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Becoming-academic in the neoliberal academy: A collective biography

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ABSTRACT

As evidenced by the collection of articles in *Gender and Education's* July 2015 issue and various articles that have circulated recently on social media [American Council on Education. 2016. "New report looks at the status of women in higher education." January 15. <http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Pages/New-Report-Looks-at-the-Status-of-Women-in-Higher-Education.aspx>; Donald, A. 2016. "Women are too often actively sidelined against their will." *Times Higher Education*. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/women-are-too-often-actively-sidelined-against-their-will>; Higher Education Network. 2016. "How should we cope with sexism? That's the wrong question." *The Guardian*. April 15. <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2016/apr/15/how-should-we-cope-with-sexism-thats-the-wrong-question>], the topic of gender in higher education is of concern to many in both academic and non-academic thought-spaces. In this collective biography, we explore entrance into the fraught and contested space of the neoliberal academy by considering our experiences as women graduate students and postdoctoral researchers. We use various digital collaborative tools to adapt the collective biography method to our needs, making the project accessible across distance and time and inside the financial constraints of graduate school. Here we describe the project, excerpt two of the entangled data-stories we produced, and use Deleuze and Guattari's concept of smooth and striated space and Braidotti's concept of nomadic subjectivity to help us think through our becoming-academic.

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education

We are eight women, graduate students and postdoctoral researchers in the College of Education at a large research university in the northwestern United States. We are queer and straight; white, Black, South Asian, and Indigenous; first-generation college students and first-generation hyphenated Americans; mothers, daughters, sisters, and partners. We are here from different places, for different reasons, and with different goals. Our research interests vary widely and overlap in unexpected ways.

As women becoming academics, we struggle to be taken seriously, to be seen as competent. As women who are queer, poor, Black, Brown, Indigenous, first-generation, and

non-traditional, we must navigate and negotiate policies and practices that are largely accepted as unproblematic norms but which we experience as gendered, raced, classed, and heteronormative. Being included in the space is insufficient, as is evidenced in disparate outcomes, experiences, and opportunities (Ahmed 2012; De Welde, Stepnick, and Pasque 2015; Ferguson 2012; Duncan 2014; Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. 2012; Hoskins 2015; McKnight 2016; Midkiff 2015). Classroom spaces, lectures, conferences, and meetings are dominated by the voices of men. The theorists we are assigned to take seriously are predominantly men. The patterned but usually unacknowledged ways students are mentored, supported, and encouraged are raced, classed, and gendered. Our difficulties are invisible, unwelcome, and 'unprofessional.'

In the space of this collective biography project, we imagine academic work that is personally and politically meaningful, even as we understand its risks and costs. We practice articulating our different becomings-academic, becomings in which the contributions of women are more easily recognized and not forced into institutional models that do gendered harm. These inquiries drive our work: How can our stories ask institutional spaces to reflect a diversity that is more than inclusion? How can our imaginings shift practices, procedures, cultures, and processes? What does it do to institutional spaces when we speak the unspoken inside their walls and share what we are discouraged from sharing?

Making ourselves at home in the collective biography method

As a method, collective biography is interested not just in memories at the level of story, but also in embodied memories that arise from both 'brainstorms and body storms' (Davies and Gannon 2006, 20). These projects make transparent the discursive practices embedded in such storying, creating space for individuals to 'extend their own imaginable experiences of being in the world through knowing the particularity of another' (12). Such knowing pushes the individual and her experience beyond humanistic notions of the subject. In this project, we focus on difference, collaging individual stories to undermine the notion of narratives as individual.

In the collective biography process, the stability and truth of the memory-story is called into question as that story (and all other stories in the space) goes through several iterations. Multiple versions of a story emphasize the constructed, fractured, unstable nature of not only an individual memory or an individual's memories, but of *all* memory and memories. As we worked with scenes from our doctoral study, our preoccupation with the how and why of what happened transformed into a consideration of how we are acted upon and how we act as a result of particular contexts that make certain ways of being and acting possible and other ways impossible. The collective biography method pushed us past a notion of ourselves as individuals remembering our experiences to an exploration of ourselves as 'subjects who constitute [ourselves] and are constituted as experiencing subjects' (Davies and Gannon 2006, 17).

An examination of becoming-academic inevitably includes the schooling assemblages in which we are produced as students, and so our program and our experiences inside it became a primary site of inquiry for this project. We acknowledge that a variety of writers use the term assemblage in a variety of ways; we follow the Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) construction, in which an assemblage is a collection of immanent social locations or forces which combine, deform, and reform in reaction to each other and to the system (87).

Davies and Bansel describe the agentic capacity of the academic assemblage as a force for producing ‘highly individualised, responsabilised subjects who have become “entrepreneurial actors across all dimensions of their lives”’ (2007, 248). They track how over the last 20 years the liberal university has transformed into the neoliberal or audit university (Davies and Bansel 2010), and academics within these institutions have been ‘re-constituted’ inside a capitalist enterprise model. Commitments to anti-racist, feminist educational and research practices that reject heteronormativity, ableism, and classism and work towards social justice – the expressed values of the doctoral program in which we are becoming academics – are at odds with and often countermanded by the neoliberal academy.

