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To cite this article: Jessica C. Harris & Z Nicolazzo (2017): Navigating the academic borderlands as multiracial and trans* faculty members, *Critical Studies in Education*, DOI: [10.1080/17508487.2017.1356340](https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2017.1356340)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2017.1356340>



Published online: 26 Jul 2017.



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Navigating the academic borderlands as multiracial and trans* faculty members

Jessica C. Harris^a and Z Nicolazzo^b

^aDepartment of Education, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA, USA; ^bDepartment of Counseling, Adult and Higher Education, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL, USA

ABSTRACT

Postsecondary institutions remain bastions of oppression, threat and harm for faculty who hold minoritized identities. While some scholars have explored the ways in which monoracial faculty of color and LGBT faculty members navigate an academy that is steeped in racism, genderism, sexism and other systems of oppression, there remains a paucity of scholarship focused on the experiences of multiracial faculty and nonbinary trans* faculty. Given the need to focus on faculty who hold liminal identities in relation to hegemonic identitarian illogic, we used Gloria Anzaldúa's borderlands theory and an auto-ethnographic analysis to explore our academic experiences as faculty members whose identities place us betwixt-and-between socially constructed monolithic identity categories.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 7 February 2017
Accepted 12 July 2017

KEYWORDS

Ethnography; gender; higher education; inequality/social exclusion in education; race

Despite continued scholarship and praxis focused on issues of 'diversity' and 'social justice' in higher education, postsecondary institutions remain bastions of oppression, threat and harm for faculty who hold minoritized identities (e.g. Ahmed, 2012; Ferguson, 2012). While some scholars have explored the racism, genderism, sexism and other systems of oppression that are embedded into the academy and marginalize minoritized faculty (Brayboy, 2003; LaSala, Jenkins, Wheeler, & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2008; Turner & Myers, 2000), there remains a paucity of scholarship focused on the experiences of faculty members who fall 'betwixt-and-between' (Turner, 1969, p. 95) monolithic identities, specifically multiracial faculty and nonbinary trans* faculty (see Museus, Lambe Sariñana, Yee, & Robinson, 2015; Nicolazzo, 2016a).

The lack of literature concerning multiracial and trans* individuals in the academy is concerning for several reasons. On a macro-level, in not focusing on multiraciality and transness, scholars have missed critical opportunities to explore, critique and destabilize how institutions of higher education are steeped in trans* oppression, or the oppression of people 'whose gender expression transgresses gender norms' (Catalano, McCarthy, & Shlasko, 2007, p. 221), and monoracism, the systemic oppression of peoples who exist outside of a monoracial-only paradigm of race (Hamako, 2014; Harris, 2016; Johnston & Nadal, 2010). Centering liminal identities, or identities that are 'neither here nor there' (Turner, 1969, p. 95), destabilizes sociohistorical systems that reproduce the everyday inequities experienced by multiracial faculty, trans* faculty and many others who do not fit societal

parameters of identity. Analyses of systems of domination, such as genderism and racism, are not fully complete without an exploration of how these systems manifest in different forms of oppression, e.g. trans* oppression and monoracism. In short, scholars who aim to destabilize genderism and racism in higher education and society must do so while accounting for trans* oppression, which centers trans* individuals within gendered systems of domination, and monoracism, which centers multiracial people within racialized systems of domination.

On a micro-level, a lack of centering multiracial and trans* voices silences individual narratives of those who exist between socially constructed boundaries of race and gender. This erasure may stifle the ability of faculty members with liminal identities to see themselves as capable of entering and remaining as members of the professoriate. Furthermore, faculty members with liminal identities may hold a critical, liberatory consciousness that guides the destabilization of socially constructed binary paradigms; yet, these voices remain in the margins of racialized and gendered borderlands (Anzaldúa, 2007).

Given the need to focus on faculty who hold liminal identities in relation to hegemonic and monolithic identitarian illogic, we explored the following research question: *What are the academic experiences of faculty members whose identities place them 'between-and-between' socially constructed monolithic identity categories?* To investigate this research question, we engaged in the critical autoethnographic practice of letter writing (Pithouse-Morgan, Mahabo, Masinga, & Ruit, 2012), which allowed us to explore how our betwixt-and-between identities, Jessica, as multiracial, and Z, as trans*, have promoted a sense of our race and gender as categorically impossible and/or unexpected in the academy (Chang-Ross, 2010; Jourian, Simmons, & Devaney, 2015). During data collection, we were in our first years as faculty members, with Jessica in a lecturer position and Z in a tenure-track position. As a result of our varied privileged/minoritized identities and experiences, we approached this study as a means by which to explore how our liminal identities and experiences influenced our navigation of an academy replete with (mono)racism (Hamako, 2014; Harris, 2016; Johnston & Nadal, 2010) and gender binary discourse (Nicolazzo, 2016b). We draw from our letters as a way to provide thick description (Geertz, 1973) as well as call upon those intimacies and vulnerabilities that often are crowded out of academic scholarship (Spade, 2010).

