A collective inquiry into betweenness: emerging scholars of color navigating the socialization process

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Abstract
Purpose – As emerging scholars of color with transnational backgrounds, we collectively recount our socialization experiences in US higher education institutes. We explore moments of betweenness as catalysts for envisioning a more inclusive academia that operates beyond the tokenism of diversity.

Design/methodology/approach – Employing betweener autoethnography (Diversi and Moreira, 2018), we inquire into the sense of impasse encountered by South Korean female emerging scholars in the field of education in becoming an outsider within the academic system.

Findings – Chronicling our shifts in perspectives of our positionality, we interweave inquiries motivating us to challenge normative pressures and map our betweener experiences onto the Wiedman and DeAngelo’s (2020) socialization model. Through this process, we wedge open in-between spaces in the socialization process that accommodate the nuanced positionality of transnational scholars.

Originality/value – Integrating postcolonial critiques on the Western-centric meritocratic academia, this piece sheds light on the complexity and fluidity of emerging transnational scholars’ socialization processes. The thick, nuanced description deepens the understanding of the complexity of their identity negotiation within the dominant logics of academia. Our inquiries interwoven through betweener autoethnography serve as guidance for mentoring international graduate students and transnational scholars.

Keywords Professional development, Socialization, Diversity and inclusion, Betweener autoethnography, Postcolonial critique, Transnational scholar

Paper type Viewpoint

Transnational scholars, amidst navigating academic socialization (Weidman and DeAngelo, 2020), engage critically with the system’s norms, often confronting the meritocratic, neoliberal and globalized academia (Alhayek and Zeno, 2023; Jammulamadaka and Faria, 2023;...
In solidarity with these efforts, we, as female Asian scholars, reflect on our socialization process through betweener autoethnography—a method highlighting the liminal spaces of becoming, and challenging tokenization of diversity (Diversi and Moreira, 2018). Our betweener autoethnography becomes a resource for us to imagine a different academic culture—a more inclusive, caring, and compassionate system towards those who inhabit the in-between spaces, or the betweeners.

**Decolonizing doctoral education from the margins**

Doctoral education fosters independent scholarship akin to socialization process, involving knowledge acquisition and adherence to academic norms (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2020; Weidman and DeAngelo, 2020). This socialization process cultivates professional identity through interpersonal interaction with advisors and colleagues of the immediate academic community, integration into academic and professional communities and learning through professional communities (Weidman and DeAngelo, 2020). Notably, this integration process is bi-directional; students also exert their agential influence on institutional culture, introducing and incorporating their unique backgrounds and identities (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2020). Thus, socialization integral to doctoral education can be characterized as a fluid process occurring across five dimensions: the higher education institute at the core, intersecting with student background, disciplinary/professional communities, personal communities and career development (see Figure 1).

Student agency plays a crucial role in responding to normative pressures, ranging from conformity to resistance (Weidman and DeAngelo, 2020). Valuing students’ proactive engagement with academic norms is central to an asset-based model of graduate education.
socialization, which challenges the deficit-based view of student feedback as mere grievances from those perceived to lack social and cultural capital (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2020). This is particularly significant for transnational scholars whose education, work, and life traverse national boundaries. Their experiential encounter with diverse cultural norms (Torres-Olave and Lee, 2020) creates the nuanced positionality as “betweeners” (un)conscious bodies experiencing life in and between two cultures (Diversi and Moreira, 2009, p. 19) or life in-between local and foreign (Diversi and Moreira, 2018, p. 80). Affirming and narrating betweener experiences challenges the colonizing discourse in academia by exposing the logic perpetuating the us-them dichotomy and forging “a visceral connection with others beyond flat exclusionary stereotypes” (Diversi and Moreira, 2018, p. 9).

