“I’VE FOOLED THEM ALL!”: IMPOSTER SYNDROME AND THE WPA

By

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation explores the emotional labor of women-identified writing program administrators (WPAs) through the lens of imposter syndrome. The theoretical framework I build is based upon an autoethnographic, cultural rhetorics, and feminist-informed methodology in which I center story as theory and see myself as a participant as well as a researcher. The methods used in the study include participant interviews and personal video diary entries of three current WPAs and myself over a 15 week period in the fall of 2019 in which I studied not only what was said in the conversations, but also how the body reacted to what was being said. By collecting this large amount of personal-experience data, I'm able to listen to the stories of my participants as the theories onto which I build my primary framework for this dissertation.

In listening to my participants' stories, I understand the emotional, embodied reactions my participants and I have to ideas of feeling "less than" in roles that we are absolutely qualified for. Through (auto)ethnographically-informed qualitative interviews, I worked with three writing program administrators—two writing center directors and one First-Year Writing director—to illuminate how women-identified academic professionals think and talk about their bodies and emotions at work through the lens of imposter syndrome. In studying how WPAs confront feelings of imposter syndrome and what their embodied working practices create, I find that my participants are Radically Willful Women who, despite knowing the consequences of imposter syndrome, engage in activities that produce it anyway. Therefore, radically willful women

continually participate in roles that produce imposter syndrome because their participation makes imposter syndrome feel less daunting and proves that it is a temporary state.

To my mother, Sonia Williams Robinson, who never had to fool anybody, who was always authentically herself, and who believed in me even when I couldn't believe in myself.

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A NOTE TO READERS

This dissertation uses story to establish a theory of vulnerability grounded in both cultural rhetorics practices and autoethnography. Because of this, readers are introduced to me through my writing both as a participant in this study and as the author of it. Readers will find that I write about myself from a creative nonfiction approach because, I think, this allows readers to not only hear my voice but see how I've struggled with imposter syndrome and the embodiment of that throughout this dissertation process. It is my hope that in approaching my dissertation, my story, this way that readers not only see me as a participant along with Mollie, Sam, and Natalie, but also as someone who embodies, in Real Time, the struggles they talk about in their stories. It is also my hope that readers find some camaraderie in my stories and struggles and that this makes this dissertation all the more enjoyable.

Along with the introduction of myself, readers are introduced to my participants, Mollie, Sam, and Natalie, throughout this dissertation in somewhat of an atypical way. Rather than introduce them early on with large swaths of pages dedicated to background information of each participant, I introduced them slowly at various points in the dissertation. This is a deliberate act to, somewhat, mimic the slow process of getting to know someone over a longer period of time and, therefore, build a more vulnerable and empathetic relationship with them because of the length of the investment the relationship takes. This slow act also allows for the readers to experience the nature of the slow encounter my participants and I experienced during our 15-week study. It's my hope that with this process, readers will come to know Mollie, Sam, and

Natalie in a more nuanced, three-dimensional way and that my participants' stories will be more enjoyable and relatable.

PREFACE

Grief Glasses

My mother haunts this dissertation. Or, better yet, she guides it. At least, that's how I want to come to see her memory. Before she died, she would ask me what I was working on, and I would watch her eyes both light up and gloss over as I tried my best to explain what a *writing program administrator* is, why *imposter syndrome* is a "thing" worthy of study, and why spending days thinking about the interconnectedness of emotions and bodies in academia (and out) made me feel all kinds of ways about my own emotions and body. On the rare occasions when I would overhear friends or family members ask her what I was "still doing in school," she would never attempt to speak for me; instead, she would tell them I was working on my doctorate and "working in a writing center." She'd always leave it up to me to explain the details. Or not. She was always my biggest fan, and I can confidently say there wasn't an ounce of her that suffered from imposter syndrome. When I began openly talking about (my own) emotions after a lifetime of dodging questions about how I was feeling or hiding behind "fine," she didn't know what to do with me or my feelings. She never understood my advocacy for and public praise of therapy, but she didn't try to diminish me. And when she passed on January 22, 2018, at the beginning of my last semester of coursework in the middle of the second year of my program, every emotion I had surrounding my work became tinged with grief. Suddenly, it was like I was wearing grief glasses, and I couldn't take them off when I returned to school and tried to throw myself into my work. The already isolating feelings and emotions that I, a woman-identified graduate student who suffered from depression and anxiety, was bringing with me every day to work were now complicated by the feelings and emotions of grief and loss that I couldn't escape. While I never believed that my life and work should, or could, be separated,

now I found myself either actively embracing or trying to resist the hardest, ugliest parts of my life as I dove deeper into my work. When I resisted my grief and loss, my work felt stifled and fake, even though I could laugh and breathe a little; when I embraced it, my work felt authentic and connected, but I often couldn't breathe while writing and cried openly at work. Needless to say, grief is an individual process for all who experience it, and while I've learned to live with the shadow of grief in my life, the reason it's there—the loss of my mother—still, three years later, feels overwhelming and surreal.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

“Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people...I think perfectionism is based on the obsessive belief that if you run carefully enough, hitting each stepping-stone just right, you won’t have to die. The truth is that you will die anyway and that a lot of people who aren’t even looking at their feet are going to do a whole lot better than you, and have more fun while they're doing it.” Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird,* (23)

CHAPTER ONE: AN INTRODUCTION

A Beginning

My glasses are smudged, and the prescription isn't as strong as it used to be. Sometimes the words on the screen blur as I'm reading, and I get frustrated. Nevertheless, I come to this space to write, to create, and I feel more confident with one of those actions than the other. I tell myself to push through this feeling, though.

My laptop whirs to life, and suddenly I'm illuminated in the harsh blue glow of the screen. The blank Google document stares back at me, cursor blinking relentlessly as I try to compose myself into a composition. I settle my fingers on the keys, noticing that my posture automatically both sinks into a comfortable hunch and tightens.

I've been thinking about this work for so long that I'm finding it difficult to actually *begin* it. Where do I start? How do I treat the stories shared with me with care and respect and honesty? How do I fit everything I—and my research participants—want and need to say into this text? How do I keep it interesting? Where do *I* fit into my research?

These questions hang in the air, swirling around the stacks of books piled high beside my computer, as I start typing. My fingers, nimble on the keys as though playing a piano, begin typing as though they know what to say, as though they've not consulted me. My spine straightens, and the smudges on my glasses don't seem to matter anymore. I begin.

An Origin Story

I've felt like an imposter in my work and career many more times than I care to admit. In some areas of my work, like administration, I feel much more confident than in others, like scholarship. It took me years to get into a PhD program. I first applied when I was graduating from my Master's program in 2005. Still thinking I was going to be a literature professor, I applied to lit programs only. When I didn't get in, after having gone straight through school my

entire life, I was devastated, and I didn't understand what I'd done wrong. I got a job outside of academia and supplemented my desire for teaching full time with adjuncting on the side. I applied again to PhD programs, this time in Rhetoric and Composition and with a wider net of schools and was again rejected by all of them. I retook the GRE, researched better schools, thought about what I really wanted and where I wanted to live, and applied again. Again, I was rejected. In total, before my last time applying, I'd applied four separate times to over 30 schools, and I was rejected by them all. In 2014, at the International Writing Center Association (IWCA) conference in Pennsylvania, I was having a drink at the hotel bar with my friend and colleague, Trixie Smith, when she asked what I was doing with my life. My marriage had fallen apart despite a move across states to save it, my job was stalling, and I felt directionless. I told her all this, and she suggested I look at a couple universities for PhD programs, that I should apply again, and that I should consider the large, midwestern university of Michigan State as an option. I took this information back to work with me and thought about it as another opportunity fell into my lap.

Through a friend, I was put in touch with administrators at a small, Christian, online university that wanted to start a writing center. I thought this might be a good opportunity to, again, shake up my life. They offered me a full-time job, but I didn't want to move again for something that wasn't a PhD, so I negotiated a part-time gig as Director of Writing. I gave online workshops to their faculty on incorporating writing into their classes, taught online classes for them, and started trying to get an online writing center off the ground, all while continuing my full-time work as an assistant director of a writing center at another university. When I found out the position wouldn't be renewed beyond the first year, I was, again, struck with the thought: *What did I do wrong?* I felt like I'd done everything asked of me and then some for these two

jobs, but whatever I did, it just never seemed good or satisfying enough. I had the idea again to apply for PhD programs one last time in the back of my mind. This time, I came up with a three-part plan: 1) apply to at least 10 PhD programs *for the last time*, and if I don't get in 2) go teach English abroad, and if that doesn't work, 3) leave academia for good. Luckily for me, my first choice finally worked out, and I ended up getting into three programs out of the 10 I applied to.

However, sitting in one of my very first classes for my PhD in 2016, listening to my peers speak about their programmatic and career goals, I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd somehow slipped into the program, unnoticed, by mistake. Even with my experience of already working in the field, I didn't feel like I could speak about this work of the discipline with eloquence and ease, the way I perceived my colleagues doing. I still found myself wondering, *How do I perfect this student role, again?* and *What even is rhetoric?* I wasn't yet ready to broach the mystical term *cultural rhetorics* without feeling like my mind just went to white noise and my eyes glazed over in a doe-eyed stare. Sitting in this colloquium class, I would look around and think *I've fooled them all! Now what?* But one day, as I was trying my best to blend in and not make any sudden movements to draw attention to myself, the professor made a statement akin to this: "Perfectionism is a tool of the patriarchy," and I snapped to attention. I'd never thought of myself as someone who chased perfection, however Type A I am, but I'd often thought of myself as an imposter—someone who has fooled the people around them and gotten where they are on whims and wishes. When my professor made that bold statement in class, what clicked in my mind was that the two (perfectionism and imposterism) were, for me at least, linked, and I saw my future research trajectory laid out in front of me like a well-trodden pathway. Before I could walk that pathway, however, I would need to acknowledge my past and come to terms with my own feelings of inadequacies in the academy.

The first way that I pledged to do this was to promise myself to be more vulnerable in academic spaces. I felt like practicing more public vulnerability would inevitably provide space for me to grow in ways I'd avoided in years past. This dissertation is just one example of that vulnerability. In many ways, this study, this research, and this dissertation are very personal. At first, I believed that my feelings of imposter syndrome (IS) were directly *because* of my newfound vulnerability (i.e. I felt like an imposter because I was opening up more); however, what I've come to realize is that the vulnerability that I practice has only made me more aware of the IS that I and my colleagues experience as emotional labor all the time. In fact, what I found was that the emotional labor of imposter syndrome is actually a thinly veiled requirement for achieving success in academia, and my dissertation topic was born.

Claim

In this dissertation, I outline a longitudinal autoethnographic study that uses both a feminist- and cultural rhetorics-informed methodology to investigate the ways women-identified[1] writing program administrators (WPAs) embody imposter syndrome, sometimes called imposter phenomena or imposterism[2]. This investigation is aimed, specifically, at understanding the ways these women come to understand what IS means—where and how that meaning is made by/for them in their academic lives—and how IS is marked—subconsciously/consciously; self-made/by others; primarily/secondarily—on, in, and through their bodies. Beginning this study, I was primarily concerned with the following questions: In what ways does IS create an emotional

[1] While I am quite aware that men, trans, and non-binary academics also experience imposter syndrome, for the purposes of this study, I wish to focus solely on women-identified subjects. While my hope was to include all women, including cis-gender women and trans women, in my study, all of my participants happen to be cis-gender women.

[2] The term "imposter syndrome" has traces of the medical field with the term "syndrome" often meaning symptoms or signs that point to an illness. By no means do I use it lightly to reinforce an ableist stance on mental health against those who suffer from imposter syndrome and those who do not. In fact, I use "imposter syndrome" and "imposterism" both interchangeably throughout this dissertation because that is how the field and the literature use the terms.

embodiment in these academic spaces?; how do my participants handle that embodiment/emotion?; and do the specific self-claimed identity markers of the women in the study affect the relationship to IS? However, once I began my 15-week conversational study with the three participants[3] I chose, I realized that imposterism was a secondary concern for me. Instead, I became much more interested and invested in how these women simply *talked* about—and didn't—their emotions and bodies at work. Of course, imposter syndrome became part of these conversations, but it shifted to the background, to a shadow on the wall. To explain this shift, I found myself thinking of shadow puppets. A body creates a shadow on a surface and—to a great extent—controls that shadow (through the uses of light and dark). When a hand is making a shadow puppet, the hand controls how the puppet moves and doesn't. The hand casts a shadow on a surface, and that shadow becomes an effect (affect) of the movements of the hand. In this analogy, imposter syndrome is the shadow on the wall. It's the effect (affect) of movements the body takes and makes as it moves through (academic) time and space. As I dove into my study more, the shadow became less and less interesting to me as the body casting the shadow became my primary focus. In what follows, I explore imposter syndrome, emotional labor, and the embodiment(s) that come with the two through four women writing program administrators. Over a 15-week study that consisted of weekly virtual meetings and video diaries, my WPAs and I discuss how imposter syndrome hides among all the other emotional labor required of a WPA and what this emotional labor looks like on—and through—our bodies.

Emotions and Emotional Labor

First defined by sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild to describe the feelings of women flight attendants, emotional labor is "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable

[3] All of whom use aliases in this dissertation.

facial and bodily display" (7). For example, for Hochschild, this version of emotional labor was observable in her flight attendants' willingness or not to smile at work. While emotional labor is obviously tied to emotions and feelings, Hochschild's definition also ties emotional labor to the physical body. This connection is an important one to highlight because it makes clear that there cannot be a separation between emotions and the body; in fact, Hochschild's definition binds emotional and bodily reactions together—our feelings create something physically observable on our bodies (i.e. a smile). Additionally, Hochschild goes on to say that "emotional labor is sold for a wage and therefore has *exchange value*" meaning that Hochschild's definition makes emotional labor a commodity (7). While this is a sticking point for emotional labor today (i.e., many don't see emotional labor tied to *labor* but rather simply an emotion one experiences without an exchange rate), this definition has been co-opted by several groups to mean everything from the daily tasks of a job to the household division of labor to simply experiencing an emotion (any emotion) at work, though the emotions are often bent toward the negative. Nevertheless, the factor that remains constant in the different definitions of emotional labor is that it is associated with a task and with the body's reactions to that task.

Drawing from Holt, Anderson, and Rouzie's definition of emotion work, Caswell, McKinney, and Jackson define emotional labor not only as those tasks associated with nurturing and care of others, but they also say that "emotions [need] to connect in some way to corresponding action in order to count as emotional labor" (26). In their scheme used to code their study of new writing center directors' labor, emotional labor is described as "work that involves care, mentoring, or nurturing of others; work of building and sustaining relationships; work to resolve conflicts; managing our display of emotions, [and/or an] unstated requirement of the job" (Caswell, McKinney, and Jackson 27). They are careful to make a clear distinction

between emotional labor, everyday labor (the day-to-day work of the job), and disciplinary work (work with other professionals in the field) (27). It's important to note that Caswell, McKinney, and Jackson's definition of emotional labor also connects the emotion to the body ("managing our display of emotions"), but it broadens the definition out more to, specifically, include care work, mentoring, and nurturing, all typically feminine, or feminized, qualities.

The question of whether emotional labor is a feminine issue or not is a fraught one. Because emotional labor is associated with emotions more so than, but not separate from, the physical bodily reactions to those emotions, many consider it feminine. However, when considering the previous definitions given in this chapter so far, one can easily see that scholars don't draw a distinction between the emotional feeling and physical feeling body (*managing a display of emotions* and *managing publicly observable facial and bodily displays*). This notion is part of what complicates the term emotional labor. If it's a "feminine issue," can men experience it? Or do they experience it in the same way that women do? What about the work of the home, where does it count on the emotional labor spectrum? Is labor without an exchange rate still *emotional labor*? In an interview with Julie Beck for *The Atlantic*, Hochschild attempted to clear up what she considers the current "hazy" concept of emotional labor for women:

> *Beck*: It's interesting because it seems like people are trying to have an important conversation about the work that women are expected to do outside of their jobs, about the way they have to smooth social interactions, or sometimes it's about having to remember all this stuff for the household, or sometimes in the office. Or about just chores? And all of these things are getting kind of smooshed together and being called emotional labor, as far as I can tell.

> *Hochschild*: I agree. We're trying to have an important conversation but having it in a very hazy way, working with [a] blunt concept. I think the answer is to be more precise and careful in our ideas and to bring this conversation into families and to the office in a helpful way.
>
> If you have an important conversation using muddy ideas, you cannot accomplish your purpose. You won't be understood by others. And you won't be clear to yourself. That's what's going on. It'd be like going to a bad therapist—"Well, just try to have a better day tomorrow." You're doing the right thing, you're seeking help, but you're not getting clarification and communicating clearly. It can defeat the purpose; it can backfire.
>
> *Beck*: It seems like [emotional labor] is mostly becoming a popular term in feminist conversations. But if we talk about all the unpaid labor women do in the home as "emotional labor," we're insinuating that any kind of labor that falls most often to a woman is "emotional." It almost seems like we're saying that women do the work and women are emotional, so that must be emotional work. Like chores are just labor. Writing Christmas cards is just labor. If we're talking about the division of labor in the household, and we start calling chores "emotional labor"—
>
> *Hochschild*: It's inherently, then, a female thing. It's feminizing, in a way, these things that should be described in a more gender-neutral way. (emphasis added for clarity)

Whether feminine in nature or not, emotional labor has become a blanket term used for just about anything nowadays, despite its original definition of being associated with a task and being

treated like a commodity. Thus, to understand the real concept of emotional labor more for this study, one should actually consider how to define *emotion*.

Laura Micciche makes clear that emotions are explicitly related to the body; therefore, she harkens back to Hochschild's and Caswell, McKinney, and Jackson's definitions that emotional labor is tied to a task the body endures. Micciche connects emotions with cultures claiming that emotions are produced *between* bodies rather than in them. Therefore, in order for Micciche's definition to work, we must be aware that emotion relies on relations, yet emotions are not inherently or naturally produced. She says that her concept of emotion looks instead at "emotion as emerging relationally, in encounters between people, so that emotion takes form *between* bodies rather than residing *in* them" (13). In other words, the ways we experience and express emotions are taught to us through our social interactions. Similarly, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion,* feminist theorist Sara Ahmed claims that "emotions are not something 'I' or 'we' have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the 'I' and the 'we' are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others...the surfaces of bodies 'surface' as an effect of the impressions left by others" (10). She further explains that "emotions are not 'in' either the individual or the social, but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects" (*Cultural Politics* 10). To return to Micciche, in reflecting on Ahmed, she says that, like Ahmed, her questions about emotions are not necessarily wrapped up in the "what are emotions" but the "what do emotions do?" (14). To this end, Micciche says, "I am interested in what emotions perform/embody/enact/generate and in how naming emotions affects our relation to the situation in and for which they are named" (14).

Like Micciche, I, too, am interested in what emotions embody relationally and how these emotions that produce imposter syndrome in some people, women especially, show up on, in, and through the body. In other words if "emotions are mediated by the body; they are made visible on and through the body via posture, facial expression, voice, and movement, just as they are perceived in others through these and other embodied signs," then what, exactly, does imposter syndrome look like for the writing program administrator (Micciche 52)? This study examines this question through the working lives of four women writing program administrators over a 15 week period, and, while I don't claim to solve imposter syndrome, the study does shed light on what IS looks like for these women—myself included—in today's academic landscape.

Who is a WPA?

Recently, I was sitting in a class where we were discussing a fellow student's drafted article that had clear takeaways for writing center administrators. When the professor asked "Who is this article for?" the class went silent. After some time, I piped up and simply said, "WPAs." The instructor looked confused and asked if I meant writing center directors. I then remembered that she might not actually realize that writing center directors are often the WPAs of their programs, that dependent writing programs—those not freestanding and still within, say, an English Department—often have one person doing all the work of the Rhetoric and Composition program. This administrative work could include everything from being writing center director to Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) director to running the First Year Writing (FYW) program. In departments lucky enough to be independent, and if these roles are fortunate enough to be filled by different people, often, the positions work together to support the mission, vision, and values of not only the greater department, but also the first-year writing program. During this class where the confusion about WPAs continued, to clear things up, I

offered a simple point of clarification: "Sometimes writing center directors are WPAs." I realized this was not the class to mount a full-scale discussion of the matter, so I left it alone after that.

Being clear about who writing program administrators are, or can be, is paramount to a study like mine. Often, WPAs are simply considered the directors, or part of an admin team[4] if one is so lucky, of a curriculum-based FYW program. This "naming is at the expense of the writing center director" and WAC directors, however (Ianetta et al. 12). Studies have shown (Olson and Ashton-Jones; Balester and McDonald) that FYW, or curriculum-based WPAs are often seen as having a higher academic status than a writing center director or assistant director in their home departments and in the university at large. According to Ianetta et al. this programmatic hierarchy says something very clear about writing center administrators:

> their status is inferior, relative to their composition program counterparts. Attention to the administrative status of writing center directors thus not only draws the critical gaze to the pedagogical ramifications of positioning and credentialing writing center directors as WPAs, but also brings attention to the manner in which [writing center directors] have long occupied lesser institutional roles. (12-13)

I use this explanation as a way to illustrate the mystery surrounding much of the work of the WPA. For many, WPAs occupy a liminal space between university, departmental, or programmatic stakeholders. They are often "in charge" of first-year writing, but outsiders don't understand much of their job beyond that, including that WPAs usually liaise between faculty and students to create dynamic, inquiry-based curricula, or that they often find themselves mediating between faculty and students or, sometimes, between faculty and faculty, not to

[4] I say "admin team" here to include assistant/associate directors and program assistants.

mention departmental and university stakeholders. The role of the WPA is vast and varied, yet there are key components that I've noticed in the type of person who desires the WPA position. Additionally, there are sometimes conflicting components among those who are successful at the job. Perhaps ironically, these successful components overlap and intersect with key points within feminist and cultural rhetorics practices.

