Article

The Power of Precarity and a Generative Gut Check

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ABSTRACT

This cross-border narrative follows an international student's journey pursuing a Ph.D. in rhetoric and composition at the University of Louisville. Initial challenges I was beset with included communication barriers, adapting to new academic and cultural contexts, and batting self-doubt. Financial strain and COVID-19 amplify concerns about future career prospects. The university's swift shift to online learning during the pandemic inspires my adaptability. Reflections on the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests and technology's limitations challenge prevailing perspectives embraced and enshrined by everyone, including the narrator. The narrative unfolds, prompting reflections on enduring racial inequality despite professed notions of parity. This critical viewpoint extends to examining technology's limitations, countering much-vaunted hype around techno-optimism. My narrative depicts pandemic-era uncertainties, emphasizing my resolve to confront challenges with courage. It encourages embracing present opportunities to overcome ambiguity and inspire others in similar situations.

Keywords: Adaptation, pandemic, parity, precarity, techno-optimism

In 2019 Fall, I came to Louisville, Kentucky, from Nepal for my doctoral study at the University of Louisville (UofL). I was excited about the fresh beginning of my academic journey in the USA. Since I had come a few weeks before the formal opening of the fall semester, I had plenty of time to choose an apartment—within walking distance of the university—to live in and keep myself steadily adjusted to every new thing that appeared on my way. As is customary for a student from the global south, many things were strangely interesting for me, and they surprised me pleasantly, impressing me that there is no place like Louisville. With my high-spirited mindset, which developed right from the

moment of my F1 visa approval at the American embassy in Nepal to the first few weeks of my transition to the world of UofL academe, I left no stone unturned in making myself well-informed of many things international students were required to know during the preliminary phase of their acclimatization.

With the dynamic mindset of a curious learner, I embarked on the coursework and tried to grasp core concepts related to many theoretical developments and pedagogical practices germane to the field I am part of. Shortly after that, I realized that the honeymoon period of my excitement ended abruptly, setting me free from what Laura Prazeres (2016) called a typical comfort zone toward which most international students from the Global South gravitate. Indeed, everyone wants to lean in their comfort zone. There is no escaping that when a person moves from one country to another; their old comfort zone no longer works as a comfort zone in a new country.

Each new terrain of transition requires that a person grappling with change steps out of their old comfort zone and constructs a new comfort zone by bringing under control all the impediments that come on the way to successful acclimatization. In connection with this, it is essential to highlight the differences between "leaving your comfort zone behind and expanding it. Leaving your comfort zone behind, along with the joy you feel in familiar experiences, can be a huge mistake. Instead, expanding your comfort zone is the approach that will most likely help you to adapt and discover new and exciting experiences…" (Eldib, 2019, p. 2). My case was no exception to this process because it is not that those tackling a transition are dislocated from their old comfort zone and unable to crave a new comfort zone. Those who embrace audaciously changes in their lives are always attuned to the environments they are landed in. To my mind, no one is devoid of living in their comfort zone because, while moving from one country and culture to another, they transition from one comfort zone to another. The central idea I aim to convey is that complete detachment from one's comfort zone is an elusive goal; instead, our journey involves transitioning between different comfort zones. This shift entails refining our mindset, cultivating resilience, and delving into introspection to navigate moments of panic, uncertainty, and powerlessness. In the subsequent discussion, I provide a concise overview of the challenges and transformative realizations that enveloped me when I embarked on my journey at the University of Louisville in the Fall of 2019, assuming the role of an international doctoral student specializing in rhetoric and composition.

Agony in Transition

Whosoever I talked to, I had to repeat what I intended to communicate at least twice or thrice. As far as my gut instinct of assessing people's casual facial expressions during formal and informal conversations is concerned, no one felt irritated. None of them looked uncomfortable for saying, 'Could you repeat it, please?' The people I talked to in the first few weeks of my transition to the university system and socio-cultural milieu were incredibly cooperative. They were fantastic and compassionate in reply to any query and curiosity on my part. On their end, there was no trouble. The problem did not lie with them and their styles of responses. My inner inferiority troubled me for repeating the same

utterance several times to make people understand what I intended to convey— those moments I coped with in the first few months of my exposure to Louisville nudged me to perform a gut check on myself.