Current literature highlights the betweener experiences of transnational scholars marked by a struggle between compliance and resistance within the Western-centric, neoliberal, meritocratic academia (Alhayek and Zeno, 2023; Jammulamadaka and Faria, 2023; Koo and Nyunt, 2022; Li et al., 2023; Torres-Olave and Lee, 2020). For instance, Asian international students in predominantly white institutions often become “academic sojourners” (Sato and Hodge, 2009, p. 144) facing a dual challenge of achieving academic success while resisting cultural assimilation. Their complicity in meritocracy may come from their legal status of being an immigrant, which requires them to perform to a certain level in order to continue their residence (Alhayek and Zeno, 2023) or rightfully inhabit white space (Jammulamadaka and Faria, 2023, p. 446) while also confronting model minority myths (Koo and Nyunt, 2022). This dynamic is part of a “uni-inclusion” logic (Jammulamadaka and Faria, 2023) that superficially embraces diversity under the condition of their utility and functionality, or the logic of “likeability” (Ahmed, 2012, p. 39).

In turn, some transnational scholars actively resist dominant institutional logic by embracing their cultural uniqueness (Li et al., 2023). Torres-Olave and Lee (2020), reflecting on their own professional development trajectory, resist the tokenized appreciation of diversity in academia or what they call as “indigenous bourgeois” (p. 144) while acknowledging the benefits of their academic network in the U.S. Their reflection reveals a nuanced positioning of transnational scholars that positions them as cultural representatives while expecting assimilation. Scholars of color, especially female, must navigate such feelings of betweenness in academia, often enduring an uncertain sense of belonging while challenging traditional norms (Jammulamadaka and Faria, 2023; Koo and Nyunt, 2022). They carve out realms of possibility by challenging normative ways of working while balancing academic responsibilities and other life-endowed projects. Yet, such resistance hints at a sense of impasse; scholars grapple with “the approximate feeling of belonging to a world that doesn’t yet exist reliably” (Berlant, 2011, p. 166). The attachment that emerging scholars form with the academic system may never return a fruitful reward. Nonetheless, they persist in forging the attachment while “halting, stuttering and aching being in the middle of detaching from a waning fantasy of the good life” (Berlant, 2011, p. 263).

The endurance of betweenness might be deliberately structured in transnational scholars’ professional development to nurture those capable of surviving the fluid socialization process. Yet, we should raise the question: How can the academic community shape itself to help emerging scholars of color endure the betweenness without debilitating? As a part of the academic community and emerging female scholars of color, we contemplate this question.

Methodology: betweener autoethnography

1. Research paradigm

Our work, rooted in emancipatory research paradigm that is inspired by feminist, critical thinking and Freirean perspectives on social transformation (Lather, 1986, 2017).prioritizes...
change and give voices to the marginalized. The emancipatory research paradigm seeks to illuminate the contradictions hidden in the lived experience of the oppressed. Simultaneously, it attempts to channel such conscientizing efforts towards fostering social transformation (Lather, 1986). It is essential to note that research as praxis avoids positioning researchers with a messianic power to liberate them from an oppressive system as if the researcher is abstracted from the process (Lather, 2017). The emancipatory path starts with humbly recognizing the limits of researchers’ knowledge, vitalizing the research process with an experimental ethos and aiming for “a different sort of doing in the name of research as praxis” (p. 79). Reflexivity in emancipatory research becomes an active, working ground continuously (un)done throughout their efforts to equalize power dynamics between the researcher and the researched—doing research “with” rather than “on” (Pillow, 2003, p. 179). Within the emancipatory research paradigm, reflexivity is an ongoing experimental project that requires constant unlearning from researchers through conscious efforts to decenter one’s discourse in the continuous encounter with others. Autoethnography emerges from such efforts to identify, interrogate and represent reflexivity by positioning researchers' personal experiences as subjects of inquiry (Adams et al., 2021).

2. Research method

We specifically adopt betweener autoethnography (Diversi and Moreira, 2009, 2018), a decolonial approach that focuses on researchers’ experiences in the spaces between “Us” and “Them” (Diversi and Moreira, 2018, p. 16) and troubles colonizing representations of the insider-outsider dichotomy. With the narrative turn in social science [1], autoethnography fully embraces stories as tools for inquiry that connect private and public life (Bochner, 2001). These stories with subjective details crystallize the social, political and cultural forces that impart depth to the human experience and inspire continuous exploration of their nuances (Bochner, 2017).

