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Relating Our Experiences: The Practice of Positionality Stories in Student-Centered Pedagogy

Based in instructors' embodied perspectives, *positionality stories* are a critical methodology that opens space for students to consider academic counternarratives that contest educational conditions and assumptions. Sharing two stories here, we illustrate how educators might use these to help students from marginalized communities develop connections with teachers and navigate academia.

Nearly fifty years ago, Paulo Freire called for a critical pedagogy in which dialectics between teachers and students become a liberating force based in real-world experiences (*Pedagogy*). Since then, composition scholars have argued that instructor-centered pedagogies may have serious negative impact on learning, oftentimes promoting student discontent and passivity (Murray; Macrorie, *Uptaught*; Elbow, *Writing without Teachers*; Howell). Our field “since 1960 increasingly has centered on students—in all their diverse plumages—embedded in the ecosystems of their experiences” (Sullivan 367). Nonetheless, as teachers we know that framing instructor-centered

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and student-centered pedagogies as dyadic methods can be a problematic oversimplification. There are times when centering the teacher's experience may contribute to a student-centered pedagogy in productive and useful ways. In this article, we take up one move that teachers can, and oftentimes do, make in the classroom—the sharing of stories about their own lived experiences—to show how such a practice centers the teacher situationally while centering students functionally. These stories, which we deem *positionality stories*, allow instructors to present academic counternarratives that contest educational conditions and assumptions while opening space for students to consider their own positionality within the academy. In these ways, positionality stories generate critical dialogue that is especially accommodating of students from marginalized backgrounds, fostering conditions such as those underscored by advocates of critical pedagogy.

Positionality stories must be practiced critically and carefully; they are not casual attempts at empathy or identification—oppressive or colonial moves when undertaken from a privileged perspective. Instead, they are open invitations to student-teacher dialogue that constellate the instructor within a network of potential resources from which students may draw as they see fit. Particularly for students whose backgrounds do not reflect traditional notions of academic identity, positionality stories may offer a way to self-position within the classroom and academia as a whole. That is, positionality stories can provide students with opportunities to move away from self-impressions of deficit that arise from assumptions that instructors are “naturally” assimilated into educational cultures. When teachers share positionality stories with students, they can highlight the tensions accompanying the difficult process of academic acculturation and invite students to confront and contest often-unquestioned norms that bolster feelings of “dis-belonging” (Erevelles 2157).

Positionality stories prove a useful instructional praxis—one that allows us to build trust with students—by facilitating generative learning moments for both students and teachers and fostering student reflection and agency as students need on their own terms. Below, we share two stories that illustrate the usefulness of positionality stories to student-centered composition pedagogy. These stories stem from our time teaching first-year composition at two different institutions (Christina at the University of Houston–Clear Lake and Phil at Michigan State University). In each of our courses, we provided positionality stories for all our students, but

we found that our positionality stories particularly facilitated generative relationships with two specific students (Mariana and Mike, respectively¹). Based on our experiences, we argue that teachers should strive to create invitational classroom spaces through increased relatability and relationality between themselves and students. We suggest that a purposeful cultural rhetorics-based centering of a teacher's positionality allows us to use powerful counterstories to remind students of the importance of embodiment and orientation in all situations.

Story and Student-Centered Pedagogy

Using mainstream student-centered pedagogies such as collaborative learning and “pedagogies of charity,”² composition teachers attempt to meet students where they are while improving upon already present skills (Bruffee; Porter). We suggest that the use of story as theorized within cultural rhetorics purposefully can aid in these aims. Some mainstream approaches engage story for various classroom purposes, but its use in cultivating student-teacher relationships is not always a primary focus. For example, Caroline Pari created an “open” syllabus for a basic writing course in which students wrote to legislators about policies that directly affected them and their communities by sharing personal stories (23–33). Others teach students to use stories to develop personal voices with power (Coles; Macrorie, “To Be Read”; Stewart; Elbow, *Writing with Power*). Ira Shor describes his use of story in terms of student-teacher negotiations that “invite students to take the most active role while the teacher restrains her or his verbal profile” (30). Such uses of story bolster student agency, empowerment, and presence. However, we believe that teachers also have important stories to tell about their own experiences, especially those from marginalized or disadvantaged backgrounds that reflect those of their students. And, we believe that by sharing their stories, teachers can help students understand composition as a process of establishing relationships through language rather than a matter of producing prescribed texts.

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While story is not a new concept in the discipline and praxis of composition, we believe that mainstream student-centered pedagogies would

benefit from acknowledging the work story has done within cultural rhetorics-based composition and research. Some scholars have long engaged story vis-à-vis research practices that have influenced cultural rhetorics (Royster; Vizenor; Powell; Journet; Royster and Kirsch), including the practice of story as an Indigenous research method (Wilson; Trimble et al.; Kovach; Smith; Riley-Mukavetz; King et al.) and a common approach among communities of color (Anzaldúa; Moraga; Moraga and Anzaldúa). We build

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from and contribute to this work by situating positionality stories within a long and vital history too often neglected by traditional research. As a research method, story in cultural rhetorics “may not be the kinds of stories you’re used to hearing, or the

kinds of things you’re used to recognizing as story” (Powell et al. 1.1). Story also serves as a way of speaking truth to power, providing alternative accounts from marginalized perspectives (Villanueva; Martinez; Price). We find the practice of story to be not only conducive to epistemological and ontological concerns, but necessary for bringing to the forefront embodiments and power dynamics for a number of cultural positions and situations. We suggest that positionality stories can broaden the ecology of the learning space, bridging the critical distance between educational spaces and the everyday realities of students and instructors in meaningful ways.

