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Storytelling and Relationality: Faculty Experiences During the Texas Winter Storm

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Moderated by Sonia Arellano and Kimberly Wieser

Introduction

Kimberly Wieser: Just as with the last conversations piece for constellations, we thought that we would have a conversation ourselves to follow up on the discussion our participants had and what our relationship to these issues are.

Sonia Arellano: So, I'm from Texas, I think maybe third-generation-ish, being of Mexican-American background. It's a little hard to tell because my parents were both from migrant farm worker families. Some of my grandparents were born in Texas, some in Mexico, crossing back and forth. But I was born in San Antonio and raised in Austin. I had a very interesting Texas experience growing up in the "liberal city" in a conservative state. I've stayed very close to my family back home. My parents still live there. My four brothers still live there. I am from a tight, large family, and during the winter storm I was very worried about my family and concerned about everything else happening. Thankfully, they were all okay. But this was definitely news that I was checking on every single day, so it was an important topic to me.

Kimberly Wieser: I felt very much the same. On my father's side, I'm a sixth generation Texan, with my dad's family migrating from the South to what's now Southeastern Oklahoma, then down the river in 1820, and eventually ending with Austin's colony. My mom's family came later during the fifties and sixties, going back and forth a bit from Mississippi with the men doing construction work and eventually just staying. I was born in Baytown. My mom still lives right across the street from Exxon, with fumes pouring out of the flare stacks and raining down on the pecan and pomegranate trees in the garden. One grandpa worked for Exxon, so, you know, I literally *lived off that stuff* for my first six years. I spent most of the

rest of my years growing up in Rosebud, a little town south of Waco. But, yeah, so I had a lot of concern about family. I've got my dad and my step-mom in Central Texas with rolling power and long outages for days and some burst pipes, despite their precautions. And then my step-mom, despite the fact that she's a retired nurse and they boiled water, picked up a rare bacterium and a virus during that time period that they are pretty certain that came from water. My son, daughter-in-law, and grandkids are also down there. So, it was a scary thing. We had the same weather here in Oklahoma, but the infrastructure didn't fall apart. And while some people did lose power, I think ours was only off for an hour on a rolling blackout once. Very different circumstances from my folks who are not really that far south of us.

Snow accumulation on a window in Ashanka's home.

Sonia Arellano: It's interesting to think about migration stories and how your family background is always there wherever we live. So, thinking about the things that the authors mentioned in this conversation, one of the overarching things that stuck out to me was the discussion of students' worries, and our role as faculty

members as we think about “continuing,” for lack of a better term. Someone mentioned how academia is continuing with “business as usual,” which really stuck with me. The authors in this conversation acknowledged that life is not currently business as usual, and they were very empathetic, thinking about their students and their struggles, empathizing with their students. Jo Hsu mentioned the correlation between access, socioeconomic status, and students being okay during this tragedy and that some students were not okay because they lacked those privileges. Christina Cedillo mentioned thinking the *best* of our students, not thinking the worst of them—being generous with time and deadlines. I just appreciate that our colleagues discussed that, and I think it's something that we should think about, not just because there's a global pandemic. Not just because there was a winter storm, but because people are struggling in their daily lives, all the time, year-round, and natural disasters also happen all across the country. In my personal experience, during my first semester at the University of Central Florida we had a hurricane, and the accommodations that we needed to ensure students were safe during these times came first and foremost. So, it really stuck out to me how our colleagues were so empathetic and the type of professors I wish I had when I was in school, generous with care and concern for their students.

Kimberly Wieser: Their concern was for their students and placing their students first. And there were some wonderful stories that came out of this. I think about Jo's response, how the faculty at UT and their department—not in any official university response—raised $33,000 to help students who didn't have food and water and needed things out of their own accord. Christina had students who were in apartments that were 30 degrees. Because of economic differences and access, some students couldn't get water and food. There was a wonderful outpouring from people taking care of students for personal reasons, right? Not because it was their job to do so. It was just such a heartening thing to hear about. And I was also struck by how this conversation drew attention to how we need to think about these things all the time. Our students always have differential access to the things that they need in order to succeed in our classrooms and in their lives. And as you pointed out, things come up regularly, like the hurricane, I mean. Ashanka’s institution unfortunately had a little bit of preparation at Texas A&M Commerce because they had dealt with school shootings already. Horrible. As she pointed out, this is our job all the time as faculty. What is our role as faculty in natural disasters but also with all these unpredictable, human things that happen? Really thinking about what our job is from an ethical perspective and from a human perspective. Our job is so much more than a professional obligation.

That topic brings us to the subject of relationality. We really see relationality throughout this conversation. Through the focus on relationality, we've seen cultural rhetorics being manifested in what we do in our workplace. We are people with a vocation doing something because we love it—because it's not always the most lucrative thing that we could be doing for a living. We work really hard, and we don't do it in regard to a clock. We don't do it in regard to what season it is. We do it because we love it. We love our students. Putting those things into play in our lives is like putting cultural rhetorics scholarship in our lives. Putting humans and those relationships first.

