

# Incidents in the Life of Kirsten T. Edwards

## A Personal Examination of the Academic In-between Space

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*Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction. I am aware that some of my adventures may seem incredible; but they are, nevertheless, strictly true. I have not exaggerated the wrongs inflicted by slavery ; on the contrary my descriptions fall short of the facts...I had not motive for secrecy on my own account, but I deemed it kind and considerate towards others to pursue this course.*

(Harriet Jacobs, 1861/2001, p. 2)

*January 20, 2009 11:43 pm*

*Well I had another “White Boy” experience at work today. Actually I had several “White Boy” experiences today. It truly is a rarity for me to have an advising appointment with a White male student (and sometimes White female) that’s not antagonistic, or competitive, or where he’s simply respectful. I don’t know what it is! I’m thinking to myself, “If I’m going to visit with my academic advisor or any university official, heck any human being, I’m going to try to have a positive, respectful interaction.” But noooo, this is obviously too much to ask. It’s almost as if they’re incapable of seeing me as an equal individual. I mean they are utterly oblivious. What did Peggy McIntosh (2008) say, “carefully taught?” I think I’m really starting to get it now. These students really have been taught by everything around them, everything that makes them who they are that they are superior. That they don’t have to have respect for anyone they deem unworthy. Sometimes I get the distinct feeling that they feel like they are paying for their “university experience” and therefore they reserve the right to view me as just another part of the “product.” Like I’m some sort of a servant, or dare I say slave, as opposed to a university professional. It really is frustrating. It’s like I try not to get all prideful, but heck I have a Masters degree, I’m a grown woman, I’m educated, I’m smart, and most importantly, I have the information they need to make it through the university and ultimately graduate. But they apparently see me as some sort of Aunt Jemima servant, whose only goal in life is to wait on them hand and foot. Like obviously they are of superior intelligence, better in every way, and there’s*

*no advice I could give to them that would be of any use. And all I need to do is meet their demands and my purpose will have been served...*

Recently, I read a narrative piece by theorist Denise Taliaferro-Baszile (2006). In the text she describes a concept she terms the *onto-epistemological in-between*, the place where she does not quite belong. When I read the text, I felt a light bulb turn on. There was an immediate understanding, communication, bonding between me and the author (or the concept). Although Taliaferro-Baszile was describing her experiences as a Black, female, junior faculty member at a Predominately White Institution (PWI), I knew instantly what she was talking about. I felt it. I did not simply theoretically understand the concept. I just knew! Maybe it was the place I was in as a black, female, doctoral student and professional employee. Maybe it was the intersection of the professional and academic. Or maybe, as I feared to admit the most, it was years of navigating White, male spaces in my educational and professional career. It was years of “feeling” like I was not “doing” what I was supposed to be doing. I was not functioning as I was expected to function; as if I was occupying the “wrong” space; as if something just did not fit right. But for whatever reason, I knew and I wanted to know more.

In addition, I wanted to know how others experienced this space. My experiences are individual and personal and are limited in their scope. By listening to the stories of other “in-betweeners,” I hoped to gain a fuller appreciation for this academic navigation (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2000). Therefore, I decided to have a conversation with three other academic “in-betweeners” who occupy different socially constructed spaces. I am interested in how other members of Academia who do not fit neatly into these ideological boxes negotiate the treacherous waters of the Academy. What do we do when our race or gender or ideologies do not coincide with the original design, with the underlining/historic values of the institution (Anderson, 1988; Solomon, 1985; Thelin, 2004)? And what do our navigational practices and understandings tell us about higher education today? As well, I made another decision to embark on this journey of discovery with post-colonial discourse and narrative inquiry lenses. I believe the historical significance of colonization and post-colonization, as well as the value of telling stories or counter-narratives will significantly aide in the development of this “in-between” concept. And so I begin.

## Colonization/Post-Colonization

As a formerly colonized nation, the United States has a legacy of exclusion and oppression, especially within established institutions such as higher education (Anderson, 1988; Solomon, 1985; Thelin, 2004). We, like many other parts of the world, have been “discovered” and subsequently conquered by a European power. We have a history of forced labor and genocide. Our past is filled with laws, rules, and policies meant to excessively privilege one group by systematically oppressing others (Memmi, 1965). However, what establishes us as a post-colonial nation are events such as the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, the Civil and Women’s Rights Movements, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Brown vs. Board of Education 1954, Affirmative Action, etc. We have laws in place now that supposedly confirm to us that “all men (and women) are created equal,” that we all have the right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of property.” And these laws apparently overturn previous institutional establishments to the contrary. Yet, are these edicts of equality materializing in our everyday lived experiences? Has legislation been successful in

eradicating the North American Colony? Or is the length of their reach limited to black and white, pen and paper?

