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2014

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Chapter Two

My Name Is Not Maria/Samira

On the Interchangeability of Brownness in U.S. Pedagogical Contexts

Fatima Z. Chrifi Alaoui, Raquel Moreira, Krishna Pattisapu, Salma Shukri, and Bernadette M. Calafell

In what has been called a "post-racial" era in the United States, women of color continue to be Othered in the academy. In this chapter, we illustrate how the dominant Black-White racial binary in the United States dismisses and conflates Brown women's experiences in the context of a predominantly White private university. This dismissal silences our voices and renders our individual bodies invisible. Through strategies such as erasure, conflation, and denial, Brown women are disciplined in the academy. While race and racism are salient in the lives of Brown women in multiple and complex ways, they are rarely elaborated upon in the current literature.

Brownness is understood in relation to the Black/White binary (Delgado, 1998). Richard Delgado (1998) defines this dichotomous structure as the assumption that "you are either black or white. If you are neither, you have trouble making claims or even having them understood in racial terms" (p. 369). In this context, we employ the term Brownness to delineate a complex group of diverse individuals that are defined by their Otherness—an Otherness that is interpreted as falling out of the assumed Black/White binary. The struggles of Brown people remain unaddressed in the racial discourses in the United States. Our marginalization is often not deemed as a serious form of oppression and is, thus, made invisible. It is important to note that we do not intend to ignore or dismiss the previous efforts towards addressing racial injustices, but only to expand on them by creating a space for the inclusion of our experiences as marginalized Brown identities.

Furthermore, this Otherness is understood "not exclusively as pathology but as a unique set of cultural cues that are most easily understood and respected by those who share those symbols and cultural practices in relation to those who mark them as different" (Hao, 2009, p. 48). The silencing of Brown bodies is, thus, in some ways recognizable and translatable across our experiences. We explore our shared understanding of Otherness while simultaneously examining how our intersecting privileged and marginalized identities complicate our connections to one another as Brown women. Specifically, we discuss how race, sexuality, and citizenship frame our relationships to one another and to Brownness in U.S. American pedagogical contexts.

Brownness in this sense is not only situated in terms of skin color, but also encompasses religion, ethnicity, nationality, language, sexuality, and history. For instance, one of the authors—Salma—has light skin privilege yet identifies as Brown because of her identity as an Arab woman with U.S. citizenship who speaks English with an "accent." This example challenges the notion of Brownness as limited to visible markers of identification; simultaneously, it urges for a more complex understanding of other marginalizing and privileging dimensions.

NAMING OUR EXPERIENCES THROUGH THEORIES OF THE FLESH

In bringing our stories to the forefront, like Madison (1999), we are committed to a theory of the flesh, which Moraga and Anzaldúa (1983) describe as being connected to our ability as women of color to theorize through the body and lived experiences. Drawing on these theories of the flesh we enact hooks' (1990) notion of talking back as our stories disrupt master narratives of women of color in the academy, especially the homogenization and assumed interchangeability of experiences. Theories of the flesh challenge traditional ways of knowing governed by the mind body split, which constructs the body as a space of excess or irrationality. Challenging this construction, theories of the flesh are places where "the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity" (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983, p. 23). Thus, privileging the body in telling our stories is political in that our raced, classed, and gendered knowledges are placed in the center. Honoring our multiple subjectivities and our abilities to be reflexive about our lived experiences is important to our methodological perspective.

In drawing on our theories of the flesh we turn to a performative autoethnographic approach that privileges embodied experiences in connection with a larger context for the purpose of social justice. We "privilege the body as a site of knowing" (Conquergood, as cited in Spry, 2011, p. 31). Drawing on

Spry's (2011) argument that performative autoethnography can be used as a methodology to disrupt normative performances of race, class, gender, nationality, and sexuality, we use embodied performances to call into question the ways our Brown bodies are read. Women of color scholars such as Owens Patton (2004), Calafell (2007, 2010, 2012), and Griffin (2012) have used similar performative methodologies in sharing their experiences in the academy. These stories are told, not simply as testimony, but also to implicate readers into reflection and action (Calafell, 2012). Through personal narratives and performative writing, we create "alternative ways of being through performance" (Spry, 2011, p. 29) as doctoral students—a Brown Brazilian Latina, therefore, a non-Spanish speaker (Raquel), a Muslim Arab of African descent (Fatima), a queer-femme biracial US American (Krishna), and a light-skinned Muslim Arab-American (Salma)—who relate to one another across identities due to a shared relationship with a tenured queer Chicana faculty (Bernadette).

This chapter will address Brown bodies in academia with special regard to how these bodies are framed as "perpetual foreigners"—constant outsiders with no legitimate claim to visibility. In addition, we will address the interchangeability of our bodies under the blanketing of Brownness that shrouds our individual identities and strips us of our agency. We will then challenge this by sharing our unique struggles to find a voice in this muting environment.[1]

THE BLACK/WHITE BINARY AND THE SPACE FOR BROWNNESS

Critical Race Theory scholars, specifically those within LatCrit and AsianCrit, claim that it was not until recently that ethnic/racial minorities other than African Americans have been added to the conversation about oppression based on race (Delgado, 1998; Gee, 1998–1999). Delgado (1998) argues that the "structure of antidiscrimination law is dichotomous" (p. 369) in the United States, due to what he calls the Black/White binary. As a consequence, the racial struggles of people falling outside of the binary are not deemed as serious. Most of all, what LatCrit and AsianCrit generated was the idea that the "discussion about race should not focus solely on the experiences and conditions of African Americans" (Gee, 1998–1999, p. 780).

