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Stranger-making as difference: childhood memories of belonging and exclusion by undergraduates of color

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we draw from the notion of stranger-making to focus on how undergraduates of color at one large university in New York City recount their subjective experiences with inclusion and exclusion at the borderlands of educational spaces. We use narratives to evoke the unfolding of life events and to destabilize categories of difference that are all too often based on a politics of perception rather than an ethical gesture to know. This paper presents four selected vignettes that demonstrate the instability of being a racialized human and draws attention to how belonging, or socially felt memberships, is simultaneously constructed and contested in schools, and how these experiences provoke turning points in an otherwise assumed linearity from childhood to the university.

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Introduction

In this article, we draw from the notion of stranger-making (Ahmed 2000) to focus on how undergraduates of color at one large university in New York City recount their childhood experiences at the borders of belonging and exclusion in educational spaces. We use narratives to evoke the fluid unfolding of life events and to destabilize categories and hierarchies of difference that are all too often based on a politics of perception rather than an ethical gesture to know. The act of stranger-making, writes Sara Ahmed, is not that the stranger is unknown but that it is narratively constructed as unfamiliar and distanced. This process of differentiation occurs at the site where encounters with difference are met, when individuals are read and produced as ‘we’ or ‘the uncommon’, when communities, ecologies, and assemblages are expanded and diminished by who is invited in and who is expelled out.

Many theories of and practices with difference pivot along the axes of race, class, gender, and other forms of non-normative identification and operate through sedimentations of past and present histories that repeat and reinscribe which bodies come to be seen as subordinate to White standards and conditions. Without denying the important political work that issues from these standpoints, we nod toward the indeterminacy of the body as a simple material figure upon which policies and practices assert their

outcomes and focus on the ‘constant construction, destruction, and repair of boundaries’ (Zembylas 2003, 108) as they are managed through a panoply of conventions, obligations, desires, and constraints. This study does not presume that living with difference is promised through acts of acceptance or assimilation (Shirazi 2018). Instead, we draw attention to how belonging, or socially felt memberships, is simultaneously constructed and contested in schools, and how these experiences provoke turning points in an otherwise assumed linearity from childhood to the university.

Memories of childhood often begin with descriptions of love and devotion to family and culture that in time and place become pockmarked by the contours and movements into and away from spaces that are seen and felt as conditionally inhabitable or disparaging. In this way, the notion of an inclusive community, we find, is not a simple coming together of bodies, but rather a recognition of familiarity (or unfamiliarity) that comes to assemble (or turn away) individuals in a process Ahmed (2000, 48) calls ‘inter-embodiment’. Succinctly, it is not the policies that make a space inclusive – although policies can certainly make a space exclusive – but the ways in which people encounter each other that brings it into recognition as a place¹ of inclusion.

Here, childhood memories help to explore how embodied and affective experiences in everyday life (deCerteau 1984; Zembylas 2003) are reworked and reconfigured by those whose subjectivities are mediated by assimilationist, segregationist, and racist histories of schooling. Rather than a peering back, memories are seen as diffractive, a tool for exploring forward into the complex ways in which we come to be in the world (DeSchauwer, Van DePutte, and Davies 2018). Each individual demonstrates their own sense of agency and intention, at and within the borderlands of social spaces that have recognized their difference and deliberated on their welcome. These are polysemic experiences that constitute the self in response to multiple meanings rather than a stable, unified identity (McCarthy et al. 2005). Even amid the difficulties, people are never fully managed by their race, language, immigration histories, or class. Here, we see that relationships with and against others pull them into an assemblage of other communal spaces, which then emerge as newfound desires and directions. By no means did the making of their strangeness end their educational pursuits.

These narratives serve as a way to resignify the work of inclusion, committing our understanding to the question of how people see themselves within and beyond the limiting constructions of identity. As not to fall into the historical inevitability of repetition without a difference (Bhabha 1996), we argue for theories and practices that take into account alternative explanations of how our sense of self unfolds over time and space, with a focus on how the plurality of each individual is sewn together by encounters with others. While many calls for inclusion are instituted through what Gayatri Spivak (cited in Landry and MacLean 1996) calls ‘the body count’, we believe a narrative turn not only deepens attention into who is given the right to occupy certain educational settings but provokes a nuanced analyses into what it might mean to be open to and to act openly with difference. While there are painful moments of abjection in the stories we share, we are also reminded of Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang’s (2014) call to refuse the centering of damage and destruction-centered narratives, knowing that the reification of pain enhances the power of the powerful and, as told, include the singular and often generative ways in which each participant enters into a variety of communal spaces in order to come to know themselves as

having a place in school. This study asks: How do the young adults in this study trace their unfolding sense of belonging and exclusion in school? How do subjective experiences affirm, refuse, or produce new ways of understanding identity in the constitution of self?