Sonia Arellano: Absolutely. You mentioned Jo's network of care. I thought it was pertinent that Jo mentioned this because during the storm Jo and Aja both talked to me and asked, "How's your family in Texas?" while they were going through it themselves. How kind! What an amazing network of care, scholars, and friends. I also think back to the idea of relationality. We saw relationality in a lot of their stories about how the institutional structures in Texas failed. The personal relationships are what helped people survive and thrive. And that's always the case, isn't it? In so many ways, the institutions, infrastructure, and bureaucracy slow down progress. And unfortunately, because institutional change happens so slowly, we have to rely on one another in order to survive hardships like this in a lot of different ways. The effects are not just material. The conversation in this piece about the relationality between the larger structures and the people in Texas was really important.

Kimberly Wieser: It reminds me of how different we are as a discipline. I know that there are other instances in academia of people forming real communities, but I do think that cultural rhetorics is a special space in academia because of the grounding of our entire practice in relationality and human story, and the value we place on these things. I think part of that comes from the communities we originate from. I grew up in a space where people knew and took care of each other. Moreover, in our intertribal Native community that exists in Norman—we have 39 tribes in Oklahoma—we take care of each other. We all come from communities in cultural rhetorics—families, where if someone passes away, you're taking food to their house. We know what we do to take care of our communities. I have increasingly seen the same kind of engagement in my department as the demographic has shifted to include more people who come from communities of care. I've had a couple of hard things happen to me over the course of my academic career, particularly in the last few years. One, I lost my adult, disabled daughter. The way my colleagues showed me support was amazing. Then recently, last year, I had

surgery and my chair, Roxanne Mountford, organized our department community to make sure my family was fed during my early recovery. My former chair asked her how she knew to do these things, and she said, “Because I grew up like that.” I think we bring that knowledge and background to this field as well. You mentioned Aja and Jo checking on you because they're here. They are new to Texas, but they know you are from there. Christina checking in on Jo is mentioned in the conversation. The way that we as cultural rhetorics scholars take care of each other, not just as allies, but as family, means a lot to me. This conversation is also reflective of that.

Sonia Arellano: I 100% agree. In the personal stories told here, we can see care not only among one another within cultural rhetorics scholars, but also in our outward communities as well. I think the part of this conversation that really speaks volumes is the authors’ connectedness to their local communities.

Kimberly Wieser: In many ways these stories exemplify something that's a thread throughout this document—the distinction between Texas politics and Texans’ politics, right? While the politics of the state and the infrastructure and the institutions—I'm not gonna say might not have taken care of people—I just need to say that they completely failed everybody, because that's what happened. Texans were failed by the state of Texas because of deals that were made to value money above people in providing energy and in making decisions regarding COVID. Yeah, *money* has been opening up businesses. As usual, *money* has been at the foundation of the official discourse that has affected so many people. But what Texans stepped up to do for each other? That belies that whole mythos of official Texas politics and really gives me hope. I have lived outside of Texas since 2004, something that is hard for me to imagine now, but it's been that long. I spent the first 36 years of my life in Texas, and I worry a lot. Somehow seeing Texas from a distance—seeing the narratives that come out in the media about Texas—results in my having to immediately call home to see what's really going on the ground, because representations aren’t always accurate to say the least. And yet, this conversation gave me hope. It gave me hope that Texas is going to be okay, and Texans will make it through these terrible times.

Sonia Arellano: I agree. I think most of us who have left home know that having distance from your home place provides a different lens—a nuanced but critical lens. And that's important. I agree with you. This conversation definitely left me hopeful and happy that these really wonderful people are in our home state and doing the good work that I’m grateful they do.

The recent winter storm with power outages, boil water notices, and food shortages exacerbated many other circumstances of Texas (politics and Covid, among other things). How was your life as a faculty member affected during this time? In what ways did you see your students affected, and how did you see your institution attempting to accommodate you and your students?

Pots and mugs full of water in Ashanka's kitchen after water conservation notices were put in place.

Ashanka Kumari: We've been largely virtual in my department here at Commerce. Both of my current courses meet virtually during scheduled times each week—these sessions are recorded and not required attendance. Our university cancelled classes for seven total business days, to my recollection, from February 11 to February 26. This meant that two sessions of my graduate seminar didn't meet, and three sessions of my undergraduate class were affected, though one of those had previously been cancelled as an independent research day.

I think what was most significant from the get-go was our Provost's email to faculty wherein he wrote, "The Provost asks you to please remind your faculty members that online classes (especially synchronous classes) do not meet when the university is closed. Closed is closed; we all have to adjust for the weather." This specific message to faculty set the tone for much of my university's response to the winter storms that followed. I live about 30 minutes from campus in a newer

neighborhood, so I did not directly get the same impact as students or the handful of my colleagues who live in Commerce. I mostly used the early part of this time to send out messages to my students, noting that I would push up all deadlines and not to worry about any due dates.