How Positionality Stories Work

A positionality story differs from an uncritical use of story in educational settings by emphasizing that meaning is constructed through interaction and in context; in other words, meaning is relational and must be understood as such lest we make assumptions about where students are coming from and what they need. As a method and pedagogy, story benefits in particular from integrating positionality. Within composition studies, scholars (Brandt et al.; Chiseri-Strater; Grobman) have addressed positionality within the context of research, similar to what Jeffrey T. Grabill suggests as a research stance: “a position or a set of beliefs and obligations that help shape how one acts as a researcher” (211). Most notably, however, philosopher Linda Alcoff discusses positionality as a concept that should not fall within the limitations of essentialism and nominalism but should bring

forth an understanding of complex subjectivity. She theorizes positionality as “identity relative to a constantly shifting context, to a situation that includes a network of elements involving others, the objective economic conditions, cultural and political institutions and ideologies, and so on” (“Cultural Feminism” 433). For Alcoff, positionality is based in specific, albeit fluid, contexts, and it can be used strategically to create and critique divergent interpretations of meaning, rather than simply being a location where already determined meaning is uncovered (434). Alcoff’s argument evokes a notion of agency, which, as she points out later in *Visible Identities*, must be coupled with materiality in order to circumvent overemphasis on agency as interpretation (145–46). It is important to note this connection because notions of positionality can be enforced by those with authority even when they run counter to how we view ourselves (Butler 33). Since we perform different positionalities in diverse social interactions at all times, we as teachers must ensure that we do not impose presumed positionalities on our students. Instead, by showing how we construe our own positionality, we can invite students to interpret and make use of their own.

In addition, we propose that stories that highlight positionality, coupled with the positionality of the storyteller, can help destabilize many of the dominant narratives with which students from marginalized communities must contend as they enter academia. In that way, positionality stories draw from Aja Y. Martinez’s critical race theory (CRT) work and counterstory. Martinez writes, “As an interdisciplinary method, CRT counterstory recognizes that the experiential and embodied knowledge of people of color is legitimate and critical to understanding racism that is often well disguised in the rhetoric of normalized structural values and practices” (69). While CRT counterstory brings attention to issues of racial discrimination and those affected by them, she notes that counterstory is amenable to articulating the experiences of other marginalized groups (66). Along those lines, we present positionality stories as a means to challenge the academy’s dominant beliefs, assumptions, knowledges, and values as they relate to different forms of bias and identity avoidance. That is, positionality stories are implicit enactments of counterstory. Moreover, positionality stories are well suited to make space for identities not readily identifiable, such as disability or class. Class, according to a number of scholars (hooks; Russo and Linkon), is an often neglected cultural marker—typically not “visible” in obvious ways—or “somehow already covered” (Russo and Linkon 5) in

comparison to the attention given to “race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender” (5). And while teachers may turn to composition scholarship that offers ideas about working-class identity and students in the writing classroom or academia (Kutz and Roskelly; Brodkey; Shor; Linkon; Seitz; DeGenaro), they may also take up positionality stories as one way to engage social class frankly in classroom discussions, to expose the myth that everyone in college is middle class, and to spark conversations about poverty, access, and social justice. Likewise, teachers can use positionality stories to bring to the forefront another kind of “invisible” identity—disability—without calling on students to reveal more than they may feel comfortable doing.

As evident in our positionality stories below, we do not merely offer stories about our own backgrounds to demonstrate empathy for students or to show that we, too, “have been there.” Rather, we do so purposefully to provide students with opportunities to perceive alternatives to dominant narratives about how they might fit into higher education and about teachers as consummate experts rather than individuals who interpret knowledge in relation to their identities and those of others. Thus, positionality stories attempt to make space to contest whiteness, straightness, maleness, eliteness, and other dominant positions as default norms that students oftentimes must strive to emulate, revealing these instead as intersecting locations of interpretation among many. While we do not have the space to delineate all of the multidisciplinary scholarship here on intersectionality (Wallace; Gonçalves; Erevelles and Minear), a framework theorized by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in the late 1980s and early 1990s, we stress that the practice of positionality stories requires a kind of intersectional lens in orientation.

