

Racial Imposter Syndrome, White Presenting, and Burnout in the One-Shot Classroom

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I am a cis-gendered, white passing, able bodied, biracial settler woman of Sri Lankan and English ancestry. I currently live and work as an uninvited but grateful guest on the traditional territory of the Syilx Okanagan Peoples in what is now known as Kelowna, British Columbia. I am also grateful to have been a guest on the traditional territories of the Anishinaabek, Haudenosaunee, Lūnaapéewak, and Chonnonton Nations, on lands connected with the London Township and Sombra Treaties of 1796 and the Dish with One Spoon Covenant Wampum Nations, in what is now known as London Ontario where I was born and raised, and completed both of my degrees. I strive and commit to learning, unlearning, reflecting, and being humble as I grow in my knowledge, understanding, and actions towards my part in decolonization and reconciliation.

Author Positionality

Racial imposter syndrome [RIS] is difficult to define, as it is hard “to nail down exactly what makes someone feel like a “racial imposter” due to its being subjective to the individual and their lived experiences.¹ To define it from a broader sense, “[i]mposter syndrome is a psychological term that refers to a pattern of behavior wherein people (even those with adequate external evidence of success) doubt their abilities and have a persistent fear of being exposed as a fraud.”² While feelings of imposter syndrome [IS] can be attributed as negative, acknowledging their existence can be used to critique the structures that enable them to occur.³ For people from mixed racial backgrounds, who may not look racialized, or have the cultural experiences of their backgrounds, RIS can show up as the belief that they do not have a right to claim or present that identity.

As the previous quote points out, even knowing we have the “right” to claim space or identities, we can consistently feel doubt about how much we can assert that right when our identity does not align with our appearance. This feeling can lead to facade trauma, described as the emotional fatigue of BIPOC women, where the individual perception of “how others view them is exhausting and wears on their wellbeing.”⁴ As a self-proclaimed racial imposter [RI], this represents the core issue of identity in the one-shot classroom, the exhaustion that comes with constantly thinking about how others perceive my racial identity, whether or not they think that identity is justified, and how much explanation I can or should provide about it.

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I constantly experience the fatigue of feeling that I am not *enough* of a racialized person to claim that identity. This disconnect between how people see me—the identity that they place on me (white)—and how I identify myself (not-white) is exhausting. This is most evident in conversations around my name: why is that your name? Or, when I share my background, why are you not darker skinned? I have spent much of my life anticipating reactions to myself, my name, and my identity. At the same time, I acknowledge that, as a white-passing person, I benefit from a tremendous amount of privilege; I recognize that my experiences of racism and bias are heavily filtered through this; therefore, sitting at the intersection of races and cultures makes it difficult for me to feel a part of any particular one.⁵

I bring this with me into the one-shot classroom. Walking into any classroom can be intimidating, even when you have done it many times before. After eight years of teaching, I still get nervous being in front of a class. More specifically, I assume that students see me as a white woman, that this is the identity they place on me. As a result, I have been unsure of how to present myself in these spaces, whether it is okay to identify as not-white while experiencing white privilege, if I am taking up too much space outlining my identity in the one-shot classroom, and whether it benefits anyone but myself to make that identity clear.

I do feel a responsibility to bring a part of my racial self into the classroom. This is partially for the students who may not see themselves reflected in these spaces, but also for me to claim some of that space for myself. I feel motivated to state my identity at the start of class and to connect that identity to the information literacy classroom as a place for myself and students to bring their lived experiences and knowledge into the work. I want to use my time in that space to facilitate conversations and explore topics that recognize and identify the flaws and inherent inequities within the library and academia. However, the time constraints of the one-shot, and providing a session that serves all students equally, makes the flaws of the one-shot clear. For me, the performative nature of it requires a level of authenticity that is often not true to my racial identity and in fact condones the white supremacist structure of academia. I persistently wonder why I should even try to take up this space, which leads to exhaustion and burnout.