Subjectivity and inter-embodiment

In approaching these inquiries, we draw from work on the politics of representation (Hall 1997; Leonardo 2013), inflected by ideas on subjectivity and subject-making (Butler 1998; Foucault 1980), to better understand how the body² becomes the fulcrum of institutionalized policies that directly link it to racialized perceptions of diversity, and how individuals take up the descriptions to which their bodies are discursively subjected and recognized within the discourse of school. While the politics of race representation tends to flatten historical genealogy into one homogenizing plane of comparison and difference (Bhabha 1996), racialized people are always more than a product of the logic that creates competitive binaries between us and them, insider and outsider, and the more broad categorization of otherness. The act of ‘naming’, then, is a discursive practice that serves to produce the subject (and what is outside) rather than simply reflect or describe it. The subject, a term not to be made interchangeable with individual, suggests instead a ‘place’ in the structure of formation that allows individuals to *come into being* by being both recognized and provided entry into a condition of possibility (Butler 1999).

In using Althusser’s (1971) concept of mis-recognition, an individual is transformed into a subject of society through an illusion of its being. Subjects, never a product of its own, are continually called upon to adopt a particular identity by being brought into the norms and values beset by various social and cultural fields. This mis-recognition perpetually figures the individual as a product of the imaginary that is mediated through others and recognized as an object of difference. This act, central to relations of difference, reinscribe how subjects come to be known and how they come to know themselves. It is the premise upon which boundaries of movement are established and regulated, both physically, through the enforcement of material, economic, and structural constraint, and affectively, through a shadowy sense of not belonging there. Beyond identity, though always with respect to identity, greater attention to how subjectivities are constituted and related in everyday behaviors, habits, and uses of space moves us toward an understanding of how engagements with difference shape the embodied and emotional experience.

In *Questions of Cultural Identity*, Hall (1996) makes a strong argument for recognizing identity as both constructed within a condition and a demonstration of self-production, always a process of becoming rather than being subjects-in-relation, in-process, in-making. This onto-epistemological use of the term ‘subjectivity’ implies that self-identity, like society and culture, is continually reshaped by discursive practices, never complete or fully coherent, with focus on the relations between forms of subjectivity and normalizing practices. As in this study, this framework unsettles assumptions and expectations in order to trace the constitution of the self within competing intersections of meaning and experience; to regard ourselves and others as both objects and subjects; and to make agency, initiation, and new self-understandings

central to an analysis of how individuals flow into spaces and occupy various positions, even if temporarily and with great difficulty.

The aim, then, is not to simply replace false imagery or reveal their distortion against some true portrayal but to rework the politics of representation itself. Although representations serve as floating signifiers that are not self-evident or invariable, they continue to define the borders between normality and deviance, oftentimes filling the latter with a continuous stream of fantasies that are entrenched in historical oppression, exploitation, and current discourses of failure, violence, and inadequacy. Approaches that seek to overturn this stronghold tend to offer contesting representations that replace negative images with positive counter-narratives of resistance or resilience. Based on the idea that there is a self-defining individual that is, first, representative of a larger group definition and, second, responsible for acting in the best interests of that group, the overturning of harmful and distorted imaginations of the other are both urgently necessary but inadequate for disbanding the terms and categories within which those narratives continue to be contained.

Even in spaces committed to inclusion, there is often an assumption that if a perceived threshold of racialized bodies is advanced by and seen within higher social institutions, this will be enough to dismantle whole structures of racial discrimination (Marable, 2016; Melamed 2011). Such attempts at inclusion can operate as a kind of visual economy (Ahmed 2000, 24) that brings the stranger in by first recognizing its strangeness, a gesture of false reverence or a kind of fetishism that includes the other by way of its difference. Yet, inclusion cannot be promised through an obliteration of this difference, nor by the presumption that one has been sufficiently or completely recognized by the other. Instead, Grossman (1996) makes a case against identity as the appropriate model for contemporary equality and calls instead for a 'transformative practice' that recognizes the becomingness of various communities and the ways in which different relations of power interpellate the struggle for change. We learn then that relations of inter-embodiment are not only representational, but strategic and positional (Puwar 2004), requiring constant vigilance so as not to re-territorialize and re-subordinate others within existing relations of power that declare to be inclusive and welcoming to all.

In this study, we see childhood narratives as one way to locate moments of conditional belonging and exclusion with an emphasis on how individuals seek out new engagements with others that then unsettle the stabilizing categories by which we typically think of inclusion into school. This inter-embodiment, or encountered recognition of and with difference, establishes communities through which some are afforded invitation, while others, noticed at their arrival, disturb the discourses and practices of normativity and are made suspect, refused, even turned away. These are not always predictable pathways, but they all appear as profound feelings that demonstrate the strong entanglements among our lives, the spaces we seek to enter, and the affected ways in which the individual and the social meet at the borders of educational spaces. At its end, we argue that any genuine intent to broaden the institution by way of inclusion, must attend to how practices and policies are simultaneously complicit with past and present forms of discrimination and exclusion.

Methods

In this study, we use narrative research (Davies and Gannon 2015; Mishler 2004) and attend to alternative trajectories and the dynamics of plots and subplots in the telling of how childhood identities with studenthood are discursively situated and performed, and how normative understandings of schools spaces are learned, refused, assimilated, and transformed. Here, we present part of a larger mixed methods study that analyzed survey data from undergraduates at one large public university in New York City and conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 voluntary participants from the same survey pool. Of 224 survey participants who self-categorized as people of color, 18 students³ who were considering but not all committed to teaching were randomly selected and interviewed by a team of research assistants using a standard semi-structured interview protocol.

