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# What Am I Doing Here? When Conference Acceptance Doesn't Mean Conference Inclusion

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**W**e've likely all spent time in places that have led us to ask ourselves, "What am I doing here?" Every now and then, there are those uncomfortable situations in which we must admit to ourselves that not only did we choose to be in this place, but we also worked hard to get there, and where conferences are concerned, we have watched attentively for acceptance of our proposed presentation. Although my hopes have been high when receiving the good news that I will be part of a conference program, I have often found myself asking the same three questions during my travels home from the conference: First, I ask if I am imagining feelings of being excluded or whether my feelings come because of imposter syndrome (Edwards), from which many students and junior faculty members suffer. Second, I ask whether I truly want or need to attend conferences that are not welcoming. Last, once I have reminded myself that conferences are part of the career I have chosen, I ask what specifically is bothering me and what I can do to help bring about changes at conferences for myself and others.

When questioning what I feel needs to be changed, I consistently come up with lists that fall under four categories that include my worry versus reality, concerns regarding care for myself and others, public and private exclusion at the hands of conference organizers and attendees, and issues regarding access. From worrying with and without reason, to feelings that care is lacking, I count negative conference experiences among the many adversities in academia faced unnecessarily by BIPOC scholars. With interest and labor, many of the difficulties faced can be remedied. Having spent a lifetime short on power, working with the resources I have on hand to make a difference comes as a second nature. I am also accustomed to seeking alliances that will lead to mutually beneficial relationships, where resources can be shared and exchanged. These behaviors are resilient responses that are feminist in that they are social, community driven in line with the concept of feminist rhetorical resilience (Flynn, Sotirin, and Brady). This concept is one that attracts me for many reasons, and I am not

## **Abstract**

This chapter recounts negative experiences at academic conferences by one junior faculty member at a Southern California university. Discussion topics include her worries about the realities of conference attendance; care or lack thereof; public and private exclusion; and issues surrounding accessibility. In each section, the author offers recommendations for changes made by conference organizers and attendees toward making conference attendance more welcoming. Citing feminist rhetorical resilience (Flynn, Sotirin, and Brady) as a response to the adversity experienced by many attending academic conferences, the author also sees aspects of feminist resilience as reasons she is attracted to conferences and believes they are important to her growth as a feminist scholar and to the growth of other scholars. While this chapter makes recommendations for academic conference organizers and attendees, it also serves a broader audience who can also benefit from considerations of ways BIPOC are excluded in public and private spaces, as well as ways those in attendance, or organizing large gatherings can be more considerate of issues surrounding access.

## **Keywords**

exclusion, inclusion, feminist, resilience, academic, conference, change, compensation

surprised I respond by wanting to retreat, ask important questions, and then replan my return, as many do in adverse situations.

What I find most compelling about feminist resilience as a research focus and as a response to adversity is its emphasis on “agency, change, and hope” (Flynn, Sotirin, and Brady 1), in which I see possibility where other responses might not yield a positive result at some point. Feminist resilience is also “communal, relational, and social” (5), which is further reassuring, as it is a reminder that the work of change, and the expectations born of hope, do not fall on the individual to be realized but on support systems and spheres of influence. Aspects of feminist rhetorical resilience, such as hope, community, relationality, and sociality, are those I have sought in conferences as gathering spaces from which I could draw from the resources provided by my academic community to expand on my efforts to grow as an academic. Ironically, I enact resilience in response to the adversity brought about by conference attendance. I believe enactments of feminist resilience support the potential that, with contributions from the conference-going community, the spaces where our fields gather can become more inclusive, caring, and productive, spaces where the resources distributed and received by many outweigh those shared by only some when exclusion is at work.

Some of the expectations upon which I have built my confidence and visions for conference attendance have to do with recognition that I am a fortunate heiress to the work done by Latinx scholars before me to forge a path so a Chicana like myself won't have to struggle through metaphorical fallen branches and expectations of tripping on exposed roots. There is a long history, such as is documented in *Viva Nuestro Caucus: Rewriting the Forgotten Pages of Our Caucus* (García, Ruiz, Hernández, and Carvajal Regidor), of the Chicano Teacher of English (CTE) and development of what is today the Latinx Caucus under the umbrella of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC). Romeo García and Anita Hernández, in their chapter in *Viva Nuestro Caucus*, note that the founders of the CTE, Carlota Cárdenas de Dwyer, Felipe de Ortego y Gasca, and Roseann Dueñas González, have called “attention to Latinx issues, advocate[d] for curricular and pedagogical support for Chicanx and all Latinx students and create[d] an agenda with which Latinx educators could engage in social activism and advocacy within the spheres of classrooms as well as in organizations such as NCTE/CCCC” (2). While my negative conference experiences are not specifically focused on CCCC or NCTE, one should understand why the work of trail-blazing members of the Latinx Caucus, such as Víctor Villanueva, and the voices of activist scholars, such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga, would have led me to believe the thorns along the academic path paved for Latinx and Chicanx scholars had long since been cleared—if not entirely, at least to the extent that we can celebrate some progress has been made. I maintain hope, as I see changes taking place as the result of conference stories shared at the 2021 Watson Conference and in other conversations