Through conversation and writing, the cornerstones of collective biographical work, we discovered that, despite our differences, we have had (and continue to have) common experiences of being produced as auditable entrepreneurial subjects in particular gendered and raced ways, which often interfere with our ability to be recognized as competent scholars and social justice activists. The collective biography method allowed us to resist how we have been and are produced as academic subjects, to undermine the insistence on competition between individuals, and to refuse the restrictive hierarchical systems of the neoliberal academy. Using each other’s stories to complicate our own experiences and recover parts of ourselves that had been erased, we find new ways to survive the seemingly impossible task of becoming scholars.

As we shared our stories, we attended to similarities and differences in our experiences with the neoliberal institution. Similarities appeared in the form of recurrent language, much of which is included in the entangled data-story excerpts below. One bit of this language, at-home-ness, was most visible by its absence: many of us shared experiences of not feeling at home – even as our professors and mentors used the language of at-home-ness – what Braidotti calls a ‘radical nonbelonging’ (2011, 44) to describe the academic spaces in which we moved. We did, however, feel at home inside the collective biography method, even though our work together surfaced pernicious tensions, resentments, and hurt feelings. As described in the following sections, we made ourselves comfortable in the collective biography method, adapting it to meet our needs; the result was a rare experience of feeling at home inside the neoliberal academy.

Rearranging the methodology

The prelude

The email invitation to participate in the group described the project this way:

We are interested in a shared research/writing project around the topic of becoming academic as women in a patriarchal, neoliberal institutional context, and the different ways that women navigate that space. This project is also about gaining experience with the application of some of the methodological and theoretical work we’ve considered in our coursework. Additionally, many of us are interested in the embodied learning that happens for women outside of classes, lectures, and exams.

Our methodological approach needed to match our theoretical commitments to engaging with experience, while simultaneously troubling both experience and our engagement with it. Using a combination of in-person meetings and digital collaborative tools

(Google Drive, Gmail, Skype, and Wordpress) as support, we first considered descriptions and exemplars of the collective biography method (Beals et al. 2013; Davies and Gannon 2006, 2011; Davies et al. 2002, 2013; Gale and Wyatt 2008; Gannon et al. 2014; Gonick 2015; Gonick, Walsh, and Brown 2011; Kern et al. 2014; Zhang et al. 2014). We recorded our meetings and used a Google Drive space to collect notes, upload recordings, and share resources. This initial work allowed us to think with theory (Jackson and Mazzei 2012) about the collective biography method, putting it into conversation with theorists we use in our other work (e.g. Deleuze & Guattari, Barad, Butler, Ahmed, Braidotti). These conversations also gave us an opportunity to reflect on and engage with our own knowledge (s) and experience(s) with writing, researching, taking classes, and inhabiting particular (queer, Black, Brown, passing, female) bodies in academic spaces. Perhaps most importantly, we began the hard work of reconciling those different ways of being with becoming-academic.

Digital collaboration

To continue our conversation across summer break, we created a private blog. Each of us took a turn posting readings (academic or otherwise) and prompts, and the rest of us responded; an example of each follows.

Prompt (to accompany Ahmed 2010; and Shahjahan 2015): What seemingly innocuous policies, practices and expectations reproduce and reinstate hierarchies? How do we respond to this as women? And what does intentional work of undermining well-worn narratives about experience do to interrupt, disrupt, destabilize sedimented hierarchies and 'open-up' the doctoral experiences for life-affirming difference?

Response: To be included, I'd have to buy into structures and systems that are hostile to my body and can result in literal and metaphorical death. And I ain't trying to die in this shit. So I think my level of engagement in any of this is tempered by this constant awareness that a.) it's mostly bullshit and b.) I could never be an insider and c.) if I could somehow be included as an insider, what would that insider status would say about me? Like, if I could somehow be an insider in an institution that is both patriarchal and white supremacist, what does that mean about my integrity? Could I feel good about myself in other spaces?

Over time, the posts and prompts entangled, producing unanticipated juxtapositions and extensions, several of which made their way into our 'final' product, discussed in the next section. The use of online collaborative spaces democratized our work, allowing scholarship to coexist with family commitments and travel plans.

The product

As we worked with our stories, we chose not to produce a composite or collective single story, but to create a fractured, nomadic subjectivity (discussed in more detail below) by means of collaged composition. We compiled a series of unattributed monologues and dialogues interrupted with excerpts from blog posts, engagements with theoretical work, and notes to self, which describe what we have learned and hope to carry with us into our future academic engagements. As we composed what we came to call entangled data-stories, we thought about how they might be performed; one example we have included here makes use of a refrain to be spoken in unison by the multiple readers, and the other is meant to be read in rounds, with voices entering and leaving, overlapping to both emphasize and distort. In collaging rather than collectivizing our

stories, we take inspiration from a variety of fractured texts, both theoretical and creative, such as Annemarie Mol's *The Body Multiple* (2002), Patti Lather and Chris Smithies' *Troubling the Angels* (1997), and John D'Agata's *The Lifespan of a Fact* (2012).

