



**Title:** What We Did the Year Everything Blew Up: An Introduction to Our Third Issue

**Author:** Alexandra Hidalgo

**Issue:** 3

**Publication Date:** December 2020

**Stable URL:**

<http://constell8cr.com/issue-3/what-we-did-the-year-everything-blew-up-an-introduction-to-our-third-issue/>

# What We Did the Year Everything Blew Up: An Introduction to Our Third Issue

**Alexandra Hidalgo, editor-in-chief**

It's hard to remember the exact moment #COVID19 stopped being an abstract threat we in the US were trying to grasp and instead became a reality. Like a sailboat approaching the shore from afar, it moved imperceptibly towards us as we watched in a hypnotic trance with our feet planted in the sand. Then, suddenly, there it was. The Conference on College Composition and Communication was cancelled, classes moved online, college dorms and cafeterias emptied out until they resembled the post-apocalyptic scenes we've watched on big and small screens for decades.

When the sailboat was close enough to touch if we walked knee-deep in the water but before it pierced the sand with its heft, my husband Nate and I decided to take our young sons on one last adventure. We wanted them to have a giddy, freewheeling afternoon to carry with them before venturing into the unknown together. And so on March 1, we drove an hour from East Lansing to the Ann Arbor Hands-On Museum and watched William and Santiago stick their hands in the same water where countless other hands had been that day, and then, like who knows how many others, press the buttons on a 1930s cash register at the Museum's painstakingly reproduced Depression-era general store. We capped our visit by dancing in front of a wall that magically turned our silhouettes into pulsating colors that left ethereal trails behind as we moved. After an aimless stroll around Ann Arbor, we stopped at a pub and had dinner. I can't remember what we ate but I enjoyed watching the golden light through the pub's generous windows as it descended on passersby walking toward their evening plans.

On the drive home, I thought we'd given the boys and ourselves a day of family delight to turn back to during the pandemic's stay. Of course the afterglow wore off long before we even understood just how disorienting—to use the mildest word I can summon—the pandemic would be. Remembering and longing for the return of days like the one we spent in Ann Arbor has been helpful, but the work of making it through these nine months of uncertainty and heartache has been a lot more complex than that. As we indefinitely work, study, play, despair, and dream together inside the same home, Nate, our children, and I rely on one of the key

tenets of cultural rhetorics—relations—to make it through. Our days, those strange pandemic days that bleed into one another, are crowded with moments of quiet exasperation and minor wonder. I am typing this as my boys bounce between laughing and squabbling in the living room I use as my office, jumping around my precious filming equipment. I decide not to kick them out, just like they decide not to mention the fact I'm playing the full soundtrack to Zoey's Extraordinary Playlist for the third time today. On good days like today we are patient with each other. On bad days the soft tissue of our love swells up until something rips. The lesion lingers, waiting for the good days so it can heal—one cell at a time.



William charging us for goods at the general store.

Not being able to step away from our closest relations both sustains and wounds those of us experiencing more uninterrupted contact with our loved ones than we're used to. Missing our closest relations both sustains and wounds those of us who, living alone, have had to interrupt the contact they enjoyed on a regular basis. Too much, not enough, too crowded, not crowded enough. No matter where we stand, our ability and inability to make it through this mess is mingled with how we embrace (physically, mentally, emotionally, digitally) our relations. As we have worked to prepare our third issue for you, we at constellations have tried to imagine what you, our audience—one of our dearest relations—want and need as you find your way through the pandemic and all the systemic injustices this crisis has highlighted and intensified around the globe.



Santiago mesmerized by nano technology.

We took our time getting this issue together for you. At our biweekly editorial team Zoom meetings, we often talk about the possibility of publishing two issues a year. Cultural rhetorics is so rich and vast a field that it should not be hard to do. And yet our attempt to have the lives of our authors, mentors, reviewers, editors, copyeditors, and social media strategists take center stage means our process can be slow, even in a non-pandemic year. In a year like 2020, we waited for ourselves and for others to find the time, focus, generosity, sense of purpose—you name it—to do what we each needed to do in order to bring this issue to you. No doubt at our next editorial meeting we will again strategize and dream about being a journal that publishes two issues a year, and we will get there someday. For now, I'm glad we are a journal that is patient with the countless complications life throws our way as we try to manage the intricate task of writing, editing, publishing, and promoting scholarship.