Betweener autoethnography particularly seeks to narrate the experience of various bodies produced in colonizing discourses (Phillips et al., 2022), illuminating the incomplete nature of knowledge claims about the us-them dichotomy perpetuated by the colonizing politics of both inclusion and exclusion in daily life. Aligning with a growing body of literature employing a critical reflexive approach to voice the unique experiences of scholars of color through autoethnography (Jammulamadaka and Faria, 2023; Li et al., 2023; Phillips et al., 2022; Torres-Olave and Lee, 2020), we engage in a critical, reflexive analysis of the institutional life in academia supporting the mandate of the emancipatory paradigm: encapsulating the hidden yet entrenched power dynamics in academia and integrating the voices of the invisible for producing knowledge that furthers its systemic transformation.

Voicing our own experiences of institutional life in academia using betweener autoethnography forges the liminal spaces as we (South Korean female doctoral students) (see Table 1) undergo the socialization process in the U.S. higher institutions (Weidman and DeAngelo, 2020). In our betweener autoethnography, we ensure rigor resisting “dogmas and reductionisms” (Lather, 2017, p. 81) by navigating validity as guided by Lather (2017, pp. 75–77). First, we triangulated our inquiry to obtain counter patterns and convergence and achieve data credibility, adopting Torbert’s (2013) triangulation of inquiry: first-person

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
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<td>Mia</td>
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<td>Sora</td>
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<td>Jae</td>
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| Source(s): Authors’ creation |
inquiry (“conscious development”), second-person inquiry (“mutuality-seeking political action inquiry”) and third-person inquiry (“objectivity-seeking social scientific inquiry”) (p. 265). Second, we recognize our inquiry operating within Weidman’s model to ensure the construct validity. Third, while seeking a click of recognition among us, we consider catalytic validity—“the degree to which the research process reorients, focuses, and energizes participants toward knowing reality to transform it” (Lather, 2017 p. 77), by presenting our work at a national conference as well as professional community of South Korean scholars and check their resonance with our inquiry (See Figure 2).

Our betweener autoethnographic journey began in August 2022. Initially, we strictly adhered to Tillmann et al.’s (2022) protocol, which structures the collective reflection into a phenomenological inquiry of our betweener experience into four parts: description, internal phenomenology, abstract conceptualization and experimentation (see Figure 3). We engaged in two rounds of individual inquiry, resulting in nine vignettes and three individual artifacts (photographic collages). Subsequently, we engaged in a two-hour-long dialogic betweener talk, conducted virtually, during which we identified six themes through inductive coding [2].

Yet, in the following section, we choose to present our “betweener” experiences chronologically, highlighting how they had become gradually integrated into our daily check-ins, which the structured protocol cannot capture. Further, while immersed in betweener talk, we sense our resistance being solely defined by disadvantage and oppression within the academic system of which we agentially become a part. This narrative reveals how our sense of duality develops, oscillating between agency and vulnerability. This detailed portrayal of our evolving understanding of betweener experience transcends the dualistic frameworks often cautioned against within the emancipatory research tradition (Lather, 2017). Thus, in the following section, we detail our evolving insights into our betweenness, blending personal vignettes with visual collages. These encapsulate the key moments of our moving identities amidst varying social, cultural and political contexts.

Findings: chronicling our shifts

Turn 1: sensing the relational value of the writing group, August 2022

Our shared motivation to cultivate a more consistent writing practice gathered us online. Though situated in different universities, we were united by the growing demands for
productivity, self-discipline and excellence that come with being (international) graduate students. The group’s inception can be traced back to a post initiated by Mia [3] in the informal online platform associated with our South Korean alma mater.

Mia’s objective for starting this group was to address the profound sense of stagnation she felt in her academic journey. She grappled with the internalized pressure to make continuous progress in her dissertation, shortly after the doctoral preliminary exam. She commented in her vignette, “I knew it was not the time to slow down but rather the time to accelerate, but I just could not do it.” Her deep sense of inertia stemmed from the internalized expectation to stay ahead in her doctoral path and achieve critical milestones.