Theorizing the academic borderlands

We used Gloria Anzaldúa's (2007) borderland theory as the guiding perspective for this research. To understand the concept of the borderland, one must first understand the creation of the borders. Elenes and Delgado Bernal (2009) defined the border as

An area that is clearly marked, concrete and static. Its function is to demarcate the outer limit among peoples, nations, and property. The purpose of the border is to designate who can and cannot legitimately enter and occupy such spaces. (p. 74)

Dominant populations create and use borders to strengthen their supremacy, all the while subjugating and (re)creating a third world culture that is positioned in opposition to, and not easily allowed to enter into, the first world culture. Within the academy, white cisgender heterosexual men, who often hold other privileged identities, e.g. upper class, able-bodied, construct the dominant culture and its borders (see Scheurich & Young, 1997; Stanley, 2007). The boundaries drawn by these individuals

are meant to oppress those deemed not worthy and too different to ‘legitimately enter and occupy’ (Elenes & Delgado Bernal, 2009, p. 74) the academy.

First world culture

The first world culture controls the border through their (re)construction of and domination over the rules of the academy (see Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Scheurich & Young, 1997; Stanley, 2007). Anzaldúa (2007) stated, ‘Culture is made by those in power’ and those who are in power ‘make the rules and laws’ (p. 28). The ‘rules and laws’ made by the first world culture, such as tenure processes, policies concerning maternity leave, curriculum and (lack of) ability accommodations, also work for those who occupy the first world culture. In essence, the ‘rules and laws’ of the first world culture unilaterally value and reflect dominant culture and offer its inhabitants ‘prime opportunities to thrive in these environments’ (Patton, Harper, & Harris, 2015, p.196). The dominant culture’s borders and rules make it difficult for those from the third world culture, specifically faculty of color and trans* faculty, to enter into, navigate, and survive within these same spaces.

As much as the first world attempts to separate ‘us from them,’ there are people who do not fit fully in either culture or land. These people, instead, exist in the borderlands. Initially conceptualized as a geographical area that exists between Mexico and the United States (Anzaldúa, 2007), the borderland often extends beyond geography to physical, emotional, mental and other (in)tangible states. Lxs *atravesadxs*¹ live in the borderland. Lxs *atravesadxs* are the individuals who are forced to cross over and navigate the borders of the third world and the first world but are never seen as ‘normal’ in either land (Anzaldúa, 2007).

In the first world, which is steeped within white cisgender male culture, lxs *atravesadxs* are viewed as ‘the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead’ (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 25). While lxs *atravesadxs* will never be ‘normal’ in the dominant culture, they often fear returning home to their motherland, or the third world. Within this research, Jessica identifies her mother culture as monoracial communities of color, while Z identifies her mother culture as trans* communities. We, lxs *atravesadxs*, often fear that our mother culture, the third world culture, will not take us in because we are perceived to be ‘unacceptable, faulty, damaged’ and not worthy of returning to, or being a part of their mother culture (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 42). For example, Harris (2015) demonstrated how multiracial women students often felt they neither fit into white first world culture nor third world monoracial communities of color. Trans* doctoral students also express feelings of occupying a liminal space within institutions of higher education and are often forced to conform to (binary) gendered expectations of the academy (Jourian et al., 2015). *In* but not *of* these two cultures, border people exist in a perpetual state of transition as they are ‘cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems’ (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 100).

While living in the borderland may lead to illness, depression, fear, prejudice and even death, there is also a powerful consciousness that rises out of this vague space (Anzaldúa, 2007). Specifically, *la facultad* and *la mestiza* consciousness (hereafter referred to as *lx facultad* and *mestizx* consciousness) may become a liberatory way of knowing that forms from living in a vague land between the borders. *Lx facultad* heightens border peoples’ awareness of monolithic social constructions of identity, such as race and gender, empowering them to work through the pain of the borderlands and work toward *lx*

mestizx consciousness. Lx mestizx consciousness, or the consciousness of those who have been torn between, has the potential to break down binary paradigms and challenge duality and rigidity, which are the very concepts that reify the borders (Anzaldúa, 2007). Below, we explore further the culture of the third world and summarize the minimal research concerning lxs *atravesadxs*' navigation of the academic borderlands.