Having lived in the South for a large part of my life now, I am aware of how quickly Southern cities can be shut down by mere flakes of snow—historically, Southern cities don't have the infrastructure set up to deal with large storms. This was immensely highlighted by what followed here in Texas with the winter storms this year, which were very much unprecedented, and as many news sites noted, one of those once-in-a-lifetime events. Because we cancelled classes the Thursday and Friday before the storms really came over that weekend, my partner and I had the chance to go get groceries and mentally prepare for the storms. I also kept my eyes on the Facebook pages for my city and surrounding community that were imploring residents to not panic and stay inside as much as possible. The first days of the winter storm were primarily ice, some of which resulted in a HUGE 100+ car crash in the Fort Worth area.

These early signs of what was to come definitely kept me hyperaware. Over the course of the week, my partner and I were—all things considered—immensely fortunate in that we didn't have any pipes burst or significant storm damage done to our home. We had one day of rolling blackouts, but they seemed to stick to a 1.5-hour schedule and then ended by the end of the day. We also used our snow-life literacies from our years living in Indiana (and mine in Nebraska prior to that) to keep our sinks at a drip. Our city's Facebook pages recommended stocking water as we were moving more and more to boil water and water conservation notices. My husband and I took out every single pot we owned and filled them with water in the early part of the week as our supply.

Aja Martinez: I am newly arrived in Texas, having just moved here in July 2020, and my connection to campus has been limited to email and Zoom interactions. So, my mode of engaging with University of North Texas, my colleagues, my students, and honestly, the city of Denton in general, has been virtual. When the storm was moving in and there were forecasts for snow and sub-zero temperatures, we were given notice through many, many, many UNT-oriented alerts (phone calls with automated messages, text messages, and email) that there may be canceled classes. These messages began on Sunday, February 14th. Then, by the end of the day on Monday, February 15th, we received these same alerts letting us know classes were canceled through Tuesday. By end of day Tuesday, they just canceled the remainder of the week because by then pipes were bursting all over campus.

The boil water notice was issued the next day. I was extremely lucky that although we experienced intermittent electricity at my home (I got into the rhythm of rushing to cook in between outages because our range is unfortunately electric), when our pipes froze by Tuesday, we (my daughter and I) still had the option of going to my partner's home, where there was water. Being newly arrived from upstate New York, we also still had clothing and general life skills/strategies to survive the cold. But what we were *not* prepared for was the total lack of infrastructure we experienced. When classes were canceled on Monday, I was already beginning to understand the week would likely be a loss for anything connected to work and school, so I sent messages to my students that same day, letting them know I'd be adjusting the schedule and to just generally survive—because that's how dire things seemed—even Wal-Mart was closed! Hell truly froze over. All Wi-Fi, internet, servers, etc. were down for most of the week, so even the ability to communicate with students became impossible by Tuesday—which interestingly was the same day we started looking for water and got to experience first-hand how terrible the road conditions were, how the traffic lights were out, and how stores like Wal-Mart were not only out of water, but they were just closed—so access to supplies became limited and a bit desperate. By Thursday, my partner and I drove north to Oklahoma in search of water and food and found a completely different situation—like the storm and devastation we were experiencing just 50 miles south wasn't a factor at all.

A screenshot of Ashanka's tweet on the Provost's statement.

Christina Cedillo: My institution has been holding pretty much all classes online since the start of the pandemic, so I was thankfully home and somewhat safe. Classes were canceled because internet access was affected, most notably by the rolling blackouts. It's important to note that the blackouts were enacted by the state agency in charge of our energy grid—as a preventative measure—rather than caused by the failure of the grid. As students began communicating, they were trying to use their phones to make contact despite their own troubles. I want to stress that some homes were as cold as 30 degrees indoors, and many people were affected by a boil advisory or had no water at all. Yet students were concerned about their classes and making up work, which tells me they have received some very toxic messages regarding values—directly and indirectly—from our institution and academia in general. That said, our school did ask for information in order to provide assistance to those students who needed food, water, and shelter. However, I think this life-threatening event and the state's utter failure of a response shows us how privilege underwrites academic success. I hope that beyond this very trying time, institutions and teachers remember that students need basic material support in order to be successful and that concern and care should be extended year-round.

A screenshot of a tweet by Christina detailing the dire situation.

