

This is transcript for Jennifer Sano-Franchini, Margaret Fernandes, Jonathan Adams, and Michelle webtext “Sounding Out in a PWI: Circulating Asian American Sound for Institutional Change” published in Kairos: Rhetoric, Technology, Pedagogy, 26(1), available at <http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/26.1/praxiswiki/sano-franchini-et-al>.

Reflections On Our Positionality

This transcript is of a conversation among the authors in which they each reflect on their positionalities in relation to the event.

PART 1

Jen: So when you all came to campus, what was your impression of Asian American studies, students, culture, presence, all of that?

Michelle: So I guess in the context of Virginia Tech, I was in an organization which was Asian American Coalition, which was a discussion based, seminar based club in which we talked heavily about Asian American issues such as—just to breach the surface is like cultural appropriation and anti-Blackness within our community, and the President of AAC, Quynh, a good friend of mine, had reached out to me to discuss a possible Asian American historical and cultural timeline, and I was more interested in the cultural aspect.

Maggie: So when I first came here, I had taught at a previous institution that was in South Carolina, like, low country so it was pretty much white dominant and then a larger percentage of African American students and then Hispanic communities. [1:04] So not a whole lot of Asian American communities or Asian international students.

And when I came here, they give you comp training to teach in Virginia Tech’s comp program, but what I was surprised by was the number of Asian international students. And so that was my first encounter and kind of like getting to know them and talk to them, just like seeing what their experience was like. I kind of had that on the ground a little bit.

Jon: I have a little bit of a different background, I actually was a TESOL teacher and certifier for a few years in undergrad, and my undergrad was a fairly popular university to send people for accent coaching.

Yeah, problematic for a lot of reasons.

Jen: [laughs]

Maggie: Oh, this is a podcast, my face went [squawk sound].

[laughs]

Jon: Yeah, problematic for a lot of reasons, but the accent from the part of the Midwest I come from is considered the standardized American accent. [2:02] So they would send people from South Korea and from Japan to come and study at the university so they could adapt that version of English.

And then I on my own time, as a job, worked at a center that helped people study and pass TESOL certification.

So my familiarization with international Asian students was very high and yet we had almost zero interactions with Asian American students because the middle of the country is strikingly white and even moving out here and working in these classes were some of my first interactions with Asian American students, and having that terrible issue of not knowing until you talk to them whether they are from this country or not from this country, and feeling terrible about not being able to know that right off the bat. [2:58] Definitely experiencing some of those issues that have been talked about and brought up over and over, especially in our Asian American rhetorics course.

Jen: Why'd you feel terrible about that?

Jon: Uh, because I mean you always feel like you should be able to do that and it certainly doesn't happen with other students, right? With white students I feel like I'm never guessing whether or not they're international and when they are international they tell you pretty straightforward, but because the population balance is so, I would say in my experience at least, almost 50/50; fifty percent of the Asian students are international, fifty percent of the Asian students aren't.

Jen: You mean here?

Jon: Here. It feels like the guesswork happens a little more frequently. Like I wish I didn't have to guess at all but it does happen.

If there was a 50/50 percent split among the white students and fifty percent of them were from international countries and fifty percent of them were from here I might have to play that guessing game as well. [3:55] I think I'd feel terrible in that case as well, cause I hate talking to somebody and either having them give me a blank stare because I'm talking too fast, especially in that first semester when they first get here, or talking to somebody and having them—which is the worst case scenario—

Jen: [laughs]

Jon: the scenario you usually try to avoid completely—say I'm from NoVA (*shorthand for Northern Virginia*) [laughs], and then you're like oh, sorry about that. I apologize.

Jen: So, this is interesting you're talking about kind of like changing context going from was it Wyoming—

Jon: Yeah

Jen: to here—

Jon: Yeah

Jen: and having to kind of shift your... Well, your interactions changed a bit? Because the makeup was a little different.

Jon: Yeah, and they just started existing, and that's true not just for the Asian student population, but just the intercultural, interracial communications altogether.

Wyoming is like 95% white people so there's just not... these conversations *need* to be happening but a lot of these conversations just don't happen because the context for them don't arise. So, coming to Virginia and being out in Virginia you get immersed in all of these conversations and all these considerations that you just didn't have to...you had the privilege not to participate in.

[5:06] It's the same...though it's not the same at all, but the same kind of thing happens with weather, right? Like if you've just lived in Southern California all your life, or in like Southern Arizona and then you move to North Dakota, you get to learn what a snowsuit is, and the importance of a snowsuit, and you've just never had to put on a snowsuit or be experienced with that before.

Maggie: See I feel like I had a very different experience because I wasn't coming from an R1 university; I came from more of a teaching college, and one of the marketing strategies of that school was like, come work by the beach.