Third world culture

Third world culture is the mother culture of many lxs *atravesadxs*, the culture in which they are born (Anzaldúa, 2007). Anzaldúa (2007) explored how *la Raza*, her mother culture, may cast her out for being a lesbian; 'the ultimate rebellion' (p. 41). Jessica identifies her mother culture as monoracial communities of color, while Z identifies her mother culture as trans* communities. We, lxs *atravesadxs*, often fear returning to our third world cultures because we are not, in regards to race and gender, enough for our mother culture. To gain a better sense of our mother cultures, we explore literature that concerns the experiences of faculty who are minoritized within their racial and/or gender identities in the academy.

Faculty of color feel that their colleagues and institutions do not value their research, including research topics, methodologies and approaches (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Joseph & Hirschfeld, 2010; Stanley, 2007). Within the classroom, white students often challenge faculty of colors' authority and intelligence, positioning faculty of color as not worthy of being in the classroom (McGowan, 2000; Pittman, 2010; Stanley, 2006; Vargas, 2002). Furthermore, faculty of color express feelings of isolation and invisibility, yet become hypervisible when called on to perpetually serve as the diversity token in predominantly white spaces (Brayboy, 2003; Turner & Myers, 2000). Given faculty of colors' negative experiences with teaching, research and service, it may come as no surprise that the tenure and promotion process, which is based on the three aforementioned professional duties, is riddled with racist, white-dictated and ambiguous obstacles for faculty of color (Griffin, Bennett, & Harris, 2013; Kelley & McCann, 2014; Takara, 2006; Turner & Myers, 2000).

LGBT faculty – who may also identify as people of color – must also navigate the dominant educational environment as queer individuals. We use 'queer' as a political label that includes 'sexualities and gender identities that are outside heterosexual and binary gender categories' (Renn, 2010, p. 132). Furthermore, it is important to understand that the terms lesbian, gay and bisexual reference sexual orientation while transgender refers to gender identity (Jourian, 2015). We draw from 'LGBT' research literature not as a way to erase trans* identities, but as a way to highlight the dearth of empirical literature regarding trans* faculty perspectives, especially those studies done by and for trans* scholars, with Stewart's (2015) and Pitcher's (2016) work as perhaps the sole exceptions.

Within the classroom environment, queer faculty may experience students who launch homophobic assaults, influencing faculty members' concerns that 'students might give them lower course evaluations, which could, in turn, influence tenure and promotion decisions' (Jennings, 2010; Vaccaro, 2012, p. 438). Similar to faculty of color, queer faculty who taught and researched through a queer theoretical perspective often felt that their colleagues disregarded their teaching and scholarship and perceived the institution to be hostile (Vaccaro, 2012). Queer faculty may also become tokens for diversity and difference within their institutions leading to feelings of hyper-visibility,

invisibility and isolation (Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009; LaSala et al., 2008). The homophobia queer faculty face while teaching, researching and serving their institutions may influence why more than 70% of queer faculty members in one study perceived a hostile and homophobic campus environment (Rankin, 2005).

The academic borderlands

Stewart's (2015) articulation of zir Black queerness in the academy may be the only piece of published scholarship to date to focus specifically on the dis/con-nections of how Black queer faculty experience the anti-Black (Patton, 2016) and gender binary (Nicolazzo, 2016b) discourses of higher education. Stewart (2015) wrote about the ways in which colleagues and students were either fascinated or puzzled by zir gender presentation, both of which exoticized zir body within the confines of the dominant academy. While we located only one article specifically concerning gender nonbinary faculty member's experiences, research with trans* doctoral students in educational programs suggests that postsecondary contexts are immersed in 'transphobia, gender policing, and the politics of disclosure and "passing"' which meant that many trans* educators 'occupied liminal or in-between spaces, were forced to choose identity spaces, and experienced feelings of uneasy tension with gendered expectations' (Jourian et al., 2015, p. 437). Research that focuses on the racialized experiences of 24 multiracial campus administrators also elucidates how a monoracial-only and socially constructed paradigm of race seeps into postsecondary contexts to influence multiracial professionals' feelings of not being 'monoracial enough' for and experiences with being policed by monoracial students and colleagues (Harris, *in press*).

