

Both and Neither

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"...as for your whiteness, there's too much and not enough there to know what to do with.... You were both and neither."

– Tommy Orange, *There There* [1]

The thoughts are always there, reliable and familiar. I hear them when I walk into a room full of white men. *"I do not belong here."* I hear them when I walk into a room full of Asian women. *"I am a fraud."* The thoughts are there even when I walk into a room full of diverse faces looking back at me. *"They are better than I am."*

I learned the name of these thoughts when I read one of many articles about being a woman in STEM: the imposter syndrome [2]. But, these thoughts were there long before I knew their name and long before I decided to join a STEM field. Like many nonwhite individuals, I suffer from the racial imposter syndrome [3]. I quietly grappled with the constant feeling of being a fraud before I ever had to face a male-dominated workplace or classroom.

I identified as both white and Asian when I was young. I am white enough to benefit from white privilege; too white to consider myself a person of color. I pass as white in many circumstances due to my pale skin, naturally brown hair, and light colored eyes, but I am Asian enough to be described as such by most non-Asian people I encounter. No, I am not both white *and* Asian. I only sometimes *masqueraded* as white, sometimes as Asian, but often I am neither. I felt indisputably a fraud, an impostor to either race. At some point, I stopped checking both the white and Asian checkboxes on forms to started checking the "other" category instead.

My "otherness" defines my earliest memories through to my latest accomplishments [4].

I was "other" enough to be placed in a mandatory desegregation busing program, forced to wait on a street corner before sunrise while my still-wet hair froze in the Midwestern winter for an hour-long ride in a van full of white children to a predominantly black elementary school where I was taunted for being "Chinese," as if that was an insult. Friendly classmates were too far away to become friends; hostile classmates were too close for me to avoid. My otherness attracted the wrong kind of attention, causing mild distractions on a good day and physical bullying on a bad day. Most teachers resented the disruption I caused by simply being in the room. Instead of resenting most people in turn, I internalized that resentment. *"I do not belong here."*

I was "other" enough to speak with a Korean accent as a child, despite being a native English speaker and not speaking any other languages. I was pulled out of class for speech lessons where I had to practice saying words like "seashore", "church," and "Thursday" aloud. Not only did I look different from those around me, but I sounded different from them as well. I became afraid of revealing my inherent incorrectness every time I spoke. *"They know I am a fraud."*

Ironically, the unchangeable otherness that haunted my youth prepared me for what was to come. As I began my studies in STEM, those old thoughts manifested for new reasons. I was an imposter, not just because of my multiracial identity, but also because of my gender [5]. I was confronted by my otherness when I walked into my male-dominated classrooms as an undergraduate student and again when I walked into those classrooms as the graduate teaching assistant leading discussion, sometimes the *only* woman in the room. *"They are better than me."*

I continue to fight my imposter syndrome as I walk into those classrooms now as a teacher [6]. I watch the number of women in my field decline and watch those that remain suffer harassment [7]. I am reminded of my new form of otherness every time I open an email addressed to "Dear Sir" or every time I am mistaken as the +1 at a professional event. Yet, I fought this tired battle before I was the only woman in the room. The battles were long and left their marks; the prize for winning always seems to be another battle. But, I persevered earning my undergraduate degree, doctorate, and then tenure.

The thoughts are always there, still reliable and still familiar. I hear them walking into a classroom as a student or teacher, shopping at an Asian market unable to read the food labels, or giving a conference presentation for a surprisingly diverse audience. *"I do not belong here."* Regardless, I am here. *"I am a fraud."* Regardless, I can still be successful. *"They are better than I am."* Regardless, I have something to contribute.

I cannot eliminate my imposter syndrome, but I am learning to be a happy and successful as an impostor [8].

ENDNOTES

- [1] This essay is inspired by my experience growing up and the 2018 book "There There" by Tommy Orange (ISBN 0525436146). The essay title and quote are from a passage on page 216 of the book.