In our collaged compositions, we sought an alternative to the dominant narratives circulating through academic spaces, particularly those that require a stable, bounded (humanist) subject. This investment in bounded, humanist subjectivity often makes it difficult to create community, particularly among women, who are less likely to be imagined as dynamic and multiple; this forecloses or disrupts the kind of productivity that can occur across and among difference. We recognize the narrative loops that we tend to occupy and find our way out of them by theorizing how a shift toward multiple reals deterritorializes worn narratives that disallow for difference and thinking newly. This work becomes inadvertently transgressive as we are able to recognize subjectivities that often go unseen in the academy because they do not easily fit. We complicate our ways of working in relation to each other and to the objects, practices, and policies of the neoliberal academy.

Entangled data-stories

In these entangled data-stories, we are produced over and against embodiments of academic success: the white male professor, the white male student, the anonymous (white male) reviewer, and those who perform white, straight maleness as best they can in order to survive in the academy. Our credibility and competence is legible only when we are performing our becoming-academic in mercenary ways, competing for attention and resources. These stories consider our contingent becoming and the ways of being such becoming forecloses.

And I keep returning

Textual note: Because this story is to be read by multiple readers, we use a traditional script format with one adjustment: inside individual parts, some sentences are enclosed in quotation marks to indicate they were spoken aloud in the original memory-story; everything else can be understood as internal monologue. This data-story includes a refrain we initially meant to be read in unison, but as we practiced the piece, we were intrigued by the resonances created when we were out of sync on the refrain, particularly when one voice began after the rest of us had finished. The names were assigned at random and do not designate the authors of these fragments.

ALL

And I keep returning.

LAURA

These days, I am obsessively asking what are the dominant narratives that defer responsibility from the institution? What are the core assumptions about graduate school that are impervious to revision? How do I shape shift from the person I believe myself to be and the one I am reduced to here? Perhaps these questions are ways I can flip the script that it is me who is lacking. But these are dangerous questions. To speak of these

questions, which I believe are the only option for remedy, places me at greater risk of future violence.

I recall one of the earlier classes in the program. We were invited into the room, told to get comfortable and that it was a safe space for us to express our ideas and be ourselves. It was one time – among many – when the discourse of safety was appropriated and evoked at surface value. The words lingered in the air-like extraneous verbiage, a caveat to legitimate what was to come. In the past 5 years, I have been publicly humiliated in class, put on the spot and asked to publicly pray (to convene a doctoral seminar), I have been failed for a course in which I refused to tokenize my identity, and I have been made to feel in countless ways that I was not good enough. My being, my intellect, my physical health has not been safe here.

ALL

And I keep returning.

EMILY

I wanted to participate in the discussion, and demonstrate that I knew a bit about the topic. I asked how we could integrate qualitative methods into research projects amidst pressure from federal funding agencies to produce quantitative work, and cited my research experience as an example. He threw his head back and laughed, and scoffed in response, ‘Well, that’s not *real* research.’ He went on to explain that anything that’s not peer reviewed doesn’t count as real research, and applied research didn’t fit into that domain. With one flippant phrase, he dismissed my entire range of experience and sowed a seed of doubt regarding my place in this program and the academy in general.

ALL

And I keep returning.

KRYSTAL

There are not enough chairs for everyone at the tables. But there are tiny desks around the edge for those of us that come in late. And I was late. The desks are not designed for women like me. I cram myself uncomfortably into one, my stomach smashed against the front. The room is much too small for all of us, the desks around the edges are too close together, and I feel trapped. I couldn’t get out of my desk without sticking my ass in someone’s face.

For some reason every class meeting was in a different space, and that was very disorienting. Changing locations every week, not knowing where we were expected to be until the last minute, checking email and checking in with one another – ‘do you know where we are meeting today?’ – created imbalance and uncertainty. A small thing, but surely intentional, serving to make us all feel unorganized and vulnerable, and the constant interrogation about the progress of our projects created an atmosphere of anxiety that made us question whether this was how the whole doctoral program would go.

I felt the disorientation in my body. Slightly nauseous, slightly dizzy, like vertigo. My neighbors are too close. I feel like I’m on a plane and can’t use the arm rest.

ALL

And I keep returning.

SPIRIT

You know, when I first met you, I thought you were just another one of those pretty girls. But then after some time in class with you, I realized you have really interesting things to say.

ASILIA

My body dictates what people think of me. I stood there in the middle of the crowded apartment, surrounded by graduate school 'community.' I smiled and nodded, listening to you go on and on about something, about your extravagant life abroad, I believe. I remained silent, as usual, still trying to decide if I wanted to cry or scream. I felt claustrophobic. Like all the years of smiling and nodding, of my outer shell being the focus, of no meaning yes, of being nothing but a body, are closing in on me. All in that moment. I couldn't breathe. This shouldn't have happened here. I came to this program to be surrounded by and work with women who would understand. Not to be in competition, not to be conforming to the male gaze, not to be regulated. You were supposed to be different. I am merely an object. Not professional enough. Too young. Too sexualized. Not sexualized enough. I'm a prisoner of my own body.