U.S. higher education serves as a significant starting point to begin this investigation of presumed decolonization. As one of the first incorporated institutions in the colonial state, higher education was marked with the DNA of the colony (Thelin, 2004). Its explicit function was to operate within and for the new colonial entity. Not only was it created to educate the male offspring of the colonizers—the next generation of the privileged—it also aided in teaching these colonial students what it meant to be the controlling class. In the same instance, as the sons of the colonizers were away preparing to control, the daughters were staying home to domesticate and reproduce (Palmieri, 1987; Solomon, 1985). In addition, the Black and Red bodies of the colonial space, the “officially” colonized, were introduced to yet another institution that would facilitate their servitude, marginalization, and subsequent dehumanization. So even in its inclusions and exclusions higher education—as with all colonial institutions—was reinforcing the demands of the colony. It was modeling for the colonial peoples, male and female, Black, White, and Red, the expectations of the colonial state. While Native Americans were “invited” to attend and adopt the ways of Europeans in their newly created Halls of Erudition; while White women were made to stay home and reproduce the “Republican Motherhood” and later provided an alternative education which was separate and unequal; while Black slaves worked in the kitchens and on the grounds of the institution, or their young Masters carried them to college as personal servants; the whole design reflected the requirements of the new colony (Anderson, 1988; Churchill, 2004; Palmieri, 1987; Solomon, 1985; Thelin, 2004).

Higher education was only a cell—albeit a potentially important cell—in the body of the colonial state. It was one microcosmic replica of the larger North American colony. And because of its static nature, higher education has miraculously maintained much of its colonial DNA for over three centuries (Thelin, 2004). As John R. Thelin (2004) argues, there remained a constant calling, or need to maintain a connection, to colonial roots by many of the oldest higher education institutions, such as Harvard and William and Mary, well into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. In reality, much of what we as a nation consider the “collegiate experience” is a simulacrum of the colonial university. As Thelin (2004) reminds us in the introduction of his comprehensive text *A History of American Higher Education*, “... [Higher Education’s] deep roots in the American past have given it an unusual mixture of perspective, confidence, and *continuity of purpose*” (p. xiii, italics added). Well what exactly was that purpose? According to Barbara Miller Solomon (1985) author of *In the Company of Educated Women*, that purpose was to educate future, “...ministers, lawyers, doctors, and *men of affairs*...” (p. 2, italics added), to provide a, “...mark of distinction [for the] *potential leaders* [of the new colony] (p. 2, italics added).” Those “potential leaders” and “men of affairs,” were definitely not female, nor were they non-White. We see in these two simple passages that the early purpose of colonial higher education was to create clearly delineated classes and functions for different groups of people. And we also see that in many ways U.S. higher education has not deviated from its original purpose. One example is the ranking of higher education institutions today. While the presence of different “types” of institutions for the “common man and woman” may lead us to believe that we as a nation are providing educational opportunities for a broader spectrum of individuals, the most prestigious institutions are still reserved for the formation of the “colonial elite” (Thelin, 2004, p. 25). And the other “types” are perceived as adapted models of normal schools for the training of the 21<sup>st</sup> century middle class (Anderson, 1988). The prestigious universities not only produce the Bourgeois

class, they also continue the maintenance of the Proletariat by preserving classist divides which are cut along sexist and racist lines (Memmi, 1965).

This preservation of divides leads me back to my original topic of inquiry. Who are the “Academic In-betweeners?” In my opinion, bearing in mind different socially constructed identities created in a colonial state, these individuals navigate spaces between privilege, oppression, and discomfort within the Academy. While some of us do occupy the space of the Bourgeois Colonized as philosopher Albert Memmi argues (1965), an intermediary class of slightly privileged colonized peoples; this is not the extent of our in-between experience. The “beauty” of the in-between space is that it has the ability to physically and metaphysically embody the professional, academic, and ideological position of both the colonizer and the colonized simultaneously, not simply that we enact colonizer and colonized behavior (Freire, 1970). I will attempt to bring some grounding to this concept by way of my own lived experience. I, as a Black, female, administrator, and scholar, do not simply function to my White male student as a class above the poor, useless, servants, and maintenance/facility workers he encounters daily. By virtue of my professional position in the institution, I also function as a personal authority to him. Therefore in the same epistemological space, I represent to my student both a higher ranking colonizer and a sub-human colonized. Where the challenges of the in-between space surface is when the colonizer within my White male student sees in me a physically marked colonized individual and desires to demote said colonized or Bourgeois colonized to my *intended* space.