Finally, the use of positionality stories complicates critiques that suggest that student-centered pedagogies impugn a teacher’s authority or status in the classroom and other social interactions. Student-centered pedagogy has been criticized as an ideal too abstract to be implemented effectively and for “privileging” student knowledge at the expense of instructor expertise. Connecting it to a postmodernist tendency to question the correctness of interpretation, Susan Ostrov Weisser argues that “student-centered pedagogy combines postmodern deconstructions of truth and anti-authoritarian impulses” (30). She suggests that students may now feel freer to question their instructors’ competence and regard all analyses as equally authoritative. Ann O. Watters warns that student-centered

pedagogies can lead to increased “devaluation of instructor expertise, not to mention authority, and the assumption that all opinions are equal and equally valid, rather than that all have equal rights to express opinions” (58). Marshall Gregory also confirms that student-centered learning environments may create a level of comfort that undermines teacher authority: “When students . . . think that a given teacher is requiring too much work or grades too hard or assigns boring readings, they take it as a student right to make these judgments about the teacher. Furthermore, students with an unconscious assumption of their status as the court of final authority believe that they can judge categorically and unequivocally” (67). In order for positionality stories to function effectively, they ever so briefly center the teacher in the moment and rely on students seeing their teacher as a figure *with*, rather than *of*, authority gained through both personal experience and academic learning. As a result, teachers can potentially begin to build trust with their students.

Building trust through positioning ourselves as figures with the necessary expertise can assist students to grow as writers and rhetors. We recognize the need to educate students regarding compelling arguments. However, we also recognize that students’ individual experiences shape their analytical processes and actually aim to cultivate those “anti-authoritarian impulses” that lead our students to question inured viewpoints. This is especially crucial for students from marginalized backgrounds whose epistemologies and knowledge-making processes are too often invalidated by dominant culture norms. We must be willing to forego a position of absolute authority to build knowledge with our students and center their real-world needs and goals to make writing relevant to their lives. We believe that positionality stories help us do so.

Conceding some measure of academic agency to our students is crucial. Freire tells us that people without privilege learn to distrust their own lived and hard-won knowledges. As students note the social advantages of cultural capital, they may experience “an irresistible attraction towards the oppressors and their way of life,” seeking to take on the trappings of the dominant class; they can come to see themselves as “ignorant” and as having little valuable knowledge to share with others (*Pedagogy* 62–63). Their belief in the infallibility of the oppressor dissolves when they are able to see another side, when they “see examples of the vulnerability of the oppressor so that a contrary conviction can begin to grow within them”

(64). While few instructors would willingly deem themselves “oppressors,” teacher-centered as well as student-centered pedagogies can easily reinscribe hegemonic norms and goals. Pedagogies that do not take the needs and aims of our students into account can enable at the microlevel aspects of colonialism, bodily regulation, and domination. Furthermore, because students from marginalized backgrounds may not easily identify with their instructors and may find the quality of their interaction with their instructors lacking (Guiffrida), they may be dissuaded from seeking much-needed assistance in laying out and striving to meet their individually determined goals. Thus, positionality stories are a way to demonstrate a productive vulnerability—one way that invites students to see their instructors as also learners whose expertise is both the result of an extensive lived process and potentially achievable by others.

In what follows, we share two teaching stories based in our respective positionalities, identifying as a Chicana professor (Christina) and a white working-class male (and at the time a PhD student) (Phil). These stories illustrate how Christina connected with Mariana, a Latina nontraditional student from South Central Los Angeles who balanced school with work and a family, and Phil connected with Mike, a nineteen-year-old Black man from Detroit who faced the challenge of finding his place and sense of belonging in college. These teaching stories show how positionality stories influence notions of orientation and what generative spaces might open for reflection on embodiment, difference, and diverse experiences. Then, we briefly connect positionality stories to other methods that draw our attention to the relevance of everyday experience to writing and in the writing classroom. Based in this understanding, we suggest that positionality stories facilitate adaptation of our teaching to the lived needs of our students and render us more accessible to students as both models of and resources for learning. In addition, because positionality stories are not intended to function as a one-sided practice, our use of them invites us to interrogate our own positionalities as an intrinsic, recursive part of our pedagogical praxes in order to create and sustain meaningful teaching relationships.

To be clear, the stories and experiences we discuss below, which are filtered through our lens, involve conversations we had with our respective students that continued throughout the semester. While we provide these positionality stories as synecdochical illustrations of the larger development of potential student-teacher relationships, they also shed light

on the limitations of this research and raise important ethical questions about re-presenting someone else's story and positionality. Due to space constraints, we do not take up these questions here but did allow them to guide us in composing this article.

Positionality Stories in Action

One aspect of positionality stories is the importance of orientation, a concept Sara Ahmed has addressed extensively, and its connections to embodiment. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed explains how orientation informs the ways in which our situated perception functions in and with the world around us. For Ahmed, bodies, spaces, and objects are dependent upon and shape each other. Although she focuses primarily on sexual orientation, she provides avenues for understanding our racialized, gendered, disabled, and classed bodies oriented in the world. As a white-stream colonial construct, the perceived world situates bodies as normative or nonnormative. Bodies and spaces emerge bound by dominant cultural histories, obtaining different forms of privilege or normalization as they (un)align along dominant lines.