The consequences that the Black/White binary generate become obvious especially for Brown people who are "both and neither 'inside' nor 'outside'" (Picart, 2007, p. 225). The "other White" strategy, for instance, is a tactic Brown people use to try to fit into the Black/White divide. According to Delgado (1998), Latina/os and other non-White groups are led to identify as White as a way to find relief from racial oppression that is made invisible because of the structure of the binary. However, this identification does not

erase the fact that Latina/os and other non-Whites still do not benefit from Whiteness.

Another pernicious consequence of the Black/White paradigm is the idea that Brown people in the U.S. are always marked as foreigners (Gee, 1998–1999). This assumption is a direct effect of the notion that "real" Americans must be either Black or White. Everyone that does not comply with that norm is assumed to be a recent immigrant and/or a non-US citizen (Gee, 1998–1999). Brown people are, then, the target of another paradigm: the citizen/foreigner binary, which considers us to be foreigners regardless of our citizenship status.

Connected to the idea of "perpetual foreigner" is the notion of "racist nativism." Huber et.al (2008) explains the concept as the combination of racism grounded in White supremacy and nativism, the intense opposition of what is considered un-American and un-patriotic. What is specific about racist nativism is the fact that the hostility towards what is considered foreign is highly racialized. Nativism, particularly, is deeply rooted in the notion that the United States belongs to Anglo-Saxons and, therefore, they are the ones with the right to be considered natives to the country (Huber et al., 2008).

Racist nativism is mainly manifested in three ways, all of which are seen as a threat to American national identity (Sánchez, 1997). The first form is marked by the aversion of languages other than English and, of course, their speakers (Sánchez, 1997). Any racial minority that continues to speak their native languages disrupts the assumed U.S. American national coherence. Next, Sánchez (1997) exposes how nativism is also displayed through the fear and opposition of multicultural and affirmative action proposals as they indicate favoring what is un-American, hurting the "true" natives of the country, Anglo-European Americans (Huber et al., 2008; Sánchez, 1997). Finally, according to Sánchez (1997), there is a belief that immigrants are exploiting U.S. public resources, such as welfare, education, and healthcare systems, again, posing a threat to "real" Americans that are entitled to enjoy those benefits. Though grounded in White supremacy, racist nativism works in conjunction with the Black/White binary since it removes the complexity of racial relations in the U.S., forming yet another dichotomy, the citizen versus foreigner.

The "neither nor" status of Brown people is precisely what destabilizes the Black/White paradigm. Picart (2007) poses that the binary is produced by the idea of an essential Black identity in opposition to an essential White identity and vice versa. The existence of bodies that not only do not fit into the divide but also question its essentialism is what challenges the binary's assumed coherence and normalcy.

HOME IN THE ACADEMY: CONCEPTUALIZING HOME

In telling our stories we draw on theories of home. While we mark the ways we are Othered in the academy, we acknowledge the possibilities created in our relationships that enable a sense of home. We adopt a conceptualization of home as a site of belonging—a fluid location where common ground is found and differences are accepted (Ben-Yoseph, 2005; Carrillo Rowe, 2005; hooks, 1990; St. Pierre, 2008; Teerling, 2011). Identity negotiation, after all, is contingent upon home/place as "identity is shaped through a shared space, a community, a home" (Kinefuchi, 2010, p. 230). Home is transient and multiple, as hooks (1990) demonstrates, "At times, home is nowhere. At times, one knows only extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations" (p. 148).

We locate *our* home/place as a political site where exclusionary structures can be critiqued, where resistance is possible, and where we find empowerment through recognition and belonging. We come to understand belonging through a "politics of relation" (Carrillo Rowe, 2005), in which we can begin to see our positions of power, as well as our positions of resistance, and reimagine power structures through "coalitional affectivity" (Carrillo Rowe, 2005, p. 19).

As women that have left their familial homes in pursuit of academic knowledge, we take on these conceptualizations of home that moves away from a familial understanding towards an understanding of "academic families of choice" (Pattisapu & Calafell, 2012) that are formed around individual and experiential commonalities as well as differences; as a site of *differential belonging* (Carrillo Rowe, 2005) to account for the "ways in which we are oppressed and privileged so that we may place ourselves where we can have an impact and where we can share experience" (p. 35). Our Brown identities converge and diverge along various dimensions allowing for a more complex examination of belonging and the formation of a home/place. Within this home/place, we cultivate critical, empathic, cross-cultural understandings of the ways in which our shared Brownness intersects with our multidimensional racial, ethnic, national, religious, and sexual identities, allowing us to challenge the ways in which others conflate us with one another.