Therefore, the core of my argument is not simply that universities are racist and sexist spaces (which they are) but that they still function and subsequently resurrect ideologies based on a colonial model. So unlike Patricia Hill-Collins (1998), I do not classify Academic In-betweeners as necessarily “outsiders-within” U.S. higher education. Alternatively, I may describe us as “dislocated insiders.” We *are* supposed to be here. A colony cannot exist without both the colonizer and the colonized (and I may argue the Bourgeois colonized). However, the nuance of the Academic In-between space is that we also serve as reminders, testifiers, or potentially the “conscious” of the remaining educational colony (Dubois, 1903). The experiences of the in-between, the experience of the in-between space says loud and clear “Something ain’t right!” When our “colonizing agent” students look into our faces confused, disgusted, confrontational, it is not because we should not be *here*. It is because we should not stand *there*. The slave should definitely be in the house, just in the kitchen, or the washroom, or on the grounds. Not in the family room, or the den, or the classroom, or the administrative office. And alternatively, the White “master” and “mistress” *should* want to remain blissfully unaware of the daily trials of life in the slave quarters. They *should* be committed to the continuation of the (post)colonial system, invested in the reproduction of injustice.

Therefore, I argue that based on my own lived experiences as well as the lived experiences of my three gracious participants, has 45 years, or one generation, after the Civil Rights Act not been long enough to forget that White is supposed to be supreme, that male is the leader, that Black is designed for labor, that people of color are sub-human, that White is the producer of knowledge (Anderson, 1988; Asher, 2002; Memmi, 1965; Rodney, 1972; Watkins, 2001)? And if you agree with my argument, what happens when Black is the holder of knowledge, when Asian is the leader, when female refuses to simply reproduce subordination, when White is challenging inequality and oppression, when male chooses to follow those leading the revolution? What happens when individuals occupy a space of Academic “mixed-class” as I like to call it, when their position within the Academy communicates one class, but their physical markers

identify them as affiliated with an entirely different class group in a colonial system? How do these “colonial contradictions” navigate this *formerly* colonized space?

Now before I further investigate this in-between concept I would like to say that I do not mean to ignore the many advances in equality we have made as an institution and nation. It is clear, I as a Black woman, have access to resources my predecessors did not. I have the privilege to spend my days discussing theory, epistemology, and ontological experiences. I own the roof over my head. I am a professional with an advanced degree. Honestly, the list of my privileges goes on and on. I would be blind, or “carefully taught not to recognize” as Peggy McIntosh (2008, p. 62) might say, if I did not acknowledge the privileged space I occupy. But what is the extent of this privilege? And why is it still a *privilege*? If I embrace the Myth of Meritocracy, then I should believe that this privilege is no privilege at all but the product of hard work and dedication. And the reason others occupy more or less “comfortable” positions is again a product of their individual effort and innate abilities. However, this is hard for me to believe. For example, the fact that the proportion of ethnic minorities that live in poverty, are unable to access healthcare, and are provided sub-standard educational resources far exceeds the proportion of Whites seems less a product of individual commitment and ability and more a product of systemic inequality (Lui, Robles, Leondar-Wright, Brewer, & Adamson, 2006).

While “growing-up” in the Academy, I am attempting to actively resist the subtle and lethal poison of the oppressor (Freire, 1970). Influenced by the self-reflexive theories of Fanon (1967) and Freire (1970), I ask myself “How can I gather enough of the poison to dissect it, investigate it, then reject it and infuse my own cultural understandings in a way that works toward social justice within the Academy?” While continually preoccupied with the work of equity, I struggle to remind myself that my own cultural understandings cannot “heal” the problem of colonization (Fanon, 1967). It can only begin the work of dismantling the issue. Deconstruction of an unjust system is one thing. Reconstruction of a just system is another. Therefore, in light of the complexities associated with the post-colonial state of U.S. higher education, through this paper I have only attempted to begin the work of deconstructing the inequitable in-between space within the institution. However, my hope is that this small beginning will eventually inspire myself and others to continue and complete the work of deconstruction and ultimately begin the work of reconstructing an equitable educational institution.

Furthermore, socially just deconstruction is further complicated by the continued efforts of the established institution. As university administrators/colonizers work to create a “home” space for White and male students within the Academy, it becomes less and less of a home for the “Other” (hooks, 1994). If “Other” students are to be successful (or succeed according to the standards of the established regime), they must adapt to the sovereignty of the colonizer (Memmi, 1965). This means allowing parts of their authenticity to shrink to gain facility with the language of the colonizer (Hill-Collins, 1990; Lawrence, 1995). Therefore it becomes a struggle for these “Colonial Contradictions” within the Academy like myself who have submitted to the process of academic colonization, the Academic In-betweeners, to then represent ourselves in non-stereotypical, emancipatory ways (hooks, 1994; Memmi, 1965). We must choose to navigate the Academy in an extremely thoughtful manner, if we hope to work towards socially just practices within this not-home space (hooks, 1991). This is not to say that I seek to provide through these stories solutions for the unjust, Academic In-between, not-home space. As mentioned before, the goal of this paper is to aide in deconstruction not to begin reconstruction. However, through an examination of and subsequent summation of these narratives, we can

begin to ascertain a more robust understanding of the Academic In-between experience and, therefore, become better equipped to think about tangible possibilities for future solutions.