The purpose of this interview was to gather narratives on educational experience as they related to knowledge about academic and career possibilities and pathways. The overall structure of this protocol asked students to trace their educational lives from childhood to college and beyond. Intermittently, researchers asked questions that led participants to speak about how their personal, cultural, social, and economic background and assumptions and how views on the world intersect with their sense of belonging to educational and career prospects. Participants were asked to talk openly about their experiences in school, types of nurture, guidance, and mentorship. They were asked about college-going inspiration, the factors that shaped their interests, accomplishments, and setbacks.

We selected four participant interviews for a deeper narrative analysis. They represented the diversity of themes we saw across the multiple interviews, including language and ethnic diversity, awareness of social structures both in education and in society more broadly, and nonlinear paths through and to higher education. Meet Janelle, Tania, Brandon, and Viviana,⁴ all students attending a large public university in New York City. Each is pursuing different majors, each is a student of color, and each, in interviews, narratives their journey through the educational system with a critical eye toward racial, ethnic, linguistic, and social class diversity. In the narratives that follow, we present how our participants describe, align, and reject these various social identities as part of their making of studenthood. Table 1 provides demographic information for the four participants and each vignette begins with a selected quote from their interview that embodies a theme consistent in their narrative.

While these tellings are singular, each with their own particularities and pathways, they sit at the crossroads of social cultural forces that bring each subject into a recognition of their own difference. The spaces within and through which they navigate are simultaneously congealed by histories of containment, discrimination, fear, and distrust and opened by affirmation, invitation, and a reaching out across difference. As a

Table 1. Four selected participants demographic and thematic information.

Participant	Gender/Racial/Ethnic identity	Linguistic identity	Overall themes and tensions
Janelle	Female/Dominican-American	Bilingual Spanish/English	Assimilating with and away from culture
Tania	Female/African-American	Monolingual English	Turning from schooling toward education
Brandon	Male/Chinese-American	Bilingual Chinese/English	Sudden surprise moves and disjunctures
Viviana	Female/Mexican-American	Bilingual Spanish/English	Family obligation while being on one's own

way of ‘seeing things and people big’ (Greene 1995, 10), we view each participant in their integrity and intentionality, seeing the unpredictable and oftentimes uncertain outcomes of their lives as contrapuntal to the fluid and porous ways in which they have come to understand their relationship to school and education.

Janelle

Of course everybody likes to say I’m here because I am awesome and I got here because I’m smart or intelligent or whatever the case may be, but the reality is without a support system it’s really hard to get places regardless of whether you are super smart.

Although Janelle considers herself a proud Dominican, her unfolding sense of self and studenthood has evolved within a matrix of shifting relational circumstances and encounters of both belonging and exclusion. Entrenched within the sociocultural context of the United States, her childhood years in school are painfully recalled by a struggle to learn English. When asked to recall her childhood education, Janelle expressed a very difficult but meaningful part of her early life as such,

Well I was born in the Dominican Republic so I immigrated to this country when I was 7 years old. And so it was a difficult transition because the way they do schooling in the Dominican Republic is different than the way we do schooling here. . . . And then when I came to school here I didn’t really speak English and I think about that experience as being terrible because I was bullied a lot for not knowing how to speak proper English.

For a large majority of immigrants and children of immigrants in this study, language is described as the discriminatory vehicle that played significantly to their sense of belonging in early school experiences (Rumbaut 2005). Monocultural assimilation, what Valenzuela (1999) calls ‘subtractive schooling’, presented ‘terrifying’ situations for Janelle, making her feel like ‘an outcast’ as she was expected to learn and exclusively use English, while growing up in a household that spoke solely Spanish.

It was not until high school that we hear Janelle say that she is able to ‘properly communicate with others’ and demands passage from her ESL/bilingual classes into the monolingual classes in English. She speaks with a hint of pride at her rapid English development while frustrated by the demands that severed her life into the two linguistic spaces of home and school. Describing such language-based preferences along a relational axis (Mishler 2004), she contrasts her ability to quickly learn English against that of her brother, her parents, and her peers in ESL, differentiating herself even within spaces of familial and cultural inclusion, and demonstrating her autonomy through examples of buying her own English dictionary, seeking out tutors for college writing, and ultimately becoming a peer mentor for other students struggling with English.

Language and culture, then, are not static variables, but shifting phenomena that become reinscribed in place and time as part of systems of structural relations and processes of differentiation. Here, Janelle works to minimize the differences between herself and the English-speaking context of school. What would it mean for the institution to attend to the felt traumas of linguistic discrimination as experienced by Janelle? In the way that culture presents its own constraints and openings for Janelle, the narrative she tells of her educational trajectory is anything but unitary and one-

dimensional. Rather than contained within classroom walls, her subjectivity is a range of social arrangements and interconnected spaces that work to create her sense of being strange and familiar to the notion of studenthood. During the interview, Janelle makes many references to a flurry of imagined life paths presented to her. The complexity of these forces signifies a struggle for her to bring coherence to the narrative of schooling.