Jo Hsu: Like Aja, I was new to my campus (and also arrived around July 2020). I'm struck by the phrasing "life as a faculty member," though, since I felt distinctly *not* like a faculty member in the three days my partner and I were without electricity, heat, water, and cell phone coverage. There were no emails, Zoom meetings, or course prep, and the messages I managed to get from and to students and colleagues in the brief windows of cell reception were about basic survival

needs—not university agendas or learning objectives. As someone with a chronic illness that has been unfortunately unstable for most of the past year, I was worried that I was going to have to navigate to the hospital through iced-over roads. Still, I know that my partner and I were relatively fortunate in that we had a stable place to live and sleep—that we had enough blankets and coats, and enough cash to buy bottled water when the corner store within walking distance opened up and charged $75 for a few bottles and some snacks.

Locally, the most robust responses I saw in these days and the weeks following were driven by interpersonal relationships rather than institutions. A few of my colleagues were at the forefront of a tremendous mutual aid effort that eventually enlisted over 40 volunteers and collected $33k to assist folks who had been displaced or otherwise harmed by the storm. Someone else started a Twitter thread connecting faculty with the Venmo accounts of students struggling to afford food. My new department had a running group text where folks checked in on one another. This is all to say that we were showing up for one another as people—as friends and neighbors—more so than actors of the University.

I also want to echo Christina, however, in that my students, in the weeks following, expressed a lot of concern about the work they missed. I received emails from students who were going on two weeks without stable housing worrying about their grades, and I hate that they have been taught that educators can be so unforgiving. Also, like Christina, I want to hope that this is a reminder that universities are filled with *people*, and that nothing we do here should be more important than supporting one another's ability to live and thrive.

Fresh snowfall in front of Ashanka's home.

Christina Cedillo: I do want to say that despite how bad things got here, some parts of Texas were hit even worse. During the storm, I spoke to Jo, and Jo had to deal with some heavy snow, too. That was very scary just seeing this happening from afar. And as Jo says, communication was limited across the state, so people used social media to check on other folks. Also, as Aja points out, everything was closed, so how does one find food and water in those conditions? And even when you are trying to prep, supplies fly off the shelf. So, a lot of the out-of-state dismissive rhetoric that said Texans don't know how to handle bad weather was very demoralizing, like a kick when one is down.

Jo Hsu: Just an aside—I was so grateful for the messages I got at the end of the day when cellular traffic let up enough for me to receive texts. It was good to hear from Christina (and to see photos of the fur babies!) and to be reminded of how fortunate I am to have supportive networks of care.

Aja Martinez: Yes to what Christina says above—Denton was very much on a scheduled/rolling blackout, whereas others went days and days without electricity. I remember Christina also posted to social media that we were issued a boil water notice but that most people's appliances for boiling are electric, and we had no or intermittent electricity, so the situation really started to feel desperate. I also have to acknowledge how incredibly privileged I've been to never ever, ever have lived through a natural disaster and failure of government and infrastructure—I made it 38 years never having had that reality, and it was a good and humbling reminder of how fucking privileged and full of access to basic necessities my life has been.

Christina Cedillo: Yes, Aja! Our power kept coming back on at around 2 a.m., so it became a scramble to boil water, charge the phone, and so on. I cannot imagine how difficult it was for you and Jo, being in a new place and trying to settle into new routines and even just knowing where to turn for help!

Ashanka Kumari: I want to echo what Jo and Christina have said about student concerns. In response to my handful of emails to my classes letting them know not to worry about assignments and take care of themselves and "let me know if I can be helpful," some students responded to say they were on campus and had been relocated to different housing, that their food supply was low, that they were cold and didn't have stable power or water supplies. It was difficult during these moments to know what to do beyond express empathy in email. This time made

me think a lot about the role of faculty in natural disasters and other uncontrollable human moments.

How do you see rhetoric in the political sphere in Texas as having real life impacts on the population of the state during the times we are in—times that include an unprecedented confluence of a global pandemic, an election year, and a devastating winter storm?

A Facebook post by now-resigned Colorado City mayor Tim Boyd.

Christina Cedillo: My institution has been very meticulous in asking for identification before entering buildings. I'm not sure how things have been going since Greg Abbott decided that Texas would be fully opened. As many may know, he is a very conservative governor whose primary goal throughout the pandemic was "getting Texas up and running again." Texas politics often make it very difficult to do what we do. UHCl is in Houston and is a very diverse school, having faculty and students from across many local and international communities. Most of my students are very kind and compassionate people who want to learn about others' experiences. So having to shut down racist discourse in the classroom isn't something that has really happened, but that doesn't mean that it doesn't happen at all. I do worry about students from minoritized communities. While many people here in Texas are kind, the state's ongoing conservative hegemony feels oppressive and seems to authorize personal attacks and rhetorical attacks in the media more broadly. Our students have had to see the Black, Asian, Latinx, and Queer communities harmed, and with people feeling very isolated during the pandemic, I worry that our students feel like they must swallow their feelings and just get by.