I recognize that my conception of navigation is biased towards socially just ends and that submitting to the oppressive, White supremacist, patriarchal, heterosexist, capitalist hegemonic understandings of academia to attain the rewards of that system such as money, prestige, promotion, acceptance albeit contaminated, (selling-out) is a navigational tool as well. However, through this paper I will focus on the navigational practices of those who are like-minded, those individuals who choose to acknowledge the antagonistic nature of the Academy, those who refuse to accept the values of the colonizer as sovereign, and choose instead to not turn a blind-eye to the indoctrination of the Academy. With that being said, I continue to recognize the oppressor within myself (Freire, 1970). I am privileged. My conceptions of social justice are flawed. I am part of an Academic elite. The very fact that I am spending hours writing a paper on colonization within the Academy proves that I am far removed from much of the struggle for equity and social justice on the larger scale. Indeed, my conceptions of the post-colonial binaries are informed by this privileged position. However, I press on. I choose to use this place of not belonging as a starting point but remain intent on maintaining a space of critique within my own academic discourse.

## Narrative Inquiry

*March 27, 2008 5:16 pm*

*Today I met with my boss to do sort of an informal performance evaluation. Anyway, the evaluation was going well. She had a lot of good things to say about me. I was actually quite surprised! But then she said something not so “positive.” She said maybe I should start calling myself “Ms. Edwards” or “Ms. Kirsten” with the students to make the relationship more formal. I told her how I like to keep it informal so the students especially the minority students will feel comfortable coming to see me. It can be so difficult for them to make it at a PWI. I want them to know there’s someone here to support them that they can talk to. She said she understood, but she thinks sometimes the students (code for White students) don’t see me as an authority figure because “I look so young.” So when I tell them something, they go behind me and ask her if what I said was correct. What?!!! I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. She said maybe if I had them address me with a title, they would see me as more of an authority figure. Obviously she doesn’t see the real issue. I reminded her that my co-worker Kendall lets the students call her by her first name and they (White students) never question her authority. In fact, they love her and worship the ground she walks on precisely because of her informality. And furthermore, Kendall was the one who trained me because she, my boss, wanted me to be trained by the more “student-friendly” advisor as opposed to the other advisor who demands that students call her Ms. Tessle. The students hate Ms. Tessle! Now, all of a sudden I need the students to address me as Ms. Edwards? Why can’t she see what’s really happening here? The only difference between me and Kendall is Kendall’s White and I’m Black. We both have Masters degrees and are current doc students, we’re around the same age, and our advising styles are pretty much the same, because again SHE TRAINED ME! You know, sometimes I wish people would just listen...I wish they would just hear me...I wish they understood. It seems like you have to shove it in their faces before they get it. And even when you do, you’re viewed as “angry,” “radical,” or my favorite*

*“overreacting.” Oh well, I guess it doesn’t matter, nobody cares about my side of the story anyway. But damn it! I’m not about to change the way I interact with my students because of some racist kids! And although I realize because of the racist environment I’m working in, there may be different requirements necessary for me to receive “some” of the same results (Hell, I’m not completely stupid!), I’ll be damned if I just give in. The environment needs to change, not me! Shoot, if they don’t respect me now, “Ms.” definitely won’t help...*

Before I began this journey of researching the “in-between,” I knew I wanted to tell my story. I wanted to be heard. But with no one to listen, I told myself. Journaling or keeping a diary had been a part of my life since I was a teenager. I have written the most during the most frustrating, confusing, difficult moments of my life. So it was comforting when other “elder” scholars of color encouraged me to document my most trying times as a doctoral student and future academic. I have been told on multiple occasions to use my experiences as fuel for my writing and to treasure the storms I weather in the in-between as gold nuggets refined in the fire. Consequently, while I was encouraged by scholars I highly respect to “write it down,” it was natural and logical for me to begin the chronicle of my in-between experience. Journaling was the healing response to my feelings of silencing and being disregarded in the Academy. Anytime I spoke out about how I was feeling, I was viewed as complaining or not being a team player. It was as if I was being told I needed to just get over it. There were things I wanted to “say”—things that were not in research journals, or quantitative analysis, or Flagship Agendas. These were issues that were not easily fixed or “leadership develop”-ed out of the organization. These were simply reality, truth, my truth. And I wanted it to be heard. But how do you make sharing your journaling, being heard, telling your story, a research project? As I would soon discover, you do it through Narrative Inquiry! As Laurel Richardson and Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre (2000, p. 965) remind us, “This new qualitative community could...reach beyond academia and teach all of us about social injustice and methods for alleviating it.”