Well when I was a kid I always remember wanting to be famous. I was really into music so I am going to write this song and be famous you know my little fantasy. Education wasn't something that I thought about. Like when I was graduating high school I really just wanted to move out of my house and become independent. I thought about going to college like other kids were talking about it. But it's not something that I was like yes, I am going to go to school. I mean I even met with a recruiter for the Air Force. And that was me just wanting to push myself to get physical education. I had applied to college because the guidance counselor told me to apply. So I applied to nursing schools in upstate New York and ... I think it was because of the money I'm not going to lie, and that's also when I applied to this college, I applied for criminal justice ... I was into that whole idea of like becoming a superwoman and saving people.

For Janelle, each marginal thought of a futurity yet-to-come becomes central to the unexpected turning points and multiple imaginaries of what her adult life could be. It is here that we notice Janelle's struggle with her own agency in making decisions about her future. During this point in the interview, Janelle mentions the diversity of paths she wanted: her love for music, her want to be strong, her desire of money, and her dream of being a 'superwoman'. Although she voices these thoughts with a kind of frivolity, all these seemingly tangential uncertainties demonstrate again the relational ways in which we present identity claims as more than individual, as historical and with multiple desires (Peirce 1995). In the case of Janelle, her musings over the future are situated retellings that provide a glimpse into the influence of her inter-embodied encounters with other youth, guidance counselors, and her mother, all of which sit at the intersection of social and cultural fields and the fantasies she has for herself.

At multiple points, Janelle describes the moment when her mother advises her to go to college as 'random'. With language differences making it difficult for her to advise on academic studies, Janelle had always just assumed that her mother had no interest in education. Even though this was a critical moment in Janelle's life, she experiences an even deeper tension around the choices her mother has made compared to the production of womanhood Janelle is facing today.

In my culture and even in my household like my mom has always played this submissive role and my father is the person who basically controls everything, like you shouldn't go here you shouldn't go here. He always has the final word. And she cooks she cleans and works on top of that like my father never cleans or cooks which I think is something now when I think about it is something in every culture in most cultures that's a traditional way. So for me I don't want that in my life. So I think that also factored in my decision to come to school. It's not because I thought about school as something I wanted to do, but more as a way for me to be an independent woman and not have to rely on other people.

When reflecting upon how people specific to the Dominican community view education, she uses the phrase 'hidden expectations', hinting at the expected loyalty to family even if at the expense of education and self-direction. She goes on to

identify some of the larger expectations and paths for Dominican youth, saying ‘none of them like go to college, none of them like really finish high school’. Here, Janelle draws cultural and generational gender-based differences between her and her mother as well as other Latinas more broadly. The balance she needs to embody includes the seemingly contradictory values between her family and school. As she contrasts her own achievements and expectations with those of her mother, she speaks about this in relation to the limited opportunities for Dominicans in the United States. Here, she is both keenly aware of structural discrimination against immigrants while frustrated by master narratives about young people of color and their disinterest in schooling. As her story unfolds, she demonstrates how her educational history is alit with linguistic and gender-based negotiations that she is forced to make in her desire to engage with educational spaces. The constant work she undertakes to establish herself as a welcome figure in such normative spaces cannot ever guarantee security and thus, she initiates an ongoing abjection of self – her language, her culture, even her mother – while finding the independence to achieve and surpass those she considers less interested.

Tania

I never once thought that I wouldn’t (go to college) because I think I probably wanted a degree. They tell you, oh if you want a job, you gotta go to college. Parents, school, everybody. Now I’m a senior and I think that it’s not the only option. I was pushed by my parents, but you know it’s like when everyone is telling you that you should and all of your other classmates are doing it too, it’s kind of like set in your mind that, ok, I’m going to college and you really don’t think too much about it.

Unlike Janelle, Tania was raised on Long Island in an affluent suburb near New York City without ever questioning whether college was in her future. Yet, even with these clear expectations, Tania, similar to other youth in our study, shares a narrative of schooling that reveals the multiple disjunctures and plot lines often set into motion by sudden events and experiences. At the early age of 9, Tania moved schools from a predominantly Black neighborhood to ‘a less diverse’ or ‘more White’ school. Prior to this move, she was happily enrolled in a gifted and talented program and described herself as someone who was ‘very amiable and social with friends’. However, at her new school, she was denied access to the gifted and talented program and, with this turning away, began to identify, and be identified by others, as ‘very shy’. She attributes this to her discomfort in the new setting and trying to make friends with what she called ‘a different demographic’. Making friends at her new school was ‘done a different way’ compared to her old neighborhood school where ‘it was just like, we were more like a family’. It could be race, she ponders, or just being young and the awkwardness that comes with making friends. Her childhood school experience turns from affirmations of belonging to one of exclusion and detachment. This transition period, one she calls ‘very distant friendly’, seems to have shaped much of how Tania begins to think about school as a place of cold interactions, an institution in passing. While it did not deter her from pursuing higher education, it was clear that this childhood experience continued to bother her.