In no way do we aim to conflate multiracial experiences and identities with trans* experiences and identities. Whilst the purpose of the present study is to discuss similarities across experiences of lxs *atravesadxs*, we recognize that we have disparate experiences influenced by our various differing identities. However, extant literature suggests that multiracial peoples and trans* peoples encounter similar experiences on the bases of existing outside of socially constructed categories of race and gender, resulting in their positioning of being neither here nor there (Anzaldúa, 2007; Harris, *in press*; Jourian et al., 2015; Stewart, 2015). While border people may share experiences with their mother culture in the academy, these experiences are nuanced by border peoples' liminality, which may result in complex encounters in their mother culture *and* in the dominant culture (Anzaldúa, 2007; Chang-Ross, 2010).

Because multiracial and trans* faculty work within the borderlands, their experiences cannot be fully equated to those of their monoracial colleagues of color and/or LGBTQ colleagues. Unfortunately, higher education scholars have done little to capture border peoples' experiences in the academy, resulting in a gap in literature that upholds dominant conceptions of monoracial and gender binary paradigms. The present study aims to redress this ongoing and institutionalized oversight is a crucial step in the process of world-making (Lugones, 1987) for those in the borderlands and begins to shift the ways monoracism – alongside racism – and trans* oppression – alongside genderism – operate in higher education.

Our research project

The present study was framed through the critical autoethnographic practice of letter writing (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2012). Chang (2008) discussed autoethnography as a mode of qualitative inquiry that allows researchers to move between self and culture, recognizing oneself and one's personal experiences as shaped by – and shaping – broader cultural discourses. Ellis and Bochner (1996) described autoethnography as a didactic process that makes clear the connections between self and culture. When merged with a critical theoretical perspective, critical autoethnographic research attends to how systemic inequities mediate individuals' experiences and, as a result, informs/is informed by cultural manifestations of privilege, power and oppression.

Guided by Anzaldúa's (2007) assertion that writing is a sensuous act that has 'palpable energy, a kind of power' (p. 93) and cultivates *mestizx* consciousness, the main source of data collection consisted of letters written between us as researchers. The data for this study consist of 17 hand-written letters written between us over a span of 13 months. Each letter averaged about eight pages. Letter writing was cyclical, in that one researcher initiated the letter writing and waited for a response from the other researcher. Letters often not only responded to the reflections and questions in the received letter but also initiated new thoughts and questions from and about the borderlands. For the first 6 months of letter writing, we both openly shared experiences of being *lxs* *atravesadxs*, with particular emphasis on these experiences as situated in the broader context of monolithic and singular understandings of identity in higher education. At the 6-month mark, we began to explore major themes that had arisen throughout our initial letters and narrow in on our research question. Our intention for using this iterative research process was to focus primarily on sharing our experiences as liminal faculty members, and having those experiences ground our study. Taking a nonlinear approach, especially in developing research questions after an initial period of letter writing, allowed us to explore those 'certain things' Spade (2010) mentioned as being off limits through the confines of 'traditional' academic inquiry and argumentation.

The iterative nature of our study design reflected O'Reilly's (2009) discussion of ethnographer's using 'a spiral approach to analysis ... moving forward from idea to theory to design to data collection to findings, analysis, and back to theory, but where two steps forward may involve one or two steps back' (pp. 14–15). In using this spiral approach, we dedicated several rounds of letter writing to formalizing themes we observed in our letters. In order to generate these themes, we read back over the letters we had written and received throughout the year. While reading through the data, we embarked on a cyclical coding process to generate themes across the letters (Saldaña, 2009). Anzaldúa's (2007) writing on boundaries and borderlands sensitized the coding process. Next, Z wrote detailed descriptions of these themes in a letter that was sent to Jessica. Jessica read through Z's letter and, in Jessica's written response, corroborated several themes while also offering additional themes generated from the individual cyclical coding process. Two subsequent letters were dedicated to discussing, merging and/or discarding specific themes, a process that resulted in the creation of the three themes detailed in the below section.

Critical qualitative inquiry eschews notions of objectivity as a means through which to measure study goodness. Instead, the present study's goodness was framed through catalytic validity, or 'the degree to which the research process re-orient[s], focuses and energizes participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it' (Lather, 1991,

p. 68). In addition, we engaged in prolonged engagement in data collection and the use of thick description when developing findings from the study, which are foundational to the (auto)ethnographic methodological tradition in which the study was rooted (Geertz, 1973; O'Reilly, 2009; Wolcott, 2008). Furthermore, we both presented initial findings at a national educational research conference, mirroring others who have used this practice to increase the study's confirmability and transferability (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2017; Jourian, 2016, 2017).