Narrative Inquiry has offered me the opportunity to position my perspective as well as the perspectives of other “in-betweeners” (Chase, 2005; Hill-Collins, 1990; Moen, 2006). Reality is now able to be seen through the eyes of the one who is living it or telling it. The subject of the experience becomes the final authority of that experience. As Torill Moen (2006, p. 58) states, “...it is impossible to understand human mental functioning without considering how and where this occurs through growth.” Embedded in this quote is the idea of subjectivity and a unique lived-experience. She goes on to say that there is “...no static and everlasting truth. Instead there are *different subjective positions* from which we experience and interpret the world” (p. 63, italics added). This means not only is my truth subjective, but the hegemonic “Truth” that is inscribed within Academic discourse is subjective and open to interpretation. In addition, this method of research has allowed me to not only tell the stories of others navigating the institution, but also weave my own development into the text (Miller, 2005). By positioning our perspectives, I am in a small way attempting to centralize our experiences in the Academic discourse, or better stated, penetrate the current hegemonic discourse about the University experience. I want to, as Charles R. Lawrence (1995) says, provide a “counter-narrative.” I would like my readers to listen and to (re)think how they view the higher education Institution. And if they hear a disconnect, contemplate why Academic Truth (that is supposedly complete and for all intents and purposes, Fact) does not coincide with our truth(s). In addition, I want to “crystallize” the in-between experience (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2000). I want to view it from multiple angles, multiple sources. In so doing, I wish to provide a fuller more substantial understanding of these

experiences. I want to hear someone else. And then I want to ask, “How does their navigational practice, further inform this very personal experience/concept.” I am interested in seeing how other in-betweeners’ experiences further develop this concept that came to me during my own individual struggle with(in) the Academy.

When writing about researching the autobiographies of early women teachers, Maria Tamboukou says,

... I have considered the author’s disappearance as an immensely thrilling and exciting theme that has been radically reworked in the narratives revolving around the construction of female subjectivities. These autobiographical narratives, I have argued, have constructed a space ‘in the margins of hegemonic discourses’...for the female self in education to emerge rather than disappear. This emergence however, **has not constituted a unitary core self**, but rather a matrix of subject positions for women ‘writing themselves’ to inhabit, not in a permanent way, but rather temporarily, as points of departure for going elsewhere, becoming other... (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2008, p. 108, bold added)

Like Tamboukou, I am not seeking a “unitary core self” for the mixed-class, Academic In-betweeners. I simply desire to create a space in this Academy where alternative voices can be heard. I also want to give others the opportunity to be heard. I do not know if they want to be heard. But I know I want to be heard, so I am inviting them along on my quest. And honestly, I want to add validity to my experience (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2000; Riessman, 2008). I already know the isolation I had encountered when attempting to communicate my personal view of the university to the “powers that be.” Alone, I feel like my narrative will be (has been) treated like the early publication of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Smith & Watson, 2000). Upon release, it was immediately ridiculed as falsified information. Its validity and value were stripped away because it did not conform to the dominant cultures’ perceived “reality.” I realize four narratives may not bring down the beast of hegemonic discourse. However, maybe it can be part of the process. With that being said, I do not fail to realize my agency in the presentation of these narratives. While I listen to the conversations I have had with my three colleagues, I acknowledge my own frames and ideologies. I know that my personal understandings can affect the way I interpret their words (Andrews et al., 2008). I am listening to these narratives at a specific point in my own human development, which has a profound impact on what I see in the data. As narrative researcher Molly Andrews states, “All of us bring to our research knowledge which we have acquired through our life’s experiences, and indeed how we make sense of what we observe and hear is very much influenced by that framework of understanding” (Andrews et al., 2008, p. 86). In addition, during a lecture given by Janet L. Miller (2009), she reminded us as budding researchers that themes do not “emerge.” We as researchers identify themes based on our own understandings and beliefs. I know that I am particularly vulnerable to “identifying” specific themes in this project, because it is so close to me. The subject of this paper is not some abstract phenomenon that I researched in a text book. The in-between is my everyday lived experience. It is who I am. I can not deny my personal investment.

However, despite my reservations, I choose to continue. The work is far too important for me to ignore. I have a responsibility as a scholar to add to the body of knowledge within my scholarship community (Riessman, 2008). Therefore, I am committed to identifying myself throughout this work to add transparency and authenticity (Miller, 2005). As well, I have made every effort

to be as honest in my description and interpretation of the narratives as possible. While I work with these conversations, I remind myself to be a reflexive researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). As I interpret the words of my colleagues, I am also deconstructing my own understanding of those words. I am working to allow *our* voices to be heard, and not to hear my voice in their words. It has been a difficult task but a necessary one if I am to work as a narrative researcher. I also understand that this is a worthwhile labor of love (hooks, 2003). Therefore, I press forward, hoping to produce scholarship that is meaningful, authentic, transparent, and socially just.

## Voices

For this project I have selected three individuals who I have identified as academic “in-betweeners.” Because of different socially constructed identities, these individuals navigate spaces between privilege, oppression, and discomfort within the Academy. In no way do I assume that between the four of us, we represent the totality of the in-between experience. Rather, I expect our shared stories will begin the process of crystallizing that experience (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2000). These stories thus provide different angles to refract light onto this “in-betweenness.” Hopefully these multiple points of view will help us gain a fuller appreciation for the “in-between space” and a greater understanding of the nature of the post-colonial Academy.