Orientation also determines how bodies may function in the world. Many contemporary institutions, such as the academy, maintain "orientation devices that keep things in place. . . . White bodies are comfortable *as they inhabit spaces that extend their shape*. . . . In other words, whiteness may function as a form of public comfort *by allowing bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape*" (Ahmed 134–35, original emphasis). Similarly, other axes of identity, such as class, gender, sexuality, and dis/ability, also form in relation to other social systems. With Ahmed's ideas about orientation in mind, the following examples of uses of positionality stories from distinct positionalities illustrate how our respective experiences orient us toward highlighting the needs of marginalized students and composing invitational pedagogical approaches.

Christina's Story

In fall of 2016, I was in my second year of teaching at my current institution, an HSI (Hispanic-serving institution) in Houston, Texas. During this semester, I taught a section of the second half of first-year writing, the research-based component. I designed the course to focus on the social implications of literacy, allowing us to discuss matters of power, access,

and exclusion, as well as ways in which literacy has been coded vis-à-vis classist, sexist, ableist, and racist norms. Unlike my third- and fourth-year courses, which are typically majority Latinx, my freshman courses tend to be predominantly white with only a handful of students from minoritized and im/migrant populations, as well as international students, mainly from India and Vietnam. This typical breakdown was reflected in this section. Working-class, nontraditional, and first-generation students made up roughly half the section, with the other half composed of dually enrolled and traditional students.

First-year writing classrooms are typically what we might term make-or-break spaces, where students are encouraged to see themselves as effective (or at least potentially effective) writers. Moreover, these courses might be where students begin to lose interest in higher education if they fail to see themselves in the expected ethos demanded by a course. Many students from marginalized and im/migrant populations see themselves as “no good at writing” and “beyond hope” due to strict emphasis on grammar and mechanics or because a course’s writing goals do not connect to everyday life. For this reason, I try to select topics that speak to students’ experiences regardless of background while leaving room for us to acknowledge the difficult journeys that some students have had to undertake in entering the college classroom for the first time. A focus on literacy allows students to understand that we are all entangled within social and cultural networks while at the same time requiring that they recognize and contend with issues of positionality, power dynamics, and orientation.

At the beginning of every semester, I ask students to introduce themselves and explain what they feel they do well and what they need assistance with when it comes to writing; in this way, I try to gear my courses toward filling in those student-identified gaps rather than impose a set agenda for delineating good writing. By and large, even students who identify as “not writers” assert that they think themselves creative individuals, deeming their imaginative faculties as having been a help or a hindrance in school depending on teacher expectations. These introductions usually go by quickly as students are either shy or quick to point out that they feel fairly confident in their abilities.

Over the course of the semester, I got to know Mariana a little better than most of the other students, mainly because she attended office hours often to ask for assistance, and during these visits we spoke about the cul-

tural and everyday implications of writing and its attendant norms. She told me that for most of her life people close to her had told her school wasn't for her, as "evidenced" by her early motherhood and marriage. She often felt like giving up because she didn't feel knowledgeable enough to be in the same composition classroom as other students. She stated that when her classmates spoke, they often used big words she didn't know, causing her to imagine they were all so much smarter than she was. However, she felt that education was the key to social mobility and to being better at her job, because it would allow her to argue on behalf of others whom she'd seen experience racial discrimination. She would often ask if any of what she was saying made any sense or whether any of this had to do with what we were learning in class. We connected Mariana's experiences to embodied literacy and her extraordinary ability to anticipate what others might do or say in particular contexts, a skill honed over time that she had neither valued nor perceived as critical work.

I also shared with her how, despite being an outstanding student in school and an L1 (English as a first language) speaker, things had changed for me when I entered college. Suddenly, my writing never seemed to fit some arbitrary standard that I did not feel privy to, that even and especially when I entered graduate school, I felt a pressure to prove myself without knowing what I was trying to prove. Since then, I recognize this confusion as part and parcel of "academic performance burden," explained by Jayanti Owens and Scott M. Lynch as additional encumbrances faced by students from minoritized communities, including fear of losing one's cultural identity and a greater struggle to acculturate to a white-centered education system (305). She was surprised that a professor had had to face similar problems as hers in seeking an advanced degree, even more so when I told her that some people in grad school had commented that minority students had it easier since expectations were lower. She drew connections between our experiences, saying that such people didn't know what *we* have to go through just to get in the door.

I told her a story that I would subsequently share with the class because I thought others might benefit. Since literacy was the course theme, we had read Gloria Anzaldúa's "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," an excerpt from *Borderlands*. In this essay, Anzaldúa describes the feelings of inadequacy associated with the denigration of Latinx dialects and her mother's fear that she (Gloria) would grow up with an accent. I confessed that growing up, my

mother had had similar fears about me. When my mother was in college and studying to be a teacher, a pedagogy professor had remarked that she would one day make a wonderful teacher but that she couldn't give her an A in the class because she had an accent and that would affect student reception. My mother was a first-generation, working-class Latina whose parents did not speak English, and instead of valuing her hard work, her professor had reminded her that she would never fit the white norm. This incident sparked a lifelong anxiety that led my mother to value assimilation. Her sister, my aunt, had a similar experience in college: just as Anzaldúa relates in *Borderlands*, she was forced to take courses to "fix" her accent, a standard requirement of the university she attended. It didn't matter whether someone had an accent or not, or how that was even determined; every Latinx student had to take that course.