ALLY

I came to talk to you about my interest in the program. Networking is not something I'm good at. I really have trouble connecting. I really need to work on this, I think to myself. So I'm here. I'm ready to network. You ask me about my research interests and I begin to tell you about the program I designed for ESL adult learners at a local non-profit ...

COURTNEY

(interrupting)

'Tell me in Spanish.'

ALLY

You want to hear about this in Spanish? Do you even speak Spanish? I think this, but smile nervously, silent, and nod.

COURTNEY

'Tell me about your passions and why you're interested in this program, in Spanish.'

ALLY

You close your eyes and listen as my voice shakes in Spanish. I do my best. I'm not quite sure what's going on.

Now you're asking me about my nose ring.

'I guess it's a form of expression. It just kind of feels like it should be a part of my body.'

COURTNEY

'Do you have any tattoos?'

ALLY

'Yes.'

This is uncomfortable. I need to get out of here. The room feels small, closing in like a dark cave leaving little light to enter. The round table in the middle of your office has shrunk, you're too close. I feel like you're hovering over me. I tell myself, no, no, he's just sitting there across the table. Stop freaking out.

You ask me which tattoo is most meaningful, and I tell you that I have a tattoo of a tree. I gather my things. I need to rush off to a meeting.

COURTNEY

'Can I see it?'

ALLY

'It's down my ribcage.'

COURTNEY

'That's okay.'

ALLY

I'm sweating. I feel trapped. I need to get out of here. I laugh it off and smile.

'I've really got to run. Thank you for your time.'

ALL

And I keep returning.

NADIA

'Thanks for being willing to sit for this interview, but do you mind if we leave the door open? I am prone to panic attacks when I feel claustrophobic. I have just a few questions, and hope you don't mind if I record this. This should not take more than thirty minutes.'

We went through the list of prescribed questions, and then we got to one of the last questions: What advice would you give a beginning Ph.D. student who is forming plans for a career as a scholar? His eyes blazed and I felt a sense of danger.

'Most importantly be obedient. You know what I mean. Follow the rules, respect your elders, don't get caught up in things that you should not. Be careful who you align with. Oh, and be organized, dedicated, motivated, set a schedule, follow it, complete it, develop the habit of starting and completing things in a timely manner.'

ALL

And I keep returning.

SPIRIT

'What is wrong?'

He ignored me.

'What is wrong?'

He ignored me.

I paused and considered another approach.

'Did I do something wrong?' A go-to question etched into my Native, queer, single mom, Black, small town, first generation, first-American-born-unassimilable-immigrant-overachieving-to-compensate identity.

His eyes became brighter as he turned to look at me. 'This,' he paused and scanned the room, 'is not what I wanted.'

'Why?'

'This is not rigorous. It lacks authority. Shall I continue?' It was more a threat than a question.

I feel ill as I recall this moment. My stomach burns and my breath tightens. Three years after the fact, I am still devastated. And it wasn't because he didn't get it. He didn't let me have the space to share my work, my perfectly-imperfect offering to my colleagues. I realized that the person I embodied that night, the beautiful parts of myself, could not be received in that space. In order to receive praise – even the most false, shallow, fleeting, 'you might think that is good for you but it ain't' kind of praise – I would have to perform my desperation for it.

ALL

And I keep returning.

ALLY

I have a history of not being good enough when it really matters.

When I was a little girl, I wanted to be a ballerina. And I wasn't just in it for the pretty dresses. I studied at the serious sort of dance academy, and rather than learning showy choreography for annual recitals, I learned to count calories and strategically wrap my toes with first aid tape.

But by age 12, it was clear that I was not at home, that I was not right. My body is not a 'ballet body,' and no careful calorie restriction, no plastic warm-up shorts, no extra conditioning classes were going to change that.

For many years now, I have been preoccupied with a quote about dancing that's in a piece of art a friend made for me. It comes from Wallace Stegner's *All the Little Live Things*: 'Be open, be available, be exposed, be skinless. Skinless? Dance around in your bones.' I didn't quite understand; I couldn't put the freedom I associate with dancing together with being exposed, open. At some point during my doctoral study, for reasons I can't remember any more, I looked up the whole passage: 'One thing I have learned hard, if indeed I have learned it now: it is a reduction of our humanity to hide from pain, our own or others'. To hide from anything Be open, be available, be exposed, be skinless. Skinless? Dance around in your bones.'

Being called out publicly, being exposed, meant I could no longer hide from my non-belonging and all the pain it evokes.

I can't even imagine experiencing at-home-ness in the academy, in this space where I am never enough, never right, where I can never fit, no matter how appropriate my emails are, how many proposals are accepted to the right conferences, how many articles are published in the right journals.

But I can see how I can become skinless. I can, finally, dance around in my bones.

ALL

And I keep returning.