By her senior year of high school, Tania remembers being

really glad I was getting out because I just couldn't take it. A lot of the people in my school were like rich and affluent and I was exposed to students that were really obnoxious to the teachers and rude because they thought they were on top of the world and I didn't like that.

At this point in school, Tania is eagerly awaiting college, drawing herself as different from those 'not of the same social class' and persisting through in hopes of getting out. Here, we see Tania distance herself away from encounters with difference that are reinforced at the borders of socioeconomic privilege and culture, attributing their behaviors to a kind of affluence she finds different, foreign, and outside of herself. How does the institution acknowledge, address, and invite a widening diversity of class experience and the kinds of inter-embodiment such differences create?

Following her love of illustration and fashion design, she is admitted into the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City and begins her college years until an experience with one 'bad professor' causes her so much anxiety, she drops out. Tania reflects on that experience:

So to think that I came so far and then the fact that a professor just like shut you down and then I developed terrible anxiety, stress, really unhappy, so I was just like, I already paid the deposit for the fashion program, so I was going to do it, but at the last minute, I was just like, you know what, this is not, I don't want this as a career anymore. If I do continue in the future, it's like just for me and not career oriented.

Tania's rejection of fashion as a career was less about her degree of interest and more about a disintegrating connection between school and career. As she meets the limits of her relationship with a professor, she resolves or fails to resolve this conflict, which in turn drives her away from the spaces she must enter to complete her degree. Unexpectedly, she makes a dramatic shift away from fashion, applying to another large university in the city and decidedly pursuing international criminal justice where she has been working toward becoming an intelligence officer for the federal bureau.

As do all, Tania experiences unplanned changes and unforeseen events that lead to shifts in the course of life and from this has learned an important distinction between schooling and education. She described a career as something you 'like prepare for' 'to get good grades on your resume' and then 'do internships, you have to look for jobs'. Contrasting this with education, she states,

It's kind of like a planning process, whereas education, I view education as something that you can always connect to real life and that's what I like about it. It's like kind of more like open, it doesn't have to be stressful. That's what I don't like with schools when they kind of take the fun out of it.

While the discourse of schooling, accentuated during this time of neoliberal reforms, conceives of education as directly connected to the workforce and global economy, Tania parses them out as two different orientations. She sees schooling, college included, as a prerequisite to a career and describes a litany of steps from grades to internships to job placement. Education, in contrast, is a kind of gesture or opening linked to notions of freedom and personhood. Similar to how Janelle sought education as a turning away from the constraints of her culture, Tania sees education as a turn away from the constraints of schooling. Both demonstrate the ways in which

studenthood is created as a response to the particularities of subjective experience, an emerging of one's self in relation to the social and cultural context and the inter-embodied encounters therein.

Brandon

I think society, in my opinion, society just thinks of a linear path, you go to college, you get your degree, you get a job, you get money. ... If every story was, I went straight from college to high school and I got straight A's, I feel that story would be boring. I would love some variety of that story.

Brandon, born and raised in New York City, had not had many experiences beyond his local Chinatown neighborhood until his acceptance to a specialized public high school. Even as the subway offers a labyrinth of geographical possibility, he recalls his shock at arriving for the first time to Columbus Circle, a popular and well-known transit hub just 5 mi north of his cultural community. Prior to this, he attended neighborhood schools, the same as all his cousins and siblings. Although he describes himself in these early grades as a 'good student', something inexplicable occurred in the middle years where he decided 'that grades didn't really matter'. With a nonchalance that borders on indifference, he explains that as his mediocre grades continued into high school, he found little to no support from teachers or counselors and thus, out of the blue and in secret, met with a military recruiter and enlisted in the army.

This is a strange story, when I first went into the recruiting office for the military, I just wanted to learn more. And I guess one thing lead to another and I liked it more and I never told my parents I started enlisting or started the entire process without them knowing. They thought I was going to college. I had applied for colleges when I was in high school and I did not expect to get into any of them, I just applied to them just so they would think that I'm actually going and when it was time to graduate, I was supposed to go to boot camp in December, but something changed and I was asked if I wanted to go right out of high school and I took that opportunity and just a few weeks before I went, I told my folks and they were surprised.

In explanation of this sudden move, Brandon describes himself as someone who always wanted to help people, a kind of ethics that he couples with his childhood dream of one day becoming a cop. His seemingly happenstance meeting with the military recruiter changed the entire educational trajectory of Brandon's life. He describes their interaction as one that 'stirred me up more than my teachers and counselors could about college'. Yet, the presence of military recruiters in the life of high schoolers from working class communities is anything but random. The inception of No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and the National Defense Authorization Act (2002) Section 9528 reversed policies that previously kept organizations that discriminate on the basis of race, gender, or sexual orientation, including the military, out of schools. Not only does NCLB allow military recruiters extensive access to secondary students' personal contact information, the New York Civil Liberties Union released a 2007 report finding that the Department of Education had almost no oversight in how much access recruiters had to high school spaces with a particularly aggressive presence in low-income communities. As military recruiters now have the same access to high school campuses as college

representatives (Ayers 2006), the military, as seen in 6 out of 18 of our participant narratives, plays a critical role in advising youth about the prospects of their future.