My fate of being an international student in Louisville was marked by what Wang et al. (2010) called the frustration with being not so convincingly communicative, colloquially conversational, and naturally interactive. Back in Nepal, I only spoke English in academic and formal settings. Over there, when I had to talk in informal moments, I used to opt for my native language. Therefore, my hold on the conversational and colloquial English language needed to be stronger. In addition, formal English was used in my home country's academic and institutional space. So, while doing my professional duty, I faced no communicative impasse, as I was already eloquent enough to express my thoughts in formal, academic English. Nevertheless, here in the US, I felt a growing need to be competent in all aspects of communication in American English.

Except for my keen interest in imbibing the conversational spirit of American English in Kentucky, the first semester of my doctoral coursework has kept me on a hectic schedule. As an international student born and groomed in a country like Nepal where "its cash-strapped and over-burdened education system struggles to provide basic education and has little capacity to adapt to the changing demands of the twenty-first century" (Shield, 2011, p. 86), I felt that I was always on the safe side of rationalizing my adjustment process. However, I found an anchorage in encouraging remarks such as "It takes time," "Everything is new to you, so…", "Transitioning from one system to a new one is a heroic and Herculean task," "You are already making a move in this direction, so keep it up," "Do not be hard on yourself; do not push yourself beyond the limit; let things unfold in their natural course," and so on. In a way, I was surrounded by a few injunctions. Without seeing through those injunctions surrounding me, I enjoyed listening to those sweet and saccharine injunctions that rang loud and clear.

When a few months passed by, self-consciousness welled up in me; the causes that contributed to my pang-fueled self-consciousness are manifold: a need to revamp my conversational pattern and accent so that folks could grasp my intended message at a first go, a need to overhaul my belief in oral literacy, which I had inherited from my native culture that prides on oral literacy to the exclusion of writing literacy; to imbibe the ethos of scholarly community in the US—the ethos that scholarship counts only if it is well-expressed in writing; publish or perish rhetoric; being careful about my safety in the wake of multiple rounds of rave alerts in my inbox; a simultaneous need to hone my digital literacy to a brutal efficiency; and to allow myself to be groomed in UofL graduate school in order for me to flourish ultimately as a saleable asset getting through a job market crucible in a hassle-free way. Getting successively through a series of agonizes jolted me awake and epiphanic; resultantly, it came to my attention that I was at pains to know of my limitations, and the impasse of consequential adjustment steadily changed into a source of commitment to thrive, if not excel, in the space I happened to position myself. Beset by these challenges, which await being surmounted by me over time, I let loose the upper hand of my vulnerability; consequently, a seed of precarity crept into my heart.

Precarity

Precarity that had already crept into my heart began to fester. To make sense of my precarity, I discuss the word 'precarity.' Before discussing the precarity that festered in the chamber of my heart, I would like to briefly dwell on precarity's theoretical relevance and bring to the fore the precarity I was prone to. Any conversation on precarity is bound to remain lackluster if it makes no room for the conviction that "Precarity…describes a few different conditions that pertain to living beings. Anything living can be expunged at will or by accident; and its persistence is in no sense guaranteed" (Butler, 2009, p. 2). For Butler, precarity is, in a way, ubiquitous; anyone could be subject to any of the jolts of precarity anywhere. Like Butler, Laureen Berlant contributed to the buildup of the theoretical arc of precarity. While Butler dwells on precarity vis-à-vis gender performativity, Berlant emplaces precarity on the vertex of politics and the attendance of despair and disillusionment. Both Butler and Berlant concur in a statement that "precariousness is an inherent state of vulnerability and dependence resulting from the relational structure of society…precarity, a political condition that is the consequence of uneven power relations, refers to the exacerbation of the precariousness of some subjects compared to others" (as cited in Harris & Nowicki, 2018, p. 26). If discussed regarding equality, the ethics of precarity leads to a consequential breakthrough in the compromised moment in life.

If I am to allow my narrative foray into the crucible of precarity in a manner most balanced, I must be confessional. During the first few weeks, I took a deep breath. Then, I walked across the quad of the University of Louisville campus. It was a sunny August day; I felt a pit in my stomach about my prospects. As an international Ph.D. student studying rhetoric and composition, I was all too aware of the precarity of my situation. Having moved from Nepal to pursue my doctoral studies, I was now thousands of miles from my family and support system. I missed my parents and siblings terribly, but I knew this was an opportunity I could not pass up. At the same time, being so far from home made me feel isolated and alone.