In a graduate program in an academic institution where students compete with one another for recognition, awards, and teaching positions, belonging is elusive. Furthermore, in an environment where women of color face marginalization, the formation of a home/place seems even more difficult as we find ourselves competing against one another for recognition from the dominant white majority. hooks (1990) asserts that as women of color strive for acceptance and compete for limited resources within a white capitalist patriarchal system, many abandon collaborative roots in exchange for blending in. This phenomenon challenges the collective strength we have to transform

oppressive institutional structures and to create a home/place within which we can build solidarity (hooks, 1990). Through joint and separate relationships with one another, we strive instead toward a politics of love and inclusion.

It is through celebration of our differences that home/places emerge. Within systems that oppress and exclude non-White bodies, the yearning for recovery, affirmation, and healing strengthens among underprivileged women of color (hooks, 1990). We do not view belonging as inherently resistive or oppressive, but as a "movement in the direction of the other" (Carrillo Rowe, 2005, p. 27); home/place is created through affective ties, human relationships, and the longing for a community (Ahmed et al., 2003; Ben-Yoseph, 2005; Carrillo Rowe, 2005; Kinefuchi, 2010; Teerling, 2011).

We have cultivated a home/place within which we can heal following silencing and traumatic experiences with marginalization in the academy. Like hooks (1990) argues, we feel the "safety of arrival" in our home/place; a space where our bodies and minds are protected and our struggles and identities legitimized. Here, we dare to make ourselves "subjects, not objects" and to "restore ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world" (hooks, 1990, p. 42). We hope to cultivate not only visibility for Brown women in the academy, but also inspiration and motivation for the Brown women and allies who witness our stories.

BEING BROWN IN THE ACADEMY

I never thought I would find myself in a classroom like this one, several moves away from achieving my doctorate. Growing up poor, biracial, and queer in the rural Midwest, I never imagined that I could become a part of this kind of intellectual community, that I would convene behind the ivied walls of a private university to theorize various dimensions of human communication. This life path was never meant to be etched on my light Brown skin as I sat beneath my grade school's asbestos ceilings. In my predominantly White hometown, access to communities of color—especially brown communities—was scarce. I grew up feeling racially abject in every space I entered. I learned early on to regard community as something inaccessible to me by merit of my strange brownness. As I grew older and began to name my queer femininity and sexuality, my feelings of foreignness became amplified. I have always felt that in each community I enter, at least one of my marginalized identities is positioned as abject. I have grown accustomed to fitting nowhere, always yearning for a home and never quite finding one (hooks, 1990).

But here I sit, poised to complete the second year of my doctoral program. Although I have come so far in my formal education, I continue to feel like

the outsider who is not meant to be here. As I have worked toward advanced degrees, the identities of my colleagues have become less and less diverse. It has become even lonelier, as so many women of color before me have warned (Berry & Mizelle, 2006). In classroom conversations, I am a queer woman of color who cannot help but to engage with theories through the lenses of my lived experiences. Like Anzaldúa (1987), I must rely on what my flesh knows; the knowledge I gain through academia must always coincide with what I know from being a queer biracial woman in this world. Theories that do not validate my lived experiences are the sources of my oppression. My adherence to this edict forces me into a constant battle of elitist knowledge against bodily knowledge—one that I must fight with a deep commitment to my roots. In class this morning, our professor turns our attention to a section of our readings that addresses variations communication styles based on subject position. In the past week, I have found myself wondering about the ways in which considerations of race, gender, and sexuality might complicate this concept. I have been uncharacteristically silent in class this quarter, due in part to the dearth of assigned readings that address identity and lived experiences' impact on communication styles. Because the authors do not take significant measures to consider the influence identities have on communication, I feel alienated, silenced, forced to theorize communication from a cerebral and detached space. I have come to understand that theories of the flesh do not take priority here.

But today, I feel compelled to speak out about my frustration with this week's readings. Tentatively, I raise my hand, suck back the dry air, and prepare my voice to stretch out from my clamped throat. My classmates' stares on my skin burn white hot. I fear that when I speak, my words will simply evaporate. When our professor calls on me, I clam up. I grapple for words, struggling more than ever to articulate how upset I am that the authors whose work we are discussing have failed to account for the ways in which identities—much less, intersectional identities—influence our communication with one another. I strive to articulate to the class how, as a queer woman of color, social norms of communication position me much differently than more privileged bodies. I cite communication studies scholars like Owens Patton (2004) and Calafell (2010), who argue that outspoken (queer) women of color are always already coded as angry and aggressive. I urge my professor and classmates to consider how these constructions of race, gender, and sexuality position women of color in particular ways in regards to communication. In closing, I state that while I understand that these authors did not intend to centralize identities in their arguments, we should not hesitate to ask *why not* and to consider what conversations about identity can do to extend these studies. Although I build shaky bridges from one word to the next, I eventually make my point.

The only thing that has held me together during these difficult moments is the group of Brown women seated across from me in our circle of desks. The gazes I have exchanged with Fatima, Salma, and Raquel provided me with the support I needed to persevere through my anxiety and fear. In this classroom, where lived experiences are treated as secondary to more traditional academic theories, I know that these women value the articulation of lived experiences just as strongly as I do. For them, my assertion that identity *matters* and cannot be dismissed entirely when theorizing communication makes sense. Like me, these women know that the decision to theorize through our bodies is extremely risky and marginalizing—both on the page and in the classroom. Although most other ears in this classroom this morning met my assertions with deep suspicion, these women welcomed and nurtured my voice. Even in my vulnerable state, in these women's presence, I feel safe to articulate my values, beliefs, and experiences.