In their "Introduction to the Special Issue: Entering the Cultural Rhetorics Conversation," Malea Powell and Phil Bratta identify four practices for framing cultural rhetorics work: decolonization, relations, constellation, and story. These practices help me to remember to listen and act on what I hear in everyday situations so that I can invite people in (relations/constellations) and demystify stereotypes and outdated tropes (decolonization) while building new stories of equity and empathy. That is exactly what I intended to do with this study, as well.

I joined my first writing program administration "team" in 2006 as the assistant director of a writing center, seven months after graduating with my Master's. Looking back, I realize that I didn't know anything about real administration at this time, and I also realize that I didn't necessarily work with the first-year writing program in the same way the curriculum-based FYW WPA did. I worked with the students whereas she worked with the faculty. Everyday, I saw the students feeling dismayed, unheard, frustrated, and unseen in their classes and by their professors. Likewise, I saw the students who were succeeding, who were not pushing themselves, and who were generally "winning" at the FYW game without trying. My interactions with the faculty often came up against complacency, frustration, and exhaustion. Rarely did I interact with both the student and the instructor who felt like what was happening in

their FYW class worked for both of them (and never for all involved), and I have to wonder if this is because of the classroom dynamic or something bigger, something more systemic.

For example, the university mentioned above, where I began my WPA career, doesn't currently (as of this writing) have unique goals and outcomes for their FYW program.[5] Instead, they defer to the WPA Outcomes from the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA). These Outcomes outline three key points writers (and teachers) should develop within FYW: rhetorical knowledge; critical thinking, reading, and composing; and processes ("WPA Outcomes") and goes on to give lengthy definitions of each point. Adopted by the CWPA in 2014, these outcomes "are supported by a large body of research demonstrating that the process of learning to write in any medium is complex: it is both *individual and social* and demands continued practice and informed guidance" ("WPA Outcomes" emphasis added). By adopting these goals without clarification, the department is actually making their writing practice the opposite of individual and social; it is general and common. For a program like the one I worked in, to adopt outcomes such as these, which are not intrinsically bad or wrong, without practical explanation or description of how they work within the program's culture is contributing to the frustration felt by all involved.

During my own time both teaching in a FYW program and working closely as part of a trifecta of WPAs (WAC, writing center, and FYW) at another university, I began to see a little more clearly that the issues facing a WPA are far-reaching across the university. What happens in the classroom or FYW are but one aspect of the amount of work that actually happens in a program. For example, several years ago, I began working with my FYW WPA on researching, developing, and piloting a model of directed-self placement for FYW at our university. Upon

[5] This is realized after an extensive examination of their English Department's General English Education website, which houses their FYW program.

first introduction to this idea, many of our Rhetoric and Composition professors were dismayed. "How are we supposed to trust students to simply choose their path within the writing program? How will they really know, as freshmen, what they need?" professors would demand of us at faculty meetings. On the other hand, students were being tracked into our "basic" writing and first-year writing classes without their own say and struggling, fighting boredom, or, at worst, failing. Our students' experiences were not our faculty's experiences; there was a communication disconnect and a fear of trying something new. Eventually, my department was able to move beyond this disconnect, this fear, and create a forward-thinking and sustainable model that worked for everyone, but the resistance we experienced at the outset made me realize that good WPAs must be willing to listen to those around them. They must be willing to take up poses and readjust when their contemplation moves them in that direction. They must know when to set aside their own egos for the benefit of the students and faculty in their stead and understand when to critique their own motivations. In short, they must be willing to listen and act on what they hear.

Moving Through This Space: A Guide

In what follows, I share the stories of three writing program administrators and myself, a former WPA, in order to showcase how imposter syndrome and emotional labor more generally show up on their/our bodies in academic spaces. I want to reiterate that I have not come to this project with the intention to solve the problem of imposter syndrome. Rather, I treat it like an affect/effect of the WPA work environment, how our bodies move in that space during specific times, and how we allow ourselves to express our experiences of emotional labor at work. This framework itself tells a story: personifying imposter syndrome allows me and my WPAs—Sam, Natalie, and Mollie—to both resist and embrace IS because we know it's there in the workplace

waiting for us. To that end, all of my WPAs experience both of these actions—resistance and embrace—of imposter syndrome in myriad ways, and this action is what makes them, what I coin, Radically Willful Women. As Radically Willful Women, my WPAs walk with imposter syndrome by 1) negotiating new roles with flexible boundaries, 2) failing publically, and through 3) transparent vulnerability. Their intentional willfulness to embrace (and resist) imposter syndrome makes each of them Radically Willful Women, which I will further expound upon in my Conclusion.

In this chapter, I have provided my motivation for coming to this study as well as some key background information on emotional labor, emotions, and WPAs. In Chapter Two, "A Coming to Terms: Bodies and Emotions," I outline the literature surrounding imposter syndrome, embodiment, and affects. I argue in this chapter that the old-fashioned way of thinking about the mind/body split is dangerous in thinking about emotions and embodiment because, truly, the two (mind and body) cannot be separated with ease and care, especially when considering emotional labor. In Chapter Three, "Storytelling and Method Making: Processes and Observations," I present the framework for my methodology and outline the methods used for data collection in my study. Additionally, I briefly introduce my participants by telling snippets of their stories related to some of our initial meetings. Chapter Four, "The WPAs' Stories: Emerging Threads," my first of two data chapters, examines the WPAs' stories more in-depth and gives the readers a real sense of who my WPAs are through the topics of emotional labor and vulnerability. In this chapter, I conclude that each of my WPAs sees emotional labor and vulnerability as inherent and important parts of their jobs, even with the additional possibility of imposter syndrome attached to each. Chapter Five, "(Un)Motivated Bodies and Imposterism," dives more deeply into the WPAs' feelings towards imposter syndrome and embodiment. This

chapter is crucial not only because of its storying of imposter syndrome, but also because it highlights how reluctant some WPAs were to talk about their bodies at work.[6] My Conclusion, Chapter Six, "Takeaways, Implications, and Limitations: Pulling Threads," pulls together the findings of my 15-week study with the WPAs and connects it to my concept of Radically Willful Women, on which I further elaborate. Additionally, I provide implications and takeaways of the project for the field of Rhetoric and Composition.

Throughout this work, you'll become familiar with the voices of Mollie, Natalie, and Sam, but you'll also read my story and my voice as well. Each chapter opens with a personal story of my own about being a WPA and/or about my own embodied, emotional state during this dissertation project. I hope that these vignettes provide more insight into this project and into myself as the author of the project. As an autoethnographic study, these vignettes also provide a key emotional element from me, the author, because "being emotional helps you to become a better autoethnographer, since so often the subject matter as well as the process is emotional" (Ellis 110). This dissertation has been nothing if not emotional.

As you read, please keep in mind that these stories, these emotions, are attached to real people, real bodies, and these people are purposefully, intentionally, sharing pieces of themselves with you across time and space. These connections, these relations and constellations, are the real enemies of imposter syndrome.

[6] I say "reluctant" here because while they did end up talking openly and honestly to me about their bodies at work, witnessing these conversations made it clear that there were varying levels (from super-comfortable to increasingly uncomfortable) of comfort in talking about bodies, most notably because they'd never had the chance to have these conversations before.

"Emotion, therefore, is our experience of the body ready for an imaginary action. Since the body readies itself for action in physiological ways, emotion involves biological processes. Thus, when we manage an emotion, we are partly managing a bodily preparation for a consciously or unconsciously anticipated deed. This is why emotion work is work, and why estrangement from emotion is estrangement from something of importance and weight."
Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, (230)

CHAPTER TWO: A COMING TO TERMS: BODIES AND EMOTIONS

A Story of Frustration

There is a story that I've told often. Too often. It's about how I came to know I wanted to write about women's emotions in academia, specifically imposter syndrome. But that's not the story I want to tell now. I've told that story in Chapter One.

Instead, I have another story.

On a Friday morning in early November 2019, I trudged through the cold and early snow across MSU's campus to Chittendon Hall, where the Graduate School is located, to attend a workshop on imposter syndrome. I was perturbed because I'd signed up for the workshop weeks ago and mistakenly double-booked myself, only realizing on this very morning that I'd have to miss an important working lunch in order to attend the lecture, but this was the third lecture of its kind the Graduate School had orchestrated since my time at MSU that I'd signed up for, and since I'd skipped the other two for various reasons (feelings and deaths), and since my data collection on this very topic was wrapping up in the coming weeks, I thought I should actually attend this one.

Just as I approached Chittendon, through my layers of coat and gloves, I felt my phone make the prolonged buzz associated with a call. Figuring it was just a spambot, I pulled my phone out to decline the call, but I realized the number was local and decided to answer it instead.

I pulled off my glove with my teeth, slid my phone to answer, and moved my scarf below my chin. "Hello?"

"Hello, Rachel. This is Bridget.[7] Can we talk?"

[7] This is an alias.

"Oh, hi, Bridget! Of course! I'm just running into a workshop, but I've got a few minutes. What's up?"

Bridget is the local elementary school liaison I'd been working with to coordinate my undergraduate writing center theory class's[8] community engagement for the semester. My students had been required to commit nine hours of service to a local elementary school over the semester by tutoring writing in kindergarten-4th grade classes. The students had signed up for days, times, and teachers months ago, and I had them doing video diaries[9] monthly on their engagement. From my vantage point, things were going well, minus a few hiccups students had reported to me with nonchalance.

Bridget's call changed all that. While this was my first semester teaching this class at MSU, the partnership she had with this class, and the writing center, extended well beyond me. Traditionally, WRA 395 is taught by an advanced graduate student one semester and one of the writing center's (WC's) associate directors the other semester. While a certain amount of autonomy is given to all the instructors, there are some goals, outcomes, and expectations that remain constant, community engagement being one of those expectations. While this was not my first time teaching a version of this course—I'd taught writing center theory for the first time in 2005 when I was a brand new writing center assistant director in Tennessee—this was my first time teaching it at MSU and my first time working with Bridget and the local school partnership.

During my conversation with her, I quickly realized there were many things I didn't know, either from my own ignorance in not asking the right questions, because we both assumed the other knew what was going on, or because a previous instructor didn't pass on enough information. Whatever the case, Bridget was calling to tell me her teachers were pissed and had

[8] Known colloquially as WRA 395.
[9] The video diaries were all done on FlipGrid.

"had enough" of my students and this partnership. I was taken aback. From what I knew, my students were having a great time in the school and learning a lot. Despite the hiccups, one student even admitted she was considering switching her major to Elementary Education because she enjoyed working with the kids so much.

Over the next fifteen minutes, shivering outside Chittendon in the cold and snow, I proceeded to listen to Bridget tell me what her teachers problems were, along with her own frustrations, and we both tried to come up with ways to salvage the remaining five weeks of the semester. Frustrated with the whole situation, at one point, I told her it might be best if my students just pulled out of the partnership and I figured out an alternative community engagement project for their remaining hours.

"I really hate for you to do that, Rachel. I'd like to salvage as much of this partnership as we can," Bridget said when I ran the idea past her.

"I really would too," I told Bridget, "but at this point, I don't see a way for us to move on, especially if your teachers are so frustrated with this process. It seems to me that the best way to salvage the relationship is to stop it right now and pick it back up with another teacher in the spring."

I told her that I'd speak to the WC director about options and email her in a few hours. We hung up, both sounding a little frustrated and defeated, and I moved my frozen feet up the big stairs of Chittendon into the workshop that was about to begin, feeling more like an imposter than I had in quite some time.

Despite the many years of experience I had in teaching this class, talking to Bridget made me feel like I was a brand new teacher with a lot to learn. I was mad and embarrassed at myself that I hadn't asked the simple questions necessary in the beginning so that we could have

prevented this problem. I was mad and embarrassed that I was just finding out, ten weeks into a project, that there was a problem this big. I was mad and embarrassed that my solutions couldn't be the final word on the problem because I needed to check further options with the writing center director. I was mad and embarrassed that I hadn't been told the details of this partnership by the previous teachers of the course. I was just mad and embarrassed, and as I sat in the workshop on imposter syndrome, I noticed my body shutting in on itself. Whereas I was initially eager and open to what I might learn in this workshop, I realized that after my conversation with Bridget, I felt critical and reactionary to nearly everything the workshop leaders and audience members said. I felt superior to them[10] on this subject that I'd already spent three years studying and thinking about, yet I felt inferior to Bridget and the "problem" of community engagement in my class.

Thinking back to this event, even as I sit in a coffee shop at Christmastime and write it all out, I find myself embarrassed by the way I reacted, even though the reactions were mostly all in my head. They were ridiculously illogical, yet I couldn't logically align the way I felt with what I knew to be true about the events that unfolded. However, that's the thing about imposter syndrome: it isn't logical. By its own definition, it's illogical and deeply rooted in feelings of deception, and our bodies[11] often react to it without our control.

Moving in Academic Space and Time: Bodies and Emotions

Johnson et al. help to shed a little light on why bodies are important in the making of meaning—or the casting of shadows, if you'll allow. In their article "Embodiment: Embodying

[10] Superiority is a strange feeling because on one hand I felt like a know-it-all, but on the other, I felt embarrassed that I was visibly labeling myself "imposter" by sitting in the workshop on imposterism.

[11] In this instance, and in most instances in this study, the term *bodies* means both the corporeal, physical body and our emotions.

Feminist Rhetorics," they argue that there should be no separation between bodies and the rhetoric, or the meaning, they make. They say:

> the physical body carries meaning through discourse about or by a body. But embodiment theories suggest that meaning can be articulated beyond language. All bodies do rhetoric through texture, shape, color, consistency, movement, and function. Embodiment encourages a methodological approach that addresses the reflexive acknowledgement of the researcher from feminist traditions and conveys an awareness or consciousness about how bodies—our own and others'—figure in our work. (39)

Each of the authors use their own bodies—marked by fatness, age, infertility, etc.—to illustrate this point. Their bodies help to create their identities because their bodies make meaning. Our material bodies tell stories and they let people know—they signify—the otherwise hidden links we might carry to particular groups, be those linguistic, cultural, historical, etc. (40). Thus, Johnson et al. create a definition of how embodiment practices "encourage complex relationships among past, present, and future, as well as across multiple identifications" (42). The ways we inhabit our bodies in spaces and times—our embodiments—create our identities, and our identities are affected by our emotions. Harkening back to Micciche and Ahmed, these emotions, then, are socially constructed *outside* the body through our relationships; therefore, our bodies are affected/effected by everything around us, by our relationships at any given moment in time.

To further elaborate, feminist theorist A. Abby Knoblauch delineates the differences between embodied language, embodied knowledge, and embodied rhetorics, drawing attention to how our field of Rhetoric and Composition often uses the terms interchangeably, when, instead, they are different. She defines

> embodied language as the use of terms, metaphors, and analogies that reference, intentionally or not, the body itself. Embodied knowledge is that sense of knowing something through the body and is often sparked by what we might call a 'gut reaction.' Finally, embodied rhetoric is a purposeful decision to include embodied knowledge and social positionality as forms of meaning making within a text itself. (52)

The use of "In a similar vein" or giving a piece of writing "legs to stand on" is an example of embodied language, while embodied knowledge is "a trigger for meaning making that is rooted so completely in the body, [that it] is rarely legitimated in academia" (54). When we feel the hairs on our arms stand up around certain places, or when we acknowledge in ourselves that certain colleagues' stares are unwanted and un-collegial though no discourse has been exchanged, this is embodied knowledge. We feel the meaning of these gestures in our bodies. This knowledge influences embodied rhetorics to create "the purposeful effort by an author to represent aspects of embodiment within the text he or she is shaping" and acknowledge how those circumstances "affect how he or she understands the world" (Knoblauch 58). Though Knoblauch uses embodied rhetoric to only explain the ways authors must incorporate bodies in their writing, I would also argue that embodied rhetoric moves outside of the literal text on the page to consider all the ways someone composes meaning. To such a degree, I would argue that our bodies create a sort of primary filter—they affect our ways of knowing and making simply because of their own existence, yet their own existence is marked and formed by cultural expectations and limitations and our own orientations. Acknowledging our embodiment(s) asks us to pay attention to these affects; however, these affects are not always self-made. For sure, they are relationally, culturally, and socially constructed.

In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed explains the way our orientations affect our identities and our tendencies using repetition toward certain "objects," whether physical or immaterial. These objects, she argues, are key components to helping construct our embodiments in spaces and times. She says, "The nearness of such objects, their availability within [one's] bodily horizon, is not casual: it is not just that I find them there, like that. Rather, the nearness of such objects is a sign of an orientation I have already taken toward the world as an orientation that shapes what we call…'character'" (*Queer* 58). Character can also be called "identity" in this instance because it is the objects that we are oriented toward which help us to embody the particular complex relationships that Johnson et al. and Knoblauch mention. Ahmed's orientations become of particular interest when thinking about them in terms of specific identity markers, such as race, sex, gender, class, etc. Considering gender, what orientations require us to take up—or resist—specific gendered bodily positions? What objects affect those orientations? Are our bodies predisposed to orient toward certain bodily positions and away from others? According to Ahmed, the answer is simple: "what we 'do do' affects what we 'can do'" (*Queer* 59). The more we do orient ourselves one way or another, or seek out a specific orientation, the more we can be oriented that way. For someone who does not adhere to traditional white, cis, heteronormative gender alliances, this creates a tension within the body and within our perceived identities. To elaborate, Ahmed claims that "Gender is an effect of the kinds of work that bodies do, which in turn 'directs' those bodies, affecting what they 'can do'" (*Queer* 60). What we 'can do' might not always align with what our bodies 'do do' or even want/need to do, particularly when spaces with rigid notions of how bodies should behave within them, such as the academy, are involved.

The Danger of the Mind/Body Split

If we are to consider how academic spaces, such as the classroom, carry their own orientations and, therefore, identities as cultural spaces, then we must also consider how our bodies create meaning simply by being bodies in those spaces, with all their own (perceived and hidden) identities intact. One way to do this is to acknowledge the outdated embodiment idea of the mind/body split and how it relates to current feminist and queer identifications of the body. For some time, bodies were thought of within the context of the dualism of the mind/body split: the body is biological, temporary, and weakened by its temporality, while the mind is transcendent, spiritual, and, ideally, knowledge-seeking. The body contained the heart; the mind contained the brain. According to cultural studies philosopher Susan Bordo, the constant, unchanging element within this dualism is

> the construction of the body as something apart from the true self (whether conceived as soul, mind, spirit, will, creativity, freedom…) and as undermining the best efforts of that self. That which is not-body is the highest, the best, the noblest, the closest to God; that which is body is the albatross, the heavy drag on self-realization. (5)

Unsurprisingly then, many theorists gendered this rendering, often casting the body, that "heavy drag," as female—weak, aging, getting in the way of knowledge, needing to be tamed—and the mind as male—that closest to God. In this way, the body becomes associated academically, theoretically, culturally, and historically with that which is female, and, even more damagingly, with that which is "feminine." The body becomes something that must be controlled in order to gain knowledge and wisdom; therefore, the feminine woman is similar. Obviously, this duality is a harmful way to see the body since it draws distinctions among the very things that make up

one's body and places unnecessary identities and character traits—deemed good and bad—on an entity that is materially unified. Bordo actually claims that instead of this dualistic way of thinking and behaving, we must instead take a cultural approach to bodies in order to consider all that they inhabit (and don't) so that we may understand their meaning. In this way, we will be able to clearly see the "margins" and the "center" and be able to work more efficiently at bridging the two. She explains:

> Dualism thus cannot be deconstructed in culture the way it can be on paper. To be concretely—that is, culturally—accomplished requires that we bring the 'margins' to the 'center,' that we legitimate and nurture, in those institutions from which they have been excluded, marginalized ways of knowing, speaking, being….Rather, when we bring marginalized aspects of our identities (racial, gendered, ethnic, sexual) into the central arenas of culture they are themselves transformed, and transforming. (41-2)

Bordo here is asking us to make a choice between margin and center. This is work, and practice, that requires intentionality and, often, vulnerability.

Even though dualism is an outdated approach to embodiment, thinking through the ways bodies and emotions are linked together—the ways the margins come to the center (or don't)—is important. For example, because imposter syndrome is an inherently *emotional* experience, one cannot consider the body and its reactions to environments or communities without considering emotions. Understanding emotion and emotional embodiment better helps us to understand our fractured and connected relations, and therefore expand—or contract—our constellations. As Laura Micciche says, mentioned in Chapter One, emotions emerge relationally between people, and, therefore, between bodies not in them. They emerge in communities not isolated from them.

She says, “emotion operates in complex ways—not exclusively an inside-to-outside discourse (self expressing innate feelings outwardly), nor an outside-to-inside one (emotion produced in the social sphere and then internalized by individuals)” (13). As such, emotions are tied to bodies and communities in layered ways that are made more complicated by the myriad identities bodies inhabit. Communities, however, don’t experience all emotions the same way. Communities build relationships, and emotions are socially constructed within these communities because they are made up of people with varying emotional attachments and entanglements. Likewise, the emotion of imposterism can only be experienced in relation to others—in a community.

Emotions, Affects, and Feelings

Understanding emotions, however, requires a bit of a journey down a cross-hatched trail. Emotions are often associated with feelings and moods, and they are lumped under the expansive umbrella of affects by many scholars. While complicated in nature, emotions tend to be physical expressions of things felt more deeply. Nicely articulated by neuroscientist Antonio R. Damasio in *The Feeling of What Happened: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*, feelings and emotions are interwoven and require a nod to cognition to be recognized. Damasio explains, “It is through feelings, which are inwardly directed and private, that emotions, which are outwardly directed and public, begin their impact on the mind; but the full and lasting impact of feelings requires consciousness…” (36). Damasio’s definition couples nicely with Micciche’s articulation that emotions are outward sensations and expressions.

