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Consciousness

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# An Afro-Latina's Navigation of the Academy: Tracings of Audacious Departures, Reroutings, and Intersectional Consciousness

Mildred Boveda

*In this autoethnographic mapping of the educational experiences leading to my current role as a researcher and teacher educator in the United States, I argue that I enacted de/colonizing processes through my academic migrations. Using personal narratives rooted in de/colonial, Black feminist, and Mami-influenced onto-epistemological orientations, I outline key movements made during my undergraduate studies at (a) an Ivy League college and a teacher education program in South Florida, and my graduate studies at (b) a second Ivy League institution and a Hispanic Serving Institution. I provide examples from a published book, web articles, and personal e-mail communications that reveal how peers, faculty, and administrators reacted to my departures and arrivals. I contend with the paradox of the US academy granting me access to theorists who name critical pedagogy and intersectionality, while simultaneously exacerbating constraints I mitigated as a Black woman with familial ties to the Global South. Centering the de/colonial sense-making women embodying multiple marginality offer, I identify the epistemic frictions that motivated my critical academic migrations. I conclude by offering points of considerations for institutions of higher education that are purportedly committed to equity, inclusion, and supporting diverse onto-epistemic orientations.*

**Keywords:** academic migrations / Black feminist / counternarrative / de/colonial / education / postsecondary education

As an academic and teacher educator practicing in the United States, my intersectional sociocultural identities are entangled with the (re)remembered<sup>1</sup> histories of a country that emerged from the first colony in the Americas—that is, the site of the first Indigenous devastations in the “New World” and where victims of the transatlantic slave trade first revolted against Western European supremacy (Stone 2013). To trace the path that led to a career in the academy, I must begin by introducing Mami (Boveda 2016b, 2016c). Mami and Papi were born in the 1930s, started a family in the 1960s, and had me in the 1980s. In addition to my status as the generational outlier in my immediate family, I was the only one born in the United States. My childhood spent mostly in Miami, Florida was a transnational, transgenerational experience. Frequent visits to the Dominican Republic, along with daily doses of Mami’s stories about life on the island, anchored my understanding of my historical, geographical situatedness.

Rooted in *de/colonial*, *Black feminist*, and *Mami-influenced onto-epistemic orientations*, I employ critical autoethnography (Bhattacharya 2018; Boylorn 2014) to describe how transnational and intergenerational understandings helped me frame my urban public school experiences as empowering despite the challenges often fetishized in narratives about urban communities in the United States. I outline key movements made during my undergraduate studies at (a) an Ivy League college and a special education teacher education program in South Florida, and my graduate studies at (b) another Ivy League institution and a Hispanic Serving Institution. These exits and reroutings informed—and were informed by—a heightening critical feminist consciousness. In retracing and (re)remembering my movements, I interweave my memories with examples from an edited book (Garrod, Kilkenny, and Gómez 2007), web articles, and personal e-mail communications. These collocations reveal how other Black and Brown women (i.e., peers, faculty, and administrators) made sense of arrivals and departures in these spaces. I identify the sustaining and marginalizing forces that motivated my critical academic migrations and eventually brought me to my current role as an assistant professor at a research-intensive state university. I conclude by offering points to consider for faculty and administrators at Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) that are purportedly committed to equity, inclusion, and supporting diverse onto-epistemic orientations.

### **Mami, Doña Clara, and the Cost of an Education**

Mami was one of the oldest children of my widowed grandmother. Historically, perceptions of women’s beauty in the Caribbean privileged what my peers in Miami called *being thick* (see also Ristovski-Slijepcevic et al. 2010; Rubin, Fitts, and Becker 2003). Like many young girls from her era, Mami desired to put on more weight. She was a thin child, however, with a tall frame and long black hair that fell down her back. My ten aunts and uncles somehow all resembled

each other and yet differed remarkably in appearance. From Mami's brown skin, to my uncle's deep mahogany complexion, to Manita's *jabao* tone and rusty, tightly coiled hair, my family's precision in and attentiveness to describing each other's distinctive features continue to impress me. As she developed into womanhood, Mami became as renowned for her archetypal waist-to-hip ratio as for her *melena*. But before she grew into her mature body, she developed a reputation for being one of the most responsible children in her hometown.