Of course, the connections I establish with these women do not protect me entirely from the negative reactions that my comments inspire. Others in the room hold fast to the belief that we can and should separate considerations of identity from theorizations of communication; theorizing identity is not what all communication scholars purport to do, after all. Despite these reactions, I know that the women across the circle heard me. Their nodding heads and warm, engaged smiles let me know that I am not alone in this endeavor. Although their warmth cannot absorb the negative affects that circulate, I find recognition and love in their eyes, which is reason enough to persevere. For me, this is the transmission of love, of home flowing from their Brown skin to mine, contingent upon the identities that position us in solidarity in these difficult spaces. In the moments when each breath is its heaviest, I make eye contact with Salma. Earlier this class period, Salma made a brilliant connection between our readings and her own research interests around hybridity. As we swayed together deep in the pit of an intellectual conversation to which we could lay no claim to lived experience as Brown women, Salma had the courage to extend our query and to make this conversation matter beyond the classroom. Salma carved this space for me to speak, just as I hope my words have carved more spaces through which other Brown women's voices might be heard.

You parted the heavy air so that my words could expand, cramped inside my lungs too long. Each of us sits inside skin that belongs nowhere, stories like ours never quite told before, each of us invisible in her own right. Invisible bodies that carry the weight of our identities on their backs (Anzaldúa,1987), burdened with our battles, aching with the pain of unrecognition and dismissal. But we see each other, read between the lines on our hands that tell the stories of flesh blending and blending again. My voice trembles as it echoes through the silent room yet I see my thoughts find a 'home' within you. Your voice reverberates within my mind, your strength to speak begetting my strength to write my body. With each key struck, bold thoughts etch across the page to endure the

consequences of refusing to accept silence. You, with your voice, and I, with my written words. Together, we are discontent with erasure. We redraw the swept-away marks our Brown sisters made across white pages when no one was listening. Your stories, my stories, our stories, converging and diverging as soft soliloquies told to an unresponsive room, as eloquent prose in chapters they will have to read.

While I was completing my undergraduate degree, I had a friend that could not see past my complexion—my white skin, and the blond hair that framed my face. He was a man of color, a man I had on various occasions spent considerable amounts of time with in and outside of school discussing the difficulties faced by members of diverse cultural backgrounds in our academic institute in the United States. As a person of color, he was someone I turned to for recognition and support—a sense of "home." bell hooks' (1990) discursive reconceptualization of "home" as a "a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference" (p. 148) makes it a site of belonging and acceptance amid diversity. My interactions with this man proved to be representative of several other experiences I faced within academia. These experiences troubled my finding of "home," as they consistently situated my Arab-American Brown identity in a "neither nor" location—neither White nor Black; neither citizen nor foreigner.

On campus, he always walked past me, seeing directly *through* my white body. I felt invisible. More so, I felt denied any claims to Brownness simply on the basis of my complexion. My cultural background, embodied struggles, and several of my valued identities were stripped from me every time his eyes glanced past me; they were 'white-washed' by my white body. These incidents were not specific to this one individual, but my interactions with him serve as distinct examples of an ongoing struggle I faced through my academic career. In a setting where the Black/White binary was salient (Delgado, 1998), my Whiteness spoke loudly; in an environment where Brown is victim of a "neither nor" status (Picart, 2007), I was both "neither" and "nor." With every passing, I felt as though my Brownness and citizenship were further erased, and painfully stripped away from every inch of the white body that housed them.

As this individual passed me by day after day, I became witness to how "passing" was being *forced* onto my White body by some people of color. I realized that the symbolic incongruence between my Whiteness and Brownness made it so that they could not coexist—that I could only be one or the other, or even worse, that I could be neither. In response, it was not enough to simply state my Arab identity. I resorted to more visual methods in an attempt to publicly (re)claim my Brown identity, such as dying my hair brown, and then black, to break away from the U.S. cultural symbolic link between Whiteness and blondness, and to have my Brown identity be paralleled by brown tresses as though they would somehow qualify it. I also donned jewelry with Arabic calligraphy, and intentionally spoke out loud in Arabic as a

means of displaying my cultural heritage. Such acts did not lead to recognition, but confusion and marginalization. After colleagues saw past the white exterior, the Brown quickly became equated to foreignness (Gee, 1998; Huber et al., 2008). As a Brown Arab-American, my identities troubled the Black/White binary and the citizen/foreigner binary, always situating me somewhere between "neither" and "nor."