Confusing this explanation, though, literary scholar Charles Altieri draws bold distinctions between not only emotions and feelings, but also moods and passions. In *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects,* Altieri claims that “feelings are elemental

affective states characterized by an imaginative engagement in the immediate processes of sensation" while "emotions are affects involving the construction of attitudes that typically establish a particular cause and so situate the agent within a narrative and generate some kind of action or identification" (2). Therefore, emotions create the action that feelings initiate. Feelings may subside while emotions linger. Altieri explains: "Emotions differ from feelings primarily because they are modes of affect in which the ego has to position itself as a psychological unit in relation to the conditions that move it. Feelings quicken and animate the psyche, while emotions involve it in caring about how it will engage certain states of affairs over time" (72).

If you're experiencing imposter syndrome, do you really care about the difference between emotions and feelings anyway? Probably not, but what you might care about are their temporality.

Feeling like an imposter in any situation is mostly[12] uncomfortable; however, being vulnerable enough to admit impostorism is always uncomfortable because it deals with rejection of these feelings and feelings of being less(er) than. Therefore the *act* of being vulnerable is an emotion caused by the *feelings* of desire, fear, or need to be understood from a defined perspective, in the case of this study, impostorism. Admittedly, the agent might not completely understand this act or the perspective it springs from, but Damasio would argue that the desire could be a subconscious act emerging from a biological and evolutionary refinement. "Emotions are part of the bioregulatory devices," he argues, "with which we come equipped to survive" (53). Vulnerability, then, is a queer emotion because it complicates the traditional linear trajectory of feelings to emotions. To be vulnerable, one allows oneself to sit in the muck of the unknown, to give honest, authentic voice to that unfamiliar, and to be exposed to the unknown

[12] I say *mostly* here because there is always some comfort in familiar emotions, regardless of how painful or damaging they are.

consequences. This emotion is both noun (vulnerability) and adjective (vulnerable) and because of this, its aid in survival is two-pronged; its use enacts a sense of survivance, the act of survival coupled with resistance, more than simply survival alone (Powell 400).

However**,** the practice of vulnerability is not an easy one. People who walk with privilege in certain spaces, myself included, have the ability to practice vulnerability much more easily and safely than those whom privilege alludes. Nevertheless, it is this lack of privilege that asks more privileged people to flood spaces with emotional vulnerability, like crying in public and authentically expressing anger or sadness, in order to recognize the imbalance in said privilege. This queerly feminist move in potentially unsafe spaces (academia, for example) recognizes and values an emotion as a valid happening, and it disrupts and complicates the expected "professionalism" and privilege of these spaces. It invites the agent to be more sensitive to feelings (the process) than protocol (the product) while also asking the audience to recognize an unquantifiable thing as legitimate. This queer double gesture is at once a performance and a shedding of performance that results in the traces of its existence being hard to pinpoint. It leaves the agent both exposed to attack while also strengthened against the attack (perhaps more as an afterthought), yet these acts of vulnerability are not easily identifiable. Someone crying in a public place may not always *signify* vulnerability (it could very well *just* be performance) just as someone sharing a piece of work with a colleague doesn't *exclude* vulnerability. This is the double gesture of vulnerability. It "signals a refusal of a certain kind of finitude" that enables vulnerability to live on through the stories we tell and retell (Muñoz 65). Particularly in academic spaces, vulnerability can be seen as a weakness rather than a truth illustrated through action or experience. Instead, one can choose to see the queer act of vulnerability in unwelcome spaces as a diffraction of sorts—vulnerability breaks apart traditional (heteropatriarchal) norms and

expectations while stitching together emotional pieces of oneself. The diffraction that vulnerability enables illustrates how "there is no moving beyond, no leaving the 'old' behind" because it requires us to be honest and in touch with ourselves in ways that encourage us to remember the "old" of our desires while living in the new (Barad 168). When we express our emotions without bounds in academic spaces, we are more likely to understand and live in authenticity. Like I said, though, this is not always easy.

For women, this is an especially bold move. Already labeled inferior in most aspects of society, women innately toe the line of vulnerability at once being taught that our stories matter while rarely feeling like we will be believed if we chose to share those stories. Consider, for instance, the recent #metoo popularity in the uninviting space of social media following the sexual assault accusations of media mogul Harvey Weinstein. It is not surprising that women felt empowered to share stories of abuse and harassment from several years prior even as that sharing created more controversy around sexual harassment and accusing questions of "Why now?" Personal spaces, like social media, that, for some, are quite hospitable, became harassing spaces. Predictably, not only is it a bold move for a woman to be vulnerable, it is also unnecessarily brave; it is survivance. Without this bravery, without this vulnerability, women would remain silent and, in the case of Weinstein and #metoo, violence against women would be perpetuated.

Consider, too, the emotionally unwelcome space of academia. Stereotypically and culturally, women have long been the more domestic sex, with men venturing beyond the household for work and purpose. Women's roles often revolved around taking care of the home and children while men's roles were grounded in creating a means for the homemaking to happen. Simply put, women were the consumers and men were the producers (Schell 22). To further help establish this split, nineteenth-century popular culture began reflecting the

differences between the public and private worlds as masculine, technological, and ruthless versus self-sacrificing, familial, and sensitive (Schell 22). It is no coincidence that these adjectives are gendered or that they have corresponding feelings associated with them: strong versus weak. The result of this domestication of women and the maturation of their work in the home was the refinement of home economics, which included "[t]he care of the family, the creation of the home, the service of others, and the cultivation of ethical children" (Matthaei qtd. in Schell 22). Despite the "professionalization" of their work at home, women were still expected to remain feminine and cultivate feminine qualities. Teaching was a natural transition from homemaking for women, and through much social reform, her "true profession" was realized when, in 1846, Catharine Beecher argued that "women were natural-born teachers because they had the predisposition—the patience, the self-sacrifice, the moral superiority—to attend to the development of children" (Schell 23). Beecher's call was heard, and women flocked to the academy; however,

> [t]eaching was a paradoxical profession for women, simultaneously disempowering and empowering. While women teachers were often subject to strict moral codes and frequently lacked full status, respect, wages equal to men's, and control over their working conditions, they also benefited significantly from their work experiences. (Schell 24)

Not a lot has changed in over 150 years.

Never Good Enough: Imposter Syndrome and the Academic Woman

Imposter syndrome was first defined by psychologists Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes in their 1978 study that focused on the *internal* feeling 150 high-achieving women

encountered in place of success. The description of the women in their study is remarkably relevant over forty years later. They say that

> Women who experience the imposter phenomenon maintain a strong belief that they are not intelligent; in fact they are convinced that they have fooled anyone who thinks otherwise…these women find innumerable means of negating any external evidence that contradicts their belief that they are, in reality, unintelligent. (1)

The more I work with IS and emotional embodiments, the more I understand how powerful my own "innumerable means" are and how they are triggered more or less in certain situations by specific people. In Clance and Imes's study, made up mostly of undergraduate women, they found that their participants fell into two categories: those with at least one higher-achieving sibling designated as the "intelligent" one, and those whose families made the women, as girls, feel superior in all ways (3); however, both groups of women experienced feelings of phoniness.

Because phoniness plays such a big role in impostorism, we must look at how it is related to participants' sense of self. Clance and Imes found:

> The women's own self-image of being a phoney is consonant with the society view that women are not defined as being competent. If a woman does well, it cannot be because of her ability but must be because of some fluke. If she were to acknowledge her intelligence, she would have to go against the views perpetuated by a whole society—an ominous venture indeed! (4)

Essentially, women feared taking on society's expectations of them, so even if they *knew* they deserved what they'd achieved, they could explain that sense of knowing away as a fluke, as phoniness. However, Clance and Imes note that even though feelings of imposter syndrome are

strong, “there are also strong (though frequently unsuccessful) attempts to overcome it” (4). In their study, Clance and Imes detected four behaviors, experienced singularly or multiply, that helped women maintain feelings of impostorism: 1) feelings that if the woman were to succeed, she might actually fail, yet diligently working hard helps satiate these feelings, 2) a sense of phoniness based in reality due to “intellectual inauthenticity,” 3) the use of charm to win approval and reward, and 4) receiving negative consequences due to confidence in ability (5).

I’ve seen—and experienced—all of these behaviors. When I take time to consider the ways bodies tell stories about our identity, particularly in places like the academy, and specifically around emotions like imposter syndrome, I think of Royster and Kirsch’s ideas of “tacking in” and “tacking out.” In *Feminist Rhetorical Practices*, Royster and Kirsch say that to “tack in,” one uses longstanding analytical tools to “focus closely on existing resources, fragmentary and otherwise, and existing scholarship” to examine and understand the missing parts of a problem. “Tacking out,” then, is

> when we stand in a conscious awareness of what we have come to know by more-traditional means and from that base use critical imagination to look back from a distance...in order to broaden our own viewpoints in anticipation of what might become more visible from a longer or broader view, where the scene may not be in fine detail but in broader strokes and deep impressions. (Royster and Kirsch 72)

Tacking in asks embodiment theorists to consider the ways research already situates the body (the queer body, the black or brown body, the female body), while tacking out looks to see how corporeal bodies are actually affecting the research. In this sense embodiment is not only a way of grounding our research in a particular bodily situatedness, but also within a feminist practice

of simultaneously looking inward at what we know (tacking in, the mind) and outward at what the bigger picture can teach us (tacking out, the body).

How, then, does imposter syndrome tack in and tack out simultaneously to deceive us?

Paying for It: Emotional Labor vs. Emotions and Labor

Emotional labor has had a scholastic renaissance of late. Scholars, especially WPAs, are writing about the ways their emotions are showing up at work more and more, and for good reason. In fact, a new edited collection has just come out as of this writing that focuses on emotional labor and the WPA (Wooten, Babb, Costello, and Navickas). Yet as scholars, we are having trouble defining our terms. When we experience emotions, even emotions at work, are we experiencing *emotional labor*? Is the act of simply experiencing an emotion laborious, or is there another element that makes *emotion* turn into *labor*? Can emotional labor ever be positive, or is it destined to always be associated with negative feelings? Hochschild, in *The Managed Heart*, takes a moment to delineate what makes the labor aspect of emotional labor so important. "The labor," she says, "requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others—[for example], the sense of being cared for in a convivial and safe place" (7). She goes on to say that emotional labor asks for "a coordination of mind and feeling, and it sometimes draws on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality" (7). Emotional labor, therefore, requires us to use both our minds and bodies in unison—our minds to experience a feeling and our bodies to convince others that the feeling is "okay"—or not—through the use of our own body language. In a sense, there is a falsehood to most people's experience of emotional labor; we often don't authentically portray how we feel realistically on our bodies. If anything, we try to hide our upset, begrudged, put upon, and generally bad feelings, especially at work, and carry on as if everything were okay.

Think, here, of Hochschild's flight attendants; part of their job was literally to mask their emotions with a smile to reassure passengers. What would happen if the flight attendant just experienced bad news or was feeling upset? Because emotional labor is a "commodity," we often feel the need to perform happiness, or at least "okay-ness" at work for fear that our exchange rate might go down. For the WPA, this need to mask our emotions comes at the cost of hiding ourselves as emotional beings. "We recognize the powerful tension between how we are perceived separately as professionals and as people with emotions. We certainly know what it is like to apologize when our emotions and our work collide or cross trajectories," declare Wooten, Babb, Costello and Navickas (4). They continue to say that "most WPAs have learned to present a persona rooted in professionalism and energetic commitment to improving student writing. But inevitably, many of those same WPAs struggle with burnout, depression, and a sense of powerlessness" (Wooten et al. 4-5). What is a WPA to do with the reality that their professional persona might very well differ—sometimes greatly—from their personal existence? As Wooten et al. decry, "we must examine the things we carry and think about the narratives attached to those things" (5). What does the emotional labor we all carry tell us? What does how we experience it on/in/through our bodies tell us about our relationship with ourselves? Should we push to experience emotional labor outwardly more authentically, or is the very nature of emotional labor hidden and discrete?

In the following chapters, you'll read the stories of Natalie, Sam, Mollie, and myself. Each of us experiences emotional labor in vastly different ways, and, therefore, are beholden to imposter syndrome and the embodiment of our emotions in ways that cross-hatch one another. Where one person is supremely familiar with the trappings of emotional labor and how it shows up—and doesn't—on her body, others of us have never had the opportunity to really stop and

examine our emotional labor at work. As you'll see, though, all of us, because we continually expose ourselves to activities that can result in feelings of imposter syndrome, are, what I call, Radically Willful Women, women who expose themselves to imposter syndrome because the job calls for it. In all, however, our stories are what shed light on the authenticity of our experiences with emotional labor, imposter syndrome, and the—hidden and visible—things we carry every day.

"When I sit down to make my stories I know very well that I want to take the reader by the throat, break her heart, and heal it again. With that intention, I cannot sort out myself, say this part is for the theorist, this for the poet, this for the editor, and this for the wayward ethnographer who only wants to document my experience."

Dorothy Allison, *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class, and Literature*

CHAPTER THREE: STORYTELLING AND METHOD MAKING: PROCESSES AND OBSERVATIONS

I sit down in the chair and notice how hard the back is. It forces me to correct my posture. The armrests squeeze my thighs tighter than I'd like. The cushion, newly recovered, provides some much-needed softness as I settle in for my day. I check to make sure I've got everything I need within arm's reach: phone, note-taking paper, pen and pencil, treats for Mandy (my dog) to keep her occupied, laptop charger, a glass of water. I cross and uncross my ankles trying to find a comfortable position. I'm sitting at the head of my teal kitchen table, and being here, I'm reminded that I "bring my past encounters with [me] when [I] arrive" (Ahmed, *Queer* 40). What in my past haunts me during this experience? What helps me? In what ways will I allow my relations and my experiences into this process? How might I (already be) block(ing) them? I pause, take a moment, and welcome the past into my present. I know my past experience as a writing center WPA will influence my work, but I'm not sure yet how, exactly. What I do know is that I'm going to have to revisit my past, and while this revisitation isn't bad or marred with trauma, it does make me feel...well, inadequate. I know my decade as a writing center assistant director was productive and fruitful, but it was also untenable and stagnant. Coming back to school showed me all the things I didn't know, and made me ashamed of some of the ways I'd been moving in my WPA space for so long. It made me ashamed of some of my comforts. Now, I'm going to have to confront that feeling of inadequacy while also reliving the moments I did good work. Can these things live in my current work simultaneously? Should they?

I became a writing center administrator in 2006, seven months after graduating with my Master's degree. I was working at the same center I'd just graduated from, in the same university where I'd done my Master's and Bachelor's degrees, and I felt comfortable, though I would be working under a new-to-me director, someone coming back into the center on a temporary basis

after the director I trained under left. When I first started, I was nervous, but entirely too confident in my limited administrative abilities. I'd served as a graduate student administrator my last year as a graduate student, but this role did little to really prepare me for the daily tasks administrators can face: budgets, hiring and firing, training, cross-campus and community collaborations, etc. I thought I was ready to go, and my new director did too, so I jumped in. Perhaps my eager enthusiasm and bold confidence shielded me from the big mistakes I made those first few years, but I knew that if I just kept my tutors' protection at my core, I should be okay. I knew that my tutors were there for my students, but I was there for my tutors. This became my mantra.

I served as the assistant director of this center at a large, Southern university, from 2006-2010, and I grew more professionally during this time of my mid-twenties than nearly any other time in my career. I also met and married my ex-husband, ironically through friends from the writing center. My tenure as an AD at this university allowed me to serve under two very different directors: one older, former military with no real writing center training and one more granola, ex-hippie who was trained in writing centers, but obviously wanted to be doing something else. I loved both my directors, and I learned a lot from them, but by 2010, my time at this university was coming to a close. My marriage was falling apart, and I didn't feel the rush of excitement in my position that I once had. I'd been at this university for eleven years, and I needed a change, so I did a mini-job search, applied to a few positions, and ended up moving to a fairly lateral position at a small, liberal Southeastern, mountain university six hours away from my hometown. In all honesty, this move was mainly to save my marriage. I thought that if I shook up our routine and got us out of our hometown, we might be able to find something

salvageable in each other. What I didn't expect was to find another job that I loved, and was really good at, again. I didn't expect to find myself as a WPA.

When I can stall no more, I open my laptop and ready myself. I'm much more nervous than I thought I'd be. I can already feel my heart racing, and, ironically, I'm worried I'm going to look unprepared and foolish. I've primed myself physically to look the part of an intellectual, or, at least, how I perceive myself as intellectual: full face of makeup, a button-up blouse, my hair fixed and down. I *look* prepared even if I might not *feel* prepared. *And that's just the issue, isn't it*, I think. *I've started off covering my nerves and feeling like an imposter in a study of my own design on imposterism.* At this thought, I'm reminded of two people: a mentor and colleague at a former institution and a current graduate school colleague who've both made comments about their academic attire and nerves. The first, female, mid-forties, queer, wore jeans and a t-shirt to teach in every single day and knew that if she was comfortable in her clothing, she would be comfortable in her classroom/meeting/office, so she adopted a "wardrobe," of sorts, that didn't change from work to home. The second, female, mid-thirties, queer, always said that you could tell her nerves during a presentation by the amount of "extras" she was wearing: jewelry, lipstick, articles of clothing (like blazers). Both talked about their cover-up comforts, or lack thereof, as armor, of sorts, and while I think neither was right or wrong about their approach to academic attire, for some reason, I've leaned hard into the "professional" side for this first interview, and I'm not sure I approve of myself for it.

I review my questions, already thinking they are too basic but trying to trust in the process designed around vulnerability that I've built. When I think back to the origins of this study, and my intentions around it, the word *vulnerability* is hard to escape. I knew from the outset that my study would center vulnerability because without that, no one would ever talk

honestly and openly with me about their emotions and feelings, particularly at work in academia. As English professors Berg and Seeber say, "to talk about the body and emotion [in the academy] goes against the grain of an institution that privileges the mind and reason" (2). I want to go against that grain.

I've got about five minutes before I need to begin, so I make my way over to Zoom and log in. I want to make sure I know how to record the interview and that the links work. I remove the post-it covering my computer camera, and I toggle over the various buttons on the screen, checking and re-checking them as I shift in my chair. The image of myself, alone, in the Zoom room feels strange, anticipatory, disembodied. I see myself how my first participant will see me, and I'm not sure I like it. I look...too much: too much makeup, too much hair, too many nerves. I can see all of my insecurities, my cover-ups (like the blouse) as cover-ups of my own imposterism. My lower back is beginning to ache from sitting up so straight in the chair. Thankfully, Mandy's snores provide a rhythmic cadence to which I find myself typing out notes in time: *Word. Word. Wooooooord. Word. Word. Wooooooooooord.* The process is soothing, but just as I find myself lulled into passivity, I check the clock and realize it's time. I click windows back over to Zoom, and one minute later hear the familiar "ding dong" of someone else entering the room. Ready or not, it's begun.

Methodology: Critical Autoethnography and Cultural Rhetorics

My study is an autoethnographic one and one championing WPA stories. My methodologies are grounded in a cultural rhetorics orientation that prioritizes story as theory. As cultural rhetorician Riley Mukavetz says, "We can learn from the stories we tell and re-tell what we do with cultural communities and the experiences of working with those communities. Those research stories are data for analysis" (110). In this way, the stories I collect from my WPAs

build the foundation for my entire work; the participants' willingness to share stories, to acknowledge the relational aspect of our work together, to build theory collaboratively, and to negotiate vulnerability with me will also guide much of the study. Because I am also working with a community that I'm a member of, I'm keenly aware of the constellations I'll be drawing from when doing this work. I cannot write or think about WPAs or the emotional embodiment of imposter syndrome without writing or thinking about myself and my own experiences, so I intend to weave myself throughout this study as a way to: 1) create a critical autoethnography, and 2) practice a vulnerable embodiment with my readers, WPAs, and myself to highlight the powerful meaning-making held in story. Acknowledging my own past as part of a WPA team means facing my own truths, even the ones I don't like about myself. When Dorothy Allison says, "I have promised myself to break the habit of lying, to try to make truth everyday [*sic*] in my life, but it is not simple. Piecing out lies and truth is sometimes excruciatingly complicated, particularly for writers," I see the struggle of her words even as she strives for the transparency that critical autoethnographic writing can bring (55). I see the potential friction of being critically honest with oneself in the face of myriad cultures and practices, yet as Powell et al. remind us, "All cultural practices are built, shaped, and dismantled based on the encounters people have with one another within and across particular systems of shared belief." Critical autoethnography is personal and requires the researcher to put themselves into a vulnerable, microscopic position in order to invite others into that position. It "values the self as a rich repository of experiences and perspectives that are not easily available to traditional approaches...and acknowledges that knowledge is based on one's location and identities. It frankly engages with the situatedness of one's experiences, rather than suppressing them" (Canagarajah 260). Thus, it is exactly the kind of methodological stance needed to talk openly and honestly about emotions and bodies without

"suppressing them." As Bryant Keith Alexander points out, this practice asks the researcher to examine the layers of their life to identify where the edges bleed out of their containment so that these edges can be further scrutinized to expose "the dynamic of politics at play in the scene" (111). Furthermore, critical autoethnography seeks intersections simultaneously through story and action, through theory and purpose; it wrestles with the *whys* of behaviors while also simply *talking*, unashamed, about the behavior. Autoethnography, as communication scholar Ellis says, "refers to the process as well as what is produced from the process" (32). It creates in the writer, researcher, and participants "a risk of bleeding, in which the categorical containments of [their] identity threatens to exceed its borders, revealing the ways in which [they] are always both particular and plural at the same time; never contained and always messy" (Alexander 110). In short, it tries to "make truth everyday," whatever that individual truth may look like. I want to make truth everyday *with* my WPAs, and to do that, I have to let myself into the process. I have to bleed past my borders.

