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A Response to Cushman, Baca, and García's *College English* Introduction

Alexandra Hidalgo, editor-in-chief

This is a story.

Friday afternoon I was working on my documentary about my father's disappearance in the Venezuelan Amazon when a friend and colleague asked if I'd read the introduction to the newest *College English* issue. I told her I had not. She urged me to do so immediately. I read "Delinking: Toward Pluriversal Rhetorics" by Ellen Cushman, Damián Baca, and Romeo García, and found myself staring at the fall trees in my backyard for what felt like hours but was only a few minutes. I then spent an inordinate amount of time composing and recomposing an email to our *constellations* editorial team.

This is a story, and I'm keeping you waiting for the conflict—the crux of the matter—to emerge. I know you want me to spell it all out now, but please let me unspool this tale in a way that makes sense to its writer. I'm sorry to keep you in suspense. Some stories must be told in frustrating ways to capture the emotions felt by those who experienced the events they recount. This is such a story.

I am not going to share my email to the editorial team here, but I will address its main points in response to "Delinking" below. First, though, I want to tell you what I felt over the last three days (I am writing this on Sunday evening) as I processed what Cushman, Baca, and García wrote. I am not opening up to garner sympathy from you. My father (the subject of the film I was working on when I learned about this situation) disappeared when I was six years old. As a result of my loss, I have experienced a lifetime of sympathy from friends and strangers alike. Their kindness helped me heal and develop a sense of self-worth and confidence that has allowed me to thrive in my personal and professional lives.

I am not writing this because I want your sympathy, but because I want you (and Cushman, Baca, and García) to know that real human beings with lives and families are affected by the words we write and that those human beings feel wounded when we express ourselves in ways that unkindly portray them or their work. I'm telling you this because I can afford the luxury of vulnerability. I am a tenured professor at a Research 1 university with a sustained and (until now) uncontroversial professional trajectory. I come from a privileged background and

have the fortune (privilege) of a loving and sizable support system comprised of family and friends, as well as colleagues in academia and the film industry. In other words, I am the sort of person who should be able to take (even minor) controversy in stride.

And yet...

Friday evening: after writing to our editorial team suggesting we take the high road, I refreshed my inbox countless times, waiting for their reactions. Those who responded were supportive of my choice not to engage, but a number of them suggested we stay vigilant about how “Delinking” was received. I went to bed telling myself that it would all soon be behind us.

Saturday: I woke up with an asthma attack. My asthma is asymptomatic, so when I don’t get enough oxygen, I don’t feel out of breath. Instead, I become listless, and the idea of moving anything beyond my typing fingers seems daunting. I sat on my writing couch and couldn’t budge as the day wore on. Friends and colleagues contacted me, wondering whether I’d seen the introduction. I told them I had, but that we were fine. Nothing to worry about. In the meantime, I couldn’t breathe.

Sunday: My asthma worsened and I started to face the conundrum that had been lurking underneath since I read “Delinking.” I’m tenured, but for the last three years as editor-in-chief of *constellations* I’ve gathered an editorial team composed of the most brilliant, kind, and cutting-edge scholars I could find. Most of them are at the beginning of their careers as faculty. Any university would be lucky to have them and even luckier to keep them. They are the future, the bright future we’re always dreaming of, but I worried “Delinking” was jeopardizing *their* future. By questioning the legitimacy of *constellations’* practices were Cushman, Baca, and García also questioning *them*?

Dinner with my husband Nate and my sons (nine-year old William and seven-year-old Santiago) was an emotional affair. I explained to the boys that for the first time in my life something I’d helped build—and by association their mother—was being publicly censored and censored in the most prestigious and oldest journal in my field. William and Santiago tried to process what I meant, then sensing they were in uncharted territory, switched the topic to our impending Halloween outings. Nate and I sent the boys away so I could weep with impunity as the dinner he labored over all afternoon grew colder. Later, I sobbed as I danced (my nightly ritual) with the little energy I’d managed to store up all day, while my

boys, who've rarely seen me break down, tried to figure out what was wrong with my face and breathing.

It was time to respond to "Delinking." And so here I am, typing away late into the night.



Rain drops distort the trees as my words pour out all morning. (Photo by Nathaniel Bowler)

This is a story about editorial practices.