Navigating the academic boundaries and borderlands as lxs atravesadxs

The three themes from this study serve as points of contact, or places where our experiences as lxs atravesadxs in the academy, merged. The three themes include being deemed not enough, the limits of visibility as a concept, and tension between writing our peoples into existence while concurrently being written over.

Not enough

We, as lxs atravesadxs, were always already positioned as not enough in the first world of the academy and, as a result, our work and our experiences were dismissed and/or actively denied. In one of his first letters, Z wrote, 'I am *always* so clearly aware of my difference, of my "not fitting," of my "unique perspective," that I am not sure what it would be like to feel settled.' The euphemisms of 'not fitting' and having a 'unique perspective' operated as a way to bring attention to his difference as a nonbinary trans* scholar. In his next letter, Z further explored messages of not being enough:

Something I have been paying attention to lately is how affect shows up across experiences. So, the feelings of erasure, hurt, anger, alienation, being the 'cool, sexy freak,' and of being 'trampled over' – these are telling to me. And the thing is, affect (at least in my mind) doesn't depend on reality – like, it doesn't matter if what we are feeling is 'really' happening – because the feeling is having an effect on us.... All of these moments add up to remind us where we are (betwixt-and-between), and act as brick walls (Sara Ahmed's metaphor) to us finding homes in the academy.

The inability to gain a sense of belonging within the first world of the academy is striking, as it suggests that lxs atravesadxs may never feel fully 'settled' in this space. Rather than critiquing the systemic oppression that operationalized our bodies, ways of thinking and existence as faculty who are not enough, we internalized these messages and began to question if it would be better for us to leave. As Jessica wrote in her initial letter, 'If people aren't on board with multiraciality, and don't even see me – how can I do this?'

Feeling not enough in the first world of the academy, we also struggled to feel whole in our third world motherlands. For example, in several letters, Jessica wrote about her difficulty creating and maintaining connections within monoracial communities of color because she did not perceive to be enough to fit into 'a monoracial paradigm of race, [therefore] I have no racial authenticity [or] socially constructed racial identity.' She wrote twice about the pain that stemmed from navigating monoracial communities of color at two different national conferences as an 'unapologetically multiracial woman.' In a July 2015 letter, Jessica relayed she was ignored, 'dehumanized,' that

she perceived to be labeled as ‘not black enough’ and her research was ‘not enough’ for some of her monoracial colleagues of color. As a result, Jessica questioned if she would be better supported by these communities in the academy if she identified with *only* one racial heritage, specifically, as Black and therefore, as ‘whole’ and ‘enough.’

Z also experienced moments when ze felt lost in the borderlands, neither allowed to be here (in the first world) nor fully accepted there (in the third world motherlands). In a January 2016 letter, Z connected hir feelings of not being enough to being forced to ‘question our realities and, as a result, question ourselves.’ After expressing hir frustrations about intragroup tension in the academy, Z offered the following quote from Tanya Titchkosky (2011), ‘If we are half out we are also half in and if we are half in we need to ask what we are “in for”’ (p. 27). After quoting Titchkosky, ze continued, ‘Being out is known to us, but when we seek being in, well, what we are in for is far from clear, and sometimes is far from what we were wanting in the first place.’ Z acknowledged that ze was not enough to be fully in their mother culture but, also, given intragroup tension and (lack of) understandings of liminal identities, that to be fully in this culture may not be fully possible either.

This narrative elucidates how monoracial-only and binary-gender paradigms constrain lxs atravessadxs, crafting our presence in the academy as simultaneously complicated and complicating. Anzaldúa (2007) clarified that lxs atravessadxs are not suffering from confusion over their identities but, instead, suffer from the border cultures’ rules that construct ‘an absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other’ (p. 41). Our experiences within the borderlands are a direct result of the (un)written rules, policies and domination of the academy (Griffin et al., 2013; Kelley & McCann, 2014; Takara, 2006; Turner & Myers, 2000) that are born out of the first world culture, often internalized by the mother culture and uphold strict paradigms/boundaries of race and gender that position lxs atravessadxs as ‘not enough’ within both cultures. We never felt quite settled in either culture, leading to our questioning if we belonged or could ‘make it’ within the academy.