Natalie: Learning to Bleed

Natalie joins me, and I immediately feel at ease seeing her. I'm grateful my first conversation is with her rather than Sam or Mollie because I feel like I know Natalie the best of all three women. She is a year younger than I am, has two small children at home, and is generally always bubbly and happy when I see her. We met a couple of years ago through my committee chair and friend, and she's a graduate of the program I'm in currently. Especially because of her association with my program, even though we know each other on a more surface level at the beginning of this process, I feel like I know the way she thinks about emotions, emotional labor, and her embodiment. This hunch will prove true as we work through our weeks of conversations and we each open up more and more to each other.

Natalie enters the Zoom room wearing a black tank top, no makeup, and damp hair. She is at home in a closed-off room (to avoid distractions from her young children). Natalie is obviously relaxed with me and with this process. We talk easily about our shared relations before I feel like I need to mention some of the business of the process. This need to stay focused and on an invisible pathway I've carved out for myself is my own imposter syndrome sneaking into this first conversation. If I don't remind her of all the details of this process, this study, she might forget what she signed up for, decide she doesn't want to participate, and leave. Or, worse, she might forget to do something in the process, like the video diaries, and I would miss out on important data. I would have failed. Telling her the details up front, again, makes me feel like I'm providing myself with a safety net when, actually, I'm cutting off productive and fruitful conversation and, mistakenly, reinforcing an interviewer/participant relationship rather than one I desire based on mutual vulnerability and trust. I've not yet learned how to bleed. To her credit, Natalie doesn't seem to notice my nerves. She pauses long enough to hear the instructions and then lets me set up the first question, asking her how she got into writing center WPA work. "It was a total accident," she says with a hearty laugh, and with that, we've begun.

Methods

Study Design: Slowing Down

When I set out to design my study, I knew that I wanted vulnerability to be at its center, as I mentioned earlier, but I wasn't sure how to do that. How could I center a precarious emotional action in a study with people I didn't know? The answer came slowly. In their book *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy*, Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber argue that academics suffer from a need to produce—and produce *new* ideas—and a disconnection from their emotions and bodies so much so that they are in crisis.

Instead of hurrying up to meet the demands of the academy, Berg and Seeber say that academics should take a note from the Slow Food movement and, quite literally, slow down. "[A]pproaching our professional practice from the perspective influenced by the Slow movement," they say, "has the potential to disrupt the corporate ethos of speed...Slow Professors act with purpose, taking the time for deliberation, reflection, and dialogue, cultivating emotional and intellectual resilience…" (11). If I wanted to build a deliberate relationship with my WPAs, and stay in tune with my own emotions and body while encouraging them to as well, I would need to slow down my process. But I still didn't know what this looked like in reality. Luckily, I was given a model in the form of an internship.

Right as I was beginning to think about my study, I had the good fortune of interning in Dr. Julie Lindquist's Writing Program Administration graduate course as a co-facilitator. The major project in that course that she and I designed was a mentoring project in which the students were paired with a current WPA in the field and asked to hold weekly one-on-one meetings/interviews. These interviews would last the length of the semester—about 13 weeks, give or take once we got going—and the students would then produce a manuscript of some kind based on their experience and on the needs of the WPA. What this project taught me from an instructor's point-of-view is that vulnerability is achievable with a stranger, but it takes a lot of time and commitment from both parties. It takes patience. It takes "deliberation over acceleration" (Berg and Seeber xviii). As I watched my fellow students report each week on their interviews, I saw the vulnerability of these pairings unfold. Some found an immediate rhythm with one another and began to talk about the difficult parts of WPA work and labor within one to two weeks, while others took much longer to connect. Eventually, over the tenure of the pairings,

all the partnerships would find this vulnerable space of connection, and I'm lucky enough to have witnessed it. I modeled my study after this project with a few changes.

Data Collection

1. *Stories & There-ness*

For my study, I had conversations with my WPAs over a 15-week period to allow room for them to open up to me in ways they might not in a one-off interview and to model slowing down and tuning into the everyday (bodies and minds). This process also put the value in our conversations on stories. My WPAs' stories are valuable, and I wanted them to see value in these stories, too. "Stories are the way humans make sense of their worlds," says Ellis (32). "Stories are essential to human understanding and are not unique to autoethnography. Stories are the focus of Homeric literature, oral traditions, narrative analysis, and fairy tales. Given their importance," Ellis argues, "stories should be both a subject and a method of social science research" (32). For really, "the truth about stories is that that's all we are," says King (153).

This process of slowing down the data collection, spacing it out over several weeks, and highlighting the everyday stories of bodies and emotions epitomized Andrea Riley Mukavetz's theory of there-ness. For Riley Mukavetz, and the Odawa elders she interviewed and observed, there-ness "is a practice of negotiating the presence and absence of roles, responsibilities, bodies, and ideas…[it] draws attention to the significance of everyday tasks—that these tasks are just as meaningful as events and realizations marked by dominant discourses" (120). My 15-week study was designed to capture the there-ness of the WPAs, their bodies, their emotions, and their surroundings. I wanted to know how they showed up—and didn't—specifically through their emotions and bodies, in conversation with me, and if our conversations might change because of this showing up, this there-ness. Ultimately, attention to there-ness encourages a vulnerability of

empathy where the "researcher and the participant are fluid" (Riley Mukavetz 120) because it asks the researcher to see themselves as the participant and the participant to see themselves as theory-maker. In these conversations with my WPAs, I didn't want the hierarchy present of researcher-participant—that I was just observing my WPAs for what I could learn about them and craft into my own narrative of the weeks. Instead, I wanted the women in my study to feel like they not only had knowledge to give, but also had the ability to create knowledge with me during our time together. To do this, I limited my study to a few participants. Where the study in the WPA class I interned in was one-to-one, I knew I needed a slightly bigger pool to figure out how more than one person experiences imposter syndrome, but I also knew my own time was limited. For this reason, and because vulnerability over 15 weeks works best with smaller numbers, I limited my participant pool to four: Natalie, Mollie, Sam, and me, all white, cis-gender, women. I tried to recruit outside of the homogenized pool; however, several WPAs of Color declined to participate in my study, and Natalie, Mollie, and Sam all agreed. The coincidence is in the fact that I knew each of them—to varying degrees—before our study began. Eventually I was able to achieve this researcher-participant fluidity with all three WPAs despite those nerves on my first day.

2. *The Vulnerable Observer*

The practical particulars of my study revolved around the virtual one-to-one conversations I had with my WPAs every other week for 15 weeks. On the off weeks, I asked my participants to keep an online video diary for me on FlipGrid based on prompts I created (see Appendix A). I did this for a couple reasons: 1) To keep them invested in our long-term conversation, I thought it best to have them experience some sort of engagement each week, and 2) I wondered how their vulnerability and emotions might change if they just spoke to

"themselves" versus speaking to me. I realized that the video diaries were setting up a whole new dynamic of there-ness for my WPAs, one that I was immediately disembodied from but still a participant of because it established a false audience: they still *talked to me* in their diaries. While I wrote the prompts and was the invisible presence in the diaries, my participants almost treated their diary entries as if I was there, talking to me the entire time and looking at the camera, where I would have been had I actually been present. While this wasn't a bad way to treat the diary entries, me being the ghostly presence in the screen is not something I anticipated when I started this study.

My own there-ness in this study revolved around my ability to be vulnerable, visible, and empathetic with my participants from the beginning. When my WPAs were happy and outgoing, so was I; when they expressed anger about their current positions, I felt their anger and became frustrated on their behalf; when they were sad or nervous, I tried to be a calming, reassuring presence for them to hook into during our talks. Because of the fluid-ness between us that I desired, part of my vulnerability looked a lot like empathetic listening to the WPAs' stories and vigilantly observing their bodies—and talking about these observations with them—as they told these stories. It also involved me allowing myself to go off-script when I felt the need arise. In doing so, I acted as autoethnographer Ruth Behar's vulnerable observer, one who wonders, what, if anything, is the story my WPA "isn't willing to tell?" (20). I found these stories, sometimes, written on my WPAs' bodies, in their subtle movements when I would ask a question they didn't know how to answer, in their smiles and laughs when they remembered a moment from their past that connected to their present, in their shy, tentative answers that skirted around questions, and in the tears they shed while recalling frustrations in their jobs or students they lost. Their bodies always said much more than their words, and I paid attention to these non-verbal

messages. For example, Natalie's hand gestures told me that she needed to illustrate her points more than her words would allow and that sometimes her words couldn't keep up with her thoughts; Mollie's composure was difficult for me to crack, but later in our study I learned of some physical ailments she was having trouble getting diagnosed, and I began to wonder during how much of our study was she in pain; Sam's lack of eye contact and physical posture change when talking about her body showed me just how uncomfortable and new this experience was to her. Noting these things made the study feel particularly precious to me. I knew I was handling these women's emotions over a very stressful time in their year; I purposefully designed the study to begin in August and run until late November to capture this busy-ness. I felt the pressure to handle my WPA's vulnerabilities carefully and represent them authentically and honestly. Ahmed says we might be careful to think of shared feelings as an easy inside-out transfer. She says, "Once what is inside has got out, when I have expressed my feelings [non-verbally or verbally], then my feelings also become yours, and you may respond to them...The logic here is that I have feelings, which *then* move outwards towards objects and others, and which might then return to me" (*Cultural* 8-9). However, Ahmed cautions us to remember that emotions "are after all moving, even if they do not simply move between us" (*Cultural* 11). "What moves us," she goes on to say, "what makes us feel, is also that which holds us in place, or gives us a dwelling place" (*Cultural* 11). In other words, the emotions and feelings that moved all around us during my study among the WPAs and me created a dwelling place in our study; they held us in place just as our recordings held us in time. Our emotions were more than what we verbalized to one another, but also what we witnessed in each other's bodies, in each other's spaces, and during each other's pauses. Our Zoom and FlipGrid rooms became sacred spaces of emotional stickiness. To Ahmed, "stickiness involves a form of relationality, or a 'withness', [sic] in which

the elements that are 'with' get bound together" (*Cultural* 91). This "withness" is a form of "there-ness." Both bind us to people, places, things, ideas, cultures, and both can, sometimes, be unintentional. You can get stuck in a dwelling place you never wanted to be in because of past emotions in that space, and you can stick to places where new emotions are shared purposefully, creating a stronger bond between the people in the place, creating a bond of there-ness. Because, as Riley Mukavetz says, there-ness modifies. "*To be there* is to be visible, present, and active in the communities we belong to" (121). To be there is to pay attention to what is sticking.

3. Tacking In and Pulling Threads

When I was first given my participants' stories, I was overwhelmed. I had 15 weeks of data to sort through, and I wasn't exactly sure what to do next, and the "preciousness" of the stories my participants shared with me was almost too much for me to deal with, even as it was exactly what I wanted and needed for this study to continue. But faced with so much new data—more than I'd ever had with any other study before—I started to once again feel like an imposter. The questions I kept facing over and over again were who was I to be the conduit of these stories? And now that I had all this data, what stories, exactly, did I want, and need, to tell?

Once I had my data, I was then faced with the task of what to do with 15 weeks' worth of stories. I found myself mystified by the mountain of data in front of me, but I reminded myself that even though I had all this data, all these stories, I didn't necessarily have to use all of them right this moment. I considered the first half of my study to be repertoire-building; in other words, during the first few weeks of the study, I was focused on building a deeper relationship with my participants through their sharing of personal stories that didn't really have much to do with imposter syndrome or embodiment. But during this time, I was highly aware of observing my participants' bodies as they spoke to me via Zoom and through the video diaries on FlipGrid.

I wanted to see how long it took all of us to get comfortable enough with one another to become vulnerable, and I measured this by our body language. For myself, I paid attention to when I let my guards down with my participants. When I stopped speaking super formally and started dressing more casually, I knew I'd hit the moment when I was comfortable with my participants. When they invited me into their homes or began drinking tea during our conversations, I knew they had dropped some of their guards, too.

Once I realized when we felt comfortable with one another (around Week 5, which is the third week of the study), I then looked for keywords in my notes, specifically around emotion words like *angry, happy, sad, upset, vulnerable,* etc. I also looked for moments when I noticed their body movements in specific ways. Once I tagged these moments in my notes, I went back to the videos, rewatched and transcribed them, and pulled out moments I thought were particularly emotional, vulnerable, or guarded.

As I sat with my data, combing over these patterns, I began to realize that all of my participants faced imposter syndrome the same way: despite knowing it might be a reaction of something new they try, they still try the things anyway. Once I realized this, threads began to emerge within their stories, almost illuminating a pathway for me out of the data jungle. As I pulled on these threads, the stories that I wanted and needed to share made more sense, so as I pulled, I tacked into what I knew from and about my participants to build a theory of Radically Willful Women: women who look imposter syndrome in the face and decide to engage with whatever activity might cause it anyway.

More specifically, tacking in in this way looked like me reading through my notes for keywords that I jotted down about the ways my participants moved in the online space (for example, I remembered how nervous Sam was to talk about her embodied emotions at work, so

in my notes about her, I looked for any time I mentioned her physical reactions to my questions—nervousness, looking away from the camera, etc.) as I asked them questions (see Appendix A). Then, I went back to these videos, rewatched and transcribed them, and searched for the threads in these videos that might build support for the story of Radically Willful Women. In other words, I spent a lot of time asking myself what makes a Radically Willful Woman, particularly in the cases of myself, Mollie, Natalie, and Sam. While it looked a little different for each participant, what I was able to notice was that all of us, myself included, didn't fear imposter syndrome but rather saw it as a necessary part of our work, our emotional labor, as WPAs. As I pulled at more and more threads, I was able to also build a story of what this emotional labor looked like on our bodies and of how we talked about it. The transcripts of the video conversations and of the diaries my participants did all showed people who valued their work as WPAs *even above* the cost of the emotional labor the job requires of them. It's my hope that their stories in this volume are able to show that as well.

Sam: Going Off-Script

It is our fifth week of the study, our third Zoom interview, and Sam joins me in the Zoom room from her office. Her computer screen faces a window perfectly framing her knick-knacks, plants, framed pictures, and bookshelf behind her. Her office is cozy, and she's obviously comfortable in it. Today, she is wearing a slate blue dress, brown glasses, statement earrings, minimal makeup, and her blonde curls are loosely cascading down to her shoulders. The sun pours into her window, and she starts our conversation off asking me about an upcoming international trip I'm taking. I'm more relaxed now at Week Five; I'm in an MSU t-shirt, wearing glasses, and I have minimal makeup on. Long gone are my full face armor and blouse days. I'm in my school office, and I keep looking behind me to see if an office-mate will barge

in. I see myself more comfortable in the conversation even as my body is slightly more tense in this work space. I'm not rushing from one question to another; I've found some sort of a rhythm with Sam. However, I've noticed Sam has taken control of the conversation from the beginning; she asks me about my trip, my classes, and my work all before I can ask her a single question. She does this sometimes, and I have chalked it up to her outgoing personality, but today something seems a little different. When I do shift the focus back to her, she admits that she's just volunteered for Faculty Senate, which is why, she says, she "doesn't look like a slob" like she normally does. "I really have no idea what I'm doing," she says as she launches into talking about why she's signed up for the committee. The tables have turned, and she's got nervous energy today, but that's not the only emotion I'm feeling from her.

Sam is a meticulous planner before our meetings, so the more focused the questions get on emotions and her own body, the more her body language changes. She admits that she's never had the opportunity to think about and talk about her body and emotions at work, and this is new for her. She moves back in her chair, begins playing with her hair, looks up and around the camera instead of right at it. When I ask her about a time when her own emotional labor felt necessary, Sam begins telling me about an international student she had—the first MA student whose thesis she directed—and how he recently went back to his home country, was diagnosed with leukemia, and passed away suddenly, about nine months ago. The hurt is obviously still there for Sam as she cries when telling me about the guilt she felt associated with "keeping him here away from his family" during his Master's degree. She is embarrassed to be crying, but she doesn't try to rush through his story. She tells me about him slowly and with detail, and the process almost seems cathartic to her. In this moment, I listen. My own grief from my mother's passing is still very fresh, and I know Sam doesn't need to hear that it will get better. She tells

me about him, his life, and his family, and I listen and nod. I give her space to talk about her student, and I let her cry, even though she says this crying isn't like her. Occasionally, I mutter, "I'm so sorry," but I will myself not to cry in this moment. This moment is not about me, but it is all about us.

4. *Emotions and Discomfort (or Emotions and Cultural Rhetorics)*

In thinking about a cultural rhetorics methodology to my study, I relied on Powell and Bratta's scaffolding to build my framework for a feminist practice grounded in empathy, listening, and vulnerability, yet when I was faced with a moment like the one Sam shared with me—and one Natalie would share with me, too—I wondered if my own empathetic listening was even enough. I know my role is not one to placate or patronize my WPAs with "the answers," but listening to their stories, seeing and feeling them share their vulnerabilities, can sometimes be uncomfortable. How much discomfort should pass between us to build a relationship? Laura L. Ellingson would say that discomfort is just one way that researchers doing (auto)ethnographic work build emotion-based relationships with their participant pool. "Sensing and communicating emotions forms an integral component of ethnographer bodies as research instruments. Emotional expression is integral to the establishment, maintenance, and ongoing development of relationships with participants," she argues (86). I would further her argument by saying when we tune into the emotions around us, we are practicing Powell and Bratta's four tenets of cultural rhetorics: story as theory, decoloniality, constellations, and relationality. Emotions build relationships and are themselves relational; therefore, they widen and expand our constellations, our communities. Emotions tell stories themselves, often nonverbally, and attention to emotions, particularly in the academy, practices decolonization because they help us to see the value and prioritization in something other than logic and reason, which are typically white, male,

heteropatriarchal academic notions. In fact, sometimes, they even champion the unreasonable, a queer act. To Ellingson, emotions are at the center of ethnographic work: "Ethnographers experience emotion bodily as part of our sense making process, both of our own and of others' experience (and the intersection of them)" (87). In my study, emotions are central to making because stories are central to making, and because stories are central to making, so are the bodies that make the stories and emotions.

Mollie: Cool and Unfazed

It is Week Three of the study, and Mollie joins me from her home today. She is backed by an artistic rendering of the globe hanging on her wall, and I believe, like me, she's at her kitchen table. Her short hair is neatly tucked behind her ears, and she's wearing a purple t-shirt. It's still early in the process, and though I've known Mollie for years, I'm intimidated by her. She's doing professional work on emotional labor, and I want to impress her. So far, our meetings have been the shortest because Mollie isn't as effusive as Sam or Natalie. Mollie gives her answers to my questions thoroughly and well, but I'm having a harder time building *conversation* with her around the questions, though we chat easily and warmly at the beginnings of each meeting. Today, I meet her with a full face of makeup (again) and fixed hair, but I allow myself a t-shirt instead of a blouse. In some ways, I am loosening up. I can tell my speech is more formal with her; I'm not dropping my *g*s or reverting to my Southern twang the way I tend to do with Natalie. Her semester just began this week, and her writing center just opened. She tells me about her scheduling issues and trying to get the center staffed during the semester's busy times. Despite this, she is calm and engaging. She talks comfortably and confidently about the questions I've prepared for her. She's been doing this work for a long time, and she talks easily about the center and her plans for moving it into a more sustainable practice centering on

social justice. Occasionally, one of her dogs lets out a little bark in the background to let us know they're there. When talking about sacrifices she's made in her work, she says, "Oof, um, I feel like every beginning of the semester is a sacrifice of a personal life because you become the writing center director twenty-four/seven...your life and social expectations go out the window just to get things up and running." As she says this, she interjects herself with an anecdote of someone asking her to do something and her saying "no." She admits that she can easily say no to things that aren't in line with her or the center's expectations, yet she knows "the institution and faculty expect that sacrifice to carry on throughout the entire semester." She admits that this saying no, and the lack of guilt associated with it, has gotten easier. Her boundaries around work are strong so that she doesn't "constantly trigger the work brain." Then, she says the phrase she'll repeat several times during our time together: "Some things can wait until tomorrow. You know, there are no emergencies in WPA/writing center work, so we don't need to figure out this issue tonight. We can do it in the morning." Mollie says this firmly, like she's practiced saying it either to herself or others, and I can't help but wonder if the statement is true.

My own sense of imposterism has sneaked into this study in many more ways than I expected it to. While, perhaps, that shouldn't be surprising to me, it has been. For instance, I didn't expect my physical appearance to be something that made me feel uncomfortable early on in the process, and I didn't expect my age and years of experience,[13] or my need to articulate it, to make me feel like a failure. The moments I did expect were the open conversations, my WPAs' often immediate willingness to *go there* with me on this journey of emotions and vulnerability, and my enjoyment talking to, listening, and observing them each week. Toward the end of my 15 weeks with my WPAs, I ran into a committee member in the hallway at work, and

[13] I have two more years experience as a writing center administrator than my most experienced WPA, and I'm older than all my WPAs.

she asked how my data collection was going. “It’s going great, but I’m really feeling the weight of the length of this study. I want to handle these stories with care. They feel so...precious to me,” I said. “That makes complete sense,” she countered, “but don’t let them feel *too* precious.” Here’s hoping the next chapters present Sam’s, Mollie’s and Natalie’s stories in a not-too-precious light.

"Theorizing about agency has often ignored all but the most rudimentary aspects of embodiment, and theories about the body have tended to forget that, typically, the human body is an agent, inevitably transforming through its actions both the world and itself."