Financially, things were also strained. As an international student, I had to pay high out-of-state tuition rates. Though I had a scholarship that covered part of my tuition, the remaining costs were barely affordable, even with my campus job as a teaching assistant. I had taken out loans to cover the gaps, and the debt hung over my head. Professionally, the future was still being determined. I was in my fourth year of the Ph.D. program, nearing graduation. However, she knew the job market was dismal, especially for rhetoric and composition scholars. Can I find a tenure-track position to sponsor my work visa, or must I return to Nepal? The thought of uprooting my life yet again was daunting. On top of it all, I faced challenges unique to international students. My visa status was contingent on being enrolled full-time every semester. If I needed to take time off, I risked losing my legal ability to remain in the US. I also had to maintain high grades and make steady progress in my program or risk losing my scholarship funding. It was an immense pressure. Walking to my afternoon seminar, I contemplated whether all these struggles would be worth it. Was this degree going to lead to the career I hoped for? Or would I end up back where I started, with more debt than she had

begun with? I tried to push these nagging doubts from my mind as I focused on the day's lecture.

Whatever the future, I knew I needed to make the most of my time here. I was determined to publish research, make connections in my field, and become the best teacher I could be. My career prospects may be uncertain, but I would let the precarity of my situation hold me back from pursuing this dream. I had come too far to turn back now. I entered the classroom and took my usual seat. As the professor began lecturing, my anxieties momentarily faded. In this space, I could focus on my studies and continue working toward my goals.

Retreat and Resilience

With the above cursory discussion concerning precarity, I shine a narrative spotlight on my precarity. From being a coursework doctoral student to a currently dissertating doctoral student bent on graduating in the summer of 2023, my awareness is stamped with precarity. I grew precarious at being advised by someone to build a community of like-minded folks to facilitate my smooth transition to the new systematicity and socio-cultural setup. Despite the pragmatics of this injunction, I remained unable to deepen a tie of friendship with my American peers due to my inability to resist the temptation of the affordances yielded by the introspective and introverted bent of my mind.

The maxim 'Birds of the same feather flock together' sounded relevant to my plight of having to explore an oasis of intimacy in the enclave of international students from South Asia who lived outside of the vicinity of UofL. Because I was deprived of the thrill of plumbing the depth of Americanness, my precarity gained the upper hand, sending me to the South Asian enclave. Moreover, the outbreak of COVID-19 and its attendant lethality worsened the precarity to which I was already prone. The contagious virus loomed threateningly. As mentioned in *Financial Times*, "Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next" (Roy, 2020, para. 47). Arguably, the pandemic ushered in an opportunity to think and act anew. However, it disrupted everything people worldwide were doing, sending them agonizingly to house arrest.

At that moment of panic and precarity that pushed all of us to explore at least a workable alternative, American institutions, including universities, hastened to transition to the online mode of instruction (Lemay et al., 2021). The pandemic-fueled transition and its success exemplify American institutions' resilience, particularly American universities. Many universities in the US transitioned to online mode of instruction. Being a country with sophisticated technological infrastructure and cutting-edge technology, it was easier for the US to introduce online systems in every sphere of human activity. In parallel, more than the technological base and leading-edge superstructure, America's willingness to change its work style struck me as a singularly fascinating hallmark. For my narrative's swift and smooth progression, I would like to laud this hallmark as resilience. I was emboldened by this exercise in resilience which

led me to deepen my trust in the recursive relationship between individual and institutional resilience.

Like all universities geared toward leveraging whatever technological infrastructure and superstructure they already have, the University of Louisville also pushed hard to make available its setup for online learning and virtual instruction. To this end, UofL put its whole energy into preparing its faculty, graduate teaching assistants (GTAs), and adjunct and non-tenure track instructors to deliver online classes hassle-free. During this preparation, instructors from all ranks and levels received full month-long mentoring concerning how to use *Microsoft Team*, *Panopto*, *Respondus Lockdown Browser*, *Blackboard*, *Discussion Board*, *Assignment*, *Blog*, *Wiki*, *Perusal*, *Voice Thread*, *Quiz*, *Survey*, *Collaborate Ultra*, *Zoom*, and so on (Additional online training for UofL faculty, 2020).

As part of UofL, I was genuinely inspired by its practice of resilience, which serves as a microcosm of the USA acting resiliently in her relation with the global community so that her Camelot charisma as the singular superpower remains intact. Suppose the superpower acts resiliently and an institution acts resiliently. Why should not a disappointed individual--carving their way through the thicket of precarity——follow the path of resilience?