I do not intend in any way to dismiss the privileges of light-skin in claiming Brownness; I acknowledge them. I have passed as White in academic settings when tense political relations between United States and countries in the Middle East were peaking. Choosing not to disclose my full identity allowed me to feel less socially threatened. Morally, I struggled with this, as did Nella Larsen (1929) in her novel, *Passing*: "It's funny about 'passing.' We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it" (p. 82). Allowing my white body to "pass," though, only added to my internal struggles with identity, voice, and recognition. According to Ramona Liera-Schwichtenberg (2000), "passing exacts a high price" (p. 372). Light-skinned individuals who identify as Brown face "the torment of living in the in between with a racialized dual-consciousness" (p. 371). Identity incongruence made me inauthentic in either community, and therefore unable to belong to both. Liera-Schwichtenberg (2000) claims that passing is a "violent challenge to identity categories" as it "constructs a diasporic identity that is never at home no matter where it is located" (p. 372). In the same light, having passing being forced onto a White body through the dismissal of their Brown identities also challenge identity categories through the development of a similar diasporic consciousnesses that renders them 'homeless' within Brown communities. This experience, among others, highlights how a white body works to erase Brownness in a world captured within a Black/White binary, and how Brownness equates to the latter part of the citizen/foreigner binary. My identity as a Brown Arab-American in white body left me feeling displaced and yearning for acceptance.

In my pursuit to complete my degree, I either chose to "pass," had "passing" forced onto me, or faced being treated as a "foreign exchange student." Thus, I sought out individuals who both saw and recognized my Brown Arab-American identity—individuals who could help me create a sense of "home." That recognition was found among really close friends, but most recently, in my doctoral program, I came across a culturally diverse group of women of color that unexpectedly helped me find a sense of "home" within academia. Their recognition of my Brownness has been key to my understanding of my identity. Fatima and I had completed our Masters program together, and I was relieved to have her as a friend and colleague once again. She then introduced me to Raquel, Krishna, and Bernadette—all of whom were welcoming and supportive almost immediately. Not only were they accepting, but they also helped me make peace with the seemingly contra-

dicting identities that I struggled with for years. Bernadette, a faculty member who also has light-skin privilege, claimed her Brownness confidently. Prior to this meeting, I had doubted my agency to claim a Brown identity, feeling unqualified to speak out against my white body that had spoken out on my behalf for years. However, after experiencing the unquestioned acceptance of my Brownness, as well as the encouragement to claim it, I was able to claim it proudly. None of us aim to dismiss the privileges Whiteness provides its 'body' by asserting a Brown identity; however, we are able to acknowledge those privileges while recognizing the depth and duality of its Brown counterpart. Together, we co-created a "home" in which we all embraced each other as women of color, regardless of ethnicity, religion, skin pigmentation, or sexual preferences. Our differences strengthened our bonds as we learnt to look beyond them while simultaneously valuing them. Home, as a site where "differences might meet and engage one another" (hooks, 1990, p. 12-13), was what I found with Fatima, Raquel, Krishna and Bernadette. Among these women, I was able to find what I had begun searching for years ago—a place where all of my identities are recognized and accepted as a unified whole; a place where I did not need to pass or have passing forced upon me; a place where I was not "neither" or "nor," but "both" and "all."

It usually takes about less than a minute for the question to come,
after a "hello," and occasionally a "how are you?"
Sometimes it is direct, but mostly it is masked by a guise
of civility (Patton, 2004), as though there is a civil way
of wanting to make immediate sense of you
of your pronunciation
of where you belong
All of us whose tongues transgress—this difference both
excluding us from the acceptable norm,
and coalescing us all as "foreigners."
Not being able to see past our shared accentuated difference,
Arab and Latina become one.
But we continue to resolve to hold our tongues
from echoing the sounds of others, in our desire to belong.
We need to listen to our tongues to be reminded of our stories
of who we are
of where we've lived
of the languages we speak
and of our selves; (Matsuda, 1991)
our identities that are inseparable
from the way our flesh puts words to our thoughts.
Our accents are so much more than an accentuation of our Brownness.
Every syllable pronunciation, every vowel elongation, every consonantal stress,
is a detail of our complex identities that go beyond simple Otherness.
Because the way we speak symbolizes where we belong:
neither here nor there,

but in the middle, somewhere.

Everyone wants to know: "what are you?" That's how it has been since I moved to the U.S. in August 2010. As an immigrant from Latin America, I thought I was aware of the hostility toward the people coming from below the Rio Grande (Huber et al., 2008). I was, however, relying on my privilege of coming to this country to work on my Ph.D. as a way to escape from the accusations people from my side of the continent have been facing in the U.S. And mostly, I thought I was different. Like many Brazilians migrating to the United States, I brought my own racial beliefs with me and I thought I could differentiate myself from Hispanics and Latinos (Marrow, 2003). My easy solution for that "what are you" question was to simply say, "I'm Brazilian." I didn't really know what the implications of that identification would be. And, honestly, I thought I would not face any. Well, I was wrong.

My reality check came on school's day one: "International Student Orientation Day."

Your name is too long
You have to adjust
Take a step back
You're standing too close
Say hi, but don't touch
You're so exotic!
But you talk too much
You're only "interesting"
With your mouth shut

When classes started, a month after arriving in the U.S., I realized things were more complicated than I first envisioned. I was fine with being an "international" student back then, even after orientation day. I grew up understanding the meaning of "international" as something positive; more than that, as something I would aspire to. Little did I know that that same word would be used to Other me, and to obscure the university's racist nativism toward people who look and sound like me. After the first quarter, I became extremely bitter about my own identity. It was as if I were being pushed into an abyss of invisibility and contempt and back up to an infinite world of tokenization.