aimed at revision of conference organization since COVID-19 required that we take new approaches to attendance. The past few years have revealed numerous positive changes from CCCC conference organizers, but there is still so much work to be done. Among my wishes for change are that many of my worries can be quelled for future conference attendees, and that the reality fits the productive and positive anticipation that should come before we share our ideas, work, and questions with our academic peers.

## WORRIES VERSUS REALITIES

Numerous situations I've anticipated and worries I've manufactured when writing a proposal to present at a conference come from my imagination, and then there are the realities. Among the realities have been concerns about debt because of conference expenses, jitters because of the fear of saying the wrong thing that might lead to not fitting in, fear of alienating myself from groups, or fear of being misunderstood as the result of nervous chatter. There is also the concern that the vulnerability of standing at the podium, particularly as a student, serves as an unwritten invitation for more senior faculty to use time set aside to ask questions to show their competence as a scholar instead of as a time to help a presenter think about their work more critically. I have been fortunate to have only experienced boastful posturing by a senior scholar once, when I was a graduate student but unfortunately watched presenters come under the fire of comments veiled as questions more recently, and it's hurtful to all who witness this, not to mention what the presenter experiences.

Admittedly, some of my worries have been for naught, and this is not necessarily a good thing. The reality is that my peers and I have most often presented to empty rooms. I could almost always count on presenting to my advisor if she was at the same conference, and I could usually count on my peers from my home university to show up to presentations, although we had already heard each other's presentations more than once. It seems, however, that more people than not had traveled an awfully long way to have an experience similar to mine. In such a case, I wouldn't have to say something wrong in my presentation to feel exclusion and alienation because I was not heard by many. But it is very easy still to feel unwelcomed in other ways, such as when a person of color like myself is perceived as being hotel staff rather than an attendee.

## CARE

In the way of care, and to quell the worries of unnecessary vulnerability at the podium, I propose mandatory training for panel moderators, who will likely end up doing the work of facilitator in efforts to protect presenters from aggressions and microaggressions disguised as questions. If questions are presented on index cards, the moderator can sift through questions formed as statements,

and presenters could choose to bypass uncomfortable questions. A prepared moderator has the power to shift a conversation when the presenter is unable. Another way of assuring constructive and nondamaging post-presentation conversations is to require conference attendees to make commitments in advance, as was done with the 2021 Watson Conference, noting the penalty of not being allowed to return to a conference in response to violations. The wrong people are being made to feel they should not attend or return to share their research.

I believe it is also up to senior scholars to show care and interest in graduate students and junior faculty as they make their way into conference spaces. After five years of attending an average of four conferences per year, I at last felt welcomed when Stephanie Kerschbaum pulled me aside in a hotel meeting spot to meet some of her colleagues. I felt like someone had asked me to eat lunch at the table with the cool kids, and that for the first time in many years, I had made connections in my field with others whom I could email and ask for advice. This shouldn't have taken five years and attendance at nearly twenty conferences, from undergraduate studies to my doctoral program, to take place. This act of consideration and friendliness is free and only takes one moment but could lead to further conversations integral to evolving research.

## ON EXCLUSION

Whether it was through the work done at the Watson Conference in 2021, or through conversations with faculty members across the country, I have learned I am not alone in feeling alienated at conferences, and the alienation happens in several ways, in public and in private. I won't posit whether one is more damaging than the other but am reassured in the realization that the behaviors occurring in both types of exclusion can be remedied through consideration for others and through changes in conference policies and what can become normalized practices centered on care.

### *Public Exclusion*

The public exclusion I mention in this section happens where other people can see it taking place but do not speak up. An example of this is when comments are made on social media when a scholar of color has celebrated being accepted to a conference and that scholar finds others requesting that they stop posting and celebrating publicly in consideration for those who are not accepted. An invitation to attend a conference is a big deal and is usually the result of many months of research, interest, and thought. Thus, celebrating at home and sharing on social media is the way I best connect with not only family and friends but also with people in my field whom I would not otherwise get to know and be inspired by. I do see the potential for kindness in the gesture of asking people to not celebrate their wins in academia because others have been disappointed. I know firsthand that not getting accepted to a desired conference smarts, and I have many emails containing

such disappointing news. However, asking that those who have been accepted stop sharing good news is an act of pushing a person outside their community of practice while denying them social support and encouragement.