[laughs]

Maggie: So there was sort of like a different... it was a high first gen community across the board, like a lot of people coming to college for the first time, and then also like a bunch of people who had always vacationed in the area who are like, "I'm going to college there and that's going to be what college looks like." [6:00] So, I developed my first experiences teaching was kind of trying to in some ways teach students how to be students and kind of like reel them in back from like, "You're actually 20 miles from the ocean, so it's not as close as you think."

So here I found that I kind of needed to both speed up in terms of what we're doing in the classroom because most of the students I came in contact with, they were pretty equipped to be students.

Jen: Uh huh.

Maggie: And then figuring out how to do that while also for the Asian international students I dealt with, kind of figuring out... cause they're *really* competent students, like they are [laughs] they're better students than me, and they've always worked really hard. And kind of figuring out how to shift what they think what an English class should be like. Because they were fully ready to do all this hard work and to not ask for help. [7:01] So my challenge there was figuring out how to both shift their assumptions and also give them the tools that they were wanting.

Jen: For me the context changed quite a lot in a way that—I don't know if it might be similar to what Author 1 was talking about—going from East Lansing, Michigan to here, in part because there was a huge international student population there. I see a lot more Asian Americans here, at least in terms of students, especially coming from NOVA, and so I feel like there are different kinds of expectations from even locals or other students.

I felt like there was—I don't know if it's just me—but I felt like there was more animosity toward Asian people in Michigan I think in part because of issues with the auto industry and kind of like blaming Asians for taking jobs or whatever, and I feel like that kind of history doesn't exist here and so I have not felt that kind of like... [8:03] Well I mean I've never experienced like racial slurs being yelled at me here in the way that I did a couple of times in Michigan.

But at the same time on the institutional level, it was kind of surprising to me that even though there are a lot of Asians on campus including Asian Americans, that it's not reflected within the university—in the buildings, in the curriculum.

PART 2

Maggie: I know I was initially like, “Yeah, I’m down to help!” [laughs]—*help*. [laughs]

Jon: Yeah, for the same reasons I thought that when you were asking for help,

Jen: [laughs]

Jon: I was really ready to help, I was really ready to engage with that process, but I thought I would be engaging that process in an assisting manner [chuckles] because, uh, I was white, it was for the Asian American Student Cultural Center, and so I thought we needed somebody to help take down, bring things in their car, maybe order food, that kind of thing, and I was on board with that, and so when we met for our first meeting, or when you sent the follow up email, I remember you saying, “So think about the kind of events and activities we can do,” and my brain being like, “Oh no. I don’t know...”

[laughter]

Jon: uh, what I would possibly do.”

So I wasn’t quite sure who the audience would be or who the event was for or its purpose. Initially, I conceived of the event as part of like Intercultural Week, which we do on campus, where they’re trying to open up the Center for other people to experience what they’re doing in the Center on a yearly basis was the initial conception that I was rolling around in my head. [1:06]

So I kind of thought we would be helping you give a presentation or help you set something up for white students or non-Asian students to learn what happens in the Asian Cultural Center, or to learn a bit more about Asian American cultural issues, Asian American cultural developments on campus.

Maggie: Yeah, I think I similarly thought that Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month would be more of like a generalized event for the university, kind of in the same way that other types of months tend to be put out for everybody. Like, most everybody is usually aware of when Black History Month is happening, and I’m not sure that this month had the same reach on our campus at least.

Jon: It was surprising to me because we were having early talks and discussions and you, Dr. Sano-Franchini, said, “ I think they already know what you’re sort of building and going to say in this particular project,” [2:03] and I realized that oh, we’re doing something with the *Asian American* community, and *they’re* going to be sort of the primary audience, which completely shifts the way you sort of think about and design one of these things.

Jen: That note that you’re making about how you initially were thinking that you’d be helping in a different kind of way, it says something about this kind of expectation about who can do this work or who should talk about these things. And maybe there are certain assumptions there that like oftentimes people feel like if I’m not part of that group, then what right do I have to say anything related to them, maybe? Is that?

Jon: A hundred percent, well, and I think the danger of missteps just goes through the roof. Even now, in this very podcast—

Jen: [giggles]

Jon: I'm so aware—

Jen: [laughs] sorry

Jon: of saying the wrong thing, not using the appropriate language, but making sure that I'm being very careful,

Jen: [3:00] Yeah.

Jon: and if I was at—heaven forbid—but if I was at, like, a White Heritage Month—

Jen: [laughing]

Maggie: Oh god!

[cross talk]

Jon: But if I was there, you don't have to be careful.

Jen: *You* don't have to

Maggie: *You* may have misstepped

[laughter]

Jon: Yeah, exactly, exactly. Yeah, heaven forbid that that event would exist, for a lot of reasons. But you understand that you are participating in an event that is affected by you but also will affect people and I think *any* event like that, even non-cultural events, when you realize that you're just entering a space where you're going to have an effect on somebody else. Even like teaching is always that way.