Academia both helped me and forced me to define my Brownness. I *had* to be something when introducing myself in front of a classroom, something other than Brazilian because in some of my classmates' minds that could also mean "Hispanic." And that is something I could never identify with. But I had no choice. My Brownness was there. It was all over the place: loud, excessive (Calafell, 2007). Whether I wanted or not, people would see and interpret my Brown body as racialized. My "foreignness" too was very obvious through my accent (Picart, 2007), my femininity, and distinct cultural habits. Distinct from White America, at least. After almost a year in the

United States, "Latina" became a possibility for me thanks to my queer Chicana mentor. She patiently waited for me to realize that my Brownness was going to be named; she taught me how to value my personal experiences and how to stand up for myself; she taught me how to hurt and how to heal. It was in her that I found the strength to proudly identify as Latina.

For quite some time I was absolutely positive the United States would never feel like home to me, even less U.S. American academia. I was convinced I would always be considered not different as I expected, but inadequate. The unsettledness that came with my Brownness was also a result of feeling homeless. Having multiple physical homes, in my case Brazil and United States, transforms the idea of one fixed "home," as its relationship to identity becomes less attached to a specific space (Ben-Yoseph, 2008). Being in different geographic locations shifted not only my certainty in terms of where home is, but also raised questions such as "who am I" and "where do I belong?" It all came with my Brownness. At times, my Brown body is highlighted to contrast with White bodies. Other times, my Brown body is highlighted to contrast with Black bodies. I fit nowhere. I don't belong here or there.

I am seeing the sunlight coming through the classroom windows. It's a Thursday afternoon and I am debating White privilege with my students, which is always a critical teaching moment. While discussing the fact that people of color are regularly requested to speak in the name of their whole racial group, I have one African American student agreeing with that idea. I decide then to support her and say that I too am usually asked to speak for Latinas. One of my White male students immediately questions my observation saying that happened to me because "you're not from here." He went on to point out that when he visited a South American country, people kept asking him to talk about the United States. Is he really comparing our experiences in a way that invalidates mine? I am just a foreigner. It is important to note that he never questioned his African American classmate. My Brownness is both invisible and evident; it is being equated with foreignness right in front of my eyes. It's not a racial issue in my student's eyes. I stare at him; he never looks back at me. Our eyes never meet; we see different things. I turn my eyes back to the sunlight.

Though my body is constantly facing issues of invisibility and tokenization, my Brownness also attracted other Brown bodies, women's bodies. Those other bodies aided mine in surviving the micro-aggressions academia is so good at (Solórzano et al., 2000). With them, I learned it was okay to be angry. Their bodies were there to validate mine, to point out—in brilliant ways, I must say—that, no, we are NOT inadequate, or over sensitive, or too angry. When I'm surrounded by Bernadette, Fatima, Salma, and Krishna, I don't feel I need to justify my Brazilianness or my latinidad; I don't need to excuse my excesses. Around the bodies of Brown women in my department I

feel strong. I matter. I can speak up with support. They have my back. No, they actually protect my whole body, flesh, bones, heart, and sanity.

They comfort me when my credentials are questioned every time I achieve something. They speak for and with me when my points of view are disregarded. They cry with me when our peers forget we are distinct people with our own opinions and individualities. They curse with me when classmates and professors think it isn't a big deal to mistake each other's names. We form a type of community that is rarely seen in academia. At first, we would stick together for a matter of survival. Now, it's more than that. It's love.
Maria or Samira?
Quiet, shh… listen: they are doing it again and again. Invisible me, invisible you
What does it mean to be named the same? We are the same in their eyes
Brown bodies, funny accents
Exotic beings, invisible individuals
Quiet, shh… listen: they are doing it again and again
I'm in Dr. Smith's class. She is a critical scholar and I have been working with her for a while now Today I share my final paper with the rest of the class. She starts calling us one by one. She looks at me and says, "Maria." "Maria?"
It took me a moment to realize she was talking to me. "Oh, I am sorry, Dr. Smith, I am Samira, not Maria"
It's happening again. I hear giggles and laughs. It's the joke now: Maria is Samira, Samira is Maria
Should we laugh and "move on?" Or should we verbalize our discontentment and be the "angry women of color" again?!
How come she doesn't mistake Jessica for Megan?
Is it because their bodies are not marked?
Is it because they are unique individuals and we are the Other?
Our identities are interchanged one more time. We are puzzled, we are frustrated, we are embarrassed
Quiet, shh… listen: they are doing it again and again
*****

"Saints of the West, be kind To my child who comes to you. Extend to her your protection."