### Professor Martin: The Familiar Guest

I interviewed Professor Martin<sup>1</sup> on February 23, 2009 at 12:25 pm. He is a Black assistant professor at a large Research university in the South. His academic experience has been varied. As he mentioned in the beginning of our conversation, his participation in several different types of institutions from a small Historically Black College/University (HBCU), to a small PWI with less than a one percent Black population, to a large PWI with a very active Black community, has significantly informed the way he navigates the academic institution or as he puts it “White spaces.” One of the first remarks he made was,

One of the things I learned from my major professor which in some ways I think is a compliment and on the other hand I feel is a put down...but I think really guides the way I think about the Academy, as he put it so eloquently...he says I have a way of making White people feel comfortable. That framing of making White people feel comfortable means that you are clearly in a White dominated society. How do you navigate it? What insights go into it? How does your knowledge of White supremacy guide the way you move within the institution?

He went on to say,

At a Black institution you gain a certain kind of grounding and what that grounding looks like is you know that even though you’re in an all Black environment you understand that environment is functioning in a wider White society. So how do you get your sea legs when you’re going out into a community that may not have the same kind of values?

Through my conversation with Professor Martin, I felt a very distinct navigational process. He was clear about his understanding that he was moving through a not-so-welcoming environment. He was also clear that to make it through this system, it would require every tool he had picked up along the way. He stated there has been "...this kind of racial-socio-cultural-political kind of lens that has guided the way I move in the institution."

Regardless of the fact that he had acquired all of the necessary credentials to participate fully in the Academy, he still felt like a "guest." His physical markers still in many instances outweighed those credentials. He appeared to have an understanding that he did not belong here or at least that the dominate culture did not feel he belonged here. He was not expected to occupy the space of "scholar" in the Academy. However, the nature of his chosen profession and his desire to work for social justice in the Academy required that he continue the navigational process. As he went on to say,

I've been as welcomed [by the dominant culture in the institution] as they can be, but ultimately for the institution to really be welcoming to a man of color there'd be so many things they would have to drastically change [which causes me to] feel familiar but I still feel like a guest in a lot of ways.

This statement personally resonated with me. As I move through the academic institution, I constantly feel like I am bumping against walls and structures that do not fit me, that were not designed with me in mind. I understood Professor Martin's constant struggle to figure out a way to move within and apart from the institution. The institution establishes clear expectations. Oftentimes, these expectations do not coincide with the experiences or the understandings fostered in communities of color. Many times these expectations stand as contradictions to the person of color. When speaking of his students' reaction to him as a Black professor, as the "Knower" in the classroom he said,

When the old White guy says "I don't know everything but let me tell you what I know," they listen. But when the Black teacher says "I don't know everything," they're like "We know so quit making stuff up (laughter)." It's the honest to goodness truth. I had one student tell me after the fact that when they first met me they assumed I didn't know what I was talking about...

I definitely understand this experience. Oftentimes, the students I work with question my directives. They go over my head to my White supervisor to confirm the validity of my statements. It is as if my race automatically contradicts my position as knower. Apparently, there are some points of community within this navigational in-between process. However, how well does my experience connect when the racial dynamics are changed?

Jane: Tough Choices...

I interviewed Jane on March 2, 2009 at 4:45 pm. Jane is a White, female, self-identified feminist, doctoral student. She has completed her coursework and is now working on her dissertation. She attends the same above mentioned university. Her research interests include issues of diversity and leadership. Specifically, she wants to look at the motivating factors that encourage White leaders in the Academy to serve as mentors or "allies" for Black students.

As she mentioned, her own struggles with gender equity has informed her desire to participate in social justice research. However, these struggles were not the impetus for such work. It was her participation in a required Race and Gender course that sparked her interests. She stated,

I had not thoughtfully taken it to the next step to say if I can recognize my experiences as a woman are a unique set of experiences and that there are still limitations and there are still...societal challenges related to being a woman, let me extrapolate that and say what kind of challenges might other kinds of people face. So I...use that phrase the “diversity Kool-aid” because I’m not naïve enough to think that everyone who’s exposed to the ideas, to those kinds of readings and conversations that I had, I’m not naïve enough to think that everyone just through exposure would have the same kind of mind set...

When I listened to Jane’s story, the impression I received, especially after having interviewed Professor Martin, was that Jane possessed a greater level of agency or choice in her navigational process. I believe this is significantly informed by Jane’s race. As we talked, it seemed Jane’s first real encounters with having to navigate the Academy came after her experience in the Race and Gender class, when she chose to participate in social justice work. She went on to say,

If I didn’t want to think about it, I wouldn’t have to. And I try to recognize that...I’ve never had to worry about whether I was, am I going to be representing or are they going to think I’m the voice of the “Other” am I...even as a woman I work with a lot of women. So I never feel like I’m the female voice. But...I recognize that other people in the college, women, minorities, in different settings, that is a barrier for them that that they may feel that their opinions and their voices may really be ignored. May really be discounted. So um, I recognize that privilege that’s associated with my Whiteness and I try not to take advantage of it...