It is important to me to also relay that my desire to bring attention to this situation is less about ego and more about bringing about awareness, as comments shaming celebration and requesting the ceasing of sharing are often made by those who are tenured and whose well-acknowledged names are seen in the program of said conference and who are recognized as past and present organizers. When these same people's books and articles are given awards, or they are published in high-profile journals, it's acceptable to read about it on social media when others respond with sentiments of congratulations. Behaviors such as critiquing the celebration of a BIPOC scholar while continuing to be celebrated yourself is an example of public exclusion under the guise of encouraging kindness, care, and the protection for others' feelings. Criticizing the celebration of award recipients for the sake of preserving others' feelings is like the act of disciplining language that BIPOC already experience in classrooms, committees, and article and chapter reviews under the umbrella of "We will tell you when and how to behave." This public exclusion is like winning the race but not being allowed to accept the trophy.

Another form of public exclusion takes place when presenters are scheduled in a conference program to present at the same time as more popular or well-known scholars and thus know even before traveling that they will present to a room filled with many empty chairs. I acknowledge that conference organizing requires extensive labor, and for this reason I have committed to taking on more of the labor that goes on behind the scenes at conferences. I ask that organizers pay mind to scheduling, to creating these blocks with sensitivity to who is being scheduled and at what time. I frankly don't even want to be at my own presentation when well-known scholars are presenting. Scheduling undergraduate and graduate student presentations at the same time as established and consistently cited scholars is the conference equivalent of receiving the *Seinfeld* sitcom's "un-vitation"—a way of telling someone they were invited but not necessarily wanted. Seeing one's name on the conference program schedule at the same time as a scholar who holds near-celebrity status speaks volumes to a conference participant up front. A panel scheduled during a time block that competes with a popular presentation knows they will not have attendees and that they will also miss out on the spotlight presentation held at the same time as their own.

The above are only two examples of exclusion that can cause a junior scholar to feel ashamed, embarrassed, and outside their field. Experiences of exclusion do harm and we are less likely to hear about the acts of exclusion that take place in private in the same ways that microaggressions and unconscious bias are oftentimes managed by the BIPOC without the notice of others. BIPOC scholars experiencing exclusion are also at risk of feeling

that they are either unqualified or, worse, unwelcome to participate in their field of study. Without significant changes, we will continue to see the dismal numbers we already see of BIPOC in academia.

### *Private Exclusion*

Private exclusion is damaging and difficult to track, because it is less likely to be seen unless it is pointed out by those it has affected. If stories of private exclusion are not shared, change is less likely to be seen. In many years past, I have witnessed and felt the private exclusion that begins with the Call for Proposals (CFP). In the past two years, however, I want to note that there has been a change in the language used in CFPs so they are more accessible, and the proposal review process is more transparent. These more accessibly written CFPs have fallen in line with shifts in composition and rhetorical studies toward a more just and democratic pedagogy that is changing the landscape of what we do as teachers of writing—and why we do it. A CFP should not require that students schedule meetings with advisors and faculty members to crack the language code of what is being asked for in an extended proposal. All CFPs should have accessible language that can be understood, not lead to feelings of intimidation, and should welcome contributions by scholars at all levels through language and supportive resources. A good example is the CCCC 2022 CFP written by Staci Perryman-Clark that invited all levels of experience and knowledge. I look forward to seeing more of this not only for myself but also for students I want to encourage to apply for conferences and learn to network in academic settings.

Another place in which private exclusion occurs is in the organization of the conference website, particularly with attention to listings for hotel accommodations near conference sites. Many conference attendees come from universities that, like my alma mater, offer little to no financial support for travel. Many believe debt and financial stress are to be expected of higher education and accept financial strain as a part of attaining a degree. Only listing the most expensive hotels is a form of gatekeeping that expresses to attendees that if they cannot afford to attend the conference, they do not belong.

Writing from experience, when a student who is new to attending conferences visits websites, they make determinations as to whether they should apply based on the information present. They wonder whether they will fit in based on such things as clothing, luggage, and technological possessions. Initial alienation takes place based on the city in which the conference is held, and once a determination is made that it is a city that offers potential safety from racial incidents, the next decisions made are based on hotel accommodations. Thus, I propose that the listings for accommodations close to conference locations should include a range of hotels and links to a wiki or forum where attendees can contact others for assistance with ride and room sharing, for instance. I understand that wikis exist in many conference websites but are oftentimes shared across very limited groups. This information

should be accessible and part of the website and made available to all attendees. I imagine there are many conference attendees who want to connect with others regarding sharing expenses and questions about access before picking up their badges.