Jae and Sora shared a similar sentiment in their vignette. Sora’s reason for joining was her wish to “gain a sense of control, discipline or anything in an otherwise chaotic rhythm during Pandemic days.” Jae initially described this group as “accountability partners.”

At the outset, our writing group adhered to a practice of recording daily writing in a shared document. We would meet every weekday morning at 9 a.m. Eastern time, write for one hour, and at the end of our hour-long session, document our progress on a shared Google Spreadsheet. However, as we became more familiar with each other and realized our similar academic backgrounds and stages, this self-audit system was naturally replaced by a five-minute check-in. All three of us were doctoral students on the cusp of beginning our dissertation projects, either in the drafting stage or contemplating the proposal. This shared experience fostered an environment where we could openly discuss our concerns about our writing and research progress.

Our brief check-ins underscored the relational significance of our virtual writing space. While the group was initially conceived as a recommended self-audit strategy to aid our doctoral pursuits “against the clock” (Kendall, 2002, p. 137), it evolved beyond a task-centric group. It became a relational space where we could share our vulnerabilities. As all of us were navigating the challenges of proposal writing and defense a pivotal stage in transitioning to independent scholars (Baltes and Brown, 2019) we found solace in discussing our experiences of navigating this critical moment with those who share the same identity of South Korean, female and international graduate students.
Jae, who had trouble articulating her difficulty studying and conducting research in English within her own department, felt this group was “therapeutical than any therapy could be.” She shared in her vignette,

For me, it was sharing the subtle emotional barriers that I had felt interacting with my American colleagues, often related to my linguistic handicap in writing and speaking. With the two other members of the group, I could talk about my negative emotions without worrying about coming across as a pessimist or underachiever.

Mia also commented on the sense of care she had yearned for in her immediate academic community: “The writing session every morning was my safe space. We vented negative emotions, concerns, and struggles. We did not act as if we were doing all right.”

Our mutual compassion was fostered by acknowledging our common fear of seeming inadequate. This apprehension likely stems from the prevailing neoliberal mentality in academia, which often sidelines self-care, compassion and community, prioritizing efficiency and competency (Kendall, 2002). Applying a critical lens to the dominant culture of the academy that espouses the value of productivity and academic excellence might mark us as outsiders or less competent. This fear of appearing to be underachievers is tied not only to the workings of the larger academic system’s logic advocating for meritocratic individualism (Brooks et al., 2018) but also to our identity shaped in the ultra-competitive South Korean education system. As graduates from a prestigious university in South Korea, working and residing outside our homeland as minorities led us to reflect on moments that prompted us to question our shifting positionality the unique experience we could not share with our local support system, including our caring advisors and like-minded friends and colleagues. Voicing the complexity of our inhabiting the in-between spaces and experiencing our shifting positionality without reserve offered us comfort. This shared sense of betweenness motivated us to inquire more deeply about our experience of becoming transnational scholars.

**Turn 2: confronting the collision: what kind of Korean are we becoming?, February 2023**

As members of the South Korean diaspora, we have often felt a sense of both belonging and estrangement from our host and origin cultures. Sora’s vignette, describing her visit to Korea, provides a poignant illustration (see Figure 4).

Sora’s vignette opened a portal for us to share experiences where we witnessed xenophobia, both as targets and, sometimes regrettably, as perpetrators. Even as people of color living in the U.S., we were not immune to harboring biases against foreign workers in South Korea. This recognition of discomfort in “seeing ourselves in Others” (Diversi and Moreira, 2009, p. 21) led us to discuss the sense of collision. Ahmed (2021) borrowed Crenshaw’s (1989) description of intersectionality as “a collision of traffic coming from many different directions,” (p. 23) and discussed how this sense of collision sheds light on the structural interlock that blocks people color from progressing in society. This perfectly captures our sense of feeling marginalized, even by our own family and culture.