Ashanka Kumari: Christina, I'm drawn to what you are saying here about worry for minoritized students. I'm currently teaching a graduate seminar with the team "Toward an Anti-Racist Rhetoric & Composition." Graduate students have homed in on language practices as a big part of our conversations and which or whose "English" we teach in our classrooms. I have a lot of K-12 teachers in my class, and our conversations often get into the troubling politics of state-mandated standardized testing that high school teachers continually have to adhere to, which are largely disconnected from the conversations and goals at the college level, at least at Commerce, where I know we focus a lot on translingualism and codemeshing among our conversations about race and identity in our writing classrooms. I've been struck by how sometimes graduate students think Rhetoric and Composition equals a field that focuses on anti-racist conversations, when in fact, this might be more of a conclusion after taking many of our classes that focus on topics that emphasize anti-racist work and finding ourselves more and more, correcting to add that "but the whole field isn't there yet, but this is what we can do to continue toward change," so to speak.

Christina Cedillo: That sounds amazing, Ashanka! Yes, I notice that my students training to teach K-12 might have anti-racist training, but it really depends on who their profs are. In my "Writing for Education" course, we have been focusing on the hidden curriculum and how teachers transmit values based on what is and isn't

said, and many of them are surprised, saying that they were previously unaware of what that is.

Kimberly Wieser: Christina, you know, in my experience as a sixth-generation Texan who has been living as a sort of "ex-patriate" for the past nearly twenty years, that's kind of one of those things that are understood by BIPOC faculty, but unspoken—the kind of thing we keep seeing pop up in contributor's essays in the symposia Ersula Ore you and I have edited in *College Composition Communication* and *Rhetoric Review.* Everyone knows that politics make what we do difficult, but we don't articulate it for fear of professional retaliation.

Christina Cedillo: Yes, Kim. At our own school, we have had students demand open and frank conversations about racism on campus and in society more generally. And they have often been ignored. Some faculty have expressed disappointment and anger that official missives do not mention words like "racism, "anti-Blackness," anti-Asian," and "white supremacy." Yet these are the communities our students come from! And many of the faculty too.

Jo Hsu: If I'm hearing some of the above correctly, I am noting the diversity of experiences elided in sweeping statements about Texas, universities, and our disciplines. I think there have been a lot of pieces reflecting on how Texas's particular brand of rugged individualism set us up for the energy grid failure. Those conversations, however, need to also account for the extreme gerrymandering of this state and the continued suppression of Black, Brown, and disabled voices. They also need to account for a broader U.S. climate that has little vocabulary for relationality, and that has overemphasized the free market as a means of determining supply and demand (in this case, Texas was an extension of the failure of systems we witnessed throughout Covid). Perhaps put differently, like a lot of the damage of 2020-2021 (or rather, a lot of the damage nationwide, in general), much of it emerges from the disconnect between prominent forms of political rhetoric and the stories, experiences, and politics being articulated by BIPOC, disabled people, and trans and queer folks.

Ashanka Kumari: Yes, I agree with both of you here. I think a lot of the conversations about the Texas government's response to the storms and COVID largely have not emphasized enough the significant role that the lack of established systems play. I also noticed that the news quickly shifted away from the aftermath of the storms to Governor Abbott's lifting of the statewide mask mandate to 100%

reopen Texas. I do think that the distraction this announcement created was perhaps an intended outcome, politically speaking.

Trader Joe's Sign.

Aja Martinez: I'll drop the image I posted of a sign at the entrance to Trader Joe's in the area saying in a very sunny TJ's way that Abbott is wrong, we care about our employees, you're wearing a mask in our store. It was great, and a reassurance. With Abbott's decision, I feel like I've seen *more* people wearing masks in public spaces than before his announcement, possibly because of how liberal-leaning Denton is, possibly because people have no mask mandate to be defiant about anymore, haha. Human reverse psychology, you know?

Ashanka Kumari: Aja, I think you're right about the increase in mask wearing. I'm seeing fewer folks wearing them below their noses as well; however, I do find it really specific to locations. For instance, if I'm in a more neutral place like Lowe's, it's

almost split at the number of folks in masks vs. not. However, doctor's offices and spaces like that seem to have double-downed on their policies and signage.

Jo Hsu: I appreciate the distinction that folks are drawing between "Texas politics" and "Texans' politics." Austin's an interesting place—both the state capital, where these decisions are being made, but also one of the most liberal (the most liberal? Whatever that means) city in the state. There are clear political divides, and it's also super apparent that a lot of voices are not being listened to by governing authorities at all (at institutional, city, and state levels).

Aja Martinez: Yes to Jo about voices not being listened to. Because we're only 50 miles from the next closest Oklahoma towns—Ardmore in this case—my partner and I ended up making a few runs for supplies to take to donation sites in central Dallas, and we connected with a few local mutual aid groups in the process. The devastation was viscerally illustrated in these Black and brown parts of central Dallas but what was also so evident was the sheer organizing power and cohesiveness of these mutual aid groups to get groceries, supplies, and food cooked for folks who were experiencing such terrible circumstances. And concerning Dallas, there were parts (the wealthier parts) that had residents reporting (John Smilges in this case—maybe we can request pics outside John's apartment posted to Twitter?) no outages at all and cleared roads and sidewalks—as early as Monday and Tuesday of that week!