Letitia Meynell, *Embodiment and Agency* (1)

CHAPTER FOUR: THE WPAS' STORIES: EMERGING THREADS

I'm at a conference, years ago. I'm in my first WPA role as an assistant director of a writing center at a large, Southern university, and I'm at the conference representing not only my center, but also my WPA team.[14] This is a big conference, and I'm about to present on something I've long since forgotten. Of course, I'm wearing a dress and tights, heels, probably, and too much makeup. I'm dressing the part, my part. I'm *wearing* my title because I feel insecure about my age. I'm barely 26-years old, and I've already been serving in this position for almost a year. Everyone around me is older than me—it seems—and I fear my age will betray my inexperience. As I walk to the podium to present, my hands start shaking making the notes I'm holding flutter as if they have a life of their own. *Of course*, I think, *this shaking has to happen now, right on cue, when everyone can see. It's just one more physical thing that betrays my experience*. I don't give myself any credit for not being able to control my body; instead, I beat myself up all the way to the podium. As I begin to speak, I notice my voice has taken on a timbre and register much louder and stronger than my normal speaking voice. I also notice I've slipped into my professional tone; long gone are my Southern intonations. I'm not dropping *g*s or stretching words out to more syllables than are necessary. My body has taken over, again, and masked any traces of my real self for this audience of professional strangers.

I get through the presentation and sit back down while my co-presenters speak. I nod and smile affably, and cross my legs at the ankles under the table. I don't fiddle with my laptop during their presentations because I am *paying attention*. Afterwards, the audience claps and stands to gather their things and begin making their ways to the next sessions. There is inevitable mingling that takes place. My co-presenters and I take a quick photo in front of our PowerPoint

[14] This team consists of a WC director, a FYW director, and a FYW assistant director.

slides and congratulate one another on being done with our presentation. Now we can relax. A few audience members have made their way up to our table to speak with us and ask follow-up questions. One man is lingering near my laptop, and as I approach, he sticks out his hand to shake mine. “I really enjoyed your presentation,” he says. I’m flattered and thank him. We make small talk and try to see if we have overlapping academic circles. Then he asks the inevitable question that I’ve been dreading: “What is it you do at your university, again?” I pause. I freeze. I don’t know what to say because I feel like I’ve been found out. I feel like this simple question is an accusation. But it isn't. It’s a simple question. I cough and smile and try to mumble an answer. “What?” he asks. “I’m a WPA,” I say louder and with false confidence, and the minute the phrase leaves my lips it feels like a lie.

The Role of a WPA in Academia

In their article, “Polylog: Are Writing Center Directors Writing Program Administrators?” Ianetta et al. answer the title’s question in the affirmative, citing two foundational studies as proof (Olson and Ashton-Jones and Balester and McDonald) while providing a spectrum onto which the WCD[15]/WPA might find themselves. This spectrum provides more notches onto which the WCD/WPA role might hang and, therefore, might validify. On one end of the spectrum is the “Universal Professional,” a model focused on professional qualifications (a PhD) and one that “assumes that WCDs and administrators of the curriculum-based writing programs are all WPAs and so would share considerable overlap in their theoretical training and experiential backgrounds” because of their professional, educational training (Ianetta et al. 14). In the middle of the spectrum is the “Local Professional” who is less invested in disciplinary standards as they are in individual knowledge. They “understand the best

[15] Writing Center Director

practices circulating in the field, but more importantly, they should have the professional ability to understand their individual contexts" (Ianetta et al. 15). Local professionals learn and grow on the job much more than through theoretical training. Finally, on the far end of the spectrum, we find the "Administrative Iconoclast," someone who "assumes that the primary value of all writing instruction is its attention to the individual—individual students, individual campuses, and individual writing centers" (Ianetta et al. 16). This model doesn't place priority in the field, where the people can seem opaque, but rather in their immediate circle, with transparency among the people day-to-day. In my former life as a WPA, I fell somewhere between an Administrative Iconoclast and a Local Professional, and while neither is bad, both of these titles led to my own feelings of imposter syndrome within the field because of my lack of a terminal degree, something neither an Administrative Iconoclast nor a Local Professional prioritize. I lacked clout in the field while I had plenty of it in my department and with my tutors. This meant that I performed a certain role at conferences and among peers, and I performed another role in my day-to-day work; I wore my admin mask when I didn't necessarily need to.

The Mystery of a WPA

Many people who work with FYW-WPAs and WCDs don't really know what they do; however, they do know what they need and want from these positions. What, then, do WPAs need to successfully facilitate their campus and community relationships? Building and forming strong relationships requires a degree of vulnerability and empathy, which is what the good WPA needs. Seeing the WPA role through a lens of cultural rhetorics (CR) enables us to understand the importance of relationships and vulnerability. Therefore, firstly, good WPAs should understand that their work is vulnerable and empathetic because it is relational. In my own work with other WPAs, I learned many things, but one of the main things is that one cannot

have a successful writing program without an empathetic administration. In all the departments for which I've had the opportunity, and sometimes pleasure, of serving in a WPA role, an attention to empathy from the acting WPA occurs time and again. Empathy is the thing that requires good WPAs to be vulnerable and humble in their administrative roles, to fail transparently, to listen to others' stories freely and eagerly, and to decenter themselves as much as possible within the greater centralizing hierarchy of the academy. Secondly, WPAs[16] need to know that their work is relational and, therefore, empathetic and vulnerable. Relationality assumes a relatedness among all things. According to Wilson, "relationships do not merely shape reality, they *are* reality" (7).

To further elaborate, as Powell et al. articulate in "Our Story Begins Here: Constellating Cultural Rhetorics," relations are a key component in building a CR ontology:

> We look to our relations all the time when practicing cultural rhetorics. We didn't get to this place on our own, we stand on the backs of our elders, work alongside other scholarly allies and relations—in academic parlance, we'd say this: our work follows from, builds on, and is connected to some important scholars in the discipline. The stories of our relations—elders, colleagues, youngsters, communities—constellate in multiple ways. Together, through these practices, we continually make and remake webs of relations.

My own WPA practices encourage me to embrace ideas of relationality, though I'm aware that not all WPAs adopt a cultural rhetorics point of view and not all cultural rhetoricians are WPAs. As a starting point for my own situatedness as a WPA, I turn to two of Royster and Kirsch's terms of engagement: critical imagination and strategic contemplation. Though they aren't

[16] For clarity, from here on, WPA refers to both curriculum-based FYW directors and writing center directors.

talking about WPAs, Royster and Kirsch argue that feminist rhetorical practices have not only changed the landscape of the study of rhetoric, but they have also "been instrumental in expanding the scope and range of factors that we now perceive as significant in determining the highest qualities of excellence in both performance and professional practice" (13). Critical imagination is a strategic stance that encourages the WPA to question, rethink, and reposition while also "making sure not to overreach the bounds of either reason or possibility" (Royster qtd in Royster and Kirsch 19). Simply, it arms the practitioner with an inquiry tool, "a mechanism for seeing the noticed and unnoticed, rethinking what is there and not there, and speculating about what could be there instead" (Royster and Kirsch 20). To use this tool, one needs to understand first the ties that bind certain academic mindsets, including long-held tools of the patriarchy and white supremacy. For the good WPA, using critical imagination allows them to not only notice those ties, but also to begin to loosen them. Foundational within critical imagination is the concept of listening. Royster and Kirsch say, "the objective [in using clarifying questions to understand critical imagination] is to develop mechanisms by which listening deeply, reflexively, and multisensibly become standard practice not only in feminist rhetorical scholarship but also in rhetorical studies writ large" (20). Listening is an empathetic, decentering practice. It is a practice that requires the use of your whole body. It requires someone to allow another to hold the stage and helps to encourage different perspectives. For a WPA, this practice means listening eagerly to students and teachers to understand their wants and needs, *perhaps before* listening to those of university stakeholders. Because the stakeholders can be the entities holding the binding ties, it is crucial to begin listening to the players in the game and what they want with an unfettered imagination of possibility before starting to see where those ties fall. A critical imagination allows the good WPA to "engender an ethos of humility, respect,

and care—an ethos [Royster and Kirsch] consider critical to achieving qualities of excellence" (21). Without this ethos, a good WPA would struggle to authentically see the relationships they are working within and could quite possibly miss out on constellations they've never considered before.

Similar to a critical imagination, another term of engagement Royster and Kirsch encourage, and one imperative for good WPAs I would argue, is strategic contemplation. Using women as the focus for their feminist lens, they say that strategic contemplation "involves engaging in a dialogue, in an exchange, with the women who are our rhetorical subjects, even if only imaginatively, to understand their words, their visions, their priorities whether and perhaps especially when they differ from our own" (21). Like the sides of a coin, strategic contemplation is the conversational balancing weight to critical imagination. Whereas the latter relies on listening to make meaning, the former calls on the action of dialogue. These actions align with a CR methodology in that they call on relations (listen) and constellate (dialogue) the stories and actions of those relations. Strategic contemplation is a meditative practice that considers patience and time among its virtues, attributes a WPA is usually short of. In my own experience, WPAs have good intentions, but university, departmental, and programmatic stakeholders, and sometimes even students and faculty, tend to dissuade or erase those intentions, encouraging the WPA to focus on the bottom line and on embracing a programmatic "rigor" that is often difficult to define. To adopt strategic contemplation means that a good WPA pushes back against and promulgates in favor of a practice of patience—one that moves forward without knowing the ending and embraces the discomfort of that position. The strategically contemplative WPA understands that they have not gotten where they are on their own, and they embrace the journeys of those relations who've gone before and beside them.

WPA Stories

Mollie on Emotional Labor

During week 5 of our interviews, I ask Mollie to tell me a story about a particular time when WPA work was emotional. She is at her home and dressed casually and comfortably, and she immediately wants to know if I want a positive or negative story because she has both. After I assure her I'm here to hear whatever she wants to tell me, she says,

> WPA and writing center work in general is emotional. To be effective at this job, you have to engage in the emotional aspect of it and sometimes that's pleasant and sometimes that's miserable. The emotional aspect is so much the relationship-building and the human connection, and when you engage with other humans, you are engaging with their emotions as much as they are engaging with your emotions and that, essentially, is writing center work in a nutshell—it's working with people.

Working with people makes up every facet of WPA work. Mollie knows and acknowledges this, but she also acknowledges that this connection is difficult; it's emotionally draining to always be beholden to other people's emotions and to let other people in on your own. Mollie walks a fine line of emotional vulnerability with her staff and colleagues, and she would much prefer to handle her own emotional work and sanity outside of the writing center space, preferably on a run. She does understand that "emotional labor everyday is necessary," but she is not foolish enough to think that this labor is easy or readily available to herself or her colleagues. She's thought and written about emotional labor a lot, and initially, she's defined it as the "relational work that writing center directors do...so emotional labor is not just having the emotion, but it's always tied to a specific activity or task that a director is asked to do." Lately, though, she's

found herself trying to tease out this definition to delineate between emotional labor for white women and how what white women directors do in centers sets up a precedent of labor for those who come after, which Mollie thinks is really unfair. She's very aware of how "white emotional labor establishes expectations for others" in crucially difficult ways. She also takes some time to draw a line between the differences among emotional labor, mental labor, and invisible labor, all of which sometimes get conflated when talking about emotional labor.

After some back and forth on emotional labor, I ask Mollie how she makes her emotional labor visible at work, and she tells me a story about a time, right around Thanksgiving, when her consultants were decorating the center with colored pictures of pilgrims and Indians. After a staff meeting she noticed them and promptly went about the center space taking all the images down. She then spent about "an hour and a half" drafting an email to her staff explaining why she took them down and copied her Chair. This was a strategic move on her part to show her own emotional labor to someone who would otherwise have never seen it in this moment. In a way, this email was a double visibilizing of her emotional labor because not only did she copy someone higher up who would never have seen this time and energy spent with her staff, but also her staff was able to see how the images affected her and why they needed to be removed, hopefully preventing something like this from happening in the future.

Mollie On Vulnerability

During her week 4 FlipGrid session, Mollie does her video diary at work in her office. There is a whiteboard behind her over her right shoulder and a sparse bookcase over her left shoulder. Mollie is wearing a black shirt that blends in well with her dark hair. She swivels in her office chair as she talks through the prompt: What does vulnerability mean to you? She makes eye contact with the camera, looking directly at herself while filming and making direct eye

contact with me while I view the video. She starts by talking about her connection with the word to Brené Brown and then admits her aversion of the term. She says,

> So, I think of vulnerability as moments when you don't want to engage, um, that you feel as though there is a risk to yourself, um, to engage. There's something kind of internally that suggests that maybe you stop and not participate in it, that it's safer to do something else...um...but also vulnerability is also a good indicator that you should actually go forward and do something and participate in that, um so. I don't necessarily like to be vulnerable, but I think being vulnerable helps us be better, better leaders and better administrators.

Ironically, this admission helps me to understand Mollie more. Knowing that vulnerability is difficult—sometimes even unwanted—helps me to see our conversations together as something she is pushing herself to do for the good of the field. She knows this work is important, even if she doesn't really enjoy or want to do it.

Mollie has been working in our field for a while, and she is fairly well known. She's published widely and hosted conferences. As Ianetta et al. might describe her, she is a Universal Professional. Mollie has been a hard nut for me to crack, possibly because she straddles this line of not liking to be vulnerable but understanding the value of vulnerability; I see her sharing, yet holding back in our interviews. She is not as verbose as either Sam or Natalie, but she is still friendly and warm. She is in her eighth year as a WPA (she started in 2012), and she is currently the writing center director at a public research university in the South where she has a good group of friends at her university to share and troubleshoot issues with. In a lot of ways, her situation is ideal because of her position and her relations, yet she is all too aware that she is not the writing center.

To explain how she is not the writing center, Mollie tells me a story about how she has worked to create a "culture of consent" in her center, and how she had a tutor violate it recently by assuming they could be excused from their shift to go substitute for a class without asking permission. When this happened, Mollie was, understandably, angry with the student, but more so with the way they had treated the center and the other consultants. She made a point to distinguish herself and her identity from that of the writing center to try to illustrate to the student how their violation hurts the center more than Mollie herself: "I am not the writing center, and if I'm going to leave I need to do all that I can to protect the culture of it so that the writing center itself moves forward regardless of who's in the leadership. And, you know, to protect the culture you need to intervene in all these moments." This distinction is not often made in the writing center world. Instead, people will refer to a center as the director's center (so-and-so's center) rather than the university's. This is an important distinction for Mollie and one that helps her make visible her labor boundaries. Mollie is not afraid to draw these clear lines for herself and her consultants, and she's not afraid of showing her labor, perhaps because of the length of time she's been doing this work. Despite being uncomfortable with vulnerability and emotional labor, Mollie knows how to protect herself in sticky situations.

Sam on Vulnerability

Sam is also good at showing her labor but in a slightly different, more personal, way. Sam begins her week 4 video diary explaining that she's trying her recording on her phone for the first time. I believe she prefaces her recording in this way in case the recording messes up; Sam doesn't like to mess up. She is in her office, dressed in a striped shirt, statement geometrical earrings with her hair up and glasses on. She looks cooley professional. She addresses the prompt of vulnerability by saying she "took some notes" and holds up a small notebook with a

word cluster centered on “vulnerability.” It is not surprising to me, even this early in, that Sam has taken extensive notes to keep herself on track. This is one of the ways Sam makes her (emotional) labor visible during our time together, and her notes help her to be vulnerable in ways she’s already thought about before we come together. Sam, a curriculum-based WPA, says that when she thinks about vulnerability, she’s reminded of the last thing she wrote, which was “the first thing [she] thought of,” though she was trying to avoid it: being on the tenure track. She says,

> I think that is a super vulnerabile position to be in, although it is not as vulnerable as say, a contingent faculty member, or, say, a part-time adjunct or something like that. I have relative stability in my tenure-track position, but I’m not tenured yet, so I feel like that comes with some low-prestige, being one of the last hired in my department, so I feel like I do have a space kind of low on the totem pole, for lack of a better term.

She goes on to outline the different aspects of the definition of the term vulnerability: trust and trust in others, which she admits she has trouble with; asking for help and letting others help; letting your guard down and not “being so uptight all the time”; being okay with and admitting to not having all the answers; being open to other things, including feedback; and, finally, “putting yourself out there.” She elaborates on the last point by saying,

> [Putting myself out there] is a scary place for me to be. I think I’ve mentioned in previous interviews with you that I don’t really like doing something if I’m new to it or if I know I’m not going to be good at it right away. And so, being able to put myself out there, um, is putting myself in a very vulnerable position.

Before our interviews, I knew Sam the least. I met her in 2018 at the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA) conference through a mutual friend, and we hit it off, immediately following each other on social media. There, I spoke to her about the fledgling beginnings of my research and dissertation ideas, and she said I could "contact her anytime" for help with the project. When it came time for me to create a list of potential WPA participants, Sam was on my list, though I had no idea if she'd be willing to commit 15 weeks to the study. To my early surprise, she did. Knowing her now, her willingness to commit to the study is unsurprising.

In terms of experience, she and Natalie closely mirror one another, though Sam is a WPA of First-Year Writing, rather than a writing center, at the smallest state school in her midwest, red state at the time of our interviews. Her department is small and congenial; she is one of two rhet/comp people and is often considered one of the "rockstars" of the department because of her bold, forward-thinking ideas. She seems to get along with and genuinely like all of her colleagues, though she does disclose toward the end of our interview process that she's starting to put feelers out for a job closer to her family in another state. She's relatively new to WPA work, holding her current position for 5 years when we spoke. While she's aware of the vulnerable position she's putting herself in with these interviews, this awareness doesn't seem to stop her from jumping in, even if the process makes her uncomfortable.

Sam on Emotional Labor

Sam tends to think of emotional labor in negative terms, and she gets visibly uncomfortable when we talk about embodiment and emotional labor. When I point this out, she claims it's because she's never really had to think about her body in an academic space before, and she "never really thought about making [emotional labor] visible and advocating for talking

about it until I had to write my cover letter for my promotion and tenure materials." She is quick to follow this up with a clarification, saying, "but unless I included that little paragraph it would just be a non issue, you know? It's just something that people don't necessarily talk about." When she talks about emotional labor in a formal way, like, say, for promotion and tenure, it is usually done as a laundry list of activities, displaying not only a formal protocol, but also a barrier she can't seem to cross at work with her emotions. With friends and her mentors, however, this is a different case. Talking about emotional labor in a casual setting, she says, "Often it's a lot of, 'oh gosh here's the fire I'm putting out,' you know? Like venting and complaining, but there's also a lot of constructive conversations, troubleshooting, you know, sharing resources, commiserating. There's a lot of positive stuff associated with that as well." She goes on to explain a reason for this divide:

> I believe that I have positioned myself within the comp program, and in my department, as someone who I believe, or I hope, that my teachers and grad students feel comfortable coming to if something isn't right, you know? If something happens in their class or if somebody says something you know and it's just not sitting well with them I want to be sure that they feel comfortable coming to me to help them troubleshoot. And I think the fact that I give space for that and that you know I tell them that I support them and I make myself available to them to bring issues to me, I feel like that is another way that I make my emotional labor visible because I think, you know, I, I hope that I, they, see that it's OK to talk about stuff like this with their boss or whatever.

Sam is nothing if not available to her colleagues and students, but sometimes, I wonder if that availability is hiding her own understanding of her body and her emotions at work. She tends to

shift conversations that center on her away from herself to her students, colleagues, or work very quickly. In a way, Sam does the complete opposite of Mollie in that Sam's boundaries are very malleable and grey, and while this isn't a bad thing at all, it does make Sam's embodied discomfort more visible.

Natalie on Vulnerability

On the far end of the spectrum from Sam and Mollie, Natalie is perfectly comfortable talking about her body at work, emotional labor, and her own "failures"[17] that show up on her body at inopportune times. Natalie comes to her second video diary framed by her office bookshelves. Immediately she admits she has "no sense of time" because she thinks she was supposed to do her diary entry last week. Jumping right into the definition of vulnerability, Natalie says vulnerability is

> being able to express yourself in a way that makes you feel a little squidgy maybe...talk about things that feel personal or that, um, feel like you're um, soft underbelly, um, that you're a little nervous about exposing, or things that you're not sure are normal or acceptable or fears you have about yourself or your abilities...so sharing those things with other people.

It's unsurprising to me that both the WCDs (Mollie and Natalie) that I'm interviewing tend to look at vulnerability more emotionally than institutionally. Natalie relates this definition to the people who show up in the writing center and how that showing up is a vulnerable act itself. She goes on to say, "What information about yourself isn't some form of vulnerability?"

[17] Failure is a tricky way to describe Natalie's experiences because she only "failed" to a certain set of eyes. In fact, in the story I'll describe later, Natalie was actually succeeding to her student and herself, making failure all the more malleable a term. As Halberstam claims, "Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (2-3).

Natalie is in a strange place with her job right now. She was recently able to hire an assistant director, and while that's offered her much-needed help and support, she's begun asking herself "What is my job now?" There is definitely no lack of work, but the work itself seems a little more opaque now.

I first met Natalie a couple of years ago through mutual academic friends at a writing center conference, and we quickly began following each other on social media. She had already completed her doctorate and was a new writing center director when we met, and I looked with envy and awe at her accomplishments and her life as I was just beginning my PhD journey. She is a 37-year old white, cis-gender woman currently in her 7th year as a WPA, specifically serving as a tenure-track director of a writing center in the midwest on a large, urban campus, her second WPA position—both as writing center directors—since graduating with her PhD. Her center has two physical locations and one online location, and she oversees about forty tutors. She is the first tenure-track director of her center, which she likes to point out, who is also 37-years old. Her faculty line is located in her university's English department, and she teaches in the writing major, writing program, and graduate program as well as administering the writing center, so she sees herself working in four different programs.