Growing up, I explained, this family literacy history caused me to feel shame and made me determined to sound "right." But understanding the complex power dynamics of literacy and dialects allowed me to understand hegemony as racism and, as Anzaldúa terms it, "linguistic terrorism." Now, I said, I research and write about literacy so that people can value how they speak as appreciation for where they come from. Mariana was astonished and excited to hear that I actually write to get published, that people listen to what I have to say. I explained that it was part of my job requirements and handed her a copy of a journal containing one of my articles. She was happy to receive it and said she would read it and then tell her family that she was studying with someone who had been published. Then, it was my turn to be surprised and perhaps more than a little grateful since, as academics, we often feel that no one really values what we have to say beyond a tiny group of colleagues.

When asked if I thought she might someday be able to publish something under her own name, I admitted that grad school was hard but that she had skill sets and experiences that could help her succeed. I reminded her that the ways of reading people, texts, and situations she had developed resonated closely with Gloria Anzaldúa's work on *la facultad*, a sense that marginalized people develop to protect themselves from physical and cultural violence. Until that moment, she said, she had never imagined so many open doors; life seemed full of possibilities instead of blocked paths. And yet, I was reminded in that moment that so few Latinxs reach this point in our professional careers where we get to see our names in academic print;

too few people from my community, especially those from working-class backgrounds, attain advanced degrees. Ultimately, this exchange helped change how Mariana saw herself as a student and as a member of the class, as demonstrated by her increased participation and her willingness to help others whenever possible, and as revealed in subsequent conversations between us. But telling these stories also made me mindful of my own positionality, of who and where I am as the result of the many relationships I maintain with students, colleagues, institutions, social structures, and communities—as well as the expectations that each of these relationships brings to bear on my experiences.

Because writing is so intrinsically tied to the personal and the political, I tell positionality stories about my own experiences and those in my family in the classroom and in other student-teacher interactions to let students know that professors from marginalized communities must also contend with biased norms and expectations whether or not we teach at minority-serving schools and despite our qualifications. That way students from similar backgrounds at least know that they are not “broken” or alone in their struggles, and students with more privilege can become more aware of issues they may not have to contend with on a daily basis. Hopefully, all students know that they can choose to share their own stories, critique their own positionalities, and realize that we interpret the world based on our identities.

Phil's Story

In fall 2016, I taught a first-year writing course, themed “Science and Technology,” at a tier-1, land-grant PWI (predominantly white institution) university in the Midwest. The course was designed for the practices of inquiry, discovery, and communication. Twenty-six students signed up for the course, and the group was composed of a number of folks, I would later find out, with different social registers: white, Black, Brown, American, Indian, Chinese, Mexican, Kenyan, men, women, hetero, gay, upper class, middle class, and working class. Although the course was themed “Science and Technology,” I stated on the first day of class and in the syllabus that “we will approach this theme broadly, focusing more on the latter part (Technology) than the former part (Science). We will also approach ‘Technology’ broadly, thinking about both non-digital and digital technologies. We will also equally think about ‘Culture.’”

The first assignment for the students was what I titled “Lived Experience.” As my assignment guidelines outlined, it required students “to reflect upon and analyze an experience or situation with a technology that changed the way [they] engage and view the world. In other words, how did [their] way of viewing the world and/or [themselves] shift because of an engagement with a technology? Remember that we are using Rudi Volti’s definition of technology as ‘a system [or thing] created by humans that uses knowledge and organization to produce objects and techniques for the attainment of specific goals’ (6).” At first, students sort of got the point of the assignment. But as several students would make clear in the first couple of weeks, they were unsure of a unique moment that informed them on their being or orientation in the world. Of course, many students quickly turned to their cell phones as their technology of choice, commenting on how this device made them realize its value in staying in contact with high school friends. And while I did leave the assignment open for students to choose this technology, I also encouraged them to think beyond the obvious and reflect more critically. In turn, I got many blank stares.

Thus I decided in the second week to give them a concrete example, drawing from my personal experience archive. I said:

Around twelve years old, I would work with my dad on the house and in the yard. We would also work on the car—changing oil, the brakes, etc. Once, I remember my dad handing me a wrench—a technology—and telling me to master this tool. He told me that one day I was going to need to pick a trade, such as construction, masonry, automotive, plumbing, or welding, and master that trade and its tools. As my hand gripped the wrench, a cultural narrative formed that oriented me to a particular path, one that connected to my gender and class. Throughout high school and into my early twenties, I made decisions based on this narrative, thinking that I was not smart enough for college or that I didn’t belong in college.