The aftermath of the winter storm brought to light many inequities that have already been exacerbated by Covid (the ability to work from home; access to medical care, food, internet; and housing insecurity). How did you see this manifesting in your life or around you at the university or in your local community?

Jo Hsu: I have to say that grades, faculty "productivity" reports, or really any form of assessment right now seem (even more than usual) like a measure of someone's social/financial safety net. Both among colleagues and among students, there were clear striations of people who had more resources and were mostly untouched by the impact of the storm, and some folks who are still struggling to pull things back together. I just had a Zoom call yesterday with a student who only this week moved back into a stable place to live. They still don't have consistent internet access and have obviously missed a large portion of their classes. What, exactly, are we grading in this moment if not some combination of socioeconomic resources and luck?

Jo's boots with snow up above their ankles.

Ashanka Kumari: But for real though, Jo. I agree. It felt so strange to complete my annual review and to focus on any kind of grades with students. I have largely switched to a labor-based grading model in my classes, but even this can be hard in that the labor we might be wanting to do, or valuing isn't what is always possible when we are fighting uncontrollable inequities.

Kimberly Wieser: Ashanka, I did that with my graduate students this semester. Their grades are based on a word count made up of discussions and their choice of a portfolio of documents written either for publication (I am editing an encyclopedia—an albatross! Never do that, lol—but it allowed me to give them an immediate and real opportunity in addition to those they find themselves) or that they have made a clear plan for—where to submit, written to that publication's

guidelines, to that conference's interests, etc.—and that are written to my satisfaction after having been given editing opportunities. I thought time was too valuable right now and students too vulnerable to do otherwise. Their time and labor should count.

Ashanka Kumari: That's so interesting, Kim. You have me thinking also about what we count as "labor" in our writing classrooms. I'm thinking a lot about how students here are largely working-class and first-generation students who work multiple jobs and/or as caretakers for family members.

Aja Martinez: Yup to both Jo and Ashanka here, such a clear economic divide in how folks have rebounded—or not—from the storm. And a total lack of comprehension and empathy I've noticed from those who were minimally impacted—people not understanding that Wi-Fi was unavailable for a week straight, at minimum, and not being flexible or understanding of this in relation to other things like having a warm place to sleep and food to eat, safe water to drink, etc.

Ashanka Kumari: So much this, Aja! Yes. I think I keep asking, or rather, emphasizing that we have to prioritize our own health and safety before we can think about what it is we are doing in our classrooms. Since the pandemic shift to all-online last March, I find myself extra emphasizing, "How are you?" as a key part of the front ten or so minutes in my classes. Prior to the global shutdown in March 2020, we at Commerce also dealt with a school shooting in late January/early February, on top of another campus-related shooting incident less than four months prior. We're all working through so much trauma that we will continue to deal with beyond the present moment.

Aja Martinez: Yeah, and the funny thing is I fled from my job at Syracuse for my health! And I landed in this Texas storm situation—so I'm hyper-attuned to this reality for my students—health first. My goodness.

Jo Hsu: Ha, Aja—I also left a place that was actively detrimental to my health, and here we are, in a pandemic, amid the total collapse of Texas' utilities infrastructure.

Christina Cedillo: Yes to what you all are saying! As Jo says, everything has really highlighted the vast class differences among students and even among faculty. Let's be real. Some students are still trying to catch up, and I have left the timeline to do so open. I am not about to set a timeline that adds to the stress my students are already feeling. Guided by my thoughts on crip time, I have decided to give students credit and then provide feedback, allowing them to work on their revisions

at their own pace. I don't really get students who just want to "take the A and run," as so many teachers often assume. They want to learn and are trying to do so in impossible conditions. So many have emailed to say their families have been affected by COVID, many of them from working-class families. COVID affected my family too, because not everyone had the privilege of working from home. So many have lost employment or have had to take on teaching responsibilities for their young children. Yet, these are ongoing conditions for many students at UHCL. So, my big hope is that our fellow faculty will stop assuming the worst of students and keep any workable solutions beyond this time.

Fresh snowfall outside of Jo's home in Austin, Texas.