The contradictions in Brandon's narrative are striking. While he lived his entire life in the bustle of New York City, he knew very little about what occurred outside Chinatown. While his knowledge seemed provincial and bounded, he enlisted in a future that would take him far away from the particulars of his immediate surroundings. Feeling unsupported and without counsel from his family and teachers, he gravitated toward a military recruiter who opened himself to a new futurity in service. While Asian-Americans are fitted into the myth of the model minority (Lee 1994; Museus 2013), framed as more industrious and studious than their Black and Latinx counterparts, Brandon expresses very little concern for conforming to stereotypes. Not wanting to enter into college immediately after high school, Brandon instead 'wanted the experiences' and imagined his future, naively in his words, as one in which he 'would protect the world'. It is unclear how long Brandon stayed in the military. He is vague and enigmatic about the details of his leaving. He does mention a medical discharge, followed by great frustration with the bureaucracy of the Office of Veterans Affairs, and then some relief at finally processing the paperwork necessary for his release.

After all this, initiating the college process was a challenge for Brandon. He remembers learning some of the process in high school but then found himself on his own, unsure of how to navigate the various pieces of the application process. Not knowing where to apply, Brandon sought advice from his sister who had attended a large university in Manhattan. Based on this, he applied and was accepted as a forensic psychology major, a field of study he admits to knowing nothing about. Imagining himself as a teacher, he says, 'you have to serve the people and the pay isn't always that great, but I told [my girlfriend] that's not what I want, it's just to help people. That is my main motivation'. Brandon recalls a high school history teacher who taught about social events and spoke of philosophy and its relation to life. 'I just want them to learn that it's not always about the grades, which is how I feel our society has placed an emphasis on. It's about learning, it's about how you develop as a person'.

Like Tania, Brandon has somehow come to understand that education is more than its promises of career and profession. He takes up the college application and the prospects of schooling through a distanced gaze, seeing it more as a function of society to which he must oblige than an opportunity for intellectual thought and wide-awakeness. For him, the military became the place of this realization.

In the military, I met some amazingly smart people, maybe not academically smart, but that's not what I care about. I really don't care if someone has a 4.0 GPA and has A's in all their classes, but if they have no life experience, I feel that you are putting all your effort into one thing, but what about everything else? I don't know their entire life story, and I wouldn't want to judge that, but I feel that if all you had to your name is your grades, then why are you here? What are you trying to accomplish?

Similar to Janelle and Tania, we see that identity does not dwell inside a person but is opened up by its contextual contingencies and the relationships that are forged, very much as a movement between and within spaces of belonging and tension. While much of positivist educational research tends to focus exclusively on school experiences,

dividing development into distinct phases and causal findings, Brandon's narrative demonstrates how the events in our lives are not limited to traditional conceptions of time and space. More than a sequence of stages with predictable linearity, his narrative is an example of how discontinuities open up possibilities for learning. They set into motion other events and experiences that at first glance may seem independent and unrelated.

Unlike the other two narratives, race, culture, and language do not feature as prominently as would be expected from the child of immigrant parents. Instead, Brandon struggles to carve his own path in relation to the societal expectation that there is one path to college after high school. He mentions on multiple occasions that for him, grades and school are not the measure of worth and that there are ample ways in which one can engage the world outside the confines of school. The invisibility of race is perhaps understandable in Brandon's account. According to Sethi (1995), Asian communities have relied on the discourse of hard work to avoid participating in the conversation on race. With many arriving with middle-class backgrounds, the perception of East Asians is tightly monitored through their status as honorary Whites: they are tracked into schools with Whites, spoken about as tied to Whites, and used by the system of Whiteness as objects of comparison to discipline Black and Latinx communities (Museus 2013). Brandon's refusal of school can be read as a refusal to the work ethic so commonly touted as typically Asian. Again, the relationship one has to societal definitions and categories of race is complicated by the relationships encountered through the passages of time. At times, it is a refusal of such that carves the various pivots and turns in a life's trajectory.

Viviana

I love giving back to the community, like in any way that I can. Not necessarily financially cause I don't have money, but in you know soft skills, stuff like that. But I don't know, I really can't tell you what I'm going to be doing five years from now. Cause I feel like I get, it's not that I'm very indecisive it's just more like I get motivated by different things I get inspired by different things, and I might see myself somewhere totally different, where I don't imagine myself.

Similar to all other undergraduates, Viviana's narrative was intensely pockmarked with coincidences and turning points. Like a pinball tossed in a machine, Viviana speaks of the seemingly random circumstances that seemed to ignite dramatic changes in both the way she thought about her future and the encounters that made such possible. Yet, for us, there is nothing random in the unfolding of life. There are events and situations that are couched within sociocultural conditions of possibility and the subjective production of self, constituted with and by others. Viviana's narrative, like all the others, is inflected by patterns of experience familiar to young people of color. Although seemingly coincidental, privileges and barriers to schooling are part and parcel to larger structures, values, and beliefs that govern the recognizability and familiarity of some as opposed to others (Foucault 1982). Her move from a private Spanish-speaking elementary school to a 'typical' public school taught her firsthand who is meant to belong in which educational spaces. As she describes this transition, she recalls the shock of not even knowing that her schooling had been taught in a

natural mix of Spanish and English, ‘cause we both understood, all of us understood both of them fluently’. The pains of realizing at her new school that she was now an English language learner set up blocks to her learning, particularly in the area of math and science. ‘Oh my gosh, I hate this. This will forever be a burden’. As in the case of Janelle, the dominating force of standardized and institutionalized English played a divisive force in Viviana’s evolving understanding of school for many years beyond her childhood.