In spite of our slow process for peer-reviewed articles, we felt a sense of urgency this year to publish content that responded to the tragedies erupting around us as they were unfolding. As I was trying to find an answer to that particular conundrum during one of my daily walks in the woods, I thought back to an invitation I received in 2018 to join a roundtable conversation that Cléo: a journal of film and feminism hosted. The editors brought together three filmmakers and one actor for a digital

roundtable where we discussed the ways in which French filmmaker Agnès Varda has influenced our craft. We found an hour when we could all meet through a Google doc and our moderator pasted questions one at a time, which we answered together. We were encouraged to dialogue with each other and that was the most enjoyable aspect of the experience for me. Cléo then gave us a few days to edit our answers before publishing the roundtable. As I thought back to that experience, it felt like the solution to the problem we at constellations were trying to solve. Not only were roundtable participants able to engage with others who shared similar interests in a profound dialogue about something we all cared and knew a lot about, but the experience only took a few hours of our time.



My disembodied head tripled in a mirror box.

As they always do when I think deeply during one of my walks, the woods had come through with a flash of inspiration for me. When I pitched the idea at our next editorial meeting, everyone was excited by the possibilities it opened for us. Through this approach, we could publish content quickly, and we could provide authors with a forum to share ideas without asking for a long commitment on their part. We decided to title the series “Conversations in Cultural Rhetorics” and have published three of them this year, first discussing the experiences of Black academics, and then how graduate students and faculty respectively are finding ways to cope with the pandemic. These dialogues provide an in-depth account of how the authors are managing particular situations while we are still going through

them, capturing an immediacy that is very hard to achieve with peer-reviewed scholarship. Since we publish our pieces on a rolling basis, this series allowed us to be one of the first journals in our field to respond to situations like this summer's murders of unarmed Black citizens by the police and to how the pandemic affects our lives.

As we celebrated the success of our first conversation at our editorial meeting, we worried about the fact that by default the conversations have to be exclusionary. In order for the format to work, we can only invite a small number of people to participate. Otherwise the conversation becomes overly long and chaotic. However, we want to make room for as many people as possible to express their views on these vital topics, so we decided to host accompanying Twitter chats around the #CRChat hashtag, open to anyone interested in discussing the topic with us and with each other at an appointed time. Our two Twitter chats so far have been lively spaces for faculty and students to come together and find meaning and connection as we process the ways in which this year seems to have changed all of us. If you have an idea for a topic you would like us to feature in future conversations and Twitter chats, please email us or Tweet at us and we'll do our best to make it happen.

As you can see if you have read our journal in the past, we redesigned our website for this issue. For the last six months, I had the immense pleasure of working with Emily Lin, an undergraduate Experience Architecture student at Michigan State University, in order to come up with a version of our website that is accessible, visually engaging, and innovative in making visitors' experiences more interactive. The resulting website is an example of the vast possibilities of working with undergraduate students to build academic digital spaces, and it reminds us that regardless of ageism, sexism, and racism, young women of color code spectacular websites and bring transcendent creativity and ideas to the table. We hope you enjoy this new, much labored-over version of our journal.

Before I tell you about the vigorous articles and conversations in this issue, I wanted to introduce you to the compassionate and brilliant team that made it all possible. The managing editors working on these pieces, from submission to publication, are Sonia Arellano, Phil Bratta, Lauren Brentnell, Candace Epps-Robertson, Jo Hsu, Catheryn Jennings, Daisy Levy, Ana Milena Ribero, and Kim Wieser. Back in June, as we were working on our #BlackLivesMatter conversation, we decided that, like the rest of the US, we needed to reckon as a journal with ways in which we could further commit to publishing and nurturing Black talent. In my

introduction to our inaugural conversation piece, I promised to hire two new Black managing editors because we strongly believe that having diverse editors is a vital step toward inviting diverse submissions and being able to identify their value and potential once they reach us. We couldn't be more excited to announce that Alexis McGee joined our editorial staff in October and that as I was literally typing this introduction Brandon Erby has also come on board. We are immensely grateful to them for joining us.