We continually re-evaluate our own intersectionality: what kind of Korean are we becoming? The question reverberated through the years of our living in America as part of the Asian diaspora. Jae shared her own experience of renegotiating the meaning of Koreanness with her fellow Korean graduate students. Their playful hostility towards Japan collided with her affinity for Japanese culture stemming from living in Japan as a young child (see Figure 5).

We experience the sense of collision while interacting with our own personal communities, which sometimes marginalize our ways of knowing through cultural yet subtle institutional logics. Mia’s colliding experience, however, happened in a more professional and
Mia’s example reveals how our home culture not only shapes our social but also professional becoming. The sense of collision feels sharper for us as we are in the process of building our own scholarly identities. As international graduate students, we often encounter situations where we are expected to participate in the institutionalized kinship offered by fellow Korean scholars, typically in the format of a special interest group. However, this special interest group frequently reproduces social relations and inadvertently forges a sense of marginalization.

Our shared experiences highlight the complexities of our identities. Living and working in various institutional and cultural settings, we have often felt marginalized even among those who share our ethnicity. Confronted with normative pressures to fit in, our minds brew with a
sense of discomfort with the one-sided assimilation process. As individuals on the margin, we encounter moments to examine and potentially transform our nonconformist perspectives to fit in the prevailing logic. Such characterizing moments arise not only when we are surrounded by people with differences in significant identity markers (i.e. race, gender, ethnicity) but also in interacting with those within the same identity categories. Even among peers with similar identities, we sense differences and this recognition of difference causes our uneasiness in negotiating the process of being included.

Our collective experience of this collision underscores a mutual discomfort in the urge to assimilate to either Korean kinship or American culture or both. Whether as people of color within a predominantly white institution or individuals weaving narratives that diverge from mainstream logics, we are all grappling with a nuanced understanding of our intersectional identity as South-Korean-female-doctoral students. What becomes clear to us is that we can never definitively understand what the hyphens connecting all our identity markers mean to us. These hyphens signify nuances that cannot be expressed in our major identity markers. With this recognition in mind, our inquiry into what kind of Korean we are becoming has evolved into a contemplation of what we have sacrificed to gain approval within the overarching framework of majority norms, as “being diversity.”

Turn 3: sensing the shared needs for warmth, May 2023
Feeling the need to share our experiences of betweenness within our ethnic and professional communities, Sora proposed using autoethnography. We had the opportunity to present our betweener talk at a national education conference (Lim et al., 2023), which led to an invitation to present at a webinar for South Korean scholars in the field of education technology. The organizer, recognizing our work as offering a feminist perspective on scholarly identity development, promoted the event as “feminist work,” encouraging colleagues to “show solidarity by showing up.”

While grateful for the invitation from fellow Korean scholars, the label of “feminist work” left us puzzled. Our betweener talk, intended to capture our elusiveness beyond major identity markers, was now labeled as “feminist.” Our curiosity about this label, tinged with uneasiness, may stem from our apprehension about conditional hospitality (Ahmed, 2012, p. 43). We feared how our betweener talk, voicing the sensed complexity of our elusive and
nuanced positionality, would be perceived by our fellow Korean scholars. What if they viewed it as a self-absorbed narrative irrelevant to their experiences? What do we aim to contribute to the community by shedding light on the narratives of our own? What is it that we are creating through this betweener talk?

Grappling with these questions, we organized the session in the hopes of redoing the categories of our work. Ahmed (2012) discusses how categories can be redefined through the description “of being included” (p. 183); “accounting for blockages and restriction within institutional worlds” offers a nuanced account of institutional life, which includes “an account of how smaller categories can become grounds of an existence” (p. 183). The “feminist” marker assigned to our work by the fellow Korean scholarly community is a prime example of how sticky markers can be applied to all non-conformist works. The “stickiness” of the markers given to a wide array of different diversity works whether feminist, queer, decolonizing, etc. prompted us to reflect on the nuanced character of our betweener talk.