I co-founded the digital publication *agnès films: supporting women and feminist filmmakers* with my dear friend Caitlan Spronk in 2010. As the editor-in-chief of a journal featuring film criticism written by filmmakers and academics, I have spent the last eleven years reminding our writers we must always think of the content we cover (even if it is not to our liking) as the result of countless hours of hard labor that is rarely financially compensated, not to mention celebrated. Our publication analyzes work by a blend of up-and-coming and established artists, and the former, in particular, labor punishing hours on passion projects that may not reach the quality of a big-budget Hollywood film, but that often take the industry in daring new directions. Being daring means taking risks. Taking risks means we may end up making mistakes. At *agnès films*, we point out those mistakes but in a constructive

fashion. We put ourselves in the shoes of the filmmakers who climb the unspeakably steep mountain that is making a film with a negligible budget and a skeleton crew, and we honor the heart and the journey, even as we point out what they may wish to rethink for future projects. We always write as if our filmmakers were on a path to future projects, as if this were one stop in a long, fruitful career.

This is a story about disagreeing without rupturing relationships.

When I teach our graduate “Writing Workshop” course at the Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures at Michigan State University, I deliver a (rare for me) monologue on our first day, reminding students that our field is deceptively small. Whenever they cite someone or discuss their work, I ask them to imagine that they are sitting across from that person, uttering the very words they wrote about them and holding their gaze, seeing their reactions as their words settle. At some point, they are likely to end up at some committee, panel or dinner with any living person they cite. That doesn’t mean they can’t disagree with them. Disagreement is the soil upon which much of our scholarship bears fruit. However, I ask them to disagree in a way that acknowledges the hours of sweat and metaphorical—and not-so-metaphorical—tears that go into our work. Obliterating someone else’s vision and vilifying them as we disagree with them only serves to stop, not forward, the conversation. Sure, one may elicit a response (perhaps like the one I’m writing now) but as the writer is trying to process the distress caused by the original piece’s tone, it will be hard to engage with the ideas (even the ones that are valuable) proposed in the first place.

This is a story about empathy.

I know that I will sit across a table, room, or zoom screen from Cushman, Baca, and García in the decades to come, as I have numerous times in the 13 years since I entered this field. When I do, I’ll remember the sweat and tears that they, like the *agnès films* filmmakers, put into “Delinking.” As I look into their eyes, I will tell myself that they wrote this introduction because they’re genuinely worried by the directions cultural rhetorics is currently exploring. They acted because, from their perspective, their ideas about what scholarship should accomplish are being ignored by what we at *constellations* are publishing. I don’t in fact know if this was why they wrote the introduction as they wrote it. However, it’s what I’m going to tell myself because they are my colleagues and it allows me to see their words as coming from a place in which they are trying to build, not tear down, the work that those of us involved with *constellations* have been doing.

I respect and acknowledge the critiques they expressed in “Delinking” and thank them for voicing them. However, I believe they should have done so in a more constructive manner. I wish that they, like our *agnès films* staff, had written their introduction as if they thought we, the *constellations* editors and authors, were scholars in the midst of rich, fertile careers (as we indeed are), instead of people whose voices should stop being voiced. I wish they’d imagined they were staring into our eyes as they composed “Delinking” (which, of course, maybe they did).

And so, as I stare at Cushman, Baca, and García in my mind, I address the concerns they uttered about *constellations* in “Delinking.” (I told you I would get to the crux of the matter eventually).

This is a story backed by data.

I will address the concerns mentioned about *constellations* in “Delinking” one by one. First, however, I wanted to point out that they misrepresented our names and misidentified the piece they cite from, a sign of writerly and editorial negligence that made me feel they were not being as careful with how they represented us as they should have been. They write, “In the introductory essay to *Constellations*, issue 4, moderated by Kim Wieser, authors Alexandra Hildago, Cat Jennings, and Ana Mileno Ribero provide ample evidence of the self-referential story that serves as prima facie claim and evidence for the history of the cultural rhetorics told there” (12). Our names, as attributed in the piece they cite from are: Kimberly Wieser (not Kim), Alexandra Hidalgo (not Hildago), Catheryn Jennings (not Cat), and Ana Milena Ribero (not Mileno). Additionally, our journal is called *constellations* (not *Constellations*). What they identify as the introduction to Issue 4 is in fact part of our Conversations series in which scholars interact with each other in real time on a Google document around questions shared by the moderator. We have published seven conversations, ranging from our inaugural piece featuring Black faculty and graduate students discussing #BlackLivesMatter, to graduate students and faculty documenting their experiences with COVID, to faculty in Texas sharing how they coped with the 2021 winter storm.