This brief story led me to discuss ways that we are oriented and given direction in the world. I explained that I gained a sense of orientation and direction through my dad’s directions: Men who work use their hands to build things; we—working-class men—don’t go to college. As Sara Ahmed reminds us, “directions are instructions about ‘where,’ but they are also about ‘how’ and ‘what’: directions take us somewhere by the very requirement that we follow a line that is drawn in advance” (16). For me, simply

graduating high school was the goal; donning a blue collar a destination; college a far-fetched fantasy. In the classroom, this story led to a discussion not only of social class, but of gender. It also made space for students to discuss and consider how such social units emerge in obvious but nuanced ways. These discussions worked as springboards to examine the relations, convergences, and divergences between humans, ideas, objects, familial expectations, social pressures, and cultural assumptions. For this first assignment, as well as throughout the semester, students came to better understand the various technologies—in fact, nondigital technologies—throughout their life that influenced the way they were oriented in the world, their cultural position and practices, and the path they were trotting in their academic and future professional careers.

After class on the day I told this story, one of the students, Mike, approached me and stressed how meaningful this sharing of my experience and story was for him. He had faced a similar expectation of not going to college, and my story, according to him, provided him hope and a way to understand some current struggles as he worked to find his place in college. He said something along the lines of “if you can overcome such an obstacle and go on to get advanced degrees and teach, then I can definitely overcome such an obstacle.” I hesitated to chime in at this moment, not because I didn’t think he couldn’t, but because this “overcoming” was not so simple because of our racial differences. Mike is a nineteen-year-old Black man from Detroit, and the class-based assumptions he contends with are intertwined with other social pressures, specifically racial stereotypes and discrimination, that I do not have to deal with. In other words, I thought about how we each may face some similar challenges, but also significantly different challenges. After listening a little more about his background, as well as his enthusiasm to be in the class now, I responded “yes, you can work against such obstacles,” and we continued to chat about a variety of other topics and interests over the next twenty minutes or so.

Over the rest of the semester, I would often talk after class and at office hours with Mike about race because I didn’t want the focus to be vis-à-vis only one subjectivity and identity (class or gender). Careful not to erase our racial differences, I made space for us to *encounter* our differences, which, as Daniel Barlow has noted, opens possibilities to *embrace* our differences (416). Through rhetorical listening, I encouraged Mike to think about his

own lived experiences, power, privileges, and oppressions, particularly in relation to race and racism, and consider the differences between his and my stories. Such practice generated productive moments for us to explore social dynamics in various contexts: in the classroom, in college, at home, in our home communities, within the country at large. He came to understand that differences cannot be ignored, and we learned that we must continue to make stronger bonds and solidarity without erasing differences. Race is always-already ever-present, and racism is pervasive in overt and covert ways. Our conversations invoked for me a valuable implication for the classroom: the various ways to open up space for others to reflect on, understand, and voice their own positionality stories as well as consider differences and solidarity. While much has been written about difference, and indeed we also need to continue to think beyond difference in order to create connections and solidarity, difference still matters, still needs to be discussed, still needs attention.

By using a positionality story, I learned the value of making myself vulnerable—before I told my brief story, I was concerned whether the students would lose respect for me since I did not come from a traditional educational background; I wasn't expected to go to college because I believed I was not cut out for college or smart enough. While having certain privileges allows me to be more vulnerable than others (for instance, LG-BTQ, people of color, and other marginalized folks take far greater risks in discussing or revealing their experiences and stories, which of course needs to be seriously considered in practicing positionality stories), taking a risk with one of my stories and orientations in the world invited many students to express their struggles, concerns, and hope, as Mike exemplified. Being vulnerable, at least in this situation, enabled a mentoring opportunity with a student who embodies a marginalized position. I was also reminded of the value of encountering difference, as Mike and I frequently talked about when, why, and how difference matters not only to understanding others' stories and experiences but also to addressing social inequalities and injustices and acknowledging responsibilities we have to others. While the relationship between me and Mike is not nearly the first time I've discussed, encountered, and worked with others (i.e., students, colleagues, teachers) and social difference, our relationship reinforced the necessity in working across social identities without ignoring difference, but making difference generative for learning and solidarity.

Methodological and Theoretical Implications

The student-teacher interactions facilitated by our use of these stories corroborate the implications of several compelling methodologies and theories for integrating identity and lived experiences into our academic ventures. Undoubtedly, the place of the classroom is rife with institutional and cultural expectations and power dynamics. As teachers, we can enter that place with the intention of not necessarily being compliant with dominant assumptions and expectations, but with the intention of modeling for our students how to contend with, critique, and contest these as a practice for composing our lives. Both of us observed that positionality stories helped in doing that modeling. Positionality stories also permit us to open up spaces where we may (re)engage with places and people, oftentimes modifying the places where they happen, corroborating Michel de Certeau's assertion that "[s]tories . . . carry out a labor that constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places" and "organize the play of changing relationships between places and spaces" (118). In sharing our positionality stories with students, we created spaces within predetermined places (i.e., the university) where we and our students could address privilege and systems of domination explicitly and implicitly and orient ourselves toward other voices, stories, bodies, and the institution.