Despite the challenges of being positioned as not enough in both the first and third worlds, we did find moments of comfort and ‘enoughness’ through embracing our borderland existence, especially with each other and with others who identified as lxs atravessadxs. In the same letter in which Jessica wrote about negative interactions at conferences, she also explored the positive interactions she had with several women of color colleagues. She wrote about two specific women of color, both of which were border denizens (one identifies as Afro-Latina, another as Southeast Asian) and shared some of her experiences with not fitting into socially constructed conceptions of race. Jessica explained, these women ‘soothe my soul’ and make me feel like a ‘whole’ person-scholar-woman of color. Z also talked about the community ze intentionally crafted throughout the years in attempt to gain ‘respite’ from the constant navigation and ‘nomadic’ lifestyle of the borderlands. We had found our people amongst us, *in the borderlands* that would, as Z wrote, ‘keep [us] whole, grounded, loved.’

The limits of visibility

Previous research explores how faculty of color and/or queer faculty experience feelings of invisibility, hypervisibility and tokenization (Brayboy, 2003; LaSala et al., 2008;

Turner & Myers, 2000) and cite colleagues' disregard for counter-dominant scholarship and perspectives (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Joseph & Hirschfield, 2010; Author 2, In review; Stanley, 2007; Vaccaro, 2012). What is missing from these previous analyses is the various ways those who identify as lxs *atravesadxs* are hyper in/visible within the same space and time. Furthermore, as our letters show, our hyper in/visibility and being 'seen' or 'showing up' is a problematic, complicated and risky position within the dominant culture *and* our mother cultures.

Throughout her letters, Jessica mentioned several ways in which she was hypervisible as a racialized being within her predominantly white academic department. As one of very few people of color in the department, Jessica soon realized that her white colleagues consistently cast her as an authority on race, specifically on Blackness. Jessica's colleagues often came into her office to discuss issues of race in society, at the institution, and within the department. For instance, white colleagues asked her about Black students' demands for equity on campus, the Black Lives Matter Movement and/or inquired about what was 'wrong' with Black students in a specific academic program. These conversations made Jessica feel not only hypervisible as a non-white and racialized being but also tokenized as someone who identified with Blackness, but not *only* as Black. Similarly, Z wrote at length about one particular situation in which a colleague came to hir office to ask if ze knew 'all the trans* people in higher education.' This experience had the effect of making Z's trans*ness hypervisible, while concurrently making hir individuality as a trans* person invisible, as if all ze – and all trans* people are writ large – was hir/their trans*ness.

Our narratives reach beyond feelings of hyper in/visibility in the first world academy toward an understanding of how we perceived to be always already hyper in/visible within our mother cultures. While Jessica explained how she was hypervisible with her white colleagues, she also described how she felt invisible to the few faculty of color in her academic department. Halfway through the fall 2015 semester, Jessica learned that the monoracial scholars of color in the School of Education had a 'semisecret' group that met every few weeks to coalesce with one another. While the group formed in response to a history of racial inequities within the School, group conversations were more recently focused on how the Black Lives Matter movement, occurring in US society and on campus, impacted faculty of color. However, Jessica was not initially invited to join the group. In a 7 December 2015 letter, Jessica explored her reactions to learning of this exclusion,

You become damaged by navigating white spaces ... imploding within the white spaces, but then you don't have many/any people of color to coalesce with. When I encounter monoracism AND racism, but then am framed by dominant ideology as being transcendent of race AND racism ... that's when I feel [I don't want to be multiracial].

Jessica explored how she was hypervisible within the first world and yet invisible within the third world, which relegated her to a vague and often uncomfortable borderland existence. In her March 2016 letter, Jessica added, 'Because I exist and self-identify outside of a monoracial paradigm, I am non-existent [at my institution].' Jessica was so 'damaged' by these encounters that she implied that it would be easier to not be multiracial and, instead, conform to dominant monoracial understandings of race.

Z echoed feelings of being *in* but not *of* hir mother culture. In the first correspondence of 2016, ze wrote,

And the shit of it all is there is hardly any place to rest! Even ‘in’ community we are ‘out’ of community ... we get no respite and I see that as a result of our liminality. I see that as a reality that we, as people in the borderlands, are always pushed to be nomadic in many ways ... the intragroup malarkey is terrible.

Instances of hyper-visibility and invisibility with the dominant culture and our mother cultures forced us to vigilantly navigate boundaries, exist in a perpetual state of transition and live in a space that is created by ‘the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary ... a constant state of transition’ (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 25).

Writing into existence/being written over

As a result of being, and researching lxs atravesadxs, we wrote often about the effects of writing ourselves and our communities into existence. Whilst we both recognized trans* and multiracial students had likely always been attending college, the lack of research – particularly research from affirmative, non-deficit frameworks – served as a call to be active in writing our identities and communities into existence, particularly from affirming perspectives. As Z wrote in one of hir letters, to write about one’s positionality as lxs atravesadxs was an attempt to ‘write myself and my people into existence.’