I have yet to write the introduction to Issue 4 because we have not published every article in the issue yet. When I do write the introduction, it will not be about *constellations*’ editors’ understanding of cultural rhetorics scholarship, but rather about the work represented in that issue and about our editorial staff’s experiences as we came to put that issue together. I will address the other claims made in the quotation above as I engage with the main points below:

1. Our editorial board's lineage

Cushman, Baca, and García point to “[t]he creation of an online journal, *Constellations*, whose editorial board is largely composed of scholars who trace their intellectual origins to the MSU cultural rhetorics program and to one person in that program particularly who served as the journal’s founding editor” (12). The founding editor to whom they refer is Malea Powell, the person who, as we have documented in our journal, developed the idea for *constellations* and worked to launch it until we published our first issue, at which point she left the journal to become the editor-in-chief of *College Composition and Communication*. I, who had been a managing editor of *constellations* since its inception, then became editor-in-chief.

I will start by stating that there is no intellectual crime in having scholars from one particular lineage come together to produce a journal. However, we at *constellations* have worked to diversify the training and scholarly views of our editors because we believe that bringing varying perspectives together sparks innovation, and our aim from the start has been to create something different from what was already there.

Our editorial board is made up of five faculty. Out of which two (40%) (Gwendolyn Pough and Trixie Long-Smith) have ties to Michigan State University. I don’t believe that either one of them would “trace their intellectual origins” to either MSU or to Powell because they were trained elsewhere and are Powell’s contemporaries. The other three (60%) faculty in our editorial board (Christina Cedillo, Raúl Sánchez, and Remi Yergeau) do not have direct ties to MSU or Powell.

As much as we value the guidance of our editorial board, the day-to-day labor of running the journal is performed by our editors. During our triweekly meetings, we discuss the journal’s many moving parts, from the content we publish, to our website, to our social media presence. Our editors and I collaborate on how to assess reviewer feedback and present it to authors in a way that is constructive and beneficial to the piece. They also work closely with the authors who have received an “Accept with Major Revisions” and above on their pieces as we get them ready for publication. Of our ten managing editors, four (Lauren Brentnell, Catheryn Jennings, Daisy Levy, and Andrea Riley-Mukavetz) were Powell’s students, so they definitely “trace their intellectual origins” to her. Six (60%) of our editors, however, have no ties to Powell or MSU. We invited Sonia Arellano, Brandon M. Erby, Jo Hsu, Alexis McGee, Ana Milena Ribero, and Kimberly Wieser to join the journal because

we wanted to grow through their fresh takes on cultural rhetorics, on scholarship, and on publishing in general.

Our assistant editors, copy editors, and social media managers are all at MSU. The reason for this is that MSU—through the generosity of The Cube, the Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures, and the College of Arts and Letters—covers their salaries. Unlike our editorial staff, these positions, which are held by graduate and undergraduate students, come with monetary remuneration, and MSU understandably would like those opportunities to remain with our students.

While our editorial teams are clearly connected to Powell and MSU, that connection is not as prevalent as Cushman, Baca, and García claim, and we have specifically worked toward diversifying our editorial team because we treasure the transformative value of having multiple voices and trajectories helping determine the journal's future.

2. Our emphasis on citing cultural rhetorics scholarship

Cushman, Baca, and García cite moderator Wieser's introduction to the "Constellating Stories and Counterstories: Cultural Rhetorics Scholarship Principles" Conversation. They quote:

Wieser defines what the "editors look for in cultural rhetorics scholarship, [which] include[s] the centrality of story; the practice of constellating stories; approaches to culture, such as counterstory, that challenge master narratives; an engagement with the work that has already been done in cultural rhetorics; and citing the work, especially the theoretical work of BIPOC scholars, in what Ribero calls 'de-canoniz[ing]' (12).

Of all the ideas from our conversation summarized by Wieser, the one they zero in on is our request that authors cite cultural rhetorics scholarship. They argue that "cultural rhetorics constellates itself as another zero-point enunciation of knowledge—to publish therein, one must cite those of the appropriate lineage, precisely in order to create its own hierarchy of knowing with reference to its own self-authored intellectual lineage" (13). I don't think of citations as hierarchical, but as peer-to-peer interactions. However, it is true that being cited is helpful to scholars as they make their way up the university's ladder, from getting into

graduate programs all the way to becoming full professors, so we appreciate the comment and will continue to ruminate on how to address it.