We should note that we each took a slightly different approach of when and where and to whom we presented our positionality stories: Christina spoke to Mariana individually during an office visit and then decided to share her stories with the class as a result of the conversation's positive outcome. In contrast, Phil told his story to the whole class, with Mike approaching Phil afterward to inquire about more details of the story, share his own story, and develop a mentor-mentee relationship with him. As such, positionality stories can be presented in various contexts and modes of delivery, but should always be with consideration of the teacher's positionality, students' background and subjectivities, and other factors that teachers and students may deem productive in relation to the content of the course and even the larger social context.

Our two different approaches, and we would argue other approaches, helped us compose generative spaces for learning and reflection in the classroom. While this subtle difference in method matters, this difference does not undermine a number of significant parallels with our use of positionality stories. For example, Christina notes the expectations

and struggles related to her marked cultural embodiment and the pursuit of education; these are intrinsically informed by familial ties, communal skepticism about higher education, and racializing discourses—potent influences rarely addressed directly in the classroom itself. Similarly, Phil offered a story to his students about his embodied identity and (lack of) educational possibilities. His story included the assumption that college was not an option, which positioned and oriented him in the world. By sharing our stories in the classroom, we both opened space for certain students like Mariana and Mike to relate to us based on contention between their own embodied experiences and institutional discourses and expectations. By sharing our stories with them individually, these students expressed a

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similar sense of not belonging and found a way of connecting with us as potential mentors by sharing their own positionality stories. Still, while the initial use of either approach opened up possibilities for using the other, we do recommend using a classroom-wide approach first as a way to indicate for students our willingness to discuss more critically identity, orientation, power dynamics, and the

issues that involve them. We also believe that a classroom-wide approach has the capacity to invite more students, rather than simply one, to share with us individually their experiences and stories if they choose to do so.

Our positionality stories provided utile counterstories regarding inherent “fit” in the academy, to borrow Martinez’s words, allowing us to reveal instead that our embodied identities still contend in covert, sometimes taxing ways with institutional and cultural norms, both within and outside the academy. Inculcated in familial and academic institutional discourses, we are oriented in particular ways to ourselves, the classroom, and our students, and we may (seemingly) sustain and perpetuate these expectations even as we work to contest them. Christina’s racialized and gendered body positions her as someone who is always-already not comfortable within the academy and yet must navigate that dis-belonging to both exert academic authority and mentor members of her community in navigating systems of higher education. Knowing she will never fully fit in in academia, she must nonetheless be “at home” enough to understand and deploy a multifaceted

positionality. Working from Ahmed's notion of orientation and ideas about home, Phil should feel (and in many ways is) at home in the academic institution; his racialized body is white and follows Ahmed's argument that colonialism forms the world as white. But, as his story implicitly shows, he also oftentimes feels not at home or not comfortable in the academy because of the institution's middle- and upper-class system. R1 institutions, at which both of us have taught, are structured around discourses and ideologies for particular students: white, middle- and upper-class, able-bodied males. Our wrangling with these kinds of issues does not end once we have established ourselves as members of the academic community or at any particular moment. Instead, our critique becomes more nuanced and complex as we trace the hierarchical and powerful entanglements between institutions, societies, and cultures. A critical orientation involves facing and turning toward these new insights in meaningful, (hopefully) contestatory ways, and as such it underscores how positionality stories resonate as ongoing moments of agency and decision making within real-world spaces.

We also recognized that positionality stories rely on strategic contemplation as theorized by Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch. Royster and Kirsch stress the necessity of a self-reflexive approach—the need to “pay attention to how lived experiences shape our perspectives as researchers and those of our research subjects” (22). Strategic contemplation entails careful consideration of spaces and places as well as the roles that embodiments play within rhetorical contexts, including both those we study and those in which we work. It asks researchers to be mindful of “subtle, intuitive, not-so-obvious parts of research” and to “listen to and hear voices often neglected or silenced” (85). Though Royster and Kirsch refer to research practices, we found that strategic contemplation factored into our pedagogy and use of positionality stories because they deliberately centered lived experiences oftentimes perceived as extraneous to pedagogical concerns. Christina is a Chicana teaching at an HSI; her position requires that she address the needs of students from similar cultural backgrounds while taking care not to speak over or for their experiences. She must also be mindful of students from backgrounds that may be radically different from hers and aim to connect with them in meaningful ways. By engaging in strategic contemplation, she strives to highlight marginalized perspectives while providing models of ethical analysis for all students. Given his subjectivity, Phil continually considers what his body represents and its

relation to students with other social identities and voices that are “often neglected or silenced” (Royster and Kirsch 85). Before class meetings, he strategically contemplates what the potential conversations might be and how his embodiment factors into students’ approach to such conversations and perception of his utterances and actions. In doing so, he tries to discern what kinds of positionality stories might invite students into class discussions, teacher-student conversations, and ongoing learning moments. Our contemplations served as foundations for our positionality stories, and we evoke Royster and Kirsch here to emphasize the recognition of dynamic material and embodied contexts in our pedagogies and teacher-student relationships. In short, we deem their work on strategic contemplation as an invaluable forebear to our theory and practice of positionality stories.