Jen: I feel like this conversation also has some interesting implications for what you're bringing up about teaching in the classroom. I mean, if the assumption is that you should talk about what you know and from the perspective of the communities with which you identify, it becomes easy to leave a lot out, I think.

Jon: [4:03] Right.

Jen: And that seems to happen on such an embodied level, like this kind of nervousness about saying the wrong thing or doing it the wrong way.

Jon: It's like an expertise thing, cause I mean these are embodied things, like you're saying, but the expertise of that embodiedness comes from the years experience of living in that community, as a member of that community, and so it feels quite a bit like going to speak in a classroom for which you are

not the expert in the subject, like me going to give a history lecture or me participating in some events like this feels like you're stepping outside of your expertise, and that can be real... dangerous and scary.

Jen: And this reminds me of some of the conversations we had in class about teaching and ways of thinking about engaging with learning in a different way where you didn't end up exactly lecturing everyone at the event, right?

Maggie: [5:03] Mmhmm

Jon: Right.

Jen: It became more of a, "Here's a topic of conversation, here are some questions we had about it, or I had about it or..."

Maggie: In developing what I was trying to say, I think a lot of what Jon's saying about expertise came to me as like, okay, I don't have expertise, and I'm not going to pretend like I have expertise, and that's an awkward space. And I realize that's actually more in line with how I teach than—

Jen: [laughs]

Maggie: But like I feel more comfortable in my classroom than I thought I would at this event because of all the things we're talking about, like embodied natures and stuff. 'Cause like, in a classroom, I'm always a little bit awkward, like—

Jen: [laughs]

Maggie: It's just a fact. But I feel more like allowed to be there, and so I feel more okay telling my students like, okay, certain power structures are here, and for some reason I did have to kind of retool that in my brain for this event where it was like okay, you're not an expert, and you don't have to pretend to be, all you can do is present what you're finding and what's interesting to you.

[6:08] And I think that's how we ended up presenting most of the things we talked about at the event was just things we found interesting, and trying to communicate something about Asian American sound.

Not *the* Asian American sound. Not trying to make it necessarily more than it had to be.

Jen: Mmhmm. And I think this conversation also raises questions about what we mean by expertise, because Jon I think you have a good point about, well, some people have lived certain things and experienced certain things their whole life, so by that, they'll have certain knowledges that other people won't. You know, that's definitely something to acknowledge.

At the same time, we all took this class. I mean, *you all* took this class. I guess what I'm getting at is like, I don't think you guys were like, at ground zero, you know what I mean?

[laughs]

Jen: Like you just showed up and you're like, "Let's talk about Asians!"

[laughter]

Maggie: [7:05] No! Absolutely, [laughs] I mean I think it would've been absolutely ludicrous before the class for us to go and try to say anything. The readings we did obviously informed that, and so often when we're talking about Asian American sound, I think we were like putting an "s" at the end of that, like making it plural, and that comes from thinking about multiple rhetorics of what it means to be Asian American.

And like, just like thinking about how we don't have to talk about this group as a monolith. We can talk about aspects, we can talk about characteristics without naming—meaning too much.

Jon: I really like that you used the word *facilitator*, right? Because that's what it felt like. When we actually got to the event and we had worked through all these issues, that's what it *felt* like. It felt like we were aiming to facilitate, to not lead discussion, to not be the discussion, to not serve as an enricher of the discussion but just to create a space where discussion could happen.

[8:07] I also think that the class—it certainly allowed me to feel more comfortable facilitating and to do something like that, because you felt like you were jumping in to listen to a conversation that had already been going for so long. And you weren't lost.

Jen: This also reminds me of LuMing Mao's facts of essence versus facts of usage, and the way that you all were facilitating your topics was a lot more in the sense of facts of usage, right, like this is what's happening, this is how people are talking about it, not, this is the essential Asian American sound, like you were saying, Maggie.

Maggie: You know once we'd all spoken, and it became more of like a, kind of an open dialogue in a way that I admit that I didn't anticipate that it would become so open, I feel like at that point I kind of like switched into listening gear. [9:00] And I felt myself listening both as a white student and a white instructor at a predominantly white institution in a mostly not-white space, which, I was hyper aware that that was one of the few times that I've had that encounter here and really at other schools that I've been at.

And I found myself listening mostly as an instructor so that I could do better, because many of the people who were talking were undergrads, and those are the students I come in contact with and it was really interesting hearing them talk about what it's like to be an Asian American Hokie [laughs] which is like, so goofy. But, it felt like I got so much out of that part of it for myself.

(quietly) I think Jon had the same experience.

Jon: Yeah, I agree. I feel like it was more for me towards the end a listening event.