As a cultural rhetorics journal, we, the editors, have long, intricate conversations at our meetings about whether an article is indeed participating in cultural rhetorics. One of the various markers we look for is engagement with existing conversations and concerns in cultural rhetorics, which usually (though not always) involves citing cultural rhetorics scholarship. Cushman, Baca, and García have rightly pointed out that this can be a problematic approach, and I appreciate their insight. As we continue to figure out how we want to run our journal, the editors and I will take this critique into account and will develop editorial practices that better navigate the balancing act of publishing scholarship that fits within cultural rhetorics while giving authors the freedom they need to continually expand the field.

My main issue on this point is what Cushman, Baca, and García argue after they cite Wieser. They write, “As recent discussions on the ethics of publication make clear, scholarly orientation to a particular editor is a troubled and troubling practice of knowledge making” (13). Then they cite guidelines by the Committee on Publication Ethics that state editors should avoid “suggesting that authors include citations to your (or an associate’s) work merely to increase citation counts or to enhance the visibility of your or your associate’s work” (qtd. in Cushman, Baca, and García 13). This, of course, is a statement all of us at *constellations* and hopefully our field, stand behind. Cushman, Baca, and García follow this with a very strange move when they write: “Requiring an author, for example, who wishes to publish in *Constellations* to cite the founding editor of that journal, is as unethical as it is imperial” (13). We could not agree more with what they say, but we have never required anyone to cite Powell, or anyone else for that matter.

We as editors do make suggestions about each piece, usually in concurrence with what our reviewers have asked for. Sometimes we suggest interlocutors whose work we think may enrich the arguments the authors are making, but our authors are asked to respond to all feedback with a memo in which they explain which suggestions they have adopted and which ones they haven’t, and why they’ve decided not to follow the latter. If authors don’t want to cite someone, they can tell us why, and we work with them on fulfilling that desire in a way that benefits the piece.

We have published 18 articles since our inception. I am not counting our pedagogy blog posts, conversations, introductions, and book reviews here because they are not peer-reviewed, and besides the pedagogy blog posts, they rarely feature

citations. Of those 18 articles, 12 (66.67%) cite Powell and 6 (33.33%) do not. If citing Powell was indeed a requirement to publish in *constellations*, why then do one-third of our articles not cite her?

Because Powell's solo output and her generative collaborations with junior scholars tend to be well-researched, inventive, and inspiring pieces, they have resonated with scholars in and outside cultural rhetorics. Often when we receive a submission, Powell is cited, and it would be as unethical for us to ask authors not to cite her as it would be to demand authors engage with her work. Our philosophy is to give authors as much room as possible to explore their ideas while trying to make sure those ideas fit within cultural rhetorics scholarship. Powell, being one of the forces propelling cultural rhetorics, fits well with multiple (two thirds, to be exact) of our pieces. We will continue to publish work that cites her ideas, as well as the ideas of the countless others you can find in our authors' works cited pages, but we will never (as we never have) force anyone to cite her.

3. Our championing of story as a methodology

The critique that Cushman, Baca, and García make that will prove most influential to us is their questioning of story as a methodology. Being a scholar who also makes documentaries and publishes memoir and fiction, I have a deep affinity for storytelling, which is what attracted me to cultural rhetorics in the first place. I have also gathered an editorial team that finds story to be a compelling method for scholarship, as noted in our "Constellating Stories and Counterstories" Conversation cited above. I appreciate that Cushman, Baca, and García point out potential drawbacks with a methodology many of us in our editorial team practice and admire.

Their first critique is that story "establishes as evidence whatever its teller claims. Story is self-referential in this sense, based on the understanding of the self, finding validation for its own telling within its own understanding that it legitimizes by dint of its enunciation" (11). There is indeed a kind of solipsism to stories that we will continue to wrestle with (it's a matter we editors are aware of). Personal stories in particular ask the audience to uncritically trust the author is being as truthful as they can be. Since memory and interpretation are deeply subjective, there is no fully truthful account of the past, only an honest attempt at truthfulness.

These limitations of story are why our articles are not fully made up of storytelling. Instead, they blend stories with archival research, citations, footage of the events described in the story, examples of student work, detailed descriptions of museums

and monuments, media guidelines produced by universities, and so on. Storytelling, in other words, is only one aspect of the scholarship we publish. That scholarship is supported by a wide range of evidence. However, we will continue to discuss and analyze the potential pitfalls of story as a methodology since, as Cushman, Baca and García point out, they can be dangerous.