Finally, we understand positionality stories not as merely telling or speaking one’s story, but as dependent on rhetorical listening to create bridges across diverse experiences. Defining rhetorical listening “generally as a trope for interpretive invention and more particularly as a code of cross-cultural conduct,” Krista Ratcliffe calls for an openness that permits us to “negotiate troubled identifications” across our divergent intersectional identities (17). By practicing rhetorical listening to compose positionality stories, instructors can develop classroom spaces in which students feel more welcome. As a result, we can create “new speech communities” such as those posited by Nan Elsasser and Patricia Irvine, that are characterized by attention to language choice, generative content, new knowledge, and action (Shor 29–30). Christina used her positionality story to demonstrate how systemic discrimination worked to deny language choice to members of her family, connecting this history to her own experiences of academic inequality and those possibly affecting her students. Christina’s student, Mariana, then recognized her own embodied experiences as knowledge too often ignored in academic spaces, knowledge that she could deploy to determine her own potential scholarly trajectory. Rather than a hostile space, the classroom became, for her, a place where she could work with students from different backgrounds to interrogate inured educational norms. At the same time, Mariana’s understanding helped Christina reflect on her own constant navigation of academia.

In contrast, Phil and Mike learned from one another how their distinct racial identities precipitated particular advantages and struggles. Phil provided Mike with academic support and mentorship, but through Phil’s

story, Mike was also able to learn about difference and his own history and experiences within social contexts. Both of them also gained a greater understanding of the need to take action from their different positionalities: their voices and stories, told in their respective home languages, continue to challenge hegemonic academic discourses and knowledges through their advancement of diversity and humane connections. Thus, positionality stories helped us create new speech communities with students in our classes by opening up space for them to experience the value of their own voices and those that differed from theirs. These stories allowed both of us to contend with the “disciplinary and cultural biases [that] displace listening” (Ratcliffe 23) and to acknowledge that our identities and those of our students are mutually constituted through relationship.

Final Thoughts

Positionality stories are an ongoing practice based in embodiment, orientation, and relationality instantiated through the stories we teachers tell in and outside class meetings. Story as a guiding practice—in self-positioning and in constellating ourselves within networks of meanings—reminds us that epistemology is not ontology; our situated perspectives cannot tell a whole story except through exchange with others. Although our (Christina’s and Phil’s) subjectivities are very different, in sharing stories about our respective educational journeys, we found that we could identify via our mutual struggles in working, teaching, and being in higher education. We also realized that these experiences guided us in selecting pedagogical approaches. As Indigenous scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Shawn Wilson remind us, stories account for not only the final products of writing but also the ways through which we come to know what stories should (or should not) be told and why. Stories allow us to build knowledges together with full awareness that, while ours may not be the dominant narrative, we may nonetheless highlight the importance of our respective backgrounds, experiences, and material realities.

Hence, positionality stories can offer teachers a way to better understand our teaching theories, strategies, and practices. Kathleen Blake

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Yancey claims, “while we want our students to interrogate their assumptions and understandings, I don’t think we do a very good job of articulating and interrogating our own assumptions about teaching” (171). The idea of positionality stories takes up Yancey’s remark about our assumptions, calling for teachers to remain attuned to how our bodies and experiences enter into and inform our teaching. Because “human bodies themselves contribute, in an ongoing way, to the construction of narrative intelligibility” and “the body is . . . the omnipresent horizon for all the narratives human beings tell” (Weiss 68–70), positionality and embodied experiences with and in positionality stories illuminate how we can represent ourselves, open up (or close off) space, and amplify (or silence) students. Positionality stories ask what assumptions we as instructors make about our bodies, privileges, experiences, and orientations in teaching and how we might invite students to question the assumptions that they make as well. Such a practice underscores student-centered pedagogy but also factors the teacher within the dynamic relationship between teacher and student.

Ultimately, we remember that Freire himself deemed any critical pedagogy a “utopian” enterprise and one “full of hope”; however, he also asserted that it was not just “empty words, but an historic commitment” (*Politics* 57). He explains that even if the social ills that we strive against currently were to be rectified, that fact should not deter us from finding new means to critique and challenge institutions of power. We would not call positionality stories “utopian” by any means, but they do offer productive ways to facilitate socially and culturally aware learning environments for both students and teachers. Perhaps equally important, and deserving of more scholarly attention, teachers must continue to be mindful of how embodiment, orientation, and positionality inform their preferred pedagogies and methodologies and their relationships with students. Suggested avenues for pursuing this type of research might include how positionality stories can inform lesson plans, whether and how they could be shared beyond academic spaces, and how they could compare extracurricular and classroom spaces to determine the limitations and affordances of both positionality stories and these spaces. By engaging in such research, we may continue to work against cultural, political, and economic oppressions, exploitations, conflicts, and violence, and strive to cultivate greater connections for and in solidarity with our students.

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Notes

1. Both names are pseudonyms.
2. In "A Pedagogy of Charity: Donald Davidson and the Student-Negotiated Classroom," Kevin J. Porter explains a pedagogy of charity as one that runs counter to practices that emphasize "truth, rationality, and shared world" over individual knowledge (586).

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