An Affirmative Stance on My Precarity

Near the end of the spring semester of 2020, in which I was taking online seminar classes while I was still a coursework doctoral student, I felt that a dark undertow of North America's claim to civilization loomed into hypervisibility, making not only American people but all the people across the world shellshocked. The heart-reding murder of George Floyd beneath a car by a white police officer sparked protests across America, forcing people from all walks of life to take to the streets. The massive protest, which took America by storm, rang loud with the slogan "Black Lives Matter (BLM)." That protest movement generated far-reaching repercussions, issuing a clarion call for ending racial injustice. It also gave an agonizing nudge to those who were smugly heedless of virulent vestiges of systemic racism, which found their stark manifestation in the murder of George Floyd, and in a series of violence against African American people, namely Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and so on.

The BLM drew the attention of the whole globe, unraveling a shocking hiatus between the US's claim to racial equality and justice and recurrent horrifying ground reality. Taking cognizance of these developments that unfolded in the teeth of the pandemic, precarity, and lethality, I could not help but reflect on a shaky foundation of the US's gorgeous and glorious claim to civilization. The BLM's flare-up eviscerated the much-vaunted post-racial utopia and the narrative of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), laying the urgent groundwork for the way for the historical reckoning (Silverstein, 2021). Furthermore, circulating conspiracy theories about the inception of COVID-19 and the tug of war between the US and China as to the formation of an internationally recognized body of investigation into the origin of the Covid 19 set the stage for the outbreak of hatred and violence against Asians in general and the Chinese in particular. The bungled

performance of the Trump administration in containing COVID-19 gave critics of America sufficient grounds to harbor doubt about America's claim to exceptionalism, which is reflected in Wade David's (2020) commentary that goes, "In a dark season of pestilence, COVID has reduced to tatters the illusion of American exceptionalism" (para. 8). All these events and eventualities, along with those cases of precarity and powerlessness, propelled me to delve deep into the narrative of American exceptionalism, of North American faith in the power of excellence, of the ideology of American dream, and of the Global North's claim to DEI.

In one of my classes on new media pedagogy (I was a coursework doctoral student), new media studies were discussed so that technology is flawless, a seamlessly sustaining force, and never leaves users in the lurch. Moreover, seeing every student and instructor emphasizing the idea of leveraging technology to the total advantage, I, too, was drawn to every affordance technology yields. This means that the razzle-dazzle of techno-optimism thoroughly washed over me. As time passed by, a bombshell revelation shocked tech users to the core. As part of this revelation, Respondus Lockdown Browser's entanglement with racism came to the surface, capturing the attention of those involved in the online mode of instructional delivery. With Respondus Lockdown Browser enmeshed in racism, all the excitements surrounding techno-optimism subsided, making people critical in their utilitarian approach to handling cutting-edge teaching and learning technology.

These unfolding events brought to light the fragility beneath the glittering allure and grand promises of cutting-edge digital tools and communication technology. Faced with this bombshell revelation of technology's ominous potential, I found myself painfully cautious, refraining from giving in to the visceral appeal of techno trends until they have been thoroughly vetted and embraced by real-world users on a significant scale. From my firsthand observations, this internal conflict threads through the narrative as it unfolds. It is a tale of skepticism woven into my experience—a response to the darker implications of technology that have come to light.

All these developments unveil how fragile the hype and the much-vaunted promise of cutting-edge digital tools and communicative technology are. Hearing this darker disclosure of technology's grim prospect and potency, I could only help to develop consistently a habit of yielding to the siren call of tech glamour once it is tested and tried on a large scale by end users. This troubled conscience, on my part, which is prompted by what I observed, comes under this narrative line that is unfolding.

My tale spans across borders and disciplines. As an international student navigating the intricacies of life far from home, my unique perspective sheds light on the challenges that many international students in the US encounter while chasing their aspirations. Nevertheless, my unwavering resolve and resilience inspire me even when faced with uncertainty. By embracing the opportunities of the present, I strive to embody the kind of mindset required to rise above the hurdles posed by unpredictability.

Conclusively, I aim to exemplify the courage needed to forge ahead, despite the mysteries that lie ahead, and I aspire to motivate others grappling with similar uncertainty to follow suit. The essence of my story is rooted in the strength of seizing today's potential without letting the uncertainties of tomorrow hold us back. It is now more critical than ever for each international student navigating the challenges of American universities to adapt to their new surroundings promptly. By doing so, they can tap into a treasure trove of possibilities from navigating the uncharted territory of uncertainty.

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