when we had minimal physical contact with people outside of our house. Our dinner conversations became centered on

the coronavirus, often comparing statistics and responses from different countries. For international students, paperwork, including that related to taxes, is powerful enough to jeopardize one's status even in a pandemic. Besides managing the effects of COVID-19 changes, international students must also take the necessary steps to maintain their status.

Because there was so much to accomplish, I tended to be ambitious in my scheduling. Graduate students are always working on many projects simultaneously. The pandemic moved academic work online but that did not imply a reduction in responsibilities. Still, there were deadlines to meet. I did not always accomplish my daily plans, which was often a source of frustration. Surprisingly, I tended to measure my success and failures in relation to the amount of work done on my dissertation, which seems to take on a larger role, significantly shaping how I manage other dimensions of my life. Even in a pandemic, the stress of the dissertation becomes that which sucks much of my affective energy. While the dissertation was almost complete, the sheer length of the draft meant that my revision was taking longer than expected. There were also job/fellowship applications, another priority for me as I was at the final stages of my PhD I also had other responsibilities outside of academic work: to family, for instance. I remember feeling overwhelmed and worried the evening of March 25 as I could not shake off the thought that I may not complete my dissertation revisions on time, and yet, I looked forward to the opportunities of a new day.

I am tired. I am worried that I could not work on my dissertation and complete my applications today, but tomorrow, these will be my priorities. I have mixed feelings right now, but I am looking forward to tomorrow. (Daily Entry—Evening, Wednesday, March 25, 2020)

On March 26, when “I spent most of the time working [on my dissertation],” I indicated:

I feel a bit hopeful and confident. I think my work on the dissertation went very fast today, and I am looking forward to doing some more work in the coming days. (Daily Entry—Evening, Thursday, March 26, 2020)

When things went as planned on Saturday, I felt “satisfied with [my] work . . . on the dissertation [and . . . application] (Daily Entry—Evening, Saturday, March 28, 2020).

My days began very early, between 12:00 a.m. and 4:00 a.m., and often it was difficult to tell the days apart as my work flowed into other days. Working long hours meant that I became tired at some point in the day. For instance, because Wednesday started around 2:00 a.m., by 2:00 p.m., after a meeting, I just had to sleep, waking up at 4:00 p.m. to prepare dinner. My work on Thursday moved into Friday. I continued my work from 12:00 a.m. to 7:00 a.m., after which I slept and woke up around 11:30 a.m. to attend the virtual WPA-GO meeting and, later, a meeting for a Wikipedia program I was participating in. That evening, I indicated that “I feel like going back to sleep!” This peculiar scheduling characterized my PhD experience and was by no means limited to my work during the pandemic. As a doctoral student, you learn to work for long hours, sleep late and, depending on the day, wake up to more responsibilities. While the body reprograms itself in response to these transformations, it sometimes resists through feelings of tiredness that serve as embodied responses to the intensity of labor that the body experiences. To clarify these dispositions is to recognize, as Chaput argues, that “affect . . . functions as a fluctuating property that links energetic matter to forms of being-in-the-world” (92). Informed by Gill’s observations on academic labor and its associated “psychic habitus,” I observe that my dispositions were shaped by a notion of a model graduate student who, through hard-work and responsibility, fashions herself as a fitting subject within neoliberal academia (236).

Significantly, of all the days, it was only on Wednesday that I took an improvisational approach to my schedule. This also happens to be the day that I did not get much accomplished, causing me to experience negative pathos. The improvisational approach allowed me to make adjustments depending on my workflow. Besides the flexibility it provided in a week of chaotic activity, improvising gave me a kind of agency that was distinct from intentional planning. This balancing was my way of ensuring that the dissertation did not completely overwhelm me. The intentional scheduling often caused me to work with few breaks, mostly to visit the washroom and get some food/water. In some instances, my break was used to call family and a colleague. Even in the effort to intentionally schedule my plans, there were always distractions from unplanned activities, coronavirus news from home especially, colleagues who needed urgent feedback on write-ups and an unplanned viewing of a documentary (*Pandemic*). While intentional

scheduling served as self-governing instruments, these distractions reinforced the ways in which the messiness of everyday life shapes my daily choices as a graduate student. On Friday, I could not complete an application partly because I was distracted by the news from my home country—Ghana. I later took a walk as it was sunny (the weather tends to be snowy in Houghton) and watched parts of the documentary, *Pandemic*, on Netflix, which was unplanned. With everything going on, I was drawn to watch this documentary, but slept in the process. Because I planned to work late on Friday, I felt guilty when I woke up at 1 a.m. on Saturday.

