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Unease with a Face of Certainty: A Personal Rhetorical History of My Imposter Syndrome

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Introduction

At a conference, I sit next to fellow panelists. Because our session is small, we create a circle to discuss. I often dread these circles. I sometimes hope someone will ask me a question—so that I have an excuse to speak.

I've been conditioned to believe (some way or another) that speaking in these circles grants you validity. I've been conditioned to believe that articulating my thoughts in a complex way lets others know I'm supposed to be here. I feel I know what I'm talking about. I just need to be asked something. Or else I wouldn't say anything at all.

Time passes, and no questions are asked. The conversation continues while I sit quietly, nodding along, but also listening for a moment to say something. I don't find one.

Even several years into my graduate studies, I still fear my place is questioned. Those who feel this way get an itching feeling that we do not quite belong, finding excuses to validate how we got in; somehow it was a fluke. We compare ourselves. We are *never* doing enough. When I complete my graduate work, I suspect I will feel similar as a new PhD, feeling that I cannot say "I'm a graduate student" when I am unsure of something or if I make a mistake. I am afraid this feeling will never truly go away.

In my experience, however, what goes unexamined is the positionality of those who feel like an imposter. Throughout my academic journey, examining my cultural background and upbringing as to why I feel this way was an interrogation I *did not* like to do, but I have read enough to believe that one's culture can in fact play a role in feelings of inadequacy: Young (2004) and Villanueva (1993) come to mind. Despite my reading of these scholars, I still believed my marginalization had no relation to my successes or failures. No excuses: bootstrap mentality. I can do it if I just try. As an Asian Pacific American, I have been shown this through the model minority myth, through my family, through media. It has taken me far too long, I think, to investigate these notions further. Villanueva (1993) writes that "the bootstraps break before the boots are on, that too many have no boots" (p. xiv), and I admit that I have had the privilege of possessing a decent pair.

I hope to reconsider how my place in academia is located within a larger personal rhetorical history, one that links aspects of my family and their own experiences to my feelings of uncertainty. To do this, I employ the personal as it “contributes to understanding the multiple locations we occupy as researchers, teachers, and citizens” (Young, 2004, p. 16). Additionally, as an emerging academic of color, I find reassurance in these types of scholarship, yet I also believe building networks and having mentors that understand your experience (even just a little bit) is crucial in this business.

Recognizing Community Cultural Wealth

In a graduate seminar, I take out the response paper I wrote regarding Delgado and Stefancic (2012). I look at it, highlighter in hand, marking the potential parts that I feel comfortable sharing. I still have trouble speaking in class, despite all the things I want to say. People have told me that it comes with time. It comes with vocabulary and from practice. But whenever I say something, it seems like nonsense. My voice shakes. I think, it comes from making a fool out of myself.

For the majority of my time in graduate school, I have had a fixed notion of what success looks like. Present at everything. Submit to journals to publish. Speak in class. Push back against what the professor says. Challenge the text. I have tried to fit into some of these aspects throughout my time as a graduate student, though I cannot say I have always felt the impulse to pursue them all. I find much value in these characteristics, yet I also recognize that doing so potentially overlooks what Yosso (2005) calls “community cultural wealth” (p. 69). These “knowledge[s], skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color” shift hegemonic notions of power so that they may “survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression” (p. 77). In other words, there is value in my decisions to *not* chase such professional development. Such assets and narratives as these contribute to individuals feeling like “empowered participants, hearing their own stories and the stories of others, listening to how the arguments against them are framed and learning to make arguments to defend themselves” (p. 75). Just as I ask students to interrogate their own narratives, I think it is about time I take a closer look at mine, especially as these feelings of imposter syndrome continue to be part of that story.

A Glance Back

My mother comes from a family of educators in the Philippines. Graduating with a bachelor’s degree in elementary education from Northern Luzon Teacher’s College (now MMSU) in the Philippines, she taught fifth and sixth grades. Her mother and father: also teachers in Ilocos Norte, a province in northern Philippines. However, after immigrating to the United States, my mother decided teaching was not for her, fearing the students would be too challenging to teach—not to mention the extra schooling she would have to complete because of the different requirements for her degree.

My father grew up on Hawai'i. After completing high school, he would attend community college shortly before dropping out and pursuing the hard labor and apprenticeship of boiler making. His mother, a native Hawaiian, worked as a waitress. His father, an immigrant from the Philippines, worked on the plantations in Hawai'i, working long hours, providing for three boys.