During the webinar, we carefully narrated our inquiries, delving into our colliding experiences as members of the Korean diaspora in American higher education and the narrative we are constructing through these experiences. We shared insights into our camaraderie and the shared feeling of being an inextricable type of “diversity.” The small group of audience seemed to resonate with our betweener experiences—we had a 2.5-h long conversation about our betweener experiences. The discussion transcended barriers of gender, generation and for the most part, institutional roles.

Towards the end of the session, the host posed a significant question: “So what?” What are the practical implications of these nuanced understandings of our betweener positions? The room grew silent. We had no immediate answer but felt deeply that an answer was needed. One of the many lessons from our years of training is not to jump in hastily in such cases. Yet, this question resonated with our wonder at the meaning of the work we are producing.

“Maybe it’s warmth,” Sora eventually spoke, hesitatingly suggesting the term “warmth” inspired by Bateson (2016). Bateson posits warmth as an approach to inclusivity, a move away from reductive, systemized thinking that promotes a “rip-off” (p. 98) solution to complexity. Warmth signals comfort with ambiguity or betweenness. Yet, even this term, filled with complexity rather than clarity, left us feeling in-between.

Turn 4: sitting with a question: what kind of scholarship do we aspire to embody?, August 2023

The recent turn took us by surprise. Months had passed since our last betweener talk about our feelings of collision. Our gatherings morphed with the shifting pace of summer and different milestones for each of us. Jae was finalizing her data collection for her dissertation in Korea, Sora began her postdoc role and Mia initiated her data collection after successfully defending her prospectus. After a certain period of repose, we reunited on Zoom, exchanging our updates.

Our conversation deepened when Sora shared her discomfort about drafting documents for seeking employment. For any doctoral students or junior scholars, entering the job market is pivotal. It presents a forced identity-defining moment after years of hard work. Yet, Sora struggled with boxing her scholarly identity into “three marketable keywords.” She lamented, “All I have done seems to be chasing after the potential (of finding a difference), which never came to me with a tangible result. Every work I have done feels futile.” Her vulnerability emerged after recognizing the failure to reside in one discipline.

“I also felt caught between the desire to be likeable and the desire to remain different,” said Mia, resonating with Sora’s frustration. The discomfort and vulnerability of being interdisciplinary have also resonated with Jae. Our deep check-in became an inquiry space where we shared our sensed homelessness emerging from the academic training that
strongly emphasizes “geographical, disciplinary, cross-sectional mobility” (Nerad et al., 2022, p. 23) in response to the demands to develop transferable skills traversing disciplinary silos (see Table 2).

Through these struggles encountered in navigating the development of scholarly identity, we uncover the intricacies of the existing frameworks and narratives that mold and often impede our scholarly becoming. Unique is the collectiveness of our inquiry: once more, we found ourselves at the intersection, experiencing the crash yet again together in searching for another identity our scholarly independence.

Interweaving inquiries for inclusive academia

Employing betweeners autoethnography, we documented our lived socialization process. Our lived socialization experience in the U.S. higher education institutes emerges from the intersection of our background (Korean heritage, female gender identity), disciplinary/professional communities (fields of education), personal communities and career development (See Figure 7). Through this reflective process, we have become aware of the dominant institutional logic that we sometimes internalize as part of the meritocratic structure in academia. Simultaneously, we critically examine how systemic, cultural and disciplinary logic infiltrates and shapes our experience of becoming transnational scholars.

Aligned with previous studies highlighting the experiences of transnational scholars who navigate the in-between spaces of complicity and resistance within the Western-centric, neoliberal, meritocratic academia (Alhayek and Zeno, 2023; Jammulamadaka and Faria, 2023; Koo and Nyunt, 2022; Li et al., 2023; Torres-Olave and Lee, 2020), we find ourselves in a similar liminal space. This space is characterized by the tension between normative pressures to conform and our own desires to acknowledge and express our individuality, all within the context of the meritocratic culture of academia. Ahmed (2012) conceptualized institutional
Note(s): The gray ovals represent the institutionalized logic identified through our betweenerautoethnography. The blue rectangles represent the inquiries driving our betweenerautoethnography.