This was my grandmother's prayer to me at the airport as I was leaving to "America." Little did I know that my existence would be mostly invisible to the Saints of the Western Academia…

Pursuing my graduate education has reshaped the understanding of my identity and positionality within academia. As a Muslim Arab transnational feminist of African descent, I wanted to connect with my community, build allies and share my experiences on a campus that is welcoming of diversity. Soon after joining the university, I found out that diversity and multiculturalism are reduced to talks surrounding my ethnic food, my traditional clothing, the language spoken in my home, and my bizarre customs. All of a sudden, my knowledge deemed to be irrelevant to my identity and the only signifier that represents who I am transformed to be my exotic being. My academic voice is dismissed. This exoticism of my experiences made me more of

aware of the color of my skin and accent of my spoken English. I realized that the language of multiculturalism and diversity had failed to capture the essence and tensions underlying the construction of racial identities, making my struggles invisible.

As I enter any classroom, I am categorized as the Other and my voice is put to mute. I was silenced through accusations of Arabism and Islamism, terrorism and fanaticism, Africanism and barbarism. I never thought that my beliefs were a curse and my race was a sin. I was hoping that the "multicultural" anthologies offered at the university would correct the stereotype; however, they failed to represent my story. These borderless feelings of belonging have resonated with me in my nomadic journey to build an academic community.

> Because I, a mestiza
> Continually walk out of one culture
> and into another,
> Because I am in all cultures at the same time
> Alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro
> Me zumbia la cabeza con lo contradictorio" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 99)

> وأفتخر عربية امرأة أنا
> الحدود على واقفة
> يسمعني أحد لا
> أستسلم لن ولكني
> أصمت ولن

I needed to recast my ethnicity so that my moving self could be acknowledged. I needed to write my own story from the borderless zone I inhabit. I needed a space that would welcome my narratives.

Finally, a course entitled "Voices of Women of Color" is introduced in the department. I happily join the course in search of a community. As I step into the classroom, I see multiple shades of Brown in the space. The first time, my Brown skin and dark hair blend in with the other women around me. The course brought women together to expose their experiences, share their commonalities and highlight their differences to deconstruct and reconstruct a new reality of the self and the other. By critiquing the institutionalized and historical colonial structure that perpetuates discrimination, the course helped me acquire the language to name my experiences of alienation and invisibility.

I have been in this class for several weeks now. My voice has not yet made it to the center. I am afraid to share my experiences. I can relate to most of the narratives of the women of color in the class, but the contextualization of my struggles is different. I am afraid to reveal my ethnic and religious identity. I knew that by telling people around me, it would possibly come out unfavorably. My decision to "come out" to my surroundings in the course as

a Muslim and an Arab emerged within the section dedicated to Arab and Muslim women's writings.

Walking into the classroom my eyes immediately focused on the center of the room. In the middle of the night my dreams awake me to this place, the center. The round table in which I situate my body in the middle of the room. I want these women to hear my story. I want to break the impasse between 'the women' and me. I look at the empty space, the plot that would soon be thickened with my concealed identities. The anticipation, emancipation, and retribution of my silence will soon come to the light within the shades of color of the floating identities that have been circling my body for weeks. As soon as I take my seat, the center invites me in. The feeling of the dream becomes the reality of my seated position. Sitting in the middle, I hear my voice. It speaks the words of Nada Elia (2002), "I suspect that women of color have tended the very existence of their Arab-American sisters because they have not sufficiently challenged the categories and labels designed by the dominant discourse" (p. 225). I feel empowered, as I invite the women to listen to my story, to be my allies. But, like dreams, my awaken state occurs abruptly with the silence that invades the room. Yes, I am a woman; but I am a different woman; a woman who does not deserve to be heard. Elia (2002) affirms, "once Arab women come to this country, a great silence descends" (p. 228). Suddenly, the White woman sitting next to me, the one that can call me, ally, begins the labor of cracking the newly painted words of my identity. She is changing the topic. She is talking about White feminism. But where is my story? The push back into my existence back into my place of the margins comes so quickly that the dream of sitting in the round table of the center fades into the nightmare of my boundaries. I have been silenced, again. Are my experiences not valid or important enough for these women to recognize my body? I am sitting right next to you! I have been your ally for weeks. Did you hear my story? Why aren't you acknowledging my voice? My body is in the line. I sit, shamefully, looking for recognition. I am vulnerable. I feel naked. My heart is wounded. Am I not a woman of color? "Having experienced countless incidents of racist prejudice I know which side I'm on" (Elia, 2002, p. 226). In the midst of my disappointment, I hear a call of acknowledgement as I begin to raise my head. The recentering of Whiteness has been called into exposure by my professor. The question of invisibility is thrown into the Whiteness that has enveloped me. The Saints of the West responded to my grandmother's prayer across the borders and sent me an ally. My professor urged the women to hear my voice. She re-centralized my experience and spoke up against the erasure of my body. That action reinvented the wheel in the course and created a support system for me inside and outside the classroom. Through embracing politics of love and care, my queer Chicana professor, who became my advisor and my mentor, taught me to see myself clearly without shame. To be proud of my identity. To heal and

repair my wounds. The power of her love helped me build an on-campus community that has served as a long-term support system for my research undertakings, academic career development, and moral support. In the words of bell hooks (2000), "when one knows true love, the transformative force of that love lasts even when we no longer have the company of the person with whom we experienced profound mutual care and growth" (p. 187). For a positive change to occur, transformative feminism in academia should be created with ethics of love and respect of differences. It should move away from universality of experience toward an acknowledgement of history, agency, and commonality.