Be more

Textual note: This data-story is to be read in rounds, though unlike the musical version, the lyrics change. It also includes lyrics from 'If You Don't Know Me By Now' (Gamble and Duff 1972), originally recorded by Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes, which are intended to be sung.

VOICE 1	VOICE 2	VOICE 3
<p>You beckoned her, an earlier student in your attempts at collecting students who will counter the fact that you are a straight, middle-class, white dude talking about race and gender and sexuality all the goddamn time you're around people that matter to you.</p>		
<p>Be More Queer, Be More Black, Be More Native, Be More Feminine, Be More Masculine, Be More Macho, Be More ...</p>	<p>Infinitely coping. How is anyone meant to take you seriously? Who can stand to hear what you are saying with you looking like that? Did you read? Have you seen? Have you heard? Were you invited? Did you get that email? Will you be at this conference? Are you attending this reception?</p>	
	<p>Be More Queer, Be More Black, Be More Native, Be More Feminine, Be More Masculine, Be More Macho, Be More ...</p>	<p>I wish that I had said that in the future, I'm going to be really fucking pissed at how much of my emotional and mental space your flippant comment took. How you hoard my time and energy in ways that you hoard the time and energy and psychic capacity of so many of your collection that you intellectually strong-arm into thinking you're important for their/our survival in the academic world.</p>
<p>I wish that I had said that just because you get to dominate most other spaces – what I study, who I study with, what I read – doesn't mean you get to dominate my physical space. Hell, in a room with you, it's often the only space I'm afforded. And even now, you're taking up space in my thoughts. Fuck you.</p>		<p>Be More Queer, Be More Black, Be More Native, Be More Feminine, Be More Masculine, Be More Macho, Be More ...</p>

(Continued)

Continued.

VOICE 1	VOICE 2	VOICE 3
Be More Queer, Be More Black, Be More Native, Be More Feminine, Be More Masculine, Be More Macho, Be More ...	In the 'becoming' part of all of this, I mourn the connections that I lose because of this process. In the past year, I have had to, against much of my will, say a soft goodbye to the relationships I worked hard to maintain. I sit often in this space of reconciling what I can become and what is past for me, or what feels like it's passed. What is more tangible to me in this process is what is past that it's hard for me to imagine the future.	'If you don't know me by now, You will never, ever, ever know me'
	Be More Queer, Be More Black, Be More Native, Be More Feminine, Be More Masculine, Be More Macho, Be More ...	Queerness is important to me, as it's central to my identity. But that is not all I bring. Unfortunately, I feel as though that is how I'm constructed in your eyes.
You will never, ever, ever know me.		
Be More Queer, Be More Black, Be More Native, Be More Feminine, Be More Masculine, Be More Macho, Be More ... Be more academic. Be more academic. Be more academic.	I feel the disorientation in my body, and smell the fear. My neighbors are too close. I feel like I'm on a plane and can't use the arm rest. I'm a little dizzy, really sweaty, and nauseous. Deep, visceral, tightness in my belly. The feeling I get right before someone dies. Deep breath. I'm so fucking uncomfortable with this faux spirituality.	
	Gay for pay ... now that you see me ...	My queerness is not your currency today, or tomorrow. Or ever.
He threw his head back and laughed, 'Well, that's not <i>real</i> research.'	Your expiration date has passed.	We will keep your application on file.

Collective biography as becoming-nomad

In this project, we imagine existing in the academic assemblage without becoming the academy; we imagine alternative or resistant academic becomings. According to Davies and Gannon (2006), the promise of collective biography is that its discursive and material processes

can make visible, palpable, hearable, the constitutive effects of dominant discourses. And in working post-structurally, those effects, while understood as real, are not taken to be inevitable – we are not *determined* by those dominant discourses. In examining how discourse and practice work on us, we open both ourselves and discourse to the possibility of change. (5)

We seek the possibility of change, not just to gain inclusion into an academy that seems determined not have us, but to open a space in which we can live ethically and productively, and to leave the space changed for those who come after us.

In our initial engagement with the collective biography literature, we gravitated toward examples that explored inclusion and difference (Davies et al. 2013; Gonick, Walsh, and Brown 2011) and those that referenced becoming in the Deleuzoguattarian sense: a process of exceeding the boundaries of the hierarchies which limit us (Davies and Gannon. 2011; Gale and Wyatt 2008; Gannon et al. 2014. With Braidotti (2011), we seek

feminist theory that 'is not only a movement of critical opposition of the false universality of the subject, it is also the positive affirmation of women's desire to affirm and enact different forms of subjectivity' (150). We focus our project on finding the means to both belong to and escape from the academy, to both live within and rebel against the academy, to both benefit from and fundamentally change the academy. We want to live our contradictions, to become-academic through uprooting what it means to be academic (Deleuze and Guattari 1980/1987, 25).