When Viviana’s older sister went to high school, only 20% of students graduated and moved on to college. That year, under the direction of a new administrator, the school underwent ‘a transformative stage’ with a strong, even unrelenting focus on college entry. By the time Viviana arrived, new programs and initiatives abounded. Students were no longer hearing ‘look at your grades, you’re just not that student they want’ but instead were encouraged to ‘apply, apply, apply’.

Like we had seminars, we had people coming in, we had a scholarship fund that they just brought into the school. So ever since, I want to say like my junior year of high school, I realized that there are opportunities. It’s just a matter of like, being informed.

Had the school taken this stance years before, it may have impacted the life trajectories of Viviana’s sister and her high school classmates. The administrative decision to encourage college-going with informative sessions and a plethora of resources is seen by Viviana as a kind of privilege her sister never received. Such changes to her high school experience laid open opportunities that she may not have encountered otherwise. For example, it was Ms. Blau and Mr. Fitz who planted the seed of applying to schools outside of California, an idea she claims she would never have considered without their encouragement.

Yet along her path, there is much evidence that Viviana’s interest in college is fleeting at best. She recognized that college is just something you are supposed to do, that there is an expectation, and that through institutional structures like grades and GPA, students are put into competition with one another to fight for access into the system. When speaking about how she arrived at college, she describes her interest less in terms of knowledge and more about starting a new life, ‘I just want to move, I just wanted to get out of here. I just want to start a new life. I just want to try something completely different’. Finding herself competitive with classmates who received 4.0 GPAs, she feels discouraged and decides to pursue theater, a profession where ‘you don’t need to go to college and I didn’t want to go to college’.

This is conflicted by the simultaneous need to fulfill the wishes and deferred dreams of her parents who immigrated to the United States from Mexico precisely for this reason. With a touching anecdote that brings tears to Viviana, she shares:

Well my dad was a valedictorian. He had a full ride into the best school where he’s from. But then he dropped out just so he could come to the U.S. So like I always have these things, *like Papi, I’m not like you, I’m not the top of the class*, like he would tell me when he was the valedictorian in his high school, he couldn’t even afford the graduation stuff, so he wore a spiderman shirt and he was like, *Mija, It doesn’t matter if you have money or not. It’s what you make of it*. And like my mom. When I was in middle school, she was doing her bachelors, so she would do night classes. I would like see my mom, and I was like mom, how’s school going? She would say, *I’m just so tired*. When we went to my mom’s

graduation, you know she cried. They both really emphasized education and I was like okay, I'll try.

Contrary to Janelle who turns to school as a way of turning away from the gendered expectations of her culture, Viviana reluctantly applies to school as an obligation to the examples set by her parents, who despite devastating financial woes are resolved to earn their educational degrees. For Viviana, her self-definition is never described as her own. Her relationship to her parents is eternally bound to memories of struggle, her recollection of not 'having had food in forever' and her mother being unable to help her, something Viviana describes as being in a 'battle'. 'I want you to go to college', she mother demands, 'I want you to get yourself out of this situation'. For many students in this study, prospects of attending college are accompanied by the burdens of finance. Unable to afford the cost of attending college in New York City, Viviana's plane ticket from California is paid for by the woman who owns the house her mother cleans on the weekends. She shares her first few weeks in the city with laughter at its difficulty. Having 'nothing, nothing', she remembers clutching the \$200 gift certificate to Bed, Bath, and Beyond, given to her by her mother, sleeping with no bed sheets, by herself in a new place, without money to eat, waiting for her scholarship money to kick in. 'There was like a lot of growing in that week', she says, although she would never admit this to her mother.

A kind of resentment toward those around her who do not have to struggle as much begins to grow in Viviana and she is thrown into the realities of economic disenfranchisement and inequity.

I've always had a lot of hostility towards like, not hostility, but it's more like I've learned to accept that some people have it easier than others, you know? and so, my parents, they like they tried, but you know there's only so much they could do.

This eats away at her experience in the theater program as she continually mentions feeling like the 'other', being 'typecast' as the Latina female role, and generally feeling like she is there as the token person of color in the program.

I hate it, I hate it here. I was like the other. I'm always the other, and I was like, nobody gets it here. And the professor is like, you should be glad you're bringing that diversity. I'm like no! One of my professors told me that 'cause I was the Hispanic, I would get typecasted. *You're going to be the person that the guy cheats on, so you're going to be the tramp of the cast.* And ever since that, that was my last semester. I cannot deal with this ignorance.