COMPOSING IN UNUSUAL TIMES

Much of the work I was doing during the period of documentation involved a significant amount of writing and reading, all of which occurred in my bedroom. Working from my bedroom was not necessarily a new development, as I had done so at various stages of my dissertation. Revising the dissertation requires that I consult several sources. Prior to the lockdown, whenever I was not working at the Multiliteracies Center, I divided my working time between the library and my bedroom. With the library closed, my bedroom became a space to access resources in one place. Significantly, there were hardly any changes in my bedroom during the period of documentation as scenic differences tended to be exterior rather than interior to my room. It was also almost always quiet.

I am currently in my bedroom. The light seems dim. I don't know why (maybe it's just my min[d] playing tricks on me after being in the room for some days now), and I am currently sitting on my bed as I write this entry. There is another laptop (solely for the purposes of editing my dissertation) on the desk in the room. Papers and books are scattered on the floor, bed and desk, and the window seems to be slightly open. It seems a bit cloudy for 11:00 a.m. It is really quiet in the house, but there is a whirring noise probably from the heater, and, once in a while, I hear a car pass by. (Daily Entry—Morning, Wednesday, March 25, 2020)

I am still in my bedroom working from my bed. The scene has not changed since I submitted the forms for Friday evening. The only difference is that I have the laptop on my lap right now

rather than on the bed. As always, there is a notebook here, a pen, and another book (now that I think about it, I am not sure why I moved this book to the bed as I don't need it now). I have not touched my desk since I filled in the Friday forms, so there is no change in the arrangement. I am typing on my laptop right now, and I am the only person. It is quiet, as most people are currently sleeping. There is no sound from outside. I can hear the buzzing from my own laptop. I can't smell anything. (Daily Entry—Morning, Saturday, March 28, 2020)

Working in other parts of the house meant moving material around, which was not advisable during the pandemic when there were concerns about the lifespan of viruses on surfaces. While I am used to working for long hours in one setting, the pandemic heightened my sense of confinement, because I no longer had the option of using other venues (like the library) for work. This confinement would sometimes interfere with my cognitive engagement, and in one instance, I indicated its possible impact on my spatial perception.

Completing graduate education is hard, but doing so during a pandemic, characterized by sharp changes and heightened isolation, is even harder and requires resilience, which is already considered as the most critical requirement for success in graduate school (see Cahn 5). What might resilience for a graduate student in such a moment look like? Resilience can be read as “attention to choices made in the face of difficult and even impossible challenges” (Flynn et al. 1), and among other actions, it includes “crafting normalcy” (Buzzanell 3). This was evident in my effort to break the monotony of my working space and “craft normalcy” for my composing process. I created two “workstations”—my desk and my bed—for different sorts of work. The desktop was for writing and reading that required “deep” attention. I always revised the dissertation or completed applications while using this arrangement. This helped me to focus in ways that I could not if I were to be working from the bed setup. I gravitated towards the bed set-up when I was tired of sitting and needed a break from cognitively-stressful work.

I always had books or papers (drafts of my dissertation and other work-in-progress chapters) around (on the floor, desk, or bed) for easy access (Figure 4.1). I often filled the Documentarian form or sent short emails while lying on my bed. For each set-up, I also had a notebook and pen for scribbling ideas before typing them (Figure 4.2).

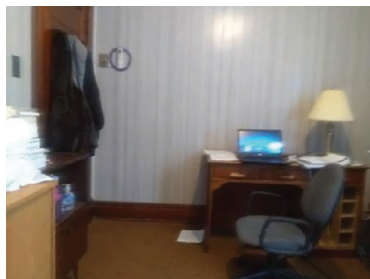


Figure 4.1. Desktop setup.

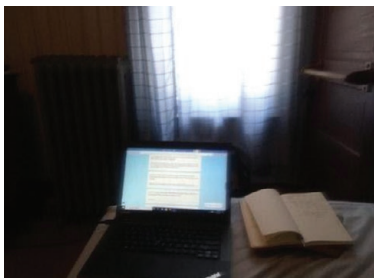


Figure 4.2. Bed setup.

MOBILITY, CONTACT(LESSNESS) AND AFFECT

My affective states during this period were somewhat linked to questions of mobility and contact. Besides Friday, March 27, I spent all the other days at home, working mostly from my bedroom. As Figure 4.3 shows, there was zero mobility outside of my house on March 25 for example.

However, on March 27, I took a 21-minute walk which helped me clear my head when I read news about the growing seriousness of the coronavirus situation in Ghana, my home country. I first went to the closest shop to my house where I have bought my groceries since the pandemic began. From there, I headed towards my university campus, which is right across from my house. I had not been to the campus since we migrated online.