Their other concern about story is that:

These stories situate the authors of them as “self-identifying” representatives of an oppressed or disenfranchised social group and as scholars who “self-authorize” themselves as knowledge makers: Theirs is a method of storytelling that recenters the hierarchy of knowledge to point back to themselves as arbiters of what counts as a cultural rhetoric and its collection of alternatives, cultural rhetorics. (12)

I would argue that anyone who is publishing peer-reviewed scholarship is a knowledge maker. I would also argue that anyone who speaks from a particular perspective (and our authors often do speak from “oppressed or disenfranchised” perspectives) is identifying as a representative of that group. Being “a representative,” though, does not mean being “the representative.” In other words, our authors do write from their experience, and as such they represent themselves as part of a larger group. However, that does not mean that what they are saying is true for everyone in that group, nor even for a substantial portion of that group. By blending personal story with the kinds of evidence I described above, they are exploring some aspect of what it is to belong to the groups they are describing, but that is what most scholarship does. As scholars, we take the particular and make claims about larger demographics. As long as those claims are not absolute and as long as we acknowledge the limitations of what we are saying, I don't think there is anything murky or unethical about that move. In fact, in many other disciplinary spaces, acknowledging limitations and authorial positions is seen as a way of demonstrating responsibility.

Their last claim I want to address regarding our approach to scholarship is that “[b]ecause cultural rhetorics imagines itself as a multicultural alternative within the terms set forth by ‘master narratives,’ it fails to see itself as replicating the very terms for structuring knowledge, and thus makes invisible the master narratives of what counts as “cultural” and what counts as ‘a counterstory’ (12-13). My reading of this critique is that they are concerned that by appointing ourselves as an alternative to colonial/imperial/patriarchal systems, we end up failing to see we are still working within those systems. My first response is that we don't see our journal

as working outside the system. We are a peer-reviewed publication funded by a land-grant Research 1 institution in the United States. We are imbricated within colonial/imperial/patriarchal systems. However, so are most academic publications, including *College English*.

I, at least, do not see *constellations* as taking down the oppressive forces that loom over academia and our lives in general. What I see us doing is using the power of scholarship and storytelling to explore topics and experiences that have not enjoyed substantial exposure elsewhere. Cushman, Baca, and García call that a “multicultural alternative” (12), and I’m fine with that representation. We have indeed sought to publish work by and about BIPOC and diverse populations, and we will continue to do so, not because we think we are going to single-handedly take down the chains that bind us with this kind of scholarship, but because those diverse voices are rich and engaging and gift us with new territories to explore and transformative ideas to ponder. Will sharing those voices help us create a more just and equitable world? I certainly hope so, but we’re not claiming we are any kind of a panacea to society’s and academia’s ills. We are a group of scholars working to publish thoughtful, diverse scholarship that invites conversation and reflection.



Our trellis becomes a launching pad for drops that catch the light and make me dream of possibility.
(Photo by Nathaniel Bowler)

This is a story about resilience and possibility.

Well, now it's Monday afternoon, and I've been writing for many hours. The fall trees in my backyard are distorted by the raindrops that have landed on my window all day. Yet, their reds, greens, and yellows shine through. I want to invite Cushman, Baca, and García to found journals that publish the scholarship they want to see in the world. *constellations* was never meant to be the end all of cultural rhetorics scholarship. We are called "constellations: a cultural rhetorics publishing space" not "constellations: the cultural rhetorics publishing space" for a reason. I am conflict-adverse to a fault, so writing this has been an agonizing journey. Still, I'm glad I went on it because it allowed me to sit with Cushman, Baca, and García's critiques and begin to think about which of the points they make we will address moving forward as our journal grows.

And our journal will continue to grow. *College English* was founded in 1939. We published our first of four issues in 2018. We are a new publication, and our editorial team is made up of astoundingly sharp humans with gigantic hearts who dedicate endless hours of unpaid labor to the task of getting this journal off the ground. They (we) all embody multiple markers of diversity in terms of gender, race, sexuality, class, and disability. That diversity helps us tackle situations like this one with a multiplicity of ideas at our editorial meetings. Some of our attempts at solving issues work better than others, but we keep trying. And we will keep trying to address the critiques made by Cushman, Baca, and García in a such way that, when we see them (as we invariably will), we can look them in the eye, knowing we've turned what they had to say into something positive for the journal and for us.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Alexandra Hidalgo is an award-winning Venezuelan filmmaker, writer, theorist, memoirist, and editor whose documentaries have been official selections for film festivals in 15 countries and 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 2018 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*.

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