www.xchanges.org
Volume 19, Issue 1
Spring, 2025

Precarity and Negotiations of Racialized Identities of Two POC Grad Instructors in a PWI

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Introduction

Discussions of how race complicates the already complex dual role of student-instructor that graduate students take on are not new. Scholarship like Das, Flahive, Zhang, and Fariz (2023) and Alam (2024) highlight how race, alongside the authors' other intersecting identities (sexuality, disability, citizenship), adds additional considerations that graduate students of color need to navigate in their journeys in academia. With these ongoing conversations, we felt the importance of contributing our stories to the conversation as to shed more light on what we believe are important factors to consider regarding how race (and our other identities) shapes our experiences as graduate student-instructors of color. Our work, then, seeks to add to these conversations by discussing how we negotiate our racialized identities while balancing the responsibilities of the dual roles that we have as graduate student-instructors. Our goal in recounting our stories is to think through the precarity and vulnerability (both institutional and personal) we experience and how that has shaped our relationships to our identities as graduate student-instructors of color.

To situate our discussion, we plan to provide a brief introduction to ourselves and the context we are currently situated in as a way to offer some background for how we fit into the conversations about race and graduate student-instructors. We then plan to share some of our experiences as graduate student-instructors of color, utilizing scholarship to make sense of our stories, to showcase the complexities that race brings to our responsibilities and how that has shaped who we are within the student-instructor dual role. We conclude by discussing how we see our experiences complicating the dual role of student-instructor (with the goal of potentially connecting to those who feel similarly) in addition to further prompting discussion amongst administrators/faculty supporting graduate student-instructors about how to account for the additional challenges that graduate students of color encounter.

How We Come to This Work

Currently, both of us are PhD students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW-Madison), though our experiences beforehand have been drastically different. Matthew (Matt) is a mixed-race (Asian/Cantonese and Pacific Islander/CHamoru) person who grew up in California. His education spans across California with his K-12 education being in the San Francisco Bay Area; his undergraduate work being at the

University of California, Merced (UCM); and his master's work being at San Diego State University (SDSU). Across his education in California, Matt was consistently situated in spaces where he had peers and mentors of color which served as a support system. In addition, he also was supporting students of color during his time in higher education as both UCM and SDSU are Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs). The combination of a support system and working with students who had similar experiences to him has brought him to the field of rhetoric and composition. It also shaped his interests within the field as he focuses on anti-racist writing assessment and pedagogy inspired by the work of scholars like Baker-Bell (2020), Young (2010), and Inoue (2019). Now in his second year at UW-Madison, which is the first Primarily White Institution (PWI) he has been at, Matt still feels like he has a support system, finding mentors and peers of color alongside allies who do justice-oriented work.

Sujash is a Bangladeshi international student turned immigrant who became a citizen of the United States last year. He went through a Bangla medium education system in Bangladesh where he attended Ideal School in Dhaka. He briefly (for a few months) attended Dhaka University, until he received a scholarship to pursue his BA in English at a small liberal arts college (Truman State University) in Missouri. He later went on to pursue a master's degree in the same institution to teach high school English in rural Missouri. While teaching K-12 was not his original plan, he had no other choice but to work as part of a restrictive work permit extension of his student visa in order to stay in the US. A year later, he left teaching high school to pursue further graduate work at Missouri State University where he first taught first-year college writing and basic writing. There, he came across composition studies as a field. Now in his third year in the PhD program in Composition and Rhetoric at UW-Madison, Sujash is simultaneously teaching an intermediate composition course and working as an instructor at the UW-Madison Writing Center. His immigration experience has led him to pursuing his research interests in immigration rhetoric and institutional and affective violence in literacy.

Since we grew up in spaces where people looked like us, the shift to PWI spaces amplified our interest in discussions of race and its role in our graduate education. This interest would allow us to articulate our experiences better to those who might not come from the same backgrounds as us.

Sharing Our Stories

We utilize story as our means of reflecting on our experiences, taking inspiration from the work of Martinez (2016) with counterstories and, more specifically, González (2020), who emphasizes the importance of Critical Race Theory (CRT) counterstorying for graduate studies. In particular, González (2020) contends that "CRT counter-storytelling can leave room for students to witness, examine, and interrogate the ways in which their experiences in graduate studies are shaped by the larger discourses of power and privilege, and, in turn, expose and resist those discourses" (para. 15). We see

Gonzalez's (2020) claim as affirming/supportive to our approach of storytelling given that we want to further complicate the graduate student-instructor dual role via the use of race. By using counterstorying, then, we are making space for us to examine and interrogate the ways in which discourses of race circulate and come into contact with our experiences in our dual role.