The visual differences suggest an absence of activity and contact (Figure 4.3) as against movement and contact within other spaces (Figure 4.4). While I was physically isolated, I had significant virtual contact with others—for example, colleagues and family. As the images in

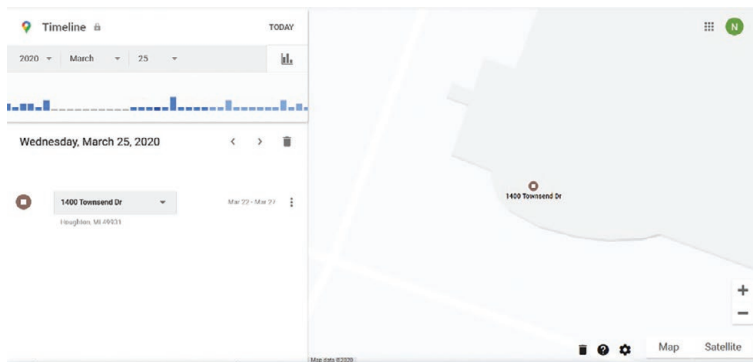


Figure 4.3. Google Maps timeline for March 25 (no mobility outside my house).

Figures 4.5–4.8 show, I hardly met people in my neighborhood or on my way to the shop and the Michigan Tech campus. The main street, which was usually busy at this time of the day, was empty. Most importantly, coronavirus-related signs were visible on campus and at the grocery shop.

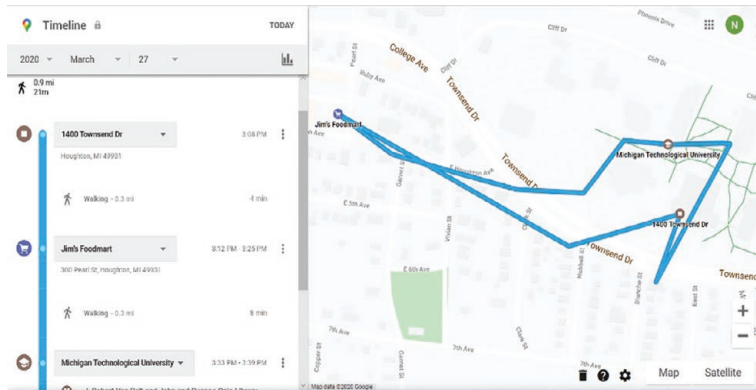


Figure 4.4. Google timeline for March 27 (mobility from my house to grocery shop and the Michigan Tech Campus).

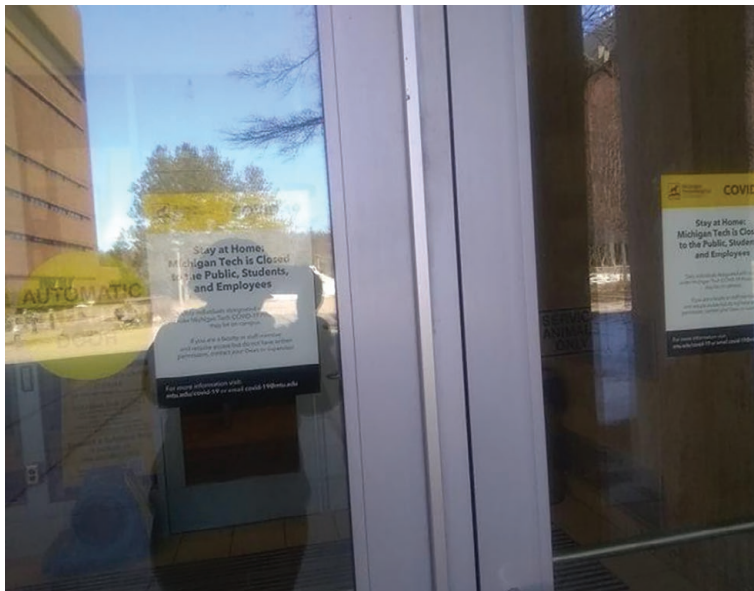


Figure 4.5. “Stay at Home” sign in the window of an exterior door on the Michigan Tech campus.



Figure 4.6. An empty exterior corridor on the Michigan Tech campus.



Figure 4.7. Vacant roadways at the intersection of Townsend and Houghton on the Michigan Tech campus.