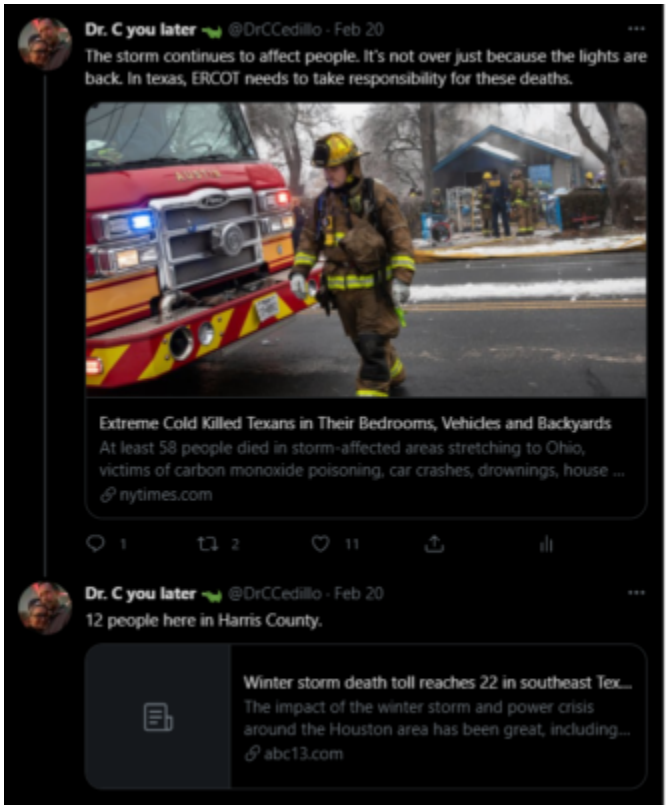
Aja Martinez: Yup to everything you're saying, Christina. My transition from Syracuse University to UNT has also been a huge class shift in terms of who my students are—SU being a private, predominantly white institution that costs like

70k a year with room and board, versus UNT whose students are first-gen, workers, and the institution itself is newly tier 1 Research *and* Hispanic serving—it's a completely different space but has very real class implications for what my students have access to.

Cultural rhetorics values storytelling as one of its key methodologies. Is there a story or a main point of your experience that you can share with us that will help others understand the devastation of the Texas winter storm and its aftermath on Texas communities?

Aja Martinez: Critical Race counterstoryteller Patricia Williams has this method of counterstory I term "autobiographic reflection," in which she narrates as sometimes witness, sometimes participant, sometimes defendant. In terms of narration as an act of witness, I was at a downtown clean-up this past weekend. It was for a church I'm connected to through my partner, and we were "warned" before the clean-up that we might find "unsavory" things to clean up because people use the church grounds as "a literal toilet." What we eventually found under a set of hedges was what we soon realized was someone's home space—and we had the directive to "clean it up"—meaning clear it out. From the accumulation of cardboard, canned food goods, blankets, etc., it was clear this person had been seeking shelter under the hedges of this church space since at least the storm—and had supplies surely provided by some of the mutual aid efforts in that downtown part of Dallas. Some of the volunteers proceeded in dismantling this home because this church space, this property, is something they asserted rights to over and above the rights of this person who set up shelter in the space—and this church isn't actually currently being used by any of these people because of COVID restrictions preventing indoor gatherings. It's just a space this group feels ownership of, even in their COVID-induced absence, and they feel the rights to "beautify" the space, to keep it lovely and livable (for some), even in their absence. I don't know—it's a counterstory as witness moment for me, especially because in the process of dismantling this shelter a photo of a Black woman and child was discovered. One of the volunteers paused at that moment and said, "Ah, that's sad," and placed the photo into the corner of the hedge area instead of throwing it away like all the other possessions of this person were thrown away. It reminded me of a Williams' quote, "Although a disproportionate number of homeless are Black, this is not essentially a racial problem. Still, I do see it as interwoven with the legacy of slavery, in its psychology of denial, in the notions of worth and unworthiness that go into the laws dealing with the homeless, and the ranking of 'legitimate' needy and 'illegitimate'

homeless—these are familiar, cruel, blind games that make bastards and beggars of those who are in fact our family" (24, *Alchemy of Race and Rights*).



A screenshot of Christina's Twitter thread on storm-related deaths and the mismanagement of the electric grid.

Christina Cedillo: A lot of my work deals with rhetorical time/space and space/time, and I found myself thinking a lot about that as I mostly laid in bed covered in blankets while waiting for the power to come back on. What makes spaces conducive to real human bodies with real human needs? How does time function to prioritize the lives of those already privileged? So, what happened was, my partner had to work during the storm, so I was home alone taking care of the pets. That first day was scary but doable. Then when the lights went out, having no power meant a lot of spoiled food, no way to communicate with family and friends, having to take the dog outside in the darkness. Now I know this doesn't sound as horrible as it could have been, but the pandemic had already exacerbated my anxiety and depression. The storm felt like the universe was collapsing on itself in some ways—mainly because I worried about how much worse so many people had it. And trying to eat in the dark, alone, when food is going bad just gives you a lot of time to think.