Unlike Professor Martin, who seems to be forced to negotiate a place of not belonging, Jane has to make a conscious decision to recognize the privilege associated with her Whiteness. She has made a choice to occupy the in-between space, to drink the “diversity Kool-aid,” because of her personal conviction to function as a socially just agent. As she stated, her Whiteness provides the privilege to choose.

I would say being a White woman, a White anything interested in diversity at a school like this definitely qualifies as an in-between space. I would say...yes I think it is sometimes a struggle. But even to say that I think is very selfish, because I have a choice to be in this struggle. And there are other in-between spaces that are much more uncomfortable, where people don’t have a choice. They can’t opt out of. So the reason that I choose to navigate this space is I feel like I have some moral imperative as a decent human being, as a Christian.

Jane continued with an example of how she can as a White-body “opt out” of the in-between,

...the ways that I struggle with are, well there are a couple of ways. So when I’m sharing my dissertation topic and you get the funny looks. So then the struggle is the next time

somebody asks you, what kind of answer do you give? And do you just, “Well I’m interested in...”

Talking with Jane was extremely enlightening for me. Although she was a self-proclaimed feminist and was honest about her struggles in the Academy as a woman, she seemed clear about having a place, a fit in the Academy as a White person. She also seemed to understand that her Whiteness provided a definite privilege. She was honest about the reality that her navigation was a choice and that while she is choosing to struggle, she is along side many who do not have the privilege of that same choice.

### Li: Invisibility

As I worked through this idea of the Academic In-between, I recognized the very clear Black/White binary I used to frame this space in. Because of the legacy of slavery, especially in the South, participants in the U.S. institution of higher education tend to hold very distinct understandings of what it means to be Black and what it means to be White in the institution. However, what happens when you do not fit into either one of these boxes?

I sat down to have a conversation with Li on March 18, 2009 at 3:30 pm. Li is a Chinese doctoral student. She is still in the coursework stage of her doctoral process. Li completed her undergraduate degree in China. She received her Masters degree from a large PWI in the Mid-West U.S. and is working on her doctorate at the same Southern institution Jane attends and at which Professor Martin teaches.

When thinking through Li’s navigational practices, hers of course were quite different from both Professor Martin’s and Jane’s. Li does not possess the same privilege of having a place in the institution and choosing to negotiate an in-between space as Jane does. However, she does seem to negotiate the in-between space very differently than Professor Martin. While Professor Martin seems to experience a very visceral reaction to his presence as a “knower” in the Academy, Li seems to experience more of an isolation or ignoring. She said,

...you write a paper and don’t mind anybody else’s business. It’s like there’s to me, as [an] Outsider especially. Not a White person, I think it’s...there’s this sense of isolation. People...everybody does their own thing and it is understood that you do your own thing and don’t mind anybody else’s [business]. That’s the part I learned. I had to somehow adjust.

I had the impression that her presence is responded to as an anomaly in the Academy. Since the Academy does not know what to do with her, it just rejects her, boxes her off. She went on to say,

I also feel that I’m waiting to do the “adjust,” but obviously my surroundings doesn’t really care. It doesn’t want to do the adjustments towards me because...you get what I mean...

When she made that statement “you get what I mean,” she looked at me with a knowing, as if there was a shared understanding between the two of us as fellow “in-betweeners” negotiating an

oppressive space. There was an acknowledgement that she did not belong and I did not belong as well.

As she further developed this feeling of isolation, she explained how her accent affects her interactions with members of the University community. She said,

First of all in America[n] society...it's [a] very strong sense of individualism and capitalism and everybody's so busy, so busy. And we don't have time for anything for anybody else especially "here comes Li." Especially during [the] beginning years. I myself speak English. I don't feel as comfortable as I should and I am conscious, very conscious, aware of my accents. I am afraid and concerned that because of my accents people will not understand me...I'm not saying that I'm not comfortable communicating with people. But when people see me, my existence and the way I speak, my accents, people respond to that even though I explain myself quite clearly. But they like they will for some people they will not even look at you when you're trying to tell them...something for some people the nice ones they will look at you like really trying hard. You can see it from their facial expression. They're trying to read hard your lips. I think...that's their effort. But I don't really think that's necessary, because I don't speak a weird weird language. There might be some accents, but it's not weird. It doesn't require that much effort.