Natalie is an easy person to talk to. She is frank and opens up easily during our interviews. Several times we find ourselves talking over one another in excitement or agreement about our shared experiences and common personal connections. Even though we've only known each other for about four years, our interviews feel like conversations among old friends. She talks very fast and tells stories with sprawling details, which she is aware of and admits frequently to me in the beginning of our process, almost as a warning. I sometimes find myself having a hard time keeping up with some of the points she's making because of this. She is warm

and bubbly, even when I can tell she is tired and feeling over-extended. She seems to embrace all of her emotions equally and with vulnerability: anger, (un)happiness, exhaustion, frustration, exhilaration, etc. In this way, she is unlike Mollie and Sam, who both (try to) temper their emotions with a measured ease. Natalie approaches our interviews and her video diaries with enthusiasm and courage. She smiles often and talks/gestures with her hands frequently.

Natalie on Emotional Labor

She often says she always has a Plan B in the back of her mind regarding her career. While she loves her work, she works hard not to be attached to it 24/7, especially because she has a young family. This part of her job—finding and managing the mysterious work/life balance in spite of, or because of, our Rhet/Comp's misunderstanding of writing center WPAs—makes her more visibly emotional than at any other time in our interview process. During our third Zoom interview, which fell in the first weeks of the fall 2019 semester and week 5 of the study, Natalie cries when talking about moving her husband and child from her first writing center director position to the one she's in now. The reason for the move, she says, was because even though she was directing a writing center and held a PhD, she was classified as staff and still struggled to get the recognition and respect the position deserved. Moving to a politically more conservative Midwest state during a tumultuous election year, was a difficult personal decision and one that was still met with frustration in her new position. Through tears, she says, "I left a fucking beautiful place to move to this state...I left because I couldn't do my own research, and...it was far away from my family, and I was pregnant, and there were those things going on." She laughs and wipes her eyes before continuing at a much slower pace. "And, um, I think there's something to be said for this notion of how important it is to have a 'tenure-track job.' I mean, my colleagues would say things like 'if you ever want a tenure-track job…' and it would

just grate on me." Natalie obviously loves and wants what's best for her family and herself, but she is very cognizant of how this former position, this move, and now her new position have had an emotional impact on her family and her work. As I watch her face shift emotions in a matter of seconds—from one filled with tears and regret to clenching down her jaw in anger and resignation—I wonder if the emotions of WPAs are, as Natalie says, "everywhere all the time."

Conclusion

Natalie, Mollie, and Sam all see emotional labor and vulnerability as integral parts of their jobs, even if they see these taking place very differently on a daily basis. Mollie sees emotional labor as always already necessary and vulnerability as an unlikeable, but also necessary, workplace burden to make better administrators. Sam addresses vulnerability with a plan and tries to guard herself from activities and actions that might put her too far out of her comfort zone all at once, yet she is willing to push herself out there if she gets a little nudge. Natalie is convinced that emotions are unavoidable at work because they are "everywhere all the time," and I can't help thinking she's right. Despite how differently these women see emotional labor and vulnerability at work, one thing remains consistently similar among them all: they are all willing to engage vulnerably in—and with—emotional labor when the moment requires it.

*"*Our bodies are forbidden to be this body of knowledge; our bodies are meant to be outside, separate from the body of knowledge. What we know, then, is not supposed to be at all about embodiment. The body of knowledge replaces the body, substitutes institutional sanctions in its place, intending to forever codify and compartmentalize what we know from what we do, from what we are, from the lived experience of our bodies."

Stacey Waite, *Teaching Queer: Radical Possibilities for Writing and Knowing* (18)

CHAPTER 5: (UN)MOTIVATED BODIES AND IMPOSTERISM

Today, I washed my hair for the first time in days. Writing and living during a global pandemic has really thrown off my sense of time, and with it, my sense of personal hygiene, it seems. But, freshly showered, as I sit down to write, I notice that the bones in my fingers ache. They don't hurt exactly, but they ache, as if there is a deep tension in them that cracking doesn't alleviate. I stretch and curl them into fists a few times and try to get started. Writing, especially this writing, doesn't come easily to me; I struggle over drafts and long for perfection and compliments on my writing. I imagine the scene in *A Christmas Story* where Ralphie daydreams about getting an A++++++ on his composition. My teacher reads my work, the music swells as she clutches her laptop to her bosom, and one grateful tear rolls down her cheek. In the cinematic scene, Ralphie is jolted from his daydream with the stern realities of the everyday class and told to take his seat to the mocking laughter of his classmates; like Ralphie, I'm jolted out of my daydream, too...by a sticking spacebar and a sore index finger.

I let the daydream slip away and cue up an interview video to watch. This one is week 9 with Sam. As soon as the video starts, I'm taken aback. I've spent so much time watching and listening to my WPAs, that I've hardly paid any attention to myself during these interviews. For this one, I meet Sam from my kitchen table, the same one I'm writing at right now, but I look so...different. The camera frames almost my entire living room behind me. It takes in my huge pink abstract painting and my built-in bookshelf full of tchotchkes. I'm wearing a black shirt, my hair is down and freshly washed (I can tell because it's not pulled back, so I keep messing with it—one of my insecurity habits), and I have on a full face of makeup. I have on black earrings. I look very formal and as if I'm trying to relax, but my smile at Sam is genuine as I say "Hello! How are you doing?" when she comes on screen. I can't help but hear the *g* pronounced very

specifically when I say *doing*. My speech has not yet relaxed. Sam goes to shut her office door, and I take a sip of water out of a Mason jar on screen. As I write this, I take a sip of coffee out of an old Spartan's mug and think it's an odd thing watching yourself watch someone.

I take a moment, pull my hands away from the keyboard and steeple them under my chin to sit with this thought. The philosopher in me wants to ask the BIG questions, like which is the real me: the made-up screen version, freshly polished and nicely articulate, or the one writing this sentence, freshly showered without a stitch of makeup on, wet hair, and wearing athleisure. I know, though, that that question is unnecessary because we're both me, we're both facing the same computer, typing on the same keys, sitting in the same chair; we're just separated by time. The same items are behind me, Mandy, my dog, is curled up at my feet in both instances, but the *Mes* are separated by eight months. Different objects—literal and figurative—are in front of me. The me typing right now is in front of the me on the screen. What is in front of the me on the screen? For these questions, I turn to Ahmed.

Sara Ahmed claims that our orientation toward certain objects help us find our way and that it's these objects that "we recognize, so that when we face them we know which way we are facing" (*Queer* 1). When I think about watching myself watch my WPAs tell their stories, I get a little flummoxed with my orientation because even though I am facing the same way in most of my videos, facing the same objects even, I *feel* different. My body feels a disconnectedness to the me on the screen that enhances my own sense of (un)feeling, or too-much-feeling. What am I supposed to do with these feelings? Should I even try to account for the orientation of the me on the screen? And do I treat the me on the screen (and my participants, even) as objects in the same way I think of my laptop and kitchen table? I know from Ahmed that "objects not only are shaped by work, but that they also take the shape of the work they do," (*Queer* 44) so my table

and laptop, in this instance, are objects of actual work. They enable me to do the work of the dissertation. When I face them, I face my dissertation. My table, specifically, has lost its function as a place for eating and has, instead, become a place for writing. But, what am I to do with the images I see *in the computer*? Is the me in the computer also an object which I face, to which I am oriented? If so, when I face it, now disembodied from my own self, what am I facing? Additionally, how am I to account for the time between the mes? I might argue that facing myself facing my participants is a queer orientation, one that creates a disembodied feeling that cannot be ignored, for I am facing a non-I who is facing me (the I) and the participants of my study simultaneously (and unconsciously). Admittedly, I'm trying to understand my orientations differently; I'm trying to disrupt the binary of "me and other" by figuring "difference differently" (Barad 170). Barad claims that to figure "difference differently," one needs to understand the role of the shadow in diffraction. "Diffraction," Barad claims, "queers binaries and calls out for a rethinking of the notions of identity and difference" (171). If I poke holes in the binary of the me today and the me on the screen, I'm left with an orientation that doesn't make "sense," that isn't easily explained, that doesn't *feel good*, that feels disembodied, that is unsettled, that is queer. But that's the point, isn't it? I *should* be feeling unsettled watching myself watch someone, right? Ahmed might argue that the screen me, or the "not me," is actually an extension of today's me. She says:

> It is the fact that what I am orientated toward is "not me" that allows me to do this or to do that. The otherness of things is what allows me to do things "with" them. What is other than me is also what allows me to extend the reach of my body. Rather than othering being simply a form of negation, it can also be described *as a form of extension*. The body extends its reach by taking in that which is "not" it,

> where the "not" involves the acquisition of new capacities and directions—becoming, in other words, "not" simply what I am "not" but what I can "have" and "do." The "not me" is incorporated into the body, extending its reach. (*Queer* 115)

Watching a video of myself extends my reach today back in time to my participants' conversations with me and to my own embodied emotional reactions to those conversations. The videos, the "not me" keeps me present in that moment while simultaneously present in this moment. I am, therefore, both embodied in the video and disembodied by it.

I lift my fingers off the keyboard and let them hover there for a moment. I blink several times in quick succession. I push my chair back and stand up. I stretch. My back has gone stiff, and my aching fingers feel sorely unlubricated now. I take a quick lap around the house letting the idea of me and "not me" sink in. Fiona Apple blares in the background as I round the corner to the living room, and the table and laptop come into my field of vision once again. I stand in front of them, staring, cross-armed without sitting. The idea of "not me" makes me think of all the times I've masqueraded as a "not me" in real time in order to get through some task, event, or social situation. "Not me" makes me think of my own imposterism. I pull out my chair and sit down. I press my sticking spacebar several times to wake up my laptop. My fingers cue up above my keys as if I were about to play a concerto. I toggle my cursor back over to my video with Sam and press play.

Bodies in Motion

Sam's Story

In our week 9 interview, I ask Sam to tell me a story of when her body connects or disconnects her to her WPA work. At this point in the interview, we are completely comfortable

with one another; we are laughing and joking, having sidebar conversations, and talking about deeply personal realities. Immediately, though, when I move to this question, Sam's body language changes. She goes from a relaxed pose, comfortably sitting back in her chair to spine tight and straight as she wraps her sweater around herself and says, "Yeah, I wasn't sure. It's hard for me to talk about embodiment." I butt in: "I've noticed!" She continues, "Yeah, I just, I just never had to think about it before. I think I just disassociated my body from all of the [laughs] all of the academia, [gestures wildly to her left] like it doesn't affect me, so…." Again, I butt in, "Well, I think that in itself is actually talking about embodiment!" "I think so, too," she says with a smile and continues with a laugh, "yeah, I don't feel anything! Okay, so [reads question] 'tell me a story about a time when your body connects you or disconnects you to your work as a WPA'...what does that mean?"

Of all my participants, Sam has the hardest time talking about her body at work. I don't think this is because she is ashamed of her body in any way; rather, she's never been encouraged to think about her body—and therefore her emotions—as an academic, as I mentioned in Chapter 4. Even though by week 13, Sam brings up embodiment herself, unprompted, she is obviously much more uncomfortable talking about this than anything else. For example, while she doesn't claim to be an imposter in her own work or to have imposter syndrome regularly, she does say that the concept of "embodiment" is a foreign one to her. "I think it's a shift in mindset; I've never been challenged to think like this before," she says,

> and, it's like embodiment and the way things are felt in your body and through your body, that was just something I never even had the language for that, like I didn't even know that it was something that could be talked about or interrogated, you know? And maybe... I hope this isn't too out there, or too meta or whatever, I

> mean, but maybe that's the mark of being female? That we don't talk about our bodies and how we move in them and how they're there, you know, and through them and how we feel stuff. The whole idea of the emotional actions or emotional reactions that our bodies have that was always snuffed out, or not de-legitimized, but just not talked about as much, and I think that's why things like imposter syndrome and emotional labor is just, it seems like, you know, like if you talk to any woman, or any feminist, they're like, 'oh yeah that stuff totally exists,' but it's not in the mainstream conversation until recently. And I think maybe that's why I have such a hard time talking about it and thinking that way. It's just because it's never been something that has had a light shone on it before.

Talking with me about embodiment and emotional entanglements pushes her to think outside of the black and white comfort zone that administrative work can sometimes provide. To help her out some with this question, I provide various examples of people's bodies at work. I say:

> When I think of bodies of course I'm thinking of your mind and your physical body. So you know for a lot of people who experience imposter syndrome sometimes it can be super debilitating, and it can cause you to not be able to to do certain tasks or to do them with the fog or to do them, you know, to have to do certain tasks at home versus at your office because you feel, you feel a little bit more free at home, feel a little bit more like yourself at home, your body can relax. But other ways, maybe not necessarily the debilitating factor, but in other things like you know perhaps it's, perhaps your body is coming out of a PhD program...I know that a lot of folks' bodies are not the best, you know? They've been kind of run ragged.

Sam jumps in, “Totally! I totally felt that.”

“Yeah,” I say, “So then, like, jumping right into WPA work you’re trying to make your body then do different things physically…”

“Right!” Sam is more relaxed now and continues:

> Yeah, ok, so I feel like that goes back to something we’ve talked about in a previous meeting about that first semester when I was just like working crazy hours and constantly tethered to my phone, and I just, I didn’t go to the gym for like six months. I was paying for the membership and everything, and I just didn’t go. But like, I think I’ve said this in the past, but, like, something had to give, and it was like physical activity, which is so detrimental because it’s like: I’m not burning calories. I’m not giving myself the endorphins that I need. I, like, when I do workout, I eat healthier all day long. I make better decisions. I sleep better...I don’t know why that was the one thing that had to give, but that’s what did. So I think, to get back to your question, that, I think, is one of the ways my body disconnected, um, from my work. It’s just, there was just...like I said, something had to give. And I think also related to that is just the idea that there’s always something to work on…[My husband and I have this running joke that] there is always going to be something for me to do. Whether it is cracking open and dusting off my textbook files, or responding, you know, giving feedback to students, or planning and setting up my Canvas module for next week or two weeks from now or whatever, it’s like, so...I do feel that in my body, you know, it’s just like nonstop. I really feel it when I allow myself to just close the damn computer screen, put my phone in another room, and just like hang out and be

> present, because I'm not a lot, and I don't like that about myself. It's not flattering at all.

Though Sam is a bit hard on herself when talking about her associations with her body, the idea of knowing one's body best through movement—like going to the gym—is not something unique to Sam. All of my participants talked about how they needed physical activity to connect to their bodies—and minds—during their working day. Whether it is going to the gym, running, or walking, each participant spoke highly of the benefit of moving their body to find clarity (Natalie), get answers to problems (Mollie), and to just feel better (Sam). They also talked about how detrimental it was to not move their bodies. For Sam, exercise was the first thing to go when she became a WPA because her plate was too full of other daily tasks, and she found that she paid the price for it. However, that doesn't mean that she doesn't occasionally witness or experience imposter syndrome.

Sam sees imposter syndrome on the students she teaches much more prevalently than among her colleagues. For her students, she says she sees it in the ways they carry themselves, the ways they carry their bodies—slumped over and stressed out—but she doesn't see this in colleagues, and they don't talk about it; however, she says, while it's not something she articulates with colleagues, "I get it. I feel it, and it's there." Mostly, she thinks imposterism isn't talked about much because her department is split in two, and for the younger cohort, to which she belongs:

> anything they can do to contribute to the success and visibility of our department is going to be very, very well-received by older, or more entrenched faculty...You really have to screw up, I think, in my department to feel like you're not doing a good job. And so, I've been really fortunate and a lot of my tenure-track

> colleagues have been really fortunate to come from R1 institutions where they're used to being super busy...and so, we come in and we're already seen as...ugh this sounds so shitty: rockstars. Because that's just how we have been trained to do things, and you plunk us down into the slower pace of [my rural state], and people are just thrilled at whatever you bring to the table.

Though reluctant to live the accolades the department wants to bestow on her and her younger cohort colleagues, Sam has done a lot for her department and could live the academic "rockstar" life if she wanted to, though it obviously makes her uncomfortable. Likewise, talking about her body at work is a new and unusual practice for Sam that similarly brings about discomfort and confusion; however, with a few guiding prompts, she is at least open and willing to share her thoughts.

Natalie's Story

When I talk to Natalie about her embodied state at work, she is relaxed yet excited. She has a lot to say about how she moves about at work and at home. Natalie is always animated during our conversations, and she talks very fast. Even if our conversations are burdensome, Natalie doesn't approach them as so. She is easy to talk to, and I find myself relating to her throughout our conversation.

When asked the same question about how her body connects or disconnects her to her WPA work during her week 9 interview, Natalie was much less hesitant to talk about her embodied state at work than Sam. Natalie is obviously used to talking and thinking about her embodied state, and our conversation flows easily. In previous conversations, she mentions how she takes walks nearly everyday to clear her mind and move her body, but in this conversation, she talks about an outside disturbance and how that affects her body and work. She says:

> Hmmm...well, I always talk about the same things, but today the thumping music was back. It's like in the courtyard [gestures to the courtyard on her left] they'll have events and they'll have speakers. It's so loud, I feel like, like, it's like warfare against me personally. It feels very bad, I'm like how do you expect people to get work done? This is my job. This is my office. I am supposed to be here. Here I am, and yet this is happening for hours at a time. I feel like I can't think, and I can't get anything done. I, like, put in headphones, and I listen to music, but the music I listen to isn't always loud enough to compensate for the music that is thumping around me.

What she actually does to compensate sometimes for the thumping music is try to find other space to work in, but that doesn't always work out either because as a WPA, a writing center director in her case, she is always seen as available to others. She has a hard time finding literal space, then, to be alone and get work done where her body isn't being sought out or negatively affected by outside forces. Of the teaching body, Stacey Waite says it, "will always be waited for, looked at, put on its front-of-the-room stage as the first kind of student knowledge, the first body of knowledge" (23). The same is true for Natalie's WPA body, and, ironically, this makes it difficult to actually get work done and be that "body of knowledge." Lacking a space to work can feel disorienting. "Yeah, I find it so frustrating when I can't use this space [her office]," says Natalie. She continues:

> I get kind of obsessed with having a quiet space, and at home, I can't [because of] my kids…[my oldest], he doesn't stop talking. He just goes, and goes, and goes and goes like there's no thinking there's no thought process that happens other than the very basic moves...and obviously I love to interact with him, so I don't

> want it to sound like I'm like 'go away, kid!' But it's really impossible to get work done, even if I'm working from home occasionally, he'll just kind of like pop up, and I'll be like 'go back downstairs!' The same thing happens in the [writing] center. Like lately, too, people will just pop in with things that they need…that causes stress and then I'm distracted.

While distraction is par for the course for many WPAs, Natalie knows that she needs her personal space for her body to function the way it needs to as a WPA, but she also knows that she needs to be around people in specific ways. She adds:

> I'm an introvert, but I'm very social. So I need time after an interaction with a person to kind of recover from that, and so it's kind of weird, cause I'll like have a big group thing and I wanna have a little group thing after the big group thing because I don't wanna go right by myself because that feels, like, weird, and it feels like too extreme. Um, so I'm thinking of that more so not just in my social life, but just how I experience the day...I try to do my writing time first because then those other ideas are less likely to interfere with my writing later as I'm like 'I'm writing...Oh, that thing from the meeting is starting to come into my head.' Right? And then, also, like, if I end the day with lots of little meetings then that's fine cause then I can go home to my family and still be social in a subdued way where I can, like, put on my pajamas, or I can, like, call my parents on the way home from work or something. I get to taper off. I get to organize those experiences in a way that my body's not like 'ok! What do you need to do to calm down and be focused so you can do the next thing on your list?' Like going from a meeting to writing is really hard. Even, I'll just check Facebook cause it's like

> fake social, right? Then I have to, like, create a scene for myself. It has to be quiet, and I'll, like, make some tea, or...I kind of have to trick myself, like, 'Oh! What was that thing you wanted to read before bed?' and you're like bookmarking all these articles you want to read, and maybe I'll like drink some tea and read two articles, and then I can....[mimes calming down]. They're just strategies for managing my own idiosyncrasies.

She acknowledges that these strategies are really ways for her to fool herself into calming down, but they work for her. However, she also points out that there are certain times of the semester when it's easier to do these techniques than others. "The time we're in right now [October], like, it feels like we don't have the time for that, but if I skip, I'm gonna suck at whatever it is I'm supposed to be doing," she acknowledges. For her, skipping her daily walks is one way she feels that "suck." "Like one thing that's totally fallen out for me is my walks," she continues:

> and I need to add it back in because it's not good. It's not good. I end up in bad places in my head, and I just feel bad all the time. My body feels bad. Um. So, it just, like, triggers a whole bunch of like things. I eat poorly. I sleep poorly. I just, I just feel bad if I don't go on walks...I just feel like I control my life through a calendar in ways that would stress some people out. I mean, I'm flexible within that, but I need to have a sense of what I'm doing each day. Um. Otherwise I feel really aimless, and I end up getting even more behind on things.

Like Sam, Natalie needs to move her body on a daily basis and feels really "aimless" when her daily exercise—in her case, walks—get taken off her schedule. Just like Sam and Natalie, Mollie also feels best when she incorporates a bit of exercise into her routine.

Mollie's Story

It's our week 7 interview, and Mollie comes to it ready to talk about embodiment. She is open and clear with her answers, never really talking around them. She thinks before she speaks and doesn't add a lot of extraneous detail to our conversations. Rarely do we go off-question. During this interview, Mollie talks about how she's had to make new accommodations to her fitness for a physical ailment she's facing. Because of these personal physical issues with her body, she's had to rethink how she moves it. To that end, she says, "Right now I'm really into walking and stretching and swimming. A lot more of the low-impact physical activity. Cause I still think that some level of fitness and getting the heart rate up is good to counteract any sort of stress and outside world life. I'm just not at a place where I can go out and run five miles like I used to." Even though these accommodations are necessary, they don't quite give her the same thrill that running used to. Mollie explains,

> It's interesting because when I do the walking or the swimming, I don't get the same brain activity that I used to with running. Cause I would go out on a run, you know, and it takes two or three miles to clear my head, and mile four or five the answers to whatever problem was going on would just magically be there. I would calm myself down enough to see 'Oh! That's the solution. Why didn't I think of that sooner?' And I don't get that with walking or swimming...Right now it's much more of a healing thing than a coping with the aspects of [being a WPA].

While stretching, walking, and swimming are working for her right now, they aren't the only things Mollie does to listen to her body. Other ways Mollie feels connected to her body at work is listening to her gut and saying no more often. Because of this, she admits that perhaps

"because I'm saying no, I don't have that level where it's caught up within me and I need to flush it out in the ways that running was [doing]." Despite the physical aspect of her daily life, Mollie admits there are times when she feels a bit disconnected to her physical body.

Mollie comes to our week 9 interview relaxed and at ease. She is in her home office, and one of her dogs is just visible on the screen over her right shoulder. It's an early morning conversation, so we are both drinking out of steaming mugs. I'm still more formal with Mollie than I am with Sam or Natalie, maybe because I'm still not sure if we're making a connection, maybe because of her status in our field, but Mollie has done nothing to warrant my nerves. She's been open and personable throughout all of our conversations. Watching the video now, though, I see myself—the "not me"—looking...nervous. Nevertheless, we have an engaging conversation, and when I ask her to tell me a story about a time when her body connects or disconnects her to her WPA work, she pauses before saying, "That's a good question," and laughs. She continues,

> You know, I think it's a little of a both/and. I think when I first initially have that moment of am I the right person to do this, I'm much more disconnected from myself. Right? So I work through this kind of like shadow layer, hovering right above myself, um, that world of uncertainty, I guess, a bit there, and then I start to become much more grounded in myself as I sort of process and work through 'okay where is this, where is this question coming from? Why am I asking myself if I'm the person to be doing this? Um, is there something that's happened that's prompted me to do this?' Definitely a lot of that processing. And then I end up being much more grounded in myself cause I'm pretty good at listening to my gut instincts, so if throughout all that processing I have not reconciled my shadow self

> with my physical body and don't feel ready and confident to do it, then I'll say no. Right? I've definitely gotten to that point where if it doesn't feel right, and I don't feel comfortable, and my gut isn't saying 'go for it,' then it's time to back out. And I think that's an important piece in all of it. Cause I think so often we're conditioned—we said yes, so we have to go through with it, but if there comes to a point where it's not a firm yes anymore I, I have no problem saying no, cause in the end that's best for me. Cause otherwise I'll have that large anxiety that will manifest in so many physical ways until the event is over, and that's just not worth it.

Mollie goes on to explain the "shadow layer" as sort of hovering over one's physical body. It's a liminal, fuzzy, out-of-body space. She further explains:

> You're connected. There definitely is that connection between yourself and your shadow self, um, you know, you're tied together, but you haven't really reconciled those two pieces yet. If that makes sense. And so the processing and the reflecting is really what sort of reconciles the shadow self and the physical body, and by processing and bringing them together, you get that internal feeling like 'yes, this is what I'm supposed to be doing.' Or if you can't get them to reconcile, then that's a no.

Mollie's idea of a "shadow layer" makes me think of the "not me" on the screen and of Barad's idea of diffraction. Acknowledging that there is a space outside of one's body where we can disconnect from ourselves gives credence to the idea that some people might not ever make the connections, that they will live in the shadow region forever. "The self (I) only ever sees itself," says Barad, "and not the other. The other, the 'non-I', is consigned to the shadow region, the

space behind the mirror" (170). What happens if we never connect our physical selves with the self of the shadow region, the "space behind the mirror"? One might argue that this is one place where imposter syndrome flourishes. "If you can't reconcile [the shadow self with the physical self]," says Mollie, "then you can't move forward or do anything."

Imposter Syndrome and the WPA

All of my WPAs knew what imposter syndrome was before our conversations, and they all described it similarly. Mollie admitted that she talked about imposter syndrome much more in graduate school saying that the job market brings up imposter feelings for everyone. Both Natalie and Sam described it as a feeling, as in feeling like a fraud or that you've hoodwinked everyone around you to get where you are. When asked to describe a specific time when they felt like an imposter in the academy, answers ranged from working on theses with students to being asked to lead workshops to seeing it most acutely when working on scholarship for the field.

Natalie's Story

Natalie chuckles and asks, "Do I have to?" when prompted to tell me a story of a specific time when she's felt like an imposter in the academy. We are in our week 9 conversation, and we've both just gotten back from a conference where we met up and had an in-person chat, so this week's conversation has lots of sidebars and laughs. Coming back to the question, she says, "It's interesting, you know, cause a lot of times it boils down to these general feelings, but you know there are definitely very specific things that happen that make those feelings come up." When Natalie talks about imposter syndrome, she beats back and forth, like a metronome, between feelings of confidence and capability to feelings of doubt and anger. Mostly, she is confident in herself and her ability as a writing center director. She knows she is good at the work, is good at mentoring people, and is good at teaching and collaborating. However, there are

moments when she reveals she doubts herself, and above all other emotions, this makes her angry. Her anger is something she knows can betray her at work—it's the emotion that is most readily available to her, perhaps out of defensiveness of her ability in her position or her gender in a leadership role. She doesn't like reliving experiences in which she has been made to feel less than. The anger she feels also sheds some light on fear that she carries with her while at work, too. She feels vulnerable in her position at work, and this causes her to feel fear for that position. However, she likes to put imposter experiences behind her and focus on the work she knows and does well. She doesn't like being made to feel like she doesn't know her work, especially because she feels like she does. When thinking about these experiences of imposterism, she calls the emotions associated with them "extended periods of yuck."

Nevertheless, Natalie tells me a story about a time she directed a Master's thesis when the student was using autoethnographic and cultural rhetorics practices to write about community in writing centers. The University Graduate Office at her university had a problem with an aspect of the thesis that Natalie knew didn't need to be a problem. She says,

> It was frustrating to me cause I didn't know how to support the grad student in that moment. I felt like my disciplinary expertise was ignored...other people are questioning my abilities, you know, in a way that felt very extreme and very high stakes for the student...but I also knew what I was doing...there's all these things going on, right? So, like writing centers are misunderstood. Rhetoric and writing is misunderstood. Writing program administration is misunderstood. Different types of methods are not understood...so, anyway, I kind of felt, like, in a puddle of imposter syndrome right there, in that I'm also trying to just get the grad student to feel like, okay, just revise it. This sucks, but you just wanna graduate.

Natalie admits that this experience challenged her, sending her into an emotionally damaging spiral, but it also affected her physically, potentially damaging important future relationships that would be vital to the center. She goes on:

> I also feel like it damaged my ability to have a relationship with, like, the grad school in a way that could be constructive to the center...and on and on and on. So that's like a recent example where you just kind of feel bad all over. You know? And I think for me too, like, it's easy for me to, like, have an event like that and just like [tell myself] 'now I'm a bad administrator. I'm a bad mentor. I'm a bad scholar.' So I already feel that way, so I'm pretty much bad at everything in my job. That's how I feel after that experience. And then I go home and just kind of feel bad about all of that. And then like why do I spend so much time on this job cause that just makes me a worse parent and a worse partner. You know what I mean? It just becomes about everything. And so, pulling yourself out of that becomes very challenging. And even more so, I feel, when you have other people attached to it. So whenever there's a consultant or a student, uh, connected to one of the issues where I feel bad, then I have to make them feel better when I'm not ready to feel better. You know? So then like that just makes it worse. I don't want to deal with *your* imposter syndrome when I'm dealing with my own. Like, I can't.

Natalie brings up an important point here about mentoring. She imagines that she cannot be an effective mentor to someone experiencing the same problems she is, i.e. imposter syndrome. Yet she quickly adds, "But I'm also your mentor, so I have to [help you]," though she admits that this

is extra emotional labor because she has to "pretend [she has her] shit together" to help her students.

Mollie's Story

Mollie comes to our week 11 conversation relaxed and bubbly. She's in her home office, and once again, one of her dogs is visible just over her right shoulder. It's the week after a major conference in our field, a conference we both attended, and we have a lot to say about it. We chat easily at the beginning of our conversation about the conference, the fast-approaching end of the semester, and a new assessment committee she's been tasked to be on. Soon, our conversation turns to imposter syndrome, and when asked if she thinks other people in the academy suffer from imposter syndrome, she simply says, "I do." To elaborate about how imposterism shows up in her students, she says:

> [My students] might not name it. They might not come to me and say, 'I'm having imposter syndrome,' [laughs], though that would be really nice, but I think I see it more in the 'I'm not confident to do this.' Um, the mental break of 'should I even be here? What am I doing with my life? I'm not sure I belong.' I hear the consultants having those sorts of conversations, and I think especially as any new individual joins a sort of community. So I think first-year students have it a lot. And the consultants tend to be that first line of defense as they're sort of figuring it out, 'Do I belong in the academy? I can't believe I got in. Should I be here?' Um, and early-career grad students I know go through that, like 'how did I get accepted?' Um, those on the job market, I mean, that's just the worst time for when it's popping up, so...and I would say the grad students are more likely to name it as imposter syndrome. But you can just, you can see the sort of defeat on

> their face, and the slumped shoulders and just that, that cowering in back to the fetal position sort of. And it might not be fully because they're sitting in a chair, but you can just see that rolling in, that rolling inwards and just the look of defeat on their faces.

While graduate students are most likely to name these feelings and experiences as imposter syndrome, Mollie admits that her colleagues might call it something else. She explains:

> Belonging. Yeah, a sense of belonging. That's been a pretty popular term for universities to talk about lately, especially in terms of retention efforts, so I think that Business language of retaining students sort of shapes faculty to pick up that lingo. At least the sort of [social media sites] that I follow and I know a lot of my grad students also follow are really naming imposter syndrome as it is. You know? 'Nope. What you're feeling is just imposter syndrome, and here's all the evidences of it.' So I think that the network that's online to support graduate students is much more likely to name it as imposter syndrome, and not all faculty are tapped into that network. So I think they fall on whatever the university is talking about, which right now happens to be a sense of belonging.

At this point in our conversation, Mollie and I commiserate about how more places on campus haven't taken up the mantle of imposter syndrome, and I hypothesis that it's because of the medical sound of the term. Universities are afraid of anything that sounds like a diagnosis, and it's much easier to talk in terms of "belonging" than it is in terms of "syndromes." "Clinical then suggests that you can get over it," says Mollie, "that there's a cure for it." So how does she talk about imposter syndrome with her students and colleagues? As transparently as possible. Mollie says,

> With grad students I do talk about it, and name it, and introduce it to them so that they sort of understand...that they're in a network of a bunch of other people who felt the same way. So it's almost like 'you're not alone' moments, which is also probably not the most supportive cause that senses a systemic issue that's going on that all the grad students might feel this. Um, but I do name it with them so that that way there's something that they can go research and look and have a name and find sort of an online network to help them process. Um, in terms of colleagues, it comes up every so often, but it's never really frequent…[at an upcoming meeting where we talk about all the graduate students] I can imagine that it will come up then, like 'so-and-so is experiencing a sense of imposter syndrome'...not necessarily diagnosing, but through our work one-on-one with grad students you can kind of check in with the whole faculty so that we're all aware, but really [we don't speak about it] at other meetings.

Though these check ins about and with students are a positive step in affirming and squashing imposter syndrome, Mollie does admit that she feels it herself sometimes, specifically when she's asked to do something new, like when she was on the job market. She admits that

> the job market really brings out the imposter syndrome in pretty much anyone...When you realize that you're the top candidate, um, for some reason, that just felt very imposter syndrome to me. They're like 'you're going to come and save our writing center and we have to have you.' And I'm like, 'Oh! I don't know if I'm the right person for you!' [laughs] There's that, like, added pressure, and then you start to question yourself, like 'oh, am I really the right person to do this?'

Though the job market was one place where she acutely felt imposter syndrome, Mollie doesn't let it rule her life. Instead, as previously mentioned, she is good at relying on her gut and saying no when things don't quite feel right. She also works hard to constantly stitch together her shadow self with her physical body so that she doesn't feel imposter syndrome regularly.

Sam's Story

Our week 9 conversation happens to take place on Sam's birthday. When I wish her happy birthday, she excitedly says, "Thank you!" then admits she, unfortunately, has to be on campus all day. Unsurprisingly, probably because it's October when this conversation takes place, our chat quickly turns to the job market, and Sam admits that, like Mollie, being on the market was a stressful time. "I was just so done after 30 [applications]," she says, "I was just like 'I can't do this; it's not sustainable'." Sam prepares extensive notes for each of our conversations, and she uses them to guide her answers to my questions. When our conversation flows to the topic of imposter syndrome, Sam excitedly says, "I DO know what it is!" When I ask her if she can define it, which is not a preplanned question, she elaborates, winging a definition that is not from her notes:

> Basically, to me, it is, regardless of your training, your credentials, your expertise, you still feel like you've hoodwinked everybody, and that somehow sheer luck has gotten you into this position, and you better, you know, constantly worry about your status in your position because pretty soon somebody's gonna find you out, and you're gonna be a total fraud, and everyone's gonna know what a fraud you are. Um, and, it's just such an insecure feeling, right? I don't like feeling like that. But I'm happy to say that I'm feeling like that less and less.

Even though she feels less and less like an imposter, when asked if she has a specific story of when she experienced imposterism, she says, “I mean, I don’t know if there is a specific moment, probably because I have locked that away in the depths of my brain to rehash at three in the morning when I wake up in a cold sweat.” But she does have general memories of feeling like an imposter. She says:

> I remember feeling like that A LOT because in my Master’s program, well, in my undergrad and even in my Master’s program, I never really felt like an academic. Um, part of that is because, and I mean, I’m gonna blame my past as a gifted and talented elementary school student where everything was just perfect, and I didn’t really have to try very hard in K-12 at all, and because of that I was the type of student who would, you know, get an essay assignment, write it in one sitting, never look at it again, and turn it in and get an A. So, that was kind of a harmful cycle, I think for me because...nobody ever really challenged me in my writing. Um, spoiler alert, most of my imposter syndrome comes from my writing, my academic writing [laughs]. Uh and research and stuff cause I never really felt like anyone was critiquing me in it, so I just figured everything was fine.

Sam’s experience of never being challenged and being in a talented and gifted program is typical of one of the groups of women in Clance and Imes’ groundbreaking study on imposter syndrome. Of this group, they say that the subject is praised by her parents so much that she believes she is “superior in every way” (3). However, once she faces a challenge, like school, she begins to doubt herself. They elaborate:

> When she goes to school, her doubts about her abilities are intensified. Although she does outstanding work, she does have to study to do well. Having internalized her parents'

> definition of brightness as "perfection with ease," and realizing that she cannot live up to this standard; she jumps to the conclusion that she must be dumb. She is not a genius; therefore, she must be an intellectual impostor. (Clance and Imes 3)

Though Sam doesn't mention praise from her parents, the talented and gifted program of her youth serves as a stand-in of praise and perfection that would later be challenged by her Master's program. She explains:

> So when I got to my Master's program, I also felt like that because, …[there was a big change in the makeup of my department, so] there were a ton of professors who were disgruntled at this change. They didn't necessarily take it out on their students, but I felt it in class, and so that made me, like, less excited about being an academic and wanting to continue research. So when I got my Master's, I was like 'I'm so done. I'm done with this. I'm not gonna be the PhD that I thought I was gonna be. I'm fine with my Master's.' And then I was a frequent flyer adjunct...and I was like 'this is great, but it's not sustainable,' so I had to go back to get my PhD. And that's where I really felt like, it was probably the best, um, the best thing that could have happened to me in that I was really thrown into this really prestigious PhD program, super serendipitous. I had no idea what 'WPA' was. I had no idea what 'Second Language Writing' was. I had no clue who [my famous professors] were, but I, on a whim, applied [to my PhD program] because they had linguistics and because it was warm there. I can't believe I, to use the term again, hoodwinked the people [in my program] to give me a TA-ship and a tuition waiver, but there I was, so I felt, like, a lot of pressure to figure out, finally, what it meant to be an academic.

Though she currently feels less and less like an imposter in her daily work as an academic, Sam obviously felt the tug of imposterism during her grad program, something all my participants felt in common, whether it was during the job market or the everyday of being a graduate student.

Conclusion

Though their experiences are different, many similarities overlap among Sam's, Mollie's, and Natalie's involvement with imposter syndrome and how they talk about their bodies at work. Sam doesn't really think about her body at work much because she was never taught to think about it in this capacity. She does, however, think about imposter syndrome and how it has affected her academic life so far. Quite the opposite of Sam, Natalie constantly thinks about her body at work and how it can or cannot be affected by outside forces, causing disruptions in her workday. She, too, understands imposter syndrome all too well and is acutely aware of its lingering holds in certain areas of her academic life. Mollie thinks about her body and imposter syndrome in terms of the shadow layer and how reconciling that layer to her physical body helps combat feelings of imposterism. She is also aware of imposter syndrome's effects on her students and their bodies. While it is clear that imposter syndrome is no secret to these women, how they handle it in their daily lives varies a great deal.

"To be identified as willful is to become a problem."
Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* (3)

CHAPTER SIX: TAKEAWAYS AND IMPLICATIONS: PULLING THREADS

There is a story I want to tell that I've not yet told. A couple of months prior to starting the drafting of my dissertation, I was in the writing center talking with some friends. I remember this conversation was jovial and light as we chatted about our day and the work we were doing. Inevitably, one of my friends turned to me and asked me where I was in my program. "I'm a fourth-year student, and I'm just about to start drafting my dissertation," I explained.
"Oh, really!" they said, "What are you writing about?"

Before drafting this work, and sometimes during the process, anytime someone would ask me this question, my stomach would drop, not because I feared the reaction to my work or how I would explain it, but because I felt like I didn't quite know the '*so what?'* part of it. While my committee advisor constantly reassured me that this was part of the process, it filled me with anxiety and dread. Like PhD student Sherwin Kawahakui Ranchez Sales, "Even several years into my graduate studies, I still fear my place is questioned." Explaining my work makes me feel like an imposter, like I'm hiding in plain sight of all the graduate students and scholars around me. Even though when I explain my work, it is well-received, I can't shake the feeling that I leave people wondering *"Is that all?"* after my fumbled attempts at explanations.

"Oh, uh, my work is about how WPAs talk about their emotions and bodies at work through the lens of imposter syndrome," I sheepishly say while I anticipate more questions. From women, I inevitably get warm head nods and appreciative remarks about how this work is needed in the academy. From men, I usually get: "What's imposter syndrome?"

On this day, my friends listen intently as I describe my work and a little bit about my study and its origins before clamming up. Then one friend, Elise, turns to me and says, "But you don't still feel like an imposter do you?" This question strikes me. I began this research because

the answer to that question was emphatically *yes*. I always felt like an imposter: at school, at conferences, in my writing—everywhere. I wanted to write about this topic in order to understand my own feelings and bodily reactions to those feelings a little more. As the question is posed to me by Elise, I have to ask myself *Am I still an imposter? Will I always be?*

I turn to Elise and give the most wishy-washy answer ever: "No, not always, but yes, still sometimes." While my answer is unsatisfying, I realize that it's more true than anything else I could have said. I don't feel like an imposter anymore at MSU, but I do still feel intimidated by certain professors; I don't feel like an imposter in the writing center, but I do still feel like some folks are waiting for me to slip up in my roles there; I don't feel like an imposter in my overall research, but I do feel inadequate writing about it. In answering Elise's question, I come to a realization: just like my participants, while I don't quite feel like an imposter all the time, there are still certain things—mostly new things—that make those old feelings of imposterism creep up; however, this doesn't mean that I avoid those new things. Instead, I—and my participants—willfully expose myself to feeling like an imposter over and over again because that's what my work requires; that's what academia requires. This work asks of me a constant (re)exposure to new ideas and new situations that perpetuate feelings of inadequacy, or, imposterism, that as academics, we must simply expose ourselves to.

Elise, a black-and-white thinker, is unsatisfied with my answer and pushes me to come up with a yes or no to her question, but I hold firm in my response and eventually the conversation shifts to another person and their work, and I'm saved for the moment.

This final chapter presents implications from this dissertation, specifically how my participants all handle imposter syndrome by being, what I coined, Radically Willful Women. I then discuss how the rhetorical act of embodying a radical will affects my participants' work. By

doing this, I situate Radically Willful Women as necessary to the work of good writing program administrators because of their deliberate intention to undertake a task, regardless of the outcome (ex: imposter syndrome). After explaining the takeaways and implications of my research, I offer up some of the limitations of this dissertation and examine future trajectories to develop this work.