Source(s): Created by the authors using Microsoft Powerpoint.
logic as akin to kinship logic, perpetuating social relations based on the appeal of likability. In this framework, the difference is equivalent to a decrease in likability. The normative pressure to conform can cause discomfort as we feel compelled to “sink into” shared kinship expectations (Ahmed, 2012, p. 41). Yet, such conformity can lead to an internal struggle, which conflicts with our intrinsic desire to maintain our individuality.

Our collective inquiry reveals that these internal conflicts become particularly pronounced during active interactions with external environments whether in personal or professional communities or within higher education institutions. It is within these interactions that we encounter aspects of ourselves that elude the dominant kinship logic we have internalized. This realization of ‘betweenness’ is sharpened by the tension between our direct experiences with the system and the epistemic resources at our disposal tools for interpretation that allow us to seek answers to our lived experiences (Pohlhaus, 2012). Recognizing the limitations of dominant logic, we arrive at a critical standpoint (Pohlhaus, 2012). The ongoing tension resulting from our social positioning, which often opposes the entrenched, power-maintained epistemic frameworks, challenges us to reassess and potentially reimagine dominant logic critically. For instance, our compliance with the culture of achievement within academia began to feel foreign to us as we seek ways in which we become liberated from the competitive, performance-oriented academic culture that is marked by “survival time—the time of struggling, drowning, holding onto the ledge, treading water—the time of not stopping” (Berlant, 2011, p. 169). Our historical involvement in the meritocratic educational system inculcated in us a dedication to productivity. Yet, after realizing that such a meritocratic culture often sidelines individual self-care and well-being, we reflect on how, if possible, we might satisfy our psychological needs for mutual care and compassion—qualities often overlooked in academia. Such crystallization experiences have encouraged us to question the prevailing logic of our origin culture. Our shared experiences of the intersectional collision (Ahmed, 2012, p. 23) heightened our awareness of our positionality within the Western-centric, meritocratic academic system. Consequently, we direct our inquiry toward the academic system and its systemic affordance for embracing individuals at the margins and acting to foster compassion, caring and warmth (Bateson, 2016).

Conclusion
A dance between conforming to and challenging academic norms constitutes professional socialization process for international doctoral students. Our narratives, while not exhaustively representing international students’ struggles, capture the complexity and fluidity of early-career transnational scholars’ experiences. These insights are critical for mentors guiding doctoral students with transnational backgrounds through academia’s unique socialization challenges. Additionally, our research design provides a methodological framework for transnational scholars to critically examine and reflect on their academic institutional life. Emphasizing the betweener experiences and incorporating their insights can trouble the hollow rhetoric of inclusion and diversity (Ahmed, 2012). We embody this inquiry through supportive check-ins with peers and integration of ethics of care in our research and teaching, fostering alternative academic logics on our own. Our seeds of resistance in our daily academic life may ultimately progress towards truly inclusive academic spaces.

Notes
1. Autoethnography challenges traditional social science by embracing subjective, narrative knowledge (Bochner, 2001), marking a shift that values nuanced narratives in theory development. It aligns with the post-modernistic claim of epistemology knowledge is always partial and inherently subjective leading to the narrative turn in social science: a paradigm shift that
recognizes the value of narratives as rich, nuanced data that can deepen social theory with their subtleties and ironies. While a detailed discussion on the methodological underpinnings of autoethnography has been omitted for the sake of the paper, interested readers can refer to relevant works listed in the reference list for more information.

2. The themes include (1) the “hustle culture” of academia espousing the value of productivity, self-discipline and excellence; (2) the pandemic as an enabler of our self-reflection; (3) increased awareness of socio-political influence on our identity-shaping at multiple levels; (4) a shared sensation of being seen, heard and understood in the online writing group; (5) the gradual development of collegiality against the backdrop of shared betweenness; and (6) the reduction of the fear associated with the writing process.

3. All names are pseudonyms.

References


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