This clear example of explicit racism marks a turning point in the trajectory of her educational experience. After this incident, she no longer wants to pursue theater and she makes the decision to transfer. She finds comfort in her general studies courses where she finds herself amid the kind of diversity that expands her horizon of ideas and people, something that she suddenly realizes she needs in her life. This is where her social justice consciousness is nurtured and she makes a dramatic turn toward international criminal justice with a strong interest in issues related to gender equity and violence against women. Inspired by many factors at the intersection of her educational and personal journey, it is evident that Viviana is at a place where she feels like she wants to give back. The opening quote from Viviana speaks to a very different direction

her life has taken, but an adventurous and spontaneous spirit that she is willing to recognize and sometimes listen to.

Conclusion

Linear stories of education are often wrapped up in privileges and comforts that allow direct ascension from one educational institution to another. But in education, it is the varied life stories, the experiences with different people and different social lives that enable teachers and students to forge relationships of connection and understanding. It is through responding to others, as a mode of encounter, not a presumption of character, that we recognize the human element as the primary condition of educational life. While it is true that sometimes numbers drive change, policies around inclusion are not enough to transform institutions and ways of thinking into humane practices. Strategic plans for diversity cannot be solely driven by effectiveness and intentions cannot be so easily satisfied. The compelling question for those working toward equity is who 'we' are as an institution, how we have become constructed through a parallel containment of 'them' (Castoriadis 1987), and what discourses produce and operate through the circulation of such limiting comparisons.

There is no doubt that in terms of inclusion, numbers matter. The disproportionately high number of White females in the teaching field is not merely representational but signifies the ways in which institutions work to homogenize certain spaces by cutting intersectionally across racial, gender, and class lines (Ingersoll, Merrill, and Stuckey 2014; Irizarry and Donaldson 2012; Santoro 2015; Villegas and Irvine 2010). We must continue to work for the integration of underrepresented peoples across all spaces and systems, yet such efforts must expand further lines of difference as emergent multiplicities and new possibilities of becoming. This requires both a necessary vulnerability to be affected and an openness to listen and be enlivening by others. On race, Leonardo (2013) forwards a concept of ambivalence and his analysis across multiple racial frameworks concludes with the question of whether or not weakening our reliance is preferable to the damage done to those who are perpetually tied to an analytics of identity and its representations. This does not mean denying the pervasiveness of race and race relations in the United States, but rather, a focus on the language of intelligibility that frames race as a natural and unproblematic construct. As we see, there is much work to be done.

However, this study turns our attention, if ever so slightly, to how the constitution of the self, as entangled within affective experiences, moves individuals into and away from positions of studenthood. While much of education is deeply imbued by normalizing power, as seen in Janelle's fractured sense of two lingual worlds and Viviana's delimiting experience with ethnic positioning, these subjective experiences open up new ways of engaging with complex questions of belonging that are otherwise left foreclosed within the dogma of identity. In working with childhood memories, we see how culture comes to be negotiated in a multiplicity of ways. For Janelle, her frustration with the cultural demands on women leads her toward school, while for Viviana, it is her devotion to family and their sacrifice that nudge her to pursue her degree. We also see how singular encounters with others have profound influence in our lives, such as Tania's utter devastation with a professor or Brandon's meeting with a military

recruiter. And in the end, context matters: Viviana leaves us still wondering, what would have happened to her sister had the school taken college admissions seriously just a few years prior to her arrival.

The fear is that without the building of new ways of engaging the other, without listening and learning and challenging the epistemic structures that create the isolating borders of otherness, the institution will continue to be places of stranger-making (Ahmed 2012). Inclusion cannot rest upon markers of identity, but must include direct effort to address the relations of power that have turned identity into a political form of governing marginality. Traditional concepts of autonomy, coherence, linear development, and reductive reasoning are reconsidered as dynamic reimaginings that open up questions as to how relationships are forged, how progress is demystified, and how listening and learning across difference do not deny patterns of experience but rather provoke a mode of encountering each other that resists the terms of its construction. If we expect our teachers to disrupt the vehicles of racism and discrimination through learning and listen to the other, then perhaps we should also expect this from our institutions.

Notes

1. As distinguished by Dorian Massey (1994), early conceptions view space as a three-dimensional container in which human activity occurs, a contextual backdrop waiting to be enlivened by human intervention. Place, in contrast, signifies, in a fundamental sense, a location that has been given meaning, articulated through the discursive act of naming, memory, and emotional attachment. An example of place is 'home'.
2. For Spivak (2000), the body is an abstraction. Undoubtedly, there is a body, and in some cases, conceiving of the body as concrete is the only way in which we are able to make sense of material reality. Yet, the body is a figure of the historical, cultural, anthropological moment that is determined, thought of and conceptualized as concrete. This is very different from the body *being* concrete. To imagine the body differently, we must participate in the production of knowledge that refuses the body as reductive to categorical thinking.
3. The racial distribution of interviewed participants is as follows: Black female ($n = 4$), Black male (3), Asian female (1), Asian male (2), Latino female (3), Latino male (4). Although the narratives in this study demonstrate the tension of using race as a marker of subjective experience, we cautiously present these numbers to give a broader sense of the individuals with whom we worked. We understand that doing so works in contrast to our efforts at acknowledging contingency, differentiation, and the process of misrecognition.
4. All names have been changed to assure anonymity.

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