"Saints of the West, be kind
To my sisters who come to you.
Extend to them your protection."

CONCLUSION: FINDING HOME

In this essay, we have intertwined our personal narratives in efforts to name our shared and disparate struggles as Brown women in the academy. We have demonstrated ways in which the positioning of a Black-White racial binary in the United States has erased, conflated, and marginalized Brown women's experiences. The stories we share point to the effects these structural and ideological erasures have in our individual journeys through education. This move to connect our struggles through a theory of the flesh and performative autoethnography creates a point of departure through which to begin dismantling these oppressive practices that deny the recognition of our humanity. We call for a more nuanced understanding of Brownness; one that allows us to differentiate our multiple belongings while honoring our connections. By coming together on the page, we extend the sense of home we have established with one another to others whom have felt similarly invisible or disenfranchised in the academy and in the literature.

The task of establishing home and of standing in solidarity with one another is not effortless. As Brown women with various combinations of intersecting identities—some privileged and some marginalized—we must remain dedicated to advocating for one another across our differences. Serving as allies for one another across intersecting identities are not simply events that take place occasionally; our alliances are continuous moments of advocacy, and co-education for one another. Just as those of us who identify as heterosexual must constantly speak out against homophobia and heterosexism, those of us who claim U.S. citizenship must stand against ethnocentrism and racist nativism. In establishing home with one another, we strive for nuanced understandings of the ways in which we can and must advocate for one another across identity lines. Additionally, because we are indeed

individuals, our experiences and opinions do not always align. For us, being in community with one another means engaging in deep and productive dialogue with one another through which we can make compromises, enact a diversity of perspectives, and respect one another's unique standpoints and opinions. We must nurture our home and one another in order to stand strong together.

Commitment to diversity is an integral part of our university's educational mission. Although the presence of our Brown bodies on campus documents the outcome of the university's mission, our "paradoxical" identities remain invisible and dislocated. Walking around campus, our "collective" bodies stand out, as they seem to be out of place. In the words of Ahmed (2012), "people of color in white organizations are treated as guests, temporary residents in someone's else home" (p. 43). That is to say, in the absence of affirmation and acceptance, our brown bodies will continue to be read as strangers. However, in this institutionalized space that "negates our very existences […] all we have is love" (Calafell, 2007, p. 437). As women of color, we found love in a safe zone headed by our mentor, who sees her mentoring relationship with us as a "homeplace" (Calafell, 2007, p. 437).

Our queer Chicana mentor created a home/place with us. The space she built because of and regardless the hostility of the environment. Specifically, in a post-9/11 era, we found ourselves, as brown bodies, "interrelated by a shared Otherness or affect of brownness that links [our] different stories and histories" (Calafell, 2012, p. 263). She built her home and now she invites us in. Together, we share our struggles in that safe space where we can heal together and heal one another; we were in the search of a home/place, and we found it in her office, in her strength. We "just need to stop for a minute and ask, 'Do you know how much you have transformed [our] space? Do you know how much your presence brings [us] comfort?'" (Calafell, 2007, p. 427)

Under the eyes of Frida Khalo, Emiliano Zapata, and Malcolm X, we sit.
We sit and sob. We sit and laugh.
We sit and contemplate the wall full of colors and beautiful references.
We sit and cry with La Malinche. We sit and laugh with Ricky Martin.
Our eyes meet in pain and compassion, in anger and joy.
This is home.
Where dislocation is replaced by location
Where dismissal becomes affirmation
Where we are found as complete complex individuals
Each recognized for our *own experiences,* our *own identities*
Yet standing united.
Where our bodies are never interchangeable,
This is home.
Where we come together as allies,
Where we are told we are not alone

Where our shared humanity and differences are celebrated,
Where love and hospitality are unconditional,
Where our loss is shared and so is our sorrow,
This is home.
Where writing becomes a way of life,
Where we are taught "a woman who writes has power
and a woman with power is feared" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 33),
This is home.
Where we reconstruct belonging to embrace all of our experiences
To change the paradigms
And to heal the suffering souls
This is the power of home.
My sisters, here we translate for one another the languages of our flesh
into a story we tell together proudly.
Tears stream onto our Brown cheeks and we find comfort in the glimmer.
The wet rivulets down our faces create their own histories
as do the streams that shape the rocks creating strong, beautiful, and weathering formations
that live on to tell their stories.
Here, we suture deep wounds, transform them into scars we wear proudly.
Thick, strong, and beautiful against the resilient prisms of our skin.

NOTES

1. For instance, even though we have diverse backgrounds and physical attributes, we often have our names mistaken for one another by students, classmates, and even faculty within our university. Fatima was mistaken for Krishna, Krishna was called Fatima, and Raquel was called both Fatima and Salma. In this academic setting, our privileged White colleagues and students have reduced us to one identity, one body, one experience, and one voice. Furthermore, Raquel, Fatima, and Salma were grouped at times as "the international students" as though we were a homogenized identity with no individuality. Through this lens, we are the perpetual foreigners at the university—we are the same. This is how the process of our Otherness and "invisibility" has evolved.