Collective biography shifts us from being lodged in, or subjected by, the academic strata to a becoming-academic/becoming-nomad. This is not the achievement of respectability or a more positive subjectification within the strata, but a movement towards smooth space, a constant working away from the stratified academy to redefine the boundaries of what academic might include. We begin to reconcile the versions of ourselves we know and want to be true with the structure of the academy, holding the two in tension, working towards our goal 'via all the dualisms that are the enemy, an entirely necessary enemy, the furniture we are forever rearranging' (Deleuze and Guattari 1980/1987, 21). To understand our process, it is necessary to describe our starting point: lodged in the stratum of the academic assemblage.

The academic stratum

Our original inquiry was an exploration of how we are 'becoming academic as women in a patriarchal, neoliberal institutional context,' an exploration of the tension between smooth and striated space. Striated space, or a stratum, is a way of describing the rigid organization of the academy that produces subjects, in our case female-identified graduate students and postdocs, as sovereign, hierarchical, and exclusionary (Braidotti 2011, 150). Striated space is *the claustrophobia of too small rooms in which the beautiful parts of ourselves cannot be received*. When lodged in the stratum of academia, its patriarchal neoliberalism makes our subjectivities in its image: the politics of respectability, individualism, competition, and the push to *be more* channels our complexities into subjugated positions. These norms in composition deny us smooth space and lodge us in the striations of academic hierarchy.

We ask, with Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987), 'what on a given stratum varies and what does not' (44)? Through our collective writings and retellings, our multiple routes entering and adjusting to the academic strata overlapped in places at particular times and then diverged into different directions. We were initially most compelled by the ways our stories overlapped and echoed: we questioned our intelligence in ways that felt new and particular to our gendered and raced bodies; we were *disoriented, unbalanced, uncertain* beyond what might be expected when embarking on a new intellectual challenge; we felt parts of our identities simultaneously foregrounded – *gay for pay* – and marginalized by our gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality. In many cases, when a marginalized part of our identity was made salient in academia, it did not produce a moment of recognition or a sense relief, but rather a simmering panic we felt in our bones. We mourned the parts of our identity that changed through our encounters with academia. Our bodies do not fit; *the desks are not designed for women like us*. We

can no longer hide from our non-belonging. And yet our most salient commonality, for now, is that we keep returning.

Eventually we began to see how these similarities always already signaled significant differences. While we have all experienced differential treatment and positioning because of our gender, some of us have the relative security of whiteness or straightness or the sociocultural capital of school knowledge. Some of our experiences are appropriated by white liberalism, with reassurances that even though many academic institutions do not hire folks who look like us, they can still speak to and teach our experiences. Some of our experiences are only valuable, only representable, when colonized by whiteness. Each of us has navigated these differences in our own ways, according to our own singular mixtures of identities and experiences. What we seek is not a smoothing out of our differences into a single Other or a single academy, but rather an abatement of the white heteropatriarchy within academia that renders our differences unrecognizable. We seek relief from *claustrophobia*; we seek a version of academia that foregrounds difference rather than capturing it within the strata. For an alternative way forward, we look to smooth places.

Smooth spaces: diversity in academia as difference

It is against the collective feeling of being overwhelmed and subsumed by the striations of the academy that we, in almost a last resort, collectively plumb our experiences, and in doing so begin to break down the radically individualized subject positions we have come to embody. We know that our subjected positions emerge through our entanglement with the academic assemblage. We know, through thinking with Braidotti (2011), that exploring our manufacture as subjects allows us to develop the 'kind of critical consciousness that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behavior' (5). We resist the subjection of the striated space of academia by creating smooth spaces: spaces in which we can escape the constraints and homogeneity of academia and experience the continuous variation and heterogeneity that we once thought our experience in academia could be; spaces where we are 'multiple, open-ended, interconnected entit[ies] ... a rainbow of yet uncoded and ever so beautiful possibilities' (Braidotti, 2011, 150); spaces in which *we can become skinless and dance around in our bones*. The answer we sought from collective biography, and the answer we experienced, is not a solution in a traditional sense. We do not seek a new definition of academia that would produce us as competent, but rather processes that allow us to live out our possibilities from the inside of academia, distinct from our academic subject positions. This necessitates the sort of accountability Braidotti (2011) posits as necessary for the nomadic feminist subject, an 'embodied, situated [form] of accountability, of storytelling, of map reading' (165).

Collective biography as becoming-nomad

One cannot live on a purely smooth space. To do so would be to become imperceptible, to lose what makes us our own singularities signaled by our own proper names (Deleuze and Guattari 1980/1987, 252, 37–38). Therefore, the work of our collective biography is not a simple shift from being lodged on a striated space to being lodged on a smooth

place. We are never completely lodged in striation to begin with; we all have moments of escape, moments when we are perceived as competent or our differences are valued. But we are too often marginalized professionally and academically along gendered, raced, classed, and sexualized lines. Our goal is *to not die in this shit*, to not be overcome by our marginalizations, our subjections, and either sell out or quit. We seek a rebalancing of the academic assemblage, not the replacement of one side of the smooth/striated binary with another, but a shift in emphasis from striation to smooth. We seek out smooth space, knowing we cling to striation out of habit or benefit. In our own ways, we

keep enough of the [academy within us] for it to reform each dawn; and [we] keep small supplies of [academic] signifi-ance and subjectification, if only to turn [academic hierarchies] against their own systems when the circumstances demand it, when things, persons, even situations, force [us] to; [we] keep small rations of subjectivity in sufficient quantity to enable [us] to respond to the dominant reality. [We] Mimic the strata. (160)

We seek out smooth space, knowing that there is nothing inherently emancipatory about it (500).