With this in mind, we plan to share our stories, utilizing our own storytelling styles, which will be followed with an analysis section that synthesizes our work in relation to discussions of race in graduate student-instructor experiences. The ultimate goal of these stories is to locate additional precarity and vulnerability that we face as racialized graduate student-instructors at a PWI and bring them to the conversation for those that might share similar experiences.

How We Are Perceived

Sujash's story: I walk into the classroom on the first day of a new semester. Ten minutes early. Not as an international student this time. But as an instructor. A student from the same part of the world I am from (the Indian subcontinent) greets me as I take a chair next to him. It's ten minutes before class starts… He is relieved to see there is somebody like him in this class! We chat about what we are excited about this semester. I tell him I am excited about my coursework. He tells me he is nervous about keeping grades up. It's a first-year-writing class. Ten minutes go by. I walk up to the podium and open my backpack to get my laptop out and plug it into the overhead projector system. I hear a few students gasp and ask out loud, oh wait, you're the teacher?

Teaching writing as a Bangladeshi immigrant to the US has come with a mix bag of surprises, sometimes for me and sometimes for my students. The stereotype is that we only dig the sciences. Material, chemical, computer. If not that, at least, business or econ. Despite my childhood education (Bangladeshi equivalent of K-12) centering around the idea that someday we all become either doctor, engineer, or businessman, I turned out to be a teacher of writing. Even in America this idea has its echo.

At a PWI, there is this racialized immigrant identity that has been a Rorschach-like shadow that follows me around. To some this shadow causes a sigh of relief (oh, there are others like me), but for most it creates confusion (the administration asking for more paperwork to be able to employ).

Matt's story: Growing up, I always got questions of "so what are you?" to which my answers never sufficed. I would get things like "you aren't Chinese [because you don't look it]" or "I didn't even know Guam was a place." Being mixed-race, no one really ever could pinpoint who I was as I never fit their conceptions of what an Asian American or Pacific Islander looked like. While this slowly went away as I went through my education, these memories still haunt me as I got to teach. What are my students going

to think of me? I don't have a Canvas picture and my name is Matthew Louie; they might think, that's a white name so it must be a white professor. When I get into the classroom, are they going to have the same questions of "so what are you?" Though students never asked, how I was racialized (or in this case not fitting into

generalizations about either Asians or Pacific Islanders fully) made me feel always like I needed to be on the defensive. I need to prove that I am Asian American and Pacific Islander despite "not looking the part" to others.

While I feel like I have got the "proving myself" as an Asian American and Pacific Islander down now, I then had the other hurdle of now proving that I was a knowledgeable and legitimate instructor of writing and the questions again come back. I literally just convinced my students that I am Asian American and Pacific Islander, do I undermine all that by saying "oh, don't worry, I am knowledgeable about writing as I come from histories of colonization and immigration which were wrought with English-only/assimilative Policies?" I don't even know if students feel like they need this information but it feels important to me to think about it as I know I don't look like what they might perceive a writing instructor to look like.

Between our stories, the throughline is how the idea of what a writing instructor looks like is connected with whiteness. This normalization of whiteness takes a toll both through our external interactions with students (amongst other people) alongside the internal thoughts we engage with as we understand that people who look like us have historically not been in this role. These external and internal pressures are not isolated to us and are ideas that have been articulated before by other graduate students in similar contexts. For example, Lee (2023) and Sales (2020) both also engage with the responsibilities and perceptions that weigh on graduate student-instructors of color. In Lee's (2023) case, it is a matter of how race and identity come up against the normalization of whiteness and language experience as she details how being Asian, in addition to jumping between the student-instructor role, has impacted her perception of how equipped she is to teach native English speakers in her English composition course. Sales's (2020) work brings in the student side of things as he recounts the tensions of how "becoming successful as a person of color, as an immigrant, as an indigenous [sic], has historically looked a certain way" (para. 13). Being a graduate student in the humanities was not seen as part of the history around what becoming a successful person of color looks like.