### ACCESS

With access in mind, I have become and will continue to be a proponent for working toward possibilities for online attendance in addition to physical presence at conferences in a way I have neglected in the past. It took a worldwide pandemic to prove there are many creative ways to attend a conference. When I think of access, my mind turns to “Enacting a Culture of Access in Our Conference Spaces” by Ada Hubrig, Ruth Osorio, Neil Simpkins, Leslie R. Anglesey, and Ellen Cecil-Lemkin that reminds readers, “Access is more than the ability to physically enter a space in a wheelchair” (90). I am saying inclusion and access to a conference is more than having your proposal accepted or making sure boxes have been checked on a list for accessibility. I agree with all my heart that “access is love” (89) and is about making things possible, with care for the people around us. And if access is love, I would say genuine inclusion, the kind that makes someone want to return because they felt welcome, is tenderness. It is the tenderness that is given in return when someone shares their hard work with you, and kindness in the form of a hospitality that says that others value the work you’ve put into your research and that they want to hear about it and respond to your invitation to help you improve on what’s been done.

So many of the requirements of access and inclusion fall into spatial awareness, reading a room, and informing others that you are available to listen and help make someone else’s experience better because some of the accommodations needed cannot be anticipated. I applaud all steps taken to encourage accessible conference presentations and conference spaces. I am a person with a chronic autoimmune disease, and knowing that there are quiet places set up where I can retreat to rest makes a world of difference. I look forward, when financially feasible, to a time when conference organizers will also consider remote conference attendance, as our differently abled bodies do not always give notice they will not be travel friendly, and it is difficult to gamble with the expense of travel in cases when we cannot be sure we will be able to make a trip. I encourage all conference attendees to be cognizant of the people in the spaces around them who could be made more comfortable with a seat next to the door when they are anxious, or at a table closer to the presenter and screen in larger rooms. These actions are cost free and can make all the difference. Returning to feminist resilience, I want to acknowledge that change does not only come because of grand gestures taken to make a difference but also because of small gestures that, when taken together, are enduring and can oftentimes ripple outward when enacted in one space, and then another, and so on.

## COMPENSATION

And last, while acknowledging the labor and money necessary to make changes, I propose compensation and recognition for scholars who do the work to train session facilitators, organize conferences in welcoming locations, and write the statements we must sign as a promise to behave as thoughtful and considerate humans. These could potentially come by way of

- registration fees waived for attendance or paid by sponsors;
- book stipends created in partnership with publishing companies;
- marked discounts on hotel accommodations;
- flight stipends;
- course releases for faculty members committed to large conferences that do not have money to pay organizing contributors.

I additionally propose that the money needed to assist students and contingent or part-time faculty with attendance could also come from private and corporate sponsors, as well as from the universities who oftentimes host events. This type of support is given at present but has been limited.

Making participants feel welcome to come together as an academic community is well worth the labor and costs incurred toward making changes. So many of the issues I've encountered at unwelcoming conferences can be changed for free, such as attention to schedules, introducing new scholars to others, and making sure others around you are comfortable. We should want to apply to a conference each time it is available, and likely would if we no longer had to ask ourselves why we chose to attend. Putting the ethics of care at the center of conference organization and attendance encourages connections through relationality and sociality, thus facilitating enactments of feminist resilience. Communities with values such as hope, care, and connection are those in which I look forward to investing time, money, and labor.

## CONCLUSION

As I ask myself one more time why I want to share my experiences and visions for changes in conferences, I once again am certain that attendance is about engagement with a community of like-minded individuals who contribute to the pedagogy I rely on to bring about change for my students through gained and renewed knowledge. I have imagined leaving conferences with contact information, with names of people I could eventually call friend or whom I could call upon to share ideas and imagine projects. I have believed these connections could assist me in my endeavors to bring about change in my field and for my students when necessary, particularly when they face adversity in the writing classroom. Others, depending on the time frame in which a conference falls, could be looking to network prior to going on the job market, to

create an important contribution to a CV when promotion, retention, and tenure are in sight, or to get to know administrators and faculty at universities at which they might want to apply during the dissertation process.

As a feminist scholar committed to creating community, conference attendance makes sense to me because it provides me an opportunity to contribute to the communities from which I will benefit in what I perceive as an exchange of resources. Each time I respond to a CFP, I imagine meeting, listening to, and having a chance to ask questions of the people whose names fill my papers. Along with this image is the opportunity to present my ideas and research while asking that others with more experience or unique insight make recommendations, give examples, and present questions that guide my research. These are romantic visions, but not so far-fetched. While I am willing to sacrifice some of these visions, I am not willing to add conference attendance to a list of adversities I already face as an academic of color.

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