Though our language for it came later, the collective biography became a ‘practice that relocates thinking away from the pull of sedentary self-replication’ (Braidotti 2011, 14). The striated spaces of the academy facilitate its self-replication, faculty members producing graduate student progeny who carry on the intellectual line, making our professor-parents proud in the pages of peer-reviewed journals and in tenure-line positions at research universities. We feel our resistance to striation in our bodies – *slightly nauseous, slightly dizzy, like vertigo* – and Braidotti’s figuration of the nomad helped us think through our experiences. For Braidotti, the nomad is ‘a figuration for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity’ (57), and nomadic consciousness ‘is a form of resisting assimilation or homologation into dominant ways of representing the self’ (60). *We keep returning*, becoming-academic as a means of resisting the fascism of the hierarchized academy through more than just resisting its striations of our singularities. As Braidotti notes, ‘nomadic subjects are capable of freeing the activity of thinking from the hold of phallogocentric dogmatism, returning thought to its freedom, its liveliness, its beauty’ (Braidotti 2011, 29); nomadic subjects ‘identify lines of flight, that is to say, a creative alternative space of becoming’ (7). Our becoming-nomadic is a way of thinking through and with our always returning neither as some simplistic version of resilience or survival, nor as something we will leave behind us once (or if) we arrive at a less precarious place in the academy. Rather, becoming-nomad is an always emerging alternative way of being academic.

Braidotti’s (2011) notion of ‘embodied materialism’ (15) helped us see in our shared stories the theme of bodies that do not fit (in *desks*, in *faculty offices*, in *the academy*) or are simultaneously hypervisible (our *piercings* and *tattoos* the subject of inappropriate attention from *male faculty members*) and invisible (our *physical discomfort* in *classroom spaces*). For Braidotti, accounting for one’s embodiment is part of a ‘feminist politics of location,’ that is necessarily ‘a relational, collective activity’ (15) drawing on ‘memory and narrative’ (16). Like collective biography, this accountability practice surfaces ‘the limitations of our locations, truths, and discourses’ (16). While we discovered refrains in our stories – how *we keep returning* even while gaining insight about the academic

assemblage we are working to join, how we feel compelled to commodify and leverage certain pieces of our identities, to *be more*, while leaving those not valued by the academy behind us, even if they are *the beautiful parts* – we also saw how we were simultaneously and variously empowered and disempowered along identitarian lines. Put another way, we are both *nothing but bodies* and bodies that *cannot be received in the space* unless we perform our identities in consumable, collectible ways. We must *be more* – *Queer, Black, Native, Feminine, Masculine, Macho* – but not in ways unintelligible within the strata.

The process of becoming-nomad, of becoming-academic, is not the achievement of status or a privileged subject position, but is the process of breaking apart identitarian notions that allow for cheap and easy forms of inclusion, colonizing inclusions which allow the academy to claim diversity while retaining white heteropatriarchal hierarchies. It is not new to be a critic of these hierarchies; our sisters have led us in this for generations (Ahmed 2012; Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. 2012; Mohanty 2003).

Our collective biography process began and will end in the middle (Deleuze and Guattari 1980/1987, 25); we must continue in the struggle in our own ways once we disperse. To see progress as process rather than outcome is to realize that ‘nothing is ever done with: smooth space allows itself to be striated, and striated space reimparts a smooth space, with potentially very different values, scope, and signs’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1980/1987, 486). Our original task was to use each other’s stories to complicate our own experiences and recover parts of ourselves that had been erased; in doing so we found new ways to survive the seemingly impossible task of becoming scholars. Perhaps this is now best stated instead by saying that we continue to find new ways of surviving every day; we continue to engage in a process that will never be complete. Our task, as Bettina Love (2016) states, is to resist by living.

Collective biography: from resistance to reorientation

Neoliberalism is referred to as a project to ‘change the soul’ by reproducing competitive individualism and personal accountability over notions of collective social welfare (Brown 2003; Lipman 2011), and our souls have been changed: *we mourn the connections we’ve lost* in the process of becoming academic women. With Braidotti (2011), we are committed to the notion that ‘feminists should be conscious of and accountable for the paradox of being both caught within a symbolic code and deeply opposed to it’ (103). As Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) remind us, it is ‘too easy to be antifascist on the molar level, and not even see the fascist inside you, the fascist you yourself sustain and nourish and cherish with molecules both personal and collective’ (215). It is too easy to be against the white supremacist heteropatriarchy and to replicate it within our own practice, even as not that. We resist more than just the homogenization of our experiences at an identitarian level; we resist through the radical action of collective academic work in which we weave together our singular experiences and their connections in a complex and shifting academic multiplicity.