If you have noticed our energized social media presence in the last few months, you have been enjoying the work of Mitch Carr, our ingenious social media strategist, who has revitalized our presence and who started our Instagram account this fall. Our assistant editor Tina Puntasecca and our copyeditors Naomi Johnson and Jennifer Bell have also worked tirelessly to keep the journal healthy and thriving. Lastly, as we struggle with funding shortages due to the pandemic's repercussions, I want to thank Kate Birdsall, director of The Cube—the publishing nexus that finances the salaries of our assistant editor, social media manager, and copy editors—for steadfastly fighting for our mission and the value of what we do whenever our funding is threatened. Now that you know about the effort and love that went into bringing this compilation of thoughts and ideas to you, I want to tell you about the articles and conversations you will find in our third issue.

In our opening piece, “Never Forget: Ground Zero, Park51, and Constitutive Rhetoric” Tamara Issak examines the racist responses that led to shutting down plans for building Park51, an open-to-the-public community center in a former department store near Ground Zero that would have included a Muslim prayer space and performing arts and fitness centers. As Issak shows, the strident opposition to Park51 is a reminder that American identity makes no room for Muslim Americans to feel at home in the country that birthed and raised them. She weaves her argument through emotive examples like Khalid Latif, the New York Police Department Muslim Chaplain who was questioned for being on Ground Zero in spite of wearing his police badge, and EMT first-responder Mohammad Salman Hamdani, whom the press turned into an on-the-run terrorist suspect until his body was found among the rubble. As Issak shows, it isn't only the press and the public who exclude Muslim Americans, even President Obama created an “us versus them” dichotomy between Muslims and the rest of the country in his speech supporting Park51. As we heal from this year's tragic events, it is vital to remember, as Issak so eloquently argues, that excluding members of our society from mourning and participating in rebuilding efforts can be fatal to any attempt at creating a more hopeful and compassionate tomorrow.

Danny Rodriguez's "Countering Racial Enthymemes: What We Can Learn About Race from Donald J. Trump," makes a nimbly argued and impassioned call-to-action for scholars to provide their own definition of race when writing about race and racism. He begins by breaking down the enthymemes in Trump's statements against Black and Latinx populations in the US, showing how behind Trump's overtly racist words there are perhaps even more troubling assumptions about who is and who isn't considered American and what characteristics Americans are supposed to embody. As Rodriguez shows, however, even well intentioned scholars in our field aiming to question racism can end up leaving the audience to make problematic assumptions through enthymemes in their own writing. As a way to combat that rabbit hole, he suggests we follow in the footsteps of scholars like Aja Y. Martinez and Joanna Brooks, who define race as they engage with it in their work. Being a man of color whose positionality is key to his understanding of the world, Rodriguez reminds us that this need to define what we mean by the terms we use goes beyond our research and into the classrooms where we invite students to create a better future by figuring out what they mean by the terms they use and what that tells them about themselves.

Through "Who Is Looking?: De-centering the Distant Spectator in Visual Rhetorics of Violence," Megan Eatman provides a nuanced look at ways in which we can invite students to respond to violence by designing assignments that ask them to create assemblages out of images that engage with conflict and the trauma that emerges from it. Using Kristin and Adam Arola's theory that assemblages, when done ethically, can subvert society's exclusionary hierarchies, Eatman proposes a pedagogy in which students research how violent images are repurposed and circulated and later attempt to create their own assemblages around representations that evoke a traumatic event. As Eatman shows, these images can be used to reframe and expose trauma without engaging with actual violence. She analyzes examples of how artist Rajkamal Kahlon combines drawings from Renaissance and Victorian medical texts with autopsies of those who died under US custody at the outset of the War on Terror. As students similarly find ways to metaphorically work through violence, they question their own role as distant spectators of others' pain, instead engaging with renewed closeness and depth with the situations for which they choose to create assemblages.

In our closing article, "Commemorating Sexism: Suffragist Suppression, Partial Memory, and the Women's Titanic Memorial," Chelsea Bock uses her historical analysis of the DC-based memorial to the world's most famous shipwreck to



examine the monument's enduring sexist legacy. She blends her own experiences visiting the memorial with her meticulous research on the two camps of women who worked toward making the monument possible—one wanting only men's sacrifice to be celebrated and the other wanting to honor the Titanic's women and men. Because the former group won, the memorial celebrates the men who stayed behind as women and children were loaded into the ship's insufficient number of lifeboats, and today it represents a tangible example of "protective paternalism." In this sadly enduring way of thinking, women's value is determined by their relationships to men as mothers and romantic partners whom men look after and nurture. While some versions of sexism undeniably stand out as damaging to women, protective paternalism can be deceptive in seeming to keep us loved and safe. Bock shows, however, that its results are devastating because they stifle women's potential to make contributions outside the domestic sphere. As we currently come to terms with the roles—both positive and negative—of memorials in the US, Bock's piece points a much-needed finger at how sexism has a palpable (even set in stone) presence in our nation's capital.