This reflection helps make sense of the community wealth capital I have, and it displays the boots given to me. Within this same symposium, Fischer, Rosche, and McCool (2020) relate a similar sentiment: as three white women, how do their positionalities simultaneously marginalize and empower them? Likewise, González (2020) acknowledges a comparable response to mine: how does being a male contribute to how we navigate the field? Both pieces recognize that with this awareness, "it is also our duty to help others cultivate their scholarly ethē; we must interrupt, advocate, and relate not only for ourselves, but for—and with—all persons who exist in marginalized spaces" (Fischer et al., 2020, "Conclusion").

There is no teacher gene, but Yosso (2005) "refers to those cultural knowledges nurtured among *familia* (kin) [as] carry[ing] a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition" (p. 79). This "familial capital" (Yosso, 2005, p. 79) becomes apparent on my mother's side and continues on with my father's educational journey—or lack thereof. A look back at his history (and his immigrant father) allows me to see how I fit in this rhetorical history. One that values hard labor and working hard. Both parents telling some sort of immigrant story. Stories such as these are important as I seek to understand narratives that are a part of me. In this symposium, Gonzalez (2020) utilizes "counterstory" within his piece as well, explaining how its usage "reveal[s] the untold stories of racism, inequity, and injustice, as they are mobilized upon people of color" ("Introduction"). In regard to my own experience, I can recognize its power as it allows me a slightly clearer picture of why I may feel inadequate in such spaces, and as Gonzalez (2020) explains further, this is especially powerful, "as [counterstories] infiltrate certain spaces like graduate studies in rhetoric in composition" ("Introduction").

In regard to my own imposter syndrome, I think a combination of feeling an obligation to keep up the tradition of a hard-working person of color and recognizing that I am one of the (if not first) few in my immediate family to get this far in education are driving factors. Somewhere along the way, I decided to pursue a field that "a good number of people might think useless" (Nguyen, 2017, para. 11), especially my immigrant mother and native Hawaiian father. Although proud and supportive of me now, my parents were not always so keen on my decision to take up the humanities. When I was younger, I would get frustrated, but I have learned to appreciate their commentary, as it speaks to their experience and indirectly illustrates the struggle and lifestyle they had to endure.

Becoming successful as a person of color, as an immigrant, as an indigenous, has historically looked a certain way. Pulling yourself up by the bootstraps and gaining financial stability: this has been synonymous with legitimacy in this country—for valid citizenship. I cannot be frustrated with their view on that. But I can push for “revisions that must take place within American culture to account for the literacy and rhetorical practices of people of color” (Young, 2004, p. 7). Nevertheless, perhaps my feelings of inadequacy stem from this need to prove my own legitimacy in their story. Not to prove them wrong per se, but to continue on a legacy of their American narrative, one that takes influence from theirs and re-envisions it, allowing fluidity of what success looks like. And I think my parents are coming along to this flexibility.

Conclusion

As emerging scholars, we may not know how to approach situations that speak to our cultural experiences, and for some (not all), we can find comfort in the familiar—at least until we can fully understand the struggles we face, and how to create space so that those unfamiliar spaces feel more and more our own. Mentorship, therefore, in any capacity is particularly important as it can reassure individuals who feel out of place.

The opportunities for mentorship in our field should increase. However, how would we do this without furthering the burden that these potential mentors already carry? Yes, as graduate students, we know who some of these scholars are; we are assigned to read them, after all. Approaching and talking with them are different matters. For some of us, it is simply more difficult than marching right up to them and introducing ourselves.

The caucuses provide a good starting point for those new scholars who flourish more in smaller group settings. My brief experience with the Conference on College Composition and Communication’s Asian/Asian American Caucus (AAAC) has been extremely helpful, and what I found meaningful were the stories and personal histories that were shared. I think the field can benefit from learning from the rhetorical history of scholars who are willing to share. While meeting scholars is a worthwhile experience, I also believe learning *about* scholars’ journeys (especially those that may identify with a marginalized community) can influence upcoming academics.

I return to one of Yosso’s (2005) forms of capital through community cultural wealth: “aspirational capital” (p. 77). She describes it as “the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers” (p. 77). For some, those barriers take the form of not having boots that have stepped foot on that road to graduate education. For some of us, we take the boots that were given and continue to tread, finding others who have taken it upon themselves to continue that “culture of possibility” (Yosso, 2005, p. 78).

At an AAAC sponsored session, I sit at yet another circle. But something is different here. We share stories of feeling like a foreigner in places where we shouldn't. We question what it means to be "Asian Pacific American." How it is fluid, not fixed. How we all sit in a rhetorical history that shouldn't ignore the past. I open my mouth to speak at what feels like a good time. My voice still shakes. I'm still nervous—but promising nods guide me, and I feel a little stronger. A little less of a fool.

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