Li is correct in saying it does not require that much effort. As we spoke I understood every word she said. Yes, she does speak with an accent, but her English is quite clear. But as she said her "existence" is a contradiction in the Academy. The immediate response she receives from University members is to assume that interactions with her will be laborious. They instinctively identify her as "Other" and subsequently as a "bother." When I asked her whether or not she thinks she fits in the Academy she said,

Do you think I fit? I don't care! After one year, two year, ten years, how much I can fit? How much I'm able to really fit myself with my surroundings? I think that's out of my control...I cannot say how exactly it will work out because as long as I try, as long as there's an interact[ion] with my surroundings, things will work. Whether they work out, work up, work down, I don't know. It will change. I believe in that so I don't really focus on do I fit. Do I fit? No, I don't think that's important.

The more I spoke with Li, the more I perceived that she had psychologically opted-out of the system. She realized that she did not fit in the Academy and that to experience some sense of belonging would require more effort than she was willing to expend. Therefore she made the choice to disengage. This disengagement seems like a direct response to the isolation she is already experiencing as a Chinese student.

In addition, my conversation with Li made me wonder why I do not choose to disengage. I wonder whether or not I have the choice to disengage. I believe my race, as a Black woman, informs my decision to actively struggle with(in) the Academy. While there are some moments of isolation, I also feel moments of attack, when perceptions and ideologies of the Black woman in the Academy stand in direct contrast to who I know myself to be as a scholar. Li's experiences definitely helped me to better understand my own experiences as well as this broad in-between space. I recognize that although her race forces her into the in-between space, it also pro-

vides/demands the opportunity/decision to disengage that space, to negotiate out. Li's Chinese identity categorizes her as "outsider" in this U.S. institution of higher education, while my identity as Black places me in the position of subordinate, servant, "not"-knower. Subsequently, these categories are attached to very specific dominant culture expectations about how we are to move within the Academy. Professor Martin as a Black man should not be producing or providing knowledge; he should be taking orders from the knowledge producers. Jane as a White person should be providing and reproducing dominant forms of leadership and knowledge. Alternatively, Li as a Chinese woman should neither provide knowledge nor receive orders; she should simply not be there.

### Deconstructions: ...and Begin Again the Work

In conclusion, I would like to say that I definitely do not have the answer for, the Truth about, the solution to, the Academic In-between. However, I do believe I have had the opportunity to take a glimpse of this space through four very different lenses. These lenses have assisted me in recognizing that navigational tools come in many different packages. Whether they require constant use and multiple techniques gained through a lifetime of strategizing, or if they are the everyday decision to *choose* to navigate, or if the tool is to navigate out and disengage when able; they are navigational tools nonetheless. Furthermore, the very existence of these tools reminds us that they are responses to an extremely robust and often overwhelmingly oppressive space. This space is real. It is not a figment of our imaginations. Every day we move through the Academy, every time we have to employ a tool, we are reminded that we do not fit. We are forced to acknowledge that the colonial architects did not have us in mind when they established the requirements for functioning within this Academy. It is also apparent that the legacy of colonization persists within this entity we call 21<sup>st</sup> century U.S. higher education. As well, the post-colonial gatekeepers are not making efforts to reverse its effects. At best, they are only making attempts to camouflage or minimize the recognition of said effects. Therefore, it becomes the responsibility of those in-betweeners, the dislocated insiders, those colonial contradictions, the mixed-class, whether born into the in-between space or choosing to occupy it, to use their voices to begin the work.

I hope through this narrative project that we have not only identified the in-between space and provided some ontological grounding for this lived experience, but that we have as in-betweeners highlighted the nature of the Academy. Our experiences in the in-between were not our own constructions, but responses to an antagonistic environment, an environment that does not agree with our currently held positions, an Academic environment. This *is* the nature of the Academy. By highlighting this reality through providing a space for the voices or narratives of fellow in-betweeners to be heard, I hope to have done part of the deconstruction work. As I mentioned earlier, deconstruction of an unjust system is one thing, reconstruction is an entirely different work. However, I am confident that hearing the stories of those that contradict the hegemonic Academic narrative is necessary in beginning the process of deconstruction (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2000). As such, we should never minimize the preliminary work of deconstruction. While reconstruction may be some time away, deconstruction is immediately at hand. As with a building overcome by asbestos, while the ultimate goal may be to build a new habitable construction, the work can not begin without first tearing down the old hazardous environment, attacking and destroying the poison within. We all as members of the Academic community have

a responsibility to attack inequity within the institution. However, that attack can be much more successful when it is strategic. If we have a clearer understanding of the chemical properties and effects of the poison, we can make better choices about our responses, our deconstruction. As is apparent, the Academy still recognizes who is expected to occupy the space of Knower or Subordinate, and who does not have a space at all. And that recognition does not seem to be dissolving anytime soon. Unfortunately, through the voices heard in this project, we are reminded that if an individual does not conform to these demands, because of their race, gender, and/or ideologies, they may ultimately find themselves negotiating the Academic In-between, or the space where they don't quite belong. Nevertheless, deconstructing that space of not belonging through our voices can help us begin to see the promise of a true academic space of liberation.

## NOTES

1. All participants' names have been changed.

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