Our stories combined with Lee's (2023), then, affirm how there is a normalization of the white body for instructors. Sales (2020) contributes further by highlighting how approximation of whiteness haunts perceptions of what graduate studies people of color have historically taken up to be deemed successful in the United States. These dissonances bring up how race factors into the graduate student-instructor dual role as, alongside the responsibilities that come with being a student and being an instructor, we are navigating the challenges of how racialization shapes the way we are perceived in these roles. This includes the combination of the "persuasion-work" we have to do to

justify why we have the authority to stand in front of a classroom, as people of color at a PWI, alongside the negotiation we need to engage in as we represent our identities as students and future scholars in rhetoric and composition.

Additional Labor and Stressors on POC Graduate Students

Sujash's story: As an international graduate teaching assistant, I have always felt like a cuckoo hatchling. In Bangladesh, we have a saying, "Kaaker Bashay Kokil," which translates to: an unwanted cuckoo in a family of crows. Cuckoo or the Kokil Pakhi doesn't build its nest; it lays its eggs in a crow's nest (Kaaker Basha). When the baby Kokil is finally born, the crow kicks the hatchling out because of its perceived difference. I would argue that the cuckoo hatchling and the racialized immigrant have a lot in common. As a graduate instructor, I have felt I needed to fit in just like the cuckoo hatchling among others. In my classroom I often felt challenged as a face of authority in front of my students, because of how I looked as a person of color, because of how I spoke English as a non-native speaker. As a student-instructor it was more than a duality, it was a multi-identity formed by my very different upbringing in academia, my vulnerability as a graduate student going through the bureaucratic hoops of immigration, my student-centered approach in teaching in which I was trying to reduce a tension stemming from student-teacher power dynamics. The teacher-student dual role in a grad program thus becomes much more complicated than a duality. However, pedagogically, this complex duality or multiplicity of identities instills in me an ethics of care (Gilligan, 2014) for my students, especially students coming from precarious backgrounds. Like Youssef (2023), I was often clueless as to what I was really doing in the classroom when it came to navigating cultural differences with my Native English Speaker Students (NESS). I resorted to sharing my anecdotes of my own student life in Bangladesh or asking them about their favorite memes. My motivation was to build an environment of care even if at times it felt silly.

As an immigrant, a racialized other, I always feel a constant fear or a precarity of being kicked out/deported due to any immigration paperwork oversight. I came to America in 2012 as an international student pursuing a bachelor's degree. Since then, surviving through institutional and affective violences disguised as assimilative measures, I have come to realize how racialized identities like mine are under constant scrutiny. I would argue that one could call this affective alienation a "cuckoo hatchling syndrome." Despite me somewhat fitting in as a teacher of writing through innumerable training sessions and orientations, it has been challenging to teach as a graduate teaching assistant with a racialized immigrant identity, due to either a "hypervisibility" (Cedillo, 2020) because of paperwork and or an "invisibility" in the national conversations on higher education. I am simultaneously hyper visible, in the context of my immigration process in which I had to lay my private life bare to this nation's bureaucratic authority, and invisible due to a lack of healthy representation of folks like me in academia.

Matt's story: After getting big into linguistic justice as a way to support students but also as a means of starting my own language reclamation journey, I jumped on every linguistic justice project available to me. During my undergrad, this was easy as I had ample free time to do this work between the non-session project time at the University Writing Center and outside of my courses. This, however, changed when I started grad school. Workload went up, we started engaging with more theory which I was not in the practice of reading, and on top of all of this I was teaching for the first time. I didn't adjust well. I ran myself into the ground trying to balance everything while trying to continue my engagement with linguistic justice when I could. "If not me, a person of color, then who?" I thought to myself continuously. By the time I was engaging in larger seminar projects (and eventually my master's thesis) it felt like I had nothing else to give. This burnout resulted in now haunting memories of not speaking up to discuss how "standard English" as the goal of FYC is problematic or not feeling I gave students enough background on how they can leverage their linguistic repertoires. I felt guilty that I didn't do/say anything but was reassured that the work that I did do, especially with my students, was enough as many of them faced linguistic discrimination so they easily connected the scholarship and discussions to their lived experiences.