Our inaugural piece in our "Conversations in Cultural Rhetorics" series, "Academic #BlackLivesMatter: Black Faculty and Graduate Students Tell Their Stories" features Sharieka Botex, Michelle Grue, Alicia Hatcher, Eric House, and Sherita Roundtree. It was an honor for me to moderate this cutting-edge dialogue between Black members of our field this past June as we grappled with the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Rayshard Brooks at the hands of police officers and processed how the pandemic disproportionately affects people of color in the US. Our authors discuss the vital role mentors play in their academic journey into institutions that are not always supportive of the needs and talents of Black students and faculty, and whose assertions that #BlackLivesMatter ring perfunctory when not accompanied by actual changes to their policies and hiring and admissions practices. Interweaving personal storytelling with suggestions for how to perform anti-racist activism and how to support Black colleagues and students regardless of our own race, this conversation is a transformative account of Black academics' experiences and what they bring to our universities and to our society.

Our second conversation, "Recognizing New Styles: How Graduate Students Are Coping with COVID," features D'Arcee Charington, Dylan Colvin, and B López opening the curtain on the ingenuity required to survive as a graduate student in the midst of a global pandemic. Having moderated this conversation, I was awed by the ways in which students figured out how to support themselves and each other as the faculty and institutions around them struggled to stand by their side in this

unprecedented crisis. From converting a school bus into a livable home that now functions as an office from which to teach remotely, to creating regular Zoom communities with fellow students of color to study and to have TV streaming and discussion gatherings, to turning to letter writing with family back home, graduate students are finding creative ways to respond to the challenges they are facing. They are also, as they share in this piece, engaging with their institutions to make sure they understand and respond to their needs as the pandemic continues to upend our lives.



Our bodies transformed into ghostly dancing shapes.

“Care in Times of Crisis: How Faculty Are Managing COVID” is our closing conversation for this issue. Featuring Garrett Bridger Gilmore, Al Harahap, Jamila Kareem, and Helen Sandoval, it was moderated by our managing editors Sonia Arellano and Lauren Brentnell. The authors speak candidly about the challenges faculty around the country are facing as they try to to handle the variegated complications that come with, for some, teaching online and, for others, teaching face-to-face in the middle of a pandemic. Similarly, while some faculty are trying to do their work while taking care of children who are now constantly home, others are struggling with isolation from the family and colleagues they have come to rely on as their companions and support system. Another concern is how to do

research without funding or attending conferences, but the authors do point out a silver lining in conferences finally being available for online attendance to those who for reasons of funding or ability cannot travel to a conference site. As we all slowly find our way toward a life beyond the pandemic, we'll want to notice the small windows of hope it has opened and keep them agape once life regains something resembling normalcy—whatever that looks like.

It has been a complex, beautiful, and instructive journey for all of us at constellations to bring this generative work to you—our audience, our dear relations. We hope you enjoy your walk down these scholarly woods and that they spark a world of new ideas for you. We certainly need our most inventive thoughts to get out of the mess we are in. Together we will find our way again...eventually.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

Alexandra Hidalgo is an award-winning Venezuelan filmmaker, theorist, memoirist, and editor whose documentaries have been official selections for film festivals in 15 countries and have been screened at universities around the United States. Her videos and writing have been featured on The Hollywood Reporter, IndieWire, NPR, The Criterion Collection, and Women and Hollywood. She has a PhD in English from Purdue University and an MFA in Creative Writing from Naropa University and is associate professor of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures and co-director of the Doc Lab at Michigan State University. Her video book *Cámara Retórica: A Feminist Filmmaking Methodology for Rhetoric and Composition* received the 2017 Computers and Composition Distinguished Book Award. Her academic video essays have been published in *Enculturation*, *Kairos*, *Present Tense*, and *Peitho*, among others. She is the co-founder and editor-in-chief of the digital publication *agnès films: supporting women and feminist filmmakers* and of the peer-reviewed journal *constellations: a cultural rhetorics publishing space*.

**PRODUCTION CREDITS:**

Copyeditors: Jennifer Bell, Nathaniel Bowler

Editorial Assistant: Tina Puntasecca