Our work is more than just a declaration against hierarchy; we attend to our shifting connections of movements and rests as an anti-fascist practice. Reactionary backlash, actual or feared, to resistance places our work, funding, and futures within the academy in a state of precarity. We experience this disciplining in our souls and psyches; it

impacts our bodies, health, sense of value, and belonging. *We can't even imagine experiencing at-home-ness in the academy.*

Becoming-collective

To counter our sense of non-belonging and the hegemonic discourses of individuality, becoming-collective is an imperative. Historically, gains for women have been made by women working together. We must follow the traditions set out by feminists before us to act, write, and be recognized collectively, against the individualistic thinking that permeates neoliberal structures which rely on competition. To participate in this thinking is to perish in its patriarchal wake, where women are consistently published at lower rates and taken less seriously as experts in the field (Knoblock-Westerwick, Glynn, and Hugu 2013). We look to our foremothers, women who stood in solidarity with each other, such as Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, and Alice Walker, who accepted the 1974 National Book Award together, stating, 'We symbolically join together here in refusing the terms of patriarchal competition and declare that we will share this prize among us, to be used as best we can for women.' *As a chorus*, we carry on the work of the women who paved the way before us.

In our collective of *Native, queer, single mom, Black, small town, first generation, first-American-born-unassimilable-immigrant-overachieving-to-compensate* women graduate students, we have organized ourselves and this work by opting out of academic competitiveness – and, by extension, neoliberal relationships – which has everything to do with our survival in the academy. Opting out of academic competitiveness and hyper-individualization is a stance of refusal and potentiality. Opting out of the ways we have been produced by the neoliberal academy as auditable entrepreneurial subjects allows us to opt in – to anti-racist and anti-sexist processes, to a potentiality deferred in a system that privileges individual production over collaborative process. This endeavor was not part of our coursework or recommended by advisors; rather it grew from our dissatisfaction with the elitist, racist, sexist, patriarchal, and paternalistic dimensions of graduate school. Each of these pressures positions us to think less of one another, and buy into paradigms of scarcity, competition, and isolation.

In our writing, reflecting, conversing, cooking and eating together, laughing, and taking breaks from the work to walk and sit in the sun, we dwelled in the doings that harmed us and began the undoings that could heal us. Many of us recalled a talk given at orientation in which we were told that there are losses involved with becoming academics and there would be grief. We were warned that we would change and perhaps become less intelligible to our family and friends. The subtext, though, was that we would become better versions of ourselves, somehow making the losses worth enduring. Years later, we realized that while the loss of relationships was certainly difficult, the loss of who we knew ourselves to be was more devastating, less survivable, and so we organized ourselves toward a new orientation: a dignity-centered approach to becoming-academic.

Knowledge production outside of the confines of the academy

Our collective biography project is a reorientation practice that challenges the notion that knowledge production is confined to the academy. Through sharing our stories, we

strengthen the ‘fatal bond’ that carries us through precarious times (Ahmed 2016). This bond – how we survive the gendered, racialized, sexualized constructions that determine how we may or may not be successful – produces us anew. Our academic selves are no longer written solely by the policies, practices, and posturing of hollow institutional commitments to our multiple identities. We hear each other. We write with/to/for/from each other. We tangle and form tangles of stories and experiences, interwoven and tight. Regardless of the newest micro- or macro-aggression one/some/all of us face, our entanglement guards against the isolation of the academy. In collectivizing our stories and experiences, we ‘call the [academy’s] frame into question’ and ‘lose something of [our] sense of place in [the academy]’ to reclaim the intelligibility once lost as a ‘price of not conforming’ (Butler 1999, 5–10).

The tangle of our stories is such that the institution cannot control or mediate them; they are narratives that cannot be taken from us no matter the level of discipline we may experience. Without the transactional capital of course credit or the pre-determined outcomes of a syllabus, our collective writes the story of the stories we could not tell in the neoliberal academic marketplace. If the academy and its myriad oppressive structures, including the ways it produces those compliant to these structures, are the bordered territories that govern the productions of our academic selves, collective biography is the process of deterritorializing; it is ‘the chaos beneath and within the territories’ which ‘destabiliz[e] the territorial character of [the territory]’ (May, 2005, 138). The fractures and fissures of our stories, and how we solder them back together to produce something new, gives rise to the chaos needed to shift the landscape for women in academia. We resist the definitive outlines and borders established around our identities as women becoming academics with the knowledge that emerges when we gather, collectively, in solidarity, without the mandates of academic regulations.

Collective biography interrupts the productive silence that the academy relies on to maintain control over our bodies and maintain privilege in white, heteropatriarchal neoliberal constructs of intelligence and scholarly activity. Our knowledge – how we learn to read the texts and subtexts of our production as scholars, what is not spoken but is deafening – surfaces as knowledge for survival among our group and the constellations of academic women we touch. In sharing stories of how we are made unintelligible by the academy, we become intelligible to one another.

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