- [2] The [imposter syndrome](#), also referred to as the impostor syndrome or the impostor phenomenon, refers to the feeling (and fear) of being a fraud. Those that suffer from the imposter syndrome dismiss their own achievements as undeserved and attributed to luck. Feeling like an imposter can be extremely isolating and exhausting; many compensate by working extra hours and seeking perfectionism. Ironically, more people may suffer from the imposter syndrome than those that do not. Informal surveys by [Hired](#) and [Blind](#) conducted in 2018 showed that over half of tech workers suffered from the imposter syndrome at some point in their careers.
- [3] I was introduced to the informal term racial imposter syndrome by the NPR [Code Switch](#) podcast on race, ethnicity and culture. It captures the feeling shared by many multiracial individuals that they are fake or inauthentic with respect to their different racial or ethnic heritages. For more, see the story "['Racial Impostor Syndrome': Here Are Your Stories](#)" by Leah Donnella published in *NPR* on January 17, 2018 and the associated podcast "[A Prescription For 'Racial Impostor Syndrome'](#)" hosted by Shereen Marisol Meraji and Gene Demby of *Code Switch*. It is similar to the experience of [cultural homelessness](#) that is experienced by many multicultural individuals. The impostor syndrome also affects many first-generation or low-income students. For example, see "Letters: 'The Deck is Heavily Stacked Against Low-Income Students'" published by *The Atlantic* on March 17, 2019 (and its associates story) and the article "You Are Not Here by 'Mistake': 1st-Gen Students on Overcoming 'Impostor Syndrome'" by Catherine Thorbecke published by *Good Morning America* on August 17, 2018.
- [4] The notion of otherness or othering often refers to when individuals feel part of their identity separates them as "other" than the norm. While related to the racial imposter syndrome, othering may also occur for reasons beyond race or ethnicity. For example, see the study "[School as a Context for 'Othering' Youth and Promoting Cultural Assets](#)" by Christine Yeh, Noah Borrero, Ivey Cruz, and Jolene Suda published in *Teachers College Record* (volume 114) in February 2012. The actress Thandie Newton also gave a TED talk titled "[Embracing Otherness, Embracing Myself](#)" in 2011 on her own experience of otherness.
- [5] There is a high prevalence of the imposter syndrome in [STEM](#), or the study of science, technology, engineering and math. For example, see "[Impostor Phenomenon in STEM: Occurrence, Attribution, and Identity](#)" by Devasmita Chakraverty published in *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education* (volume 10, number 1) on May 31, 2019 and "[Should I Stay or Should I Go? The Role of Impostorism in STEM Persistence](#)" by Karen W. Tao and Alberta M. Gloria published in *Psychology of Women Quarterly* (volume 43, issue 2) on October 15, 2018. I also recommend "Living Science: The Truth is in the Distribution" by Indira M. Raman published in *eLife* on October 19, 2016. While that last two publications focus on women in STEM, the imposter syndrome crosses gender boundaries.

[6] The imposter syndrome is prevalent among faculty in academia. For more, see "[Outing the Imposter: A Study Exploring Imposter Phenomenon among Higher Education Faculty](#)" by Holly M. Hutchins published in *New Horizons in Adult Education and Human Resource Development* (volume 27, issue 2) in 2015 and "[What Triggers Imposter Phenomenon among Academic Faculty? A Critical Incident Study Exploring Antecedents, Coping, and Development Opportunities](#)" by Holly M. Hutchins and Hilary Rainbolt published in *Human Resource Development International* (volume 20, issue 3) in 2017. The article "[Faking It: Women, Academia, and Impostor Syndrome](#)" by Kate Bahn published in the *Chronicle Vitae* on March 27, 2014 discusses this with respect to women in academia.

[7] The percentage of women earning degrees in computer and information sciences fell from its peak of 37% to below 20% in the 2000s and remains at that rate even today, although there are signs this may be improving. Even worse, the percentage of women that are full professors in computer science was only 15% in 2017. All of the figures quoted here are from the "[NCWIT ScoreCard: The Status of Women in Technology](#)" by DuBow and Pruitt published by the *National Center for Women and Information Technology* in 2018.

Sexual harassment is a prevalent problem in both STEM and academia, especially for those that do not identify as heterosexual or male. One survey reveals 58% of female academic faculty and staff experienced sexual harassment. For more, see the report "[Sexual Harassment of Women: Climate, Culture, and Consequences in Academic Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine](#)" published by the *National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine* in 2018.

[8] For strategies managing the imposter syndrome, see the article "[Yes, Impostor Syndrome Is Real. Here's How to Deal With It](#)" by Abigail Abrams in *Time* published on June 20, 2018 or the guide "[How to Overcome 'Impostor Syndrome'](#)" by Jessica Bennet (illustrated by Ariel Davis) published in the *New York Times* on June 4, 2019. The article "[How to Overcome Impostor Syndrome](#)" by Sindhumathi Revuluri published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* on October 4, 2018 provides advice focused on those in academia. Many of these strategies have helped me throughout the years and I hope they will help you.

However, I still struggle with the imposter syndrome to this day. Those reliable, familiar thoughts of being an imposter are telling me even now that I am not qualified enough to write about not feeling qualified enough. You should probably *not* listen to me. I should probably *not* give you advice. Regardless, I will.

Personally, I have stopped trying to eliminate the feeling of being an imposter. It is as much a part of me as my unchangeable otherness everywhere I go. I focus instead on reducing the fear of being an imposter. I am an imposter—*so what?* Is an invisible menacing finger going to point me out as an imposter and force me out

of my career? As an imposter, I am still successful. As an imposter, I still enjoy what I do. I choose to be here regardless of whether I deserve to be here. All that matters is that I want to be here.

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