Around the age of 11, shortly after Mami's father passed away, she was propositioned to work in the more developed part of Sánchez, Samaná. Doña Clara<sup>2</sup> approached my grandmother and requested Mami come live with her in her house in exchange for the sponsorship of her education. Doña Clara's husband was the town's treasurer who once served as its Secretary of Public Works. They had two children, a daughter who was Mami's age and a son who was 4-years old. My grandmother was an incredibly tough and savvy woman, but never learned how to read or write. Mami had long desired to attend school during a time and place where there were no compulsory education laws. She saw Doña Clara's invitation as her opportunity to exit the harsh realities of living in the rural mountainous *terrenas* of the Dominican Republic and to receive a formal education.

Mami served her mistress for many years, but Doña Clara never sent her to school. Although her family only lived a few miles away, Mami was exposed to a world of much greater comforts than those in *la terrena*—even if she toiled to keep those comforts up for Doña Clara and her family. My mother worked as an unpaid servant, or *criada*, for most of her adolescence. Mami carefully managed the little bit of money my grandmother periodically gave her and sometimes earned tips when Doña Clara's acquaintances would visit. (At 16, Mami was finally able to purchase her first pair of shoes.) An autodidact, she honed her reading, writing, and calculation skills while running errands for Doña Clara. During her limited free time, she wrote poems, read the local newspaper, and memorized the lyrics to her favorite ballads. Marcia, the older daughter, was *más fuerte* than Mami and gave her clothes once she outgrew them.

As an adult, I came to realize that however normalized the role of the *muchacha* or *criada* may be in Dominican culture (Chaney and García Castro 1993), these types of arrangements are exploitative and indicative of the colonial vestiges of slavery. In the stories she told me, Mami *always* spoke kindly of Doña Clara and even kept a black-and-white picture of her in our meticulously kept family photo album. Yet, when I pressed her about her experiences in Sánchez, Mami opened up about the times she ran away. Doña Clara or her husband would seek her out and do their best to convince her to return. At the age of 18, Mami decided to part ways with the family and to make her own path. She kept in touch with her former mistress and maintained a bond with her children. When talking about her experiences, Mami prefers to focus on how she made the most out of every opportunity afforded her. Today, the

former criada has a daughter who is an engineer, a son who owns a business, and a daughter who is writing about feminist exits and reroutings for this journal.

**Mami-Influenced Onto-Epistemology:  
A De/Colonial, Black Feminist Approach to (Counter)Narratives**

Colonization refers to a group of people invading a space that is not their own and to which they are not Indigenous. In addition to usurping Indigenous spaces, colonizers steal resources and enslave or subjugate people to support and propagate their own cultural values, knowledges, and practices. Decolonizing discourses argue for the expulsion of colonizing influences and settler presence on Indigenous lands (e.g., Tuck and Yang 2012). As I consider my (re)membered transnational histories and analyze my experiences across the US academy, I align myself with transnational scholars who recognize that neither colonization nor decolonization ever existed separately from the other. Kakali Bhattacharya asserts there is not just “one thing” that is decolonizing about her research and argues that she engages in “the continuous troubling of the dangerous binary of colonized and decolonized discourses to avoid claiming a moral or rhetoric victory on the other side of colonizing discourses” (2009, 1078). In his work on Black indigeneity, George Dei also cautions against the temptation of implementing a westernized, binary approach to decolonization:

While it is important to avoid rendering a false binary or moral evaluation between good (indigenous) and bad (conventional/Western) knowledges, the objective is nonetheless to challenge imperial ideologies and colonial relations of knowledge production that continually characