

# Chapter 8. Writing My Way into Belonging: Negotiating Positionality and Exposure in Rhetoric and Writing Scholarship

Letizia Guglielmo  
KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY

In 2019, my co-edited collection *Immigrant Scholars in Rhetoric, Composition, and Communication: Memoirs of a First Generation* was published by NCTE, and it was the first time I would claim publicly within the field's scholarship an identity that was, as I describe it, multiply first-generation. I had been working on this project with my friend and colleague Sergio C. Figueiredo and with a wonderful group of contributors since 2015. With each stage of the project, from our call for proposals, to our engagement with contributors' generously shared and insightful narratives, to our proposal to NCTE, to the drafting and revision of my own chapter, and to the looming publication date, I found myself contending with insider-outsider status in my own literacy narrative: as the child of immigrants, as a young student sent to an ESL classroom for speaking two languages and answering in Italian in my English-speaking classroom, as a teacher-scholar of rhetoric and writing studies contending with a lived history in this liminal space, one that had shaped and would continue to shape my professional work. It was after many years in the field as a tenured professor, author, co-author, editor, and co-editor and through a book project that was deeply personal that I finally wrestled fully with my positionality and the facets of lived experience that had profound effects on my identity and my work and yet often remained hidden and undertheorized. As the child of immigrants who identifies as a multiply first-gen feminist teacher-scholar, my own positionality is intimately connected to the content of this chapter, to my teaching and scholarship, and to the ways I perform and theorize positionality.

Editing a collection of scholarly work was not new to me, and it had been, in fact, my way into recognizing my potential contributions to scholarship at the intersection of my broad areas of expertise: rhetoric and writing studies and gender and women's studies. My first edited collection, *MTV and Teen Pregnancy: Critical Essays on 16 and Pregnant and Teen Mom*, for example, grew out of a collaborative project with an undergraduate student and from wondering what it would look like to create space for multi-disciplinary conversations among scholars engaged and invested in similar analysis and feminist intervention. Subsequent edited projects explored academic publication and collaboration and misogyny in American

culture, which each amplified the voices and intellectual contributions of undergraduate and graduate students and early- and late-career scholars, including colleagues in contingent positions. Developing and managing projects like these had allowed me to blend what I found to be the very best parts of academic work—collaboration, collective inquiry, mutual mentoring—with scholarly publication and produced intellectual insights that would not have existed without the multi-vocal and often interdisciplinary approach facilitated by edited collections. In each of these projects, as I read drafts of contributors' work, offered feedback, engaged in conversation via email, the larger project goals were shaped as much by my own vision as by the new insights I gained from contributors' work. It was a privilege to develop, manage, and contribute to projects like these, and I took seriously the responsibility of framing and making public contributors' intellectual work in ways that extended and complicated ongoing scholarly conversations and facilitated professional and career goals. Although I often revealed pieces of myself as an editor and as a contributor in those projects—how they came to be, how and why I was invested in the topics and the work, where I entered these conversations, and why I found value in the work and its contributions to scholarship in the field—this sharing of “my way in” did not reveal what I would later identify as a whole self. While I recognized that the act of editing a collection required claiming and making space for the work, for the voices and contributions of each of the collection's authors, it did not always feel like an active process of making space—both physical and rhetorical—for myself, for my identity, for my lived experience.

It was through this process of making and claiming space—in imagining taking up physical space in our published scholarship and rhetorical space in our field—that I began to confront and, simultaneously, to resist the connections between positionality, acknowledging positionality, and inviting readers to question (my) belonging. I wondered, for example,

*When I tell this personal story, will readers question if I'm the right person to tell it? If I am “first-gen” enough?*

*What would it look like or mean to claim positionality or a group membership and identity in this context?*

*In what ways would that claiming mean my positionality, my identity was fixed?*

*Can my positionality change? If I claim one key facet of my identity to enter one rhetorical space, am I permitted to enter a different space differently?*

*How might sharing this personal story invite colleagues to question if I am qualified to be in this field, to enter this space?*

I confronted what I came to understand as the double bind of positionality and exposure. In the telling, revealing, making visible, uncovering, stepping

forward we are also inviting the gaze, inquiry, scrutiny, questioning, a potential looking away. What I underestimated in this process, what had not been so viscerally, physically apparent and felt in my previous projects was the emotional labor of this work. The effect of having to articulate—to make meaning from the whole of my lived experience. Although scholars have explored the significance of emotional labor in our field in various facets of our professional work, including administration, the emotional labor of writing when we are the subject of our own theorizing is an entirely different kind of labor. While this negotiation of emotional labor was clear to me in other parts of my work, having served by the time of writing the chapter and working on the collection in various administrative roles, contending with this emotional work in my writing was new. Yet what I was experiencing was not solely about my writing or writing process but rather about whether I should be writing *about* writing and the teaching of writing given what increasingly felt like a tenuous, questionable authority and dissonance about myself and my identity as a writing scholar.

This emotional labor was the product of making my story both public and felt. A feeling of swimming and of being engulfed, of both being inside of and part of, and analyzing while trying to make space. Revisiting my writing process makes this journey of unraveling, of openness and retreating clear, especially in my resistance to finishing a chapter draft for the collection until the final manuscript was due. Instead, reaching for published scholarship helped me to make sense of my experiences and to build connections with other scholars. This liminal space left me wanting to assimilate, fade into the background, become subsumed into someone else's theoretical explanation and not to become the central focus of my own narrative. In the midst of the doubt I was experiencing about what I could truly *know*, it was easier to lean on, to add to, to extend the conversation rather than take it in a radically new direction or to ask what if there is a different way, a different experience, another way of knowing. I found comfort—and, perhaps, a layer of invisibility—in the reading and research process as well as in the reading and rereading and offering feedback on contributors' proposals, then first drafts, then subsequent drafts. As a step toward writing my own story, I began a notes document in November 2015, worked on notes from scholarly sources from September 2015 through April 2018, and then moved to a notes-to-draft document in April 2018, after proposals and drafts had long been accepted from contributors and multiple drafts had been revised. Both aware of this resistance and avoiding confronting or exploring it, I eventually emerged from the liminal space with these opening lines of the first full draft: "Crafting this chapter—similar to my story of literacy and of conscious language development—has been a journey of reflecting and recovering, of questioning and realization, of silencing and coming to voice."

At moments, the process was overwhelming, and then, at once it felt like crossing a threshold into acceptance and belonging. As an editor, this double bind also forced me to confront what felt like gatekeeping practices grounded in privilege. At the level of meta-analysis of the project and of my dual roles as co-editor

and contributor, the issue of gatekeeping was complex and ever present as we explore in the collection's introduction:

As teacher scholars, many of [the] collection's contributors participate in [a] process of gatekeeping in some way by teaching in these fields while also attempting to disrupt policy and conversations concerning literacy and language. Their narratives call us to consider when the authors' own literacy, legitimacy, and citizenship have been questioned [as revealed in the individual narratives shared], when (if ever) they are sanctioned to participate in the gatekeeping that is institutional literacy. (Figueiredo & Guglielmo, 2019, p. 10)

Similarly, what right did I have to ask contributors to tell such personal stories when I was withholding elements of my own. And what responsibility did I have to not only ensure the work was published but also that it was framed with care and intentionality, including with attention to the implications of this work on professional careers and future scholarly contributions? This was one of the moments, perhaps, when I realized how much more of myself I could and should—would have to—reveal in my own narrative. I was, after all, through my feedback, asking contributors to say more, to share more of themselves and the intricate details of their lived experiences. How could I justify not doing the same? How could I authentically share this work with the field while withholding parts of myself, my motivations, my story?

The nature of the project also included the added layer of revealing much more about our family histories—including my own—than we often do in our academic work and what that means about whose story we each get to tell. Although I had written about various parts of my lived experience in previous projects, telling my personal story of finding my way to the work, those rhetorical moves seemed to represent segmented pieces of a complete professional identity that only began to blur the public and private, professional and personal. When our stories of positionality are inevitably grounded in our lived experiences, how do we ethically, compassionately, and authentically represent the experiences of family, friends, mentors, colleagues, students in ways that avoid one-dimensional versions of complex realities? At each turn in the project were “questions of how we know what we know, what is persuasive, and the legitimate status of certain kinds of knowledge,” and in appreciating how “this collection speaks less to a mastery of identity and more to the process of negotiating the encounters and relations through which [we] have attuned themselves to the dynamic unfolding of experience,” I came to understand the dynamic complexity of positionality (Figueiredo & Guglielmo, 2019, p. 4).

Negotiating my own positionality in this project also facilitated my way into belonging because I had acknowledged publicly the multiple positions from which I do this work and how they shape my teaching, scholarship, and mentoring.

Given the focus of my teaching and scholarship, I recognized elements of this process as a feminist rhetorical practice: not only a way of “build[ing] theory from description of where [we are] in the world,” as Sara Ahmed (2017) describes, but also a way of writing myself into the space by identifying a silence or omission on the lived histories of scholars in the field who identify as first generation connected to immigrant status (p. 4). As we share in the introduction, “Collectively, these narratives function as counterstory, disrupting those public and academic conversations in varied and complex ways that resist stereotypes about language and literacy, unsettle mandates for fixed identities, and extend our definitions of first generation in the academy” (Figueredo & Guglielmo, 2019, p. 6). This project was a way of writing us—myself—into the broader growing narrative of first-gen in higher ed, including first-gen faculty, which did not yet fully represent our experiences.

The writing and publishing experience also has facilitated my own more deliberate and open engagement with positionality because, in this project, I felt I had put it all on the table. The project and my individual chapter allowed me to shape and to share a more complete narrative with room to explore the how and why of my work. And having published a collection of first-generation immigrant scholars meant that part of my identity was officially claimed. This claim facilitated how I entered teaching and scholarly space, including the space of my undergraduate and graduate classrooms. Telling my own story allowed me to interrogate my assumptions about teaching, learning, literacy, and the ways that I can show up as my authentic self in teaching and scholarship, ways that create space for marginalized voices and for emerging scholars. My chapter, like many of those shared by the collection’s contributors, reveals the multiple negotiations, the bargains, the naming, sometimes as we name ourselves, our identities, our languages, and more often how we are *named* outside of ourselves, in ways we do not choose. For me, this complex process played out in school settings across my education and career, experiences that would later invite interrogation of “their intersection with systems of power in our classrooms and in our professional work?” (Figueredo & Guglielmo, 2019, p. 11). In this way, theorizing and consistently sharing this counterstory (see Martinez, 2020) has allowed me to consider its role in my teaching and the feminist rhetorical theory and practices that underscore my pedagogy, making room for students to share their own positionalities as a step toward inclusivity. At the same time, however, this project has helped me to articulate more clearly the intersections between this lived experience and imposter syndrome and the complexity of inclusion, urging us as to remain mindful of “the risks we may ask our students to take in [classroom] spaces,” what we ask them to reveal, to name (Figueredo & Guglielmo, 2019, p. 10).

Reflecting on the varied ways that my experience co-editing this project has facilitated intimate and ongoing engagement with positionality, I see potential for generative conversation on how editing can and perhaps should serve as a call—a reflective moment—for us to think deeply and share publicly our own

positionalities as we identify and find connection with topics and figures and theories and ways of doing and of being in this work. To explore what it means to add our voices to conversations on these topics, to move these conversations in new directions, and to create space for new voices and new perspectives in our roles as editor-mentors.

## References

- Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a feminist life*. Duke University Press.
- Guglielmo, L. (2019). A right to my language: Personal and professional identity as a 'first generation American-born' teacher-scholar/rhetorician. In L. Guglielmo & S. C. Figueiredo (Eds.), *Immigrant scholars in rhetoric, composition, and communication: Memoirs of a first generation* (pp. 102-121). National Council of Teachers of English.
- Figueiredo, S.C., & Guglielmo, L. (2019). Introduction: Framing, tracing, and complicating the experiences of U.S. immigrant teacher-scholars. In L. Guglielmo & S. C. Figueiredo (Eds.), *Immigrant scholars in rhetoric, composition, and communication: Memoirs of a first generation* (pp. 1-16). National Council of Teachers of English.
- Martinez, A.Y. (2020). *Counterstory: The rhetoric and writing of critical race theory*. National Council of Teachers of English.