Definitions: Radically Willful Women

I made bread on the day of my dissertation prospectus defense. Bringing a snack to the defense wasn't required, but I did so anyway to cover my nerves and, perhaps, bribe my committee with sweets. During the defense, I was nervous. I knew what I wanted to do, but this was only the second time I had the good fortune of having my entire committee together, and the sheer presence of the scholars in the room made me babble. At one point, bread neatly sitting on a paper plate in front of her, one of my committee members asked me what I hoped to learn about imposter syndrome through this study. I perked up. I knew the answer to this, and it wasn't even something I'd prepared for. "To be honest, I'm not all that interested in finding out something new about imposter syndrome," I said, "I'm much more interested in the bodies and emotions surrounding it." Then, I had a thought, something I foreshadowed in Chapter One. "It's like a shadow puppet, right?" I continued,

> Imposter syndrome is the shadow on the wall that the hand casts, but I'm more interested in the hand casting the shadow. In my mind, a hand puppet casting a shadow on a wall is actually making an effect of its actual self, a mimic or a mime. The shadow is not the real hand but the image of it filtered through light and darkness. The hand itself is the thing causing the effect; it is the one in—or out—of control of the shadow. When it moves, so does the shadow. Imposter

> syndrome is like the shadow on the wall; it is the effect of a body moving in (academic) space and time, in lightness and darkness.

This explanation seemed to satisfy, and even satiate, my committee member, and she took a bite of her bread.

To examine the bodies that create the shadows, I have to think about the will—the radical will— taken to move the bodies. Radically Willful Women are intentional, deliberate and stubborn. They are thorough in their thinking and actions, and while their actions might sometimes seem questionable and untethered, they are actually quite precise and intentional—they are willful. As Sara Ahmed says, "When we use the word 'will' or 'willing' it implies then an experience a subject has of itself as bringing something about, whether or not the subject is bringing something about. It is possible then to experience oneself as willing something that one does not bring about" (*Willful* 24). For my participants, none of them "brought about" imposter syndrome, yet they all *willingly* engaged in it when the times, or activities, called for them to. In a way, imposter syndrome, then, is a non-negotiable aspect of WPA work. It is a part of the work, an emotional response to the work, that no one wants to experience, but that we all are willing to engage in because we know our work will be better through this engagement. To be radically willful means to look at (the potential for the effect of) imposter syndrome as required emotional labor and attach yourself to it anyway. It is to look potential imposter syndrome in the eye and defy its emotional attachment. Of willfulness, Ahmed says it "can be required to sustain an attachment, one that might have previously been experienced as habit, as a 'second skin.' When it is assumed you are holding on because you are stubborn you might have to become stubborn to hold on" (*Willful* 151). For the WPAs in my study, their work is their 'second skin,'

and they must be willing to hold on to this habit, to embody this skin, in order to do the emotional labor the work requires.

The term *radical* might be polarizing to some, but feminists have taken this word up for years. Like the radical feminists of the past, Radically Willful Women are willing to expose themselves to uncomfortable situations if the job calls for it. To simplify their definition, radical feminists are the product of a split between the reformist "women's rights" groups and the more radical "women's liberation" groups (Rhodes 29). What radical feminists wanted was an understanding "that the first, foundational oppression in human history was sexism" (Rhodes 29). The "radical" part of radical feminism is intentional choice to engage feminism as a way of life. The "radical" of radical willfulness is also about intention—the intentional choice to engage with imposter syndrome as a means to persist. Radicalism, often associated with extreme politics, defines my participants' will as something counterintuitive and blatant. It is an in-your-face will. In other words, radicalism, as Greenfield suggests, centers human activity, and in so doing, is "often (though not always) the politics of revolution...it is dependent upon explicit naming of specific values…[and] is committed to using those values as a basis for creating its ethics" (Greenfield 59). For the participants in my study, their radical will helped them to survive imposter syndrome and its effects on their emotions and bodies by actually having them intentionally engage with it from the start.

WPAs as Radically Willful Women

Mollie, Natalie, Sam, and I all experience imposter syndrome from time to time in our work. We feel this emotion in our bodies to varying degrees, and we each have ways that we deal with the repercussions of the emotional labor imposter syndrome requires. In other words, each of us performs our imposter syndrome and the outlying emotions surrounding it differently, and

as Laura Micciche reminds us performing emotions "means that [emotions] take form, become recognizable, and enter the realm of rhetoric when they are bodily enacted and lived, which always entails some degree of performance" (62). Our performances are our radical reactions to being faced with imposterism. Our willful performances of our emotions, and the willful moving of our bodies to cope with these emotions, can be a threat to imposter syndrome. Likewise, our performances make imposter syndrome more visible; our performances are the hands moving so that there is a shadow on the wall, to return once again to my metaphor. While these performances might show up differently for others, for us they center around flexible boundaries, public failure, and vulnerability.

Mollie and Boundaries

For Mollie, boundaries are important so that she can mark time for work and time for rest and make visible her emotional labor at work. However, she acknowledges that the boundaries bleed into one another sometimes. "I think the hard part about being an academic is that so much of it happens in your brain," she says, "and it's just constantly thinking about things. I feel like I'm constantly thinking about various research projects, or pieces that I want to write, and that's all intellectual work, even though a lot of it's just fun." While this work might be fun, it's still taxing, and it's still a form of emotional labor. "To sit there with your thoughts," she continues, "is still work, and I have a really hard time turning that sort of thing off...you never really know what's going to prompt that black hole in the brain. So, I try. I try very hard to have downtime that focuses just on me, but you just never know what's going to pop up." She does, however, admit that feelings of imposter syndrome creep up from time to time, especially when she's called to participate in academic tasks outside of her immediate work. These tasks, like serving on an undergraduate curriculum committee when she doesn't teach undergraduates, create an

opportunity for her to be radically willful—she knows she has less investment in this opportunity than others, yet she's been called to participate in it, so she does. She moves her boundaries around to accommodate a new task, and, therefore, she lets the possibility of imposter syndrome sneak in. Her attachment to this opportunity creates a space for her to perform radical willfulness. Yet she knows that she will always ask the questions of "why am I here, and what do I have to offer" when it comes to new experiences.

Mollie's attention to boundaries and her own advocacy for, or at least acknowledgement of, her own emotional labor has taught me that as a Radically Willful WPA, one must have boundaries that are flexible in nature. Boundaries, like Mollie's, are there to show us where we stand with our ideal working life, but ideals are rarely reality. Instead, a Radical Will is intentional about blurring boundaries when necessary because the job of a WPA asks for that. Thus, a Radically Willful WPA is one who intentionally and willfully allows for the possibility of imposterism because of their firm yet flexible boundaries in their private and public lives.

Natalie and Public Failure

Natalie, on the other hand, experiences her imposter syndrome in a very public way. When she was working with an MA student, and Natalie's skill set was questioned, her imposter syndrome flared even though she knew she was right and that her skills were exactly what the student needed to finish their thesis. It was a Radical Willfulness that allowed Natalie to continue her work with the student in the face of public failure. According to Ahmed, "Willfulness can be required in order to persist not only *as* an individual but *in* one's very loyalty to a culture whose existence is deemed as a threat" (*Willful* 151). Natalie's knowledge of protocol pertaining to her student's qualitative research methods was deemed insufficient by the University Graduate Office, and she was, therefore, a threat to her student's graduation trajectory; however, Natalie

knew she was right and willfully persisted in her work with her student. Despite this, she acknowledges that "we feel like an imposter when we try something new." Natalie is also not afraid to fail publicially, and in so doing, displays and acknowledges her own feelings of imposter syndrome. She says that the way her life works now, things need to happen in exact time frames, and if they don't, "there's just things [she's] going to suck at." She goes on: "Like right now, this semester, that's been grading. I'm not very good at that. I'm way behind...I haven't picked books for next semester yet." She says that she has to find this balance amongst her work in academia and her life with her family and that in years past, the things that have fallen off her priorities list are things for herself and for her family. This is something she's trying her best to change. When asked, however, if she thinks she'll ever stop feeling like an imposter, she pauses, and says, "I think yes and no, right." She goes on:

> The ways that I see myself as an imposter have become more nuanced, so it's just trickier. Before I'd be like 'I don't know anything about that. Oh, my god!' and now I'm kinda like 'I know something.' But I'm like, wait. Do I know the right things? Do I know them in the right way? Am I practicing them in a way that is, you know, responsible? Do I think I know them but I really don't? Am I enacting the values that I hold? Am I holding this knowledge in a way that is productive? So I just find new ways to mark myself as an imposter, but I also know that I know things. You know? And so, I probably feel less like an imposter more of the time.

Even though Natalie feels less like an imposter most of the time, she still willfully engages in activities that produce imposter feelings, and she allows herself to nuance those feelings in a

public way. She allows herself to sit in the muck that imposter syndrome produces as she pulls apart her feelings.

Natalie's willingness to publicly fail and sit with feelings of imposter syndrome have taught me that Radically Willful Women often have their knowledge challenged and must defend it in ways others might not have to because they put themselves out there in ways others might not. This act of defense can produce imposter syndrome as made manifest through Natalie's description of second guessing your own deeply held beliefs. In the face of imposter syndrome, a radical willfulness pushes against feelings of being unworthy or less-than with questions, like Natalie's "Do I know the right things in the right way?" Even when we actually do know these things, being questioned or challenged about them can make us second guess ourselves, and when this happens at work, as it did with Natalie, this second guessing produces an emotional labor laced with imposterism.

Sam and Vulnerability

As mentioned previously, Sam was unused to talking and thinking about her body and emotions at work until pushed to do so with this study. Gradually, she warmed up to the idea of talking freely about her emotions and body at work because she began to see the interconnectedness of her work and her embodiment of that work. She allowed herself to become vulnerable with me during our study, and she let her guard down. When she did this, she found she had some realizations about imposter syndrome: "I feel like a non-imposter more than I feel like an imposter, which, I think, is nice. And then I was thinking maybe I shouldn't feel like that. Maybe I should feel like an imposter more." Much like Natalie, Sam worries about the state of her imposterism; she worries if not feeling like an imposter is actually masquerading some of her own imposter feelings; however, she does acknowledge areas where she feels confident in her

work. She says, “But at this point in my career, at the institution I’m at, I’m feeling pretty comfortable. I rarely, if ever, feel like an imposter in my teaching. Even when I was a, um, lower-prestige graduate student, I still felt pretty confident in my teaching. I’m comfortable with the curriculum that I’m teaching and with being the ‘expert’ in my English department.” Teaching has never been a point of contention for her confidence. What has been, though, and where she shows up as a Radically Willful Woman, are the areas of her working life where she is exposed to or asked to contribute to new activities. This engagement takes a great deal of vulnerability, particularly if one knows that one of the outcomes of the engagement is a sense of imposter syndrome. Sam explains her initial reticence to try new things:

> But, when I do feel moments of imposter syndrome, they’re very specific moments, and basically it’s at times when I feel less confident because I have little to no experience. Um. And I think, this shows up in all areas of my life...but it’s like if I know I’m not gonna be good at something on the first try, I don’t want to do it, and maybe that’s because I grew up in the gifted and talented group that was pulled out of classes to do special curriculum, and so there was always this pressure to be good naturally at things. But now, even if I don’t have a lot of practice in these things, it still makes me feel exposed. For example, talking about budgets and going over financial stuff—I’m not that good at financial stuff in my personal life—and so to [be in charge of a budget is daunting]...also whenever I talk to Deans and Provosts and people who are like higher up than me...I guess I’m just still not comfortable with how to act in those very professional situations, and I’ve never held that kind of position before, so it makes me feel a little uneasy I guess. Like when I’m trying something new.

Trying something new is never easy, but Sam's Radical Will allows her to see the effects of the new activity and to participate in it despite those effects. This is her Radically Willful act: being vulnerable in the face of newness. As an example, Sam illustrates,

> I'm gonna try to be elected to the CWPA executive board, and so, if and when I put my name in the hat for that, I'm sure I'm gonna be like 'Oh my god, I suck. Nobody cares. Nobody likes me, and nobody is going to vote for me' kind of a thing. Um. Revising my textbook, that kind of thing. You know I'm sure once I get back to that, I think it'll be a little bit, a small sense of worry. Um, presenting at a new conference, like going to RSA, I think, for the first time in 2020, and so I'm not aware of...what's expected at that conference. And then, you know, submitting articles to journals is always like, 'Well, maybe they're gonna hate it!' But that's ok...And I don't know why I'm so hard on myself about that because everyone's new at some point, right?

Sam knows that being new to activities is not unique to her experience, and she acknowledges that "I've never—knock on wood—I've never really had a situation where nobody wants to help you. You know? By and large, I feel like people are inherently good, and they want to help you and they want to see you succeed...So I don't know why I don't expect a reciprocal thing from other people, but...I don't know." Despite the help she might get from others, Sam acknowledges that her own vulnerability and Radical Willfulness can be a little clouded by the confidence she exudes to others. She explains, "I've had people, you know once they get to know me, say, 'You seem so confident all the time!' and maybe it's part of my sunny disposition, you know? My bubbly personality and things like that, and maybe that makes me *look* more confident and less like I feel like an imposter…."

What Sam's vulnerability to engage with new activities and speak about her lack of confidence in these activities shows me is that Radical Willfulness looks like showing up to things even when you might not be completely prepared for those things; it is an intentional seeking out of activities and engagements that push you to feel outside of your comfort zone and, therefore, can produce feelings of imposter syndrome. While these feelings of imposterism are hard to ignore, they are not permanent, and they are also not universally felt the same way. However, feeling the feelings of imposter syndrome by willfully and radically engaging in an act makes visible the emotions associated with imposterism in ways they were not previously visible. Indeed, as Micciche argues, "we come to know emotion only through its embodied forms," so embodying imposter syndrome makes it known, and, therefore, easier to overcome (19).

Conclusion

Mollie, Natalie, and Sam are all Radically Willful Women. Even though their jobs put them in positions that expose them to feelings of imposter syndrome—through new experiences: new committees, new engagements with students, new scholarship, etc.—they radically and willfully engage with these activities in the face of the feeling, often knowing the feeling of imposterism will come to them if they engage with the activity. Instead, they understand that their jobs carry an expectation of imposter syndrome as part of the emotional labor of the job. To return to our hand puppet example one final time, Radically Willful Women see the shadows on the walls and the connections to their bodies making those shadows, and they understand that they're in control of the movement their hands make, even if the hand shakes as it makes the movement. Radically Willful Women acknowledge the role their bodies have in imposterism and they engage in the activity anyway because they know their emotions are temporary and

necessary for the work they have to do. In other words, Radically Willful Women are willing to make adjustments between emotions of confidence and imposterism to get their work done. As Ahmed explains, "Willing adjustments (or being willing to adjust) might relate to what Arlie Hochschild describes as emotional labor, when subjects 'close the gap' between how they do feel and how they should feel" (*Willful* 52).

As I mention in my Introduction, this study never set out to solve the problem of imposter syndrome. I can't task myself with that unruly feat. But I do see a place in our field for the work of examining the WPA community via the gaze of imposter syndrome. Recently, there has been a flourish of full-length texts considering what it looks like to be a WPA, either as a woman or not (Caswell, Grutsch McKinney, and Jackson; Ratcliffe and Rickly; Wooten, Babb, and Ray; Perryman-Clark and Craig; Wooten, Babb, Costello, and Navickas, etc.). What this tells me is that the stories WPAs have are waiting to be told; they are finally yearning to be told. Perhaps imposter syndrome has kept many of WPAs quiet for too long. It is my hope that by bringing together women who are willing to talk honestly and critically about how the hardships and struggles of our field reside in their bodies and through their emotions, the trend of hearing the voices of WPAs will not be a short-lived one.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Interview Questions

Week 1

1. Tell me a little about yourself. How did you get involved in WPA work?
2. Was there a moment when WPA work was something you knew you wanted to do?
3. What have you found surprising in your work? How is the work you do different than what you thought it might be?
4. What has been unsurprising? What did you expect?
5. Talk to me about your experiences being mentored.
    1. Does this story speak to all your experiences, or is it an outlier?

Week 3

1. What do you define as your strengths at work? What do you think other people define as your strengths?
2. How have your strengths influenced, been emphasized, or been expressed in your work?
3. Do you find it easy to achieve the things you want at work? Why/why not?
4. Tell me a story about a time you've had to make a sacrifice in your current WPA position? What was the sacrifice?
    1. What do you worry people will think about you? What keeps you up at night about others' perceptions of your work? How did you know you'd have to make this sacrifice?
5. What's most important to you in your work?

Week 5

1. People say that WPA work is emotional. Can you tell me about a particular time when it has been emotional for you? What was your strategy for contending with that?
2. Tell me about an instance when the emotional aspect of being a WPA felt like too much? How about a time when the emotional labor spent felt very necessary?
3. How do you (or do you) make your emotional labor visible? How does it affect your already-visible WPA work?
4. How does your experience with emotional labor show up with others?
5. When you have a moment of emotional labor, how do you experience that in your body? What does it do to you?

Week 7

1. How do you physically react to feelings of inadequacy at work?
2. How do you emotionally react to feelings of inadequacy at work?
3. Do these feelings show up on/in/through your body? In what ways?
4. Do you ever feel like you're not up to the task of being a WPA, does that have an effect on your body, too?
5. Do you pay any special attention to your body (exercise, yoga, mindfulness, therapy, eating habits) to cope with the work of being a WPA?

Week 9

1. Do you know what imposter syndrome is?

a. (If not, researcher will explain it as: an emotional response to an ideological academic framework that makes one believe that they are not good enough to be where they currently are)

2. Tell me a story about how you've specifically felt like an imposter in the academy?
3. How did you embody this experience throughout your work? In other words, did you work change, even a little, because of this feeling?
4. In what ways do your specific identity markers have an effect on your feelings of being an imposter within your discipline?
5. Tell me a story about how your body connects you (or disconnects you) to your work as a WPA?

Week 11

1. How do you see colleagues or students suffering from imposter syndrome in the academy?
2. How do you navigate close relationships with colleagues at work?
3. Do you have any women in your work life who you don't think identify with imposter syndrome? What makes you think this?
4. How do you ever consider your body (physical and/or emotional) when you make or think of these relationships?

Week 13 (depending on directions prior conversations)

1. Sara Ahmed says that "feminism begins with sensation: with a sense of things" (21). What do you think of this statement?
    a) Does feminism begin with sensation for you? If so, do you agree that sensations are felt on and in the body?
2. Can you tell me about a time when you *felt* your feminism in your body?

Week 15

1. As a WPA, how or when do you slow down? In other words, what are your moments of work and non-work? And what are your moments and strategies of making sure work doesn't become non-work?
2. At what moment do you predict you will stop feeling like an imposter (in all areas, in some areas, etc.)?
3. How would you like to be described in terms of this interview/study? (Here I'm thinking any identity markers you might like or dislike using: race, age, years doing the work, location, name or alias, etc.)

Initial Video Diary Prompts (bi-weekly)

Week 2

- What does your physical daily routine look like?

Week 4

- What does vulnerability mean to you?

Week 6

- What are your emotional priorities as a WPA?

Week 8

- *Perfectionism is a tool of the patriarchy*—describe your reactions to this phrase

Week 10

- Fill in the blank and elaborate on it:
    - If I wasn't a WPA, I'd be_____ because I _____.

Week 12

- How do you take care of yourself?

Week 14

- What advice do you have for future women-identified WPAs?

APPENDIX B: Informed Consent Form

You are being asked to participate in a study on imposter syndrome, embodiment, and vulnerability, all of which will comprise the data for my dissertation. Your participation is completely voluntary and unpaid. Your participation in this study will take the form of bi-weekly video-based interviews, bi-weekly video diary recordings, and allowing me two site visits to shadow and observe your work and work environment.

Background

This longitudinal autoethnographic study uses both a feminist- and cultural rhetorics-informed methodology to investigate the ways women-identified writing program administrators embody imposter syndrome (IS). This investigation will be specifically aimed at understanding the ways women in this study come to understand what IS means—where and how that meaning is made by/for them in their academic lives—and how IS is marked—subconsciously/consciously; self-made/by others; primarily/secondarily—on, in, and through their bodies.

Procedures

If you agree to participate in this part of the study, you will take part in a couple of different kinds of data collection over an entire semester's length (15 weeks): bi-weekly, video-based interviews (Skype, Zoom); bi-weekly video diary entries; and at least two site visits. The interview(s) will feel like a conversation in which you will be asked a few questions about your feelings associated with imposter syndrome, vulnerability, womanness, and your body in the academy, and then be encouraged to talk as long as you like. The interview(s) will be video and audio recorded, and you will have the opportunity to be anonymized through an alias, if you wish. The videos and audio will be used as part of a hybrid dissertation (in possible website presentation).

Risks and Benefits

You may find that some questions ask for experiences or information you may not be willing to share. You are free not to answer any question or to stop any interview at any time. There may be no direct benefit for you for participating in this study, though you may come into new understandings of your own experience with imposter syndrome and the academy. Additionally, the field of Rhetoric and Composition, as a part of Higher Education, will benefit from hearing these stories and the process of sharing and listening to the stories works to help more women-identified academics self-disclose feelings like imposter syndrome.

Confidentiality

The data from the interview(s) will be used for the purposes of this study and any future publication based off this dissertation. Your identity may be kept confidential, and all data will be stored in a password-protected location.

Participation

Participation in this study requires submitting to audio and video recording. By signing this consent form, you are agreeing to be audio and video recorded.

Nonparticipation
You are free to refuse to answer any question or to withdraw from further participation in this research at any time.

Contacts
The researcher directing this study is Rachel Robinson, and she may be contacted at robi1078@msu.edu or 615-397-2474. The PI of this study is Dr. Trixie Smith, and she may be contacted at smit1254@msu.edu or 517-432-3610.

If you have questions or concerns about your role and rights as a research participant, would like to obtain information or offer input, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program at 517-355-2180, Fax 517-432-4503, or e-mail irb@msu.edu or regular mail at 4000 Collins Rd, Suite 136, Lansing, MI 48910.

Statement of Consent
I have read the above information. I affirm that I am at least 18 years of age, identify as a woman, and am a writing program administrator at a United States university (at the time of this signing). If I had questions, I have asked them and received answers. I give my consent to participate in this study.

Signature _____

Print Name_____

Date: _____

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