Compounded by my RIS, this burnout, emotional fatigue, and depersonalization has led to some cynicism. I do not feel that what I am doing in these one-shots is meaningful or valuable in many contexts, in addition to feeling like I cannot bring my identity into the space without taking up time. It is a challenge when you want to do more, but also worry that you instead could be inhibiting student learning by repeating surface level skills training.⁶ Considering these factors and the volume of one-shots I teach (70–100 each year), it is no wonder that I feel burnout.

So what am I moved to do then as a RI? I do see an opportunity to leave breadcrumbs in my teaching, through what I say and show in these sessions. Examples of breadcrumbs can be seen throughout the literature: through what examples are shown,⁷ presenting problems,⁸ and questioning authority in information sources.⁹ I use some of these strategies, but I also make intentional comments in the classroom to let students know that there is more to unpack than what I am showing them.

For example, I often teach the peer-review process and the role it plays in identifying “quality” of sources. I like to talk about the white, Eurocentric focus that it often takes. I only say a couple sentences about this, often cloaked in humor, and encourage students to reach out to me if they want to learn more. And some do! This is not a big thing—it may seem like

the smallest of things—but introducing the idea of who gets to participate and whose voices are represented is meaningful for me. The second approach is when talking about authority of sources. Students quickly identify academics as an authority they should be using for their work. I attempt to use this to introduce the idea that lived experience and community knowledge are other forms of authority. Again, these are not big ideas. These are small breadcrumbs that I hope give students a sense that there is more to explore within their assignments and outside of the classroom.

As an educator and someone with RIS, leaving these breadcrumbs does a lot for me. The constraints of the one-shot make it difficult to engage students beyond the surface level. By inserting these small opportunities to think beyond what the library has to offer at face value, I am able to push the boundaries of what it means to be in the one-shot space as a multiracial person.

All of this is to say that who we are in the classroom is complicated. Bringing our full selves is impossible, often not safe, and not something we should feel required to give up in a structure that does not value thoughtful, intentional, and integrated instruction. Leaving these breadcrumbs is one way that I have found space to signal my own values, identity, and critiques of what can be done in a one-shot. This helps to ease some of that tension and emotional exhaustion I feel by knowing that the one-shot does not do what we hope it does in terms of providing meaningful learning opportunities for information literacy.

Notes

1. Leah Donella, “‘Racial Impostor Syndrome’: Here Are Your Stories,” NPR Code Switch (Jan. 17, 2018), para. 1, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2018/01/17/578386796/racial-impostor-syndrome-here-are-your-stories>.
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3. Maddie Breeze, “Impostor Syndrome as a Public Feeling,” in *Feeling Academic in the Neoliberal University: Feminist Flights, Fights and Failures*, eds. Yvete Taylor and Kinneret Lahad (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 192.
4. Kayli Evans, “Facade Trauma: Reimagining Impostor Syndrome in BIPOC Women Graduate Students,” California State University, (2021), 93, <https://scholarworks.calstate.edu/downloads/5q47rt649>.
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6. Christina Maslach and Micahel Leiter, “Understanding the Burnout Experience: Recent Research and Its Implications for Psychiatry,” *World Psychiatry* 15, no. 2 (2016): 103, <https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20311>; Nicole Pagowsky, “The Contested One-Shot: Deconstructing Power Structures to Imagine New Futures,” *College & Research Libraries* 82, no. 3 (May 2021): 301, <https://crl.acrl.org/index.php/crl/article/view/24912>.
7. Maria T. Accardi, *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2013), 37.
8. Heidi L.M. Jacobs, “Posing the Wikipedia ‘Problem’: Information Literacy and the Praxis of Problem-Posing in Library Instruction,” in *Critical Library Instruction: Theories & Methods*, eds. Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alane Kumbier (Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2010), 186.
9. Katelyn Angell and Eamon Tewell, “Teaching and Un-teaching Source Evaluation: Questioning Authority in Information Literacy Instruction,” *Communications in Information Literacy* 11, no. 1 (2017): 102, <https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/comminfolit/vol11/iss1/5/>.