After moving to UW-Madison, however, I was faced with a new challenge. No longer was my classroom primarily composed of students of color, many of whom were multilingual. Many of the students I have now come from backgrounds in which English was the only language they spoke. The readings and activities I had prior now take up different meaning as the connection was no longer that of lived experiences but the experiences of others. I wasn't intimidated in bringing up the conversation but I was certainly fearful of being the person who first introduces the topic of linguistic justice to many of my students. I questioned myself, am I going to represent the topic, right? Am I going to approach it in a way that engages with meaningful discomfort without causing students who might not be familiar with the connections between language and race to foreclose themselves from learning about the issue? It felt like a spiral of more and more questions on top of these. My fears of burnout as a result of these questions started to kick in as I was building the lesson plan to discuss linguistic justice. Ultimately, from what I gathered, the lesson was well received though even now I am still worried about what happens if, in the future, I misstep because of burnout, an off day, or something else? Will I tarnish students' perspective on the topic ultimately pushing them away from the topic entirely? Will I be failing the amazing scholars that inspired my interest in linguistic justice like Baker-Bell (2020), Young (2010), and Inoue (2019)? I guess it comes down to this: as a person of color whose experiences are connected to linguistic discrimination (via my family's experiences with language), opening unfamiliar students' orientations to the topic and providing students who have experienced linguistic discrimination the representation they deserve is extremely important to me and I want to get it right.

While we have different experiences, our work points to the additional emotional labor that weighs on us (like the trauma of going to the US citizenship process in Sujash's case) or we feel compelled to take up given our racialized identities (such as Matt

wanting to ensure he best represents the linguistic justice scholarship). This emotional labor we are doing is amplified because we are situated at a PWI and the complexities that come with working with students. We acknowledge the emotional labor that comes with interacting with students is not something isolated to our discussion about race and graduate student-instructors but we still want to add greater nuance surrounding the interactions that being racialized has on our positions as graduate student-instructors of color.

Sujash's experiences converse well to the work of Alam (2024) who discusses similar concerns about his potential interactions with students given his precarity as a graduate student on a F-1 visa trying to discuss race in the classroom. In both the case of Alam (2024) and Sujash, there are very justified reasons to avoid difficult conversations in the classroom like race, navigating cultural differences, and managing the hauntings of their respective precarious positions. Nevertheless, both of them are compelled to take up this emotional labor to resist reinforcing the centrality of whiteness in their writing classrooms and, more importantly, best support all their students. For Alam (2024), he felt compelled to talk about race in the classroom because of its potential to allow for students of color to have the room to share their experiences and white students to gain some more in-depth understanding of race. For Sujash, this was wanting to ensure that he could provide a caring classroom for his students. Their work highlights the emotional labor happening for them as, despite their work with the precarious positions they find themselves in, both as a result of their racialization and citizen status, they feel responsible for resisting hegemonic structures that normalize the white body and lack of care in the classroom.

Matt's story also emphasizes his desire to best support his students though from a less precarious position as someone who did not have to engage with visas and/or the immigration process. In his case, Matt's story speaks to the ways in which emotional labor is amplified for racialized graduate student-instructors at PWIs because being one of the only people of color in the room requires the additional work of covering difficult topics surrounding race, like linguistic justice, while also attempting to avoid becoming what students believe is the definitive voice on a topic so nuanced. This challenge and emotional labor are things that we see paralleling the experiences that Randall (2019) discusses, though we know there are additional intersecting identities that make her experiences different. In particular, she highlights her experiences being asked about topics that involve race and being happy she cultivated a community in which her students felt comfortable asking but also weighed down by the additional emotional labor she would have to bring to the classroom as a graduate student-instructor. Both Randall (2019) and Matt, then, showcase how emotional labor as a result of racialization manifests in the classroom and the complexities that come with it as discussing these topics both adds additional emotionally heavy work but also can disrupt students' perceptions of how race functions in the United States alongside offering some validation and representation for students of color.

Conclusion

In sharing our stories, our goal was not to make generalizations about the experiences of graduate student-instructors of color, suggest race is the most important/only dimension to consider, or just show the challenges we face. Instead, we wanted to bring more attention to the additional considerations to the student-instructor dual role that graduate students navigate through the lens of race. Here, we have highlighted two considerations that have been important to us: our feelings of needing to "prove" our legitimacy and fit as writing instructors, given our racialized identity, alongside the emotional labor that we are also navigating that sits partially outside of the purview of both roles of student and instructor. We argue that our examples highlight a kind of additional labor that becomes normalized for racialized people and adds to the complexity of the dual graduate student-instructor identity. This additional labor is tied to not only adjusting to the responsibilities and the white racial habitus that we need to partially embody in graduate school but our lived realities impacting us outside the classroom as well (e.g. Sujash's immigration process and Matt's identity building as a mixed-race person in the diaspora). This additional labor will vary across all racialized graduate student-instructors as each of us have unique lived experiences based on the intersections of our identities but we argue that it is necessary to consider how discussions of this labor can fit into graduate curriculum/training to help racialized students navigate their studies, teaching, and livelihoods.

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