The feelings associated with writing one’s people into existence were often liberating, exposing the power of mestizx consciousness that is formed throughout the act of writing (Anzaldúa, 2007). Throughout our letters, we described how mestizx consciousness was formed in two different manners. First, the act of writing letters to one another, from the borderlands, provided comfort and solace for us both. Throughout the year of collecting data, we continually mentioned that our letter writing provided a release and reminded us we were not traversing the first and third world cultures alone.

While letter writing was an act of individual resistance, our letters also elucidated how our scholarship, specifically our research, was an act of macro-level resistance that translated to microlevel experiences of other lxs atravesadxs navigating academic borders. As a result of our research and writing, we sought ‘new images of identity, new beliefs about ourselves, our humanity and worth no longer in question’ (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 109). For example, as Jessica wrote in one of her letters,

I’m doing research on multiraciality in higher education at the moment and just feel so fucking affirmed through the participants’ narratives. Just putting that [participant recruitment] message out was so affirming, like, ‘Yes, it’s me again. Yes, I’m doing more research on multiraciality. No, no, I’m not going away.’

Writing ourselves and our communities into existence had various positive effects, including the ability to build connections with fellow lxs atravesadxs that superseded research projects as well as fostering feelings of affirmation and self-efficacy through the research process itself.

While we attempted to liberate our communities through the act of writing, monoracial and gender binary paradigms actively and consistently worked to constrain and confine our experiences, identities and scholarship as lxs atravesadxs in the first world culture of the academy. The reality remains that our borderlands scholarship is assessed, peer reviewed by, and published within an academy that is steeped in systems that construct and maintain binary, monolithic and inflexible ideologies. This is the



essence of liminality, in which agentic and dominant structures intertwine to inform our experiences that are always in a state of transition. Jessica explored this phenomenon, stating, ‘I am *between-and-between* feeling so energized and so drained by this research ... I have to let myself go to research myself.’ She went on to describe how researching multiraciality into existence was like walking through quicksand, a process that ‘has consumed me.’ We felt simultaneously consumed – or fully immersed – in our research as well as consumed – or swallowed whole – by the research process.

This notion of consumption translated into what Z described in one letter as a feeling of ‘alotness,’ or a sense of being written over by majoritarian perspectives and people with dominant identities. In one letter, Z wrote about watching HerStory, a web series about trans* women. Drawing connections between the show and this current theme, ze wrote,

As I watched the show, I was reminded of a comment a friend of mine made last year.

They were talking about self-authorship and said that while we, as trans* people, were working to author our lives, society was working to write over our lives in constricting and constricting ways.

The *dis/connections* Z articulated between self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2009) and the ways *lxs* *atravesadxs*’ identities and experiences are consumed speaks to the complexities of writing oneself into existence. In essence, being/researching alongside of *lxs* *atravesadxs* was *dis/empowering* as the academy and the motherland ‘grate[d] against’ (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 25) us and our scholarship, often resulting in academic erasure. Z may have said it best when ze wrote, ‘Although we are making our own way ... we are being reoriented and forced to question ourselves along that path ... “writing over” also calls into question our own worth.’

Finally, we explored the dangerous embodied effects of those who are written over by socially constructed boundaries. Throughout the year of data collection, we both shared experiences of (new) illnesses that were brought on by seemingly unexplainable events. For example, Z experienced extreme back spasms requiring multiple chiropractic and massage appointments for the first time in her life, and Jessica had a series of undiagnosable headaches and numbness that placed her in and out of the hospital throughout the spring 2016 term. These embodied pains cannot be causally linked to being *lxs* *atravesadxs*; however, research indicates that the effects of minority stress and micro-aggressions can often manifest physically (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Sue, 2010).

Implications

The current study provided multiple implications for research and practice. From a methodological and analytical perspective, this study encourages further exploration of frameworks, such as *borderlands* theory and intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989), to understand the experiences of those with multiple minoritized identities, but those who are *between-and-between* multiple identities. For example, whereas intersectionality has largely been used to explore how those with multiple minoritized identities navigate various interlocking systems of structural domination, findings from this study expose how more needs to be done to explore the (in)ability for those who fall between the

cracks of identity (i.e. *lxs atravesadxs*) to navigate their cultural environments (Harris, 2016). We propose this as an extension of Crenshaw's (1989) original conceptualization of intersectionality rather than a new term or framework in itself. Our rationale for this move is that the analytical process by which Crenshaw came to intersectionality would remain consistent, while the way one thinks about identities – or, more directly, thinks *betwixt-and-between* multiple identities and intersecting structures of domination – is in need of further nuance and complexity (see Harris, 2016).