I thought about my students, making sure they won't be blamed for having no internet. Friends who were trapped in their freezing homes. And then the news started to come in about the Latinx family who lost a child due to the cold, the veteran who died trying to keep his breathing aid running by plugging it into the car outlet. Real people lost their lives because this state is run by people who would rather make money through deregulated utilities than ensure they don't deprive people of the utilities that they pay hard-earned money for. So, I tried to sleep the days away until I heard the lights come back on and could do what needed to be done until the power came back on again. Not to mention that the mishandling of the COVID vaccine schedules meant being scared to find help or resources outside the home. Politics literally made anywhere but home a space hostile to my body, given my immunosuppressed condition. Time was lived from lights-on to lights-on, and the rest of the time, we just didn't exist to those who run things. And as Aja mentions, to make matters worse, we knew not everyone had to deal with power outages or loss of potable water.

People in the more affluent areas didn't lose power. From my apartment, I could see the haze of lights over the wealthy community just east of where I live. It's an ugly feeling. Not envy, mind you, but rage. All I could think of was how folks in areas like Baytown and Deer Park might be doing; these are cities where many of our students live. Already vulnerable to petrochemical explosions and industrial pollution, now to deal with no power and probably hoping power didn't go out at the factories and release all sorts of poison.

Ashanka Kumari: I am struck by how much we are collectively, I think, having to rethink how much time and space in relation to work and our lives matters. I'm thinking about all the directives across the nation (some places more than others) to "be more flexible" during these times, but also, am bothered by the number of teachers I've heard about doubling down on work and deadlines. These ideas make me think about the concept of "relationality" in cultural rhetorics such that our own movements are connected to everything around us. A student emailed me recently noting they had been completing midterms at a pace of about two a week lately, apologizing for missing deadlines in my class. I, of course, told them I'm willing to work with them and not to stress about anything being "late," but I have been troubled by the responses from some that we should proceed as if things are "business as usual," a concept that our Provost and Dean have also emphasized in past emails to remind us that nothing here is business as usual. I say this because, as Jo noted earlier, there is a distinction among Texas' politics and Texan's politics that also seeps into our understandings of time and space locally, both in response

to COVID and the winter storms. In terms of the winter storms, I'm not sure how or whether we can reckon with the long-term impact of the choices our state has made if serious changes to infrastructure aren't implemented.

Jo Hsu: Echoing Ashanka, one of the major teachings of cultural rhetorics for me is relationality as a guiding compass: how do our actions, our policies, our structures hold us accountable to the people we value, and those who have enabled our lives and work? There are stories of devastation, some of which have already been widely reported. There were also moments of tremendous community-based action. Almost every local group I was a part of—regardless of kind—reoriented toward providing food, water, and shelter to people in the absence of governmental support. Even a Facebook group made for odd jobs and food delivery focused exclusively on sourcing and delivering heat lamps, food, tents, sleeping bags, and other necessities to people who needed them. So, I want to parallel that with the complete lack of accountability and relationality that enabled this series of events—how even with warnings and (optional) policies and all of the signs of a changing climate, no one with the power to do so felt compelled to prepare Texas for a major winter event. I keep thinking about the mass-mobilization of people on the ground in juxtaposition with the complete inaction of Texas officials who had been warned in 2011 that they needed plans for averting such a disaster. I'm hoping that with disruption comes reinvention. It may be that from this moment we learn that our immediate networks are always going to be our first point of care—that the institutions never will care for us—and perhaps that will create reason and better affective vocabularies for strengthening our relationships, regarding one another as whole humans, and fostering one another's ability to live full lives.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Christina V. Cedillo is Assistant Professor of Writing and Rhetoric at the University of Houston-Clear Lake. Her/their research draws from cultural rhetorics and decolonial theory to focus on embodied rhetorics and rhetorics of embodiment at the intersections of race, gender, and disability. Her/their work has appeared in *CCC*, *RSQ*, *Composition Forum*, and other journals and various edited collections. Christina is co-chair of the CCCC Latinx Caucus and lead editor of the Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics.

Jo Hsu is an assistant professor of Rhetoric and Writing at the University of Texas at Austin, where they are also core faculty in Asian American Studies and an affiliate of the LGBTQ Studies Program. Broadly speaking, Jo's research uses narrative to examine how gender, race, disability, and sexuality entwine in mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. Their work can be found in disciplinary journals such as the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, *Women's Studies in Communication*, and *College Composition and Communication*. Their creative writing has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and can be found in *Kartika Review*, *Color Bloq*, and other literary outlets. Throughout their (often wayward and meandering) academic journey, Jo has been fortunate to have the support of generous mentors and co-conspirators, and they strive to further these forms of mutual care and collaborative worldbuilding.

Ashanka Kumari is Assistant Professor of English at Texas A&M University – Commerce. Her current research centers first-generation-to-college graduate students and the ways they navigate academia with their lives. She recently published *Mobility Work in Composition*, a collection co-edited with Bruce Horner, Megan Faver Hartline, and Laura Sceniak Matravers. Her writing has appeared in *Composition Studies, Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*; *WPA Journal*; and *The Journal of Popular Culture*, among others.

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