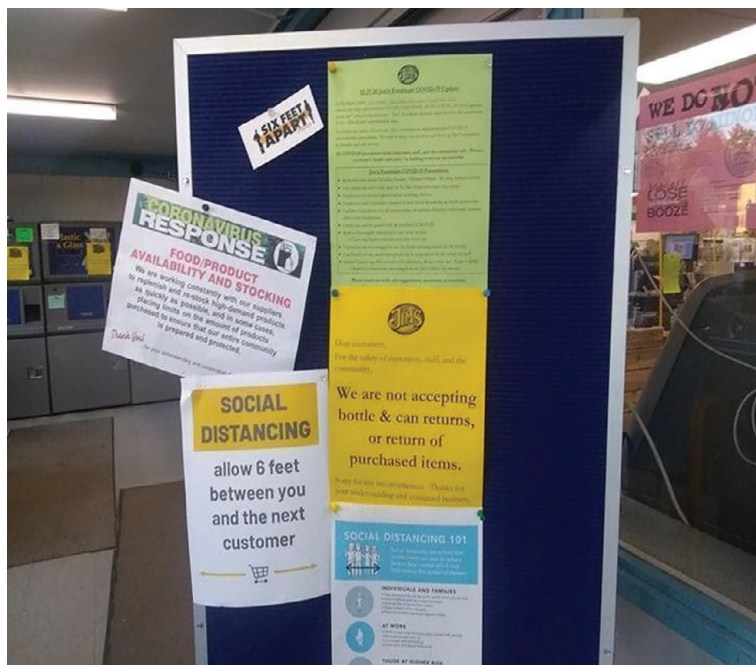


Figure 4.8. Signs regarding COVID-19-specific policies posted at the Foodmart near the Michigan Tech campus.

The images from around campus (Figures 4.5–4.8) highlight a crucial link between my personal isolation (Figure 4.3) and a social isolation engendered by the pandemic. If, as Ahmed argues, emotions “move” and that mobility “connects bodies to other bodies,” then there is something to be said about the absence of socio-physical mobility and its impact on one’s academic energy during a pandemic (11).

LIVING A TRANSNATIONAL LIFE

My CCCC presentation would have argued for how space-time entanglements of the transnational recalibrates our disciplinary commonplaces and complicates comparative rhetorical analysis—a point now supported by the transnational circulation of the coronavirus and its rhetorical manifestations across geopolitical contexts. Patterns in my narrative over the three-day period highlighted how my liminal state as an international student complicated my experiences and impacted my emotive state. When I began the Documentarian role on Wednesday, I was worried about not only the situation in the US, but also

the increasing seriousness of the situation in Ghana where my family, including my husband, mother, siblings and many other members of my extended family reside.

While the pandemic is experienced on a global scale, its impacts are concretely experienced at local levels, and for those living at “borderlands” (Anzaldúa), such as international students, the sense of the local is itself complicated, for it includes not only the places we are physically located, however unwelcoming it might feel sometimes, but also our connections with the locations of those with whom we feel at home. If I was anxious about the coronavirus in Ghana, it was also because I missed the death and funeral of two relatives during my doctoral studies: my grandmother in 2016, and my father, last year. I have had to continue with my doctoral work as usual, even in these difficult times, by compartmentalizing—with my “unburied dead,” to cite Busia, “follow[ing] behind through bedroom doors” (25). This affective residue flows into the new “psychic habitus,” to borrow Gill’s (236) term, engendered by the pandemic, heightening my sense of worry for my family in these moments and sometimes leading to distractions from work, which, in turn, increase my anxieties about not being able to complete revisions for my dissertation especially.

I was unable to file the dissertation in the spring, but an extension from the Michigan Tech Graduate School enabled me to complete my submission in early summer at no extra cost. I am still working as a content specialist in the meantime and searching for academic positions both in Ghana and the United States. I have received some rejections, but no response from others. I have also had interviews for some positions both in Ghana and the US, but I have not yet received any offers. I am currently in a state of uncertainty and waiting. As someone who is no longer a student, I do not have the same institutional support that students are able to receive, such as the recent effort to get the United States government to rescind its decision concerning international students. It is unclear how the economic impact of the pandemic affects the employment of international scholars. I had planned to return home depending on what happens in the first half of my OPT year, but a decision to go home is not an easy one. First, there are health issues to consider, and second, it has become even more expensive to return home. A mandatory fourteen-day quarantine for people entering Ghana implies that I would spend twice as much to return home. Not only am I unable to make future plans, I have also become practically immobile.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Besides serving as an archive of my experiences, this documentation has provided a means to have honest conversation with myself about my experiences as a doctoral candidate completing a dissertation in these challenging times. It has allowed me to actually think, clarify, and ultimately articulate the range of emotions I was experiencing in these moments and their links with my constantly shifting affective states during the dissertating stage. While some of the emotions I am experiencing are not new, they have been aggravated by the pandemic and the precariousness of being an international student during a global crisis. Though I have completed my doctoral degree and do not have a permanent job, my routines have hardly changed. I am still doing more writing and reading—some of which are related to my part-time job as a content specialist, others are related to work-in-progress papers and job applications. I also have new responsibilities, like serving as a reviewer for an academic journal. I am not sure about the future, but I remain focused in spite of the uncertainties of my current situation. I draw much inspiration from Cavafy's poem "Ithaka," which literally motivated me through my doctorate. At some point, I even had it printed and pasted on my office wall to remind me that, though the PhD journey would be "full of adventures, full of knowledge," it would be a "long" road (Cavafy 37). As I look into the future, I know there will always be obstacles on this academic journey, but I continue to learn to not "carry them along within [my] soul," (37) but to be ready to pivot and be resilient in the face of unexpected changes.

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