Another notable implication from the current study is the importance of cross-identity coalition-building. As we explicated through our letter writing, we each found difficulty finding a home within the first world of the academy and our third world mother cultures. Thus, for us as *lxs atravesadxs*, it became imperative to undertake the process of world-making in the borderlands. While world-making and kinship have often been framed as an *intra*-identitarian project, our findings suggest that there is much to be gained from reconceptualizing world-making and cultivating homes as *lxs atravesadxs* as an *inter*-identitarian project. In other words, while our individual experiences as *lxs atravesadxs* were never 'just like' each other's, the process through which we created a world of our own (e.g. through our letter writing and developing a kinship network [Nicolazzo, 2016b, 2017]) was similar enough for us to coalesce together. Our study also builds upon recent work related to the development and maintenance of virtual kinship networks (Nicolazzo, 2016b, 2017; Nicolazzo, Pitcher, Renn, & Woodford, 2017). While our data collection occurred through letter writing – a decidedly non-virtual process – the ways we have continued to maintain connection across geographic distance both mirror and extend the aforementioned research suggesting that material space is not a requirement for developing lasting kinship networks.

Our study also emphasizes the importance of long-term research engagement. Although the current neoliberal knowledge regime in higher education (Pasque et al., 2012) dissuades researchers from taking significant time to do research, our study shows the transformative nature of resisting such neoliberal ideology. The process of prolonged engagement is important for one's ability to make meaningful connections across difference. In this sense, long-term research engagement disrupts and resists Rist's (1980) notion of 'blitzkrieg ethnography,' or the quick collection of data without care or consideration for those with whom one is researching. Furthermore, long-term research allows the space and time for researchers to make sense and discuss the complexities of our experiences as *lxs atravesadxs*. An implication of our research, then, is for faculty who serve on promotion and tenure committees to rethink the normative criteria they use to evaluate early career scholars' 'scholarly productivity.'

Our findings signal the importance of centering the unique lived experiences of those who are between identities, and how their/our being between identities often means we fall through the proverbial cracks. More critical research should be done that centers the lived experiences of those who exist *betwixt-and-between* identities. In doing so, researchers have the opportunity to create more complex, nuanced tableaux of peoples' experiences in college contexts, as well as resist the monoracialism and gender binary discourse replete throughout higher education.

Finally, it is not just a lack of scholarly attention that makes this study significant. What this study exposed was the continued reliance on dualistic either/or frameworks of thinking about people, experiences and identities. The present study made clear how



some educators struggle to think, theorize and recognize those identities and subjectivities that fall between/outside monolithic notions of who one is or can be. Beyond expanding recognition for those of us who identify as lxs *atravesadxs* in the first world of the academy, the significance of this study lies at unearthing the epistemological and ontological illogics that erase and problematize our existence in the first place. The significance of this study moves beyond increasing recognition and seeks a redistribution of opportunities and resources by challenging the hegemony of identities as monolithic, consistent and/or coherent. It is this *unlearning of monolithic notions of selfhood* where this study's deepest significance and where its most transformative possibility rest.

Notes

1. Anzaldúa used the term 'los *atravesados*' in her writing. We have changed the term to 'lxs *atravesadxs*' to reflect current gender-expansive linguistic turns in Spanish, as well as to reflect how the current research study traversed and transgressed gender categorizations (Scharrón-Del Río & Aja, 2015).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Through her research, *Dr. Jessica C. Harris* critiques interlocking systems of oppression that are embedded throughout postsecondary contexts and influence educational and social inequities. Her multidisciplinary research agenda focuses on multiraciality on the college campus and women of color survivors of campus sexual violence. Dr. Harris teaches graduate level courses such as critical race theory in education, history of higher education and student development theory. Her research, teaching and service are guided by commitments to radical social justice and educational equity.

Dr. Z Nicolazzo teaches courses on college student development, postsecondary access and diversity, equity and culture. Her research centers on trans* collegians, with a particular emphasis on trans* student resilience and kinship-building. Dr. Nicolazzo's specific areas of interest include gender in higher education, particularly the experiences of trans* collegians; college student activism; and intersectionality, particularly students' experiences of the intersections of race, disability and gender identity. Dr. Nicolazzo also writes about the use of alternative methodologies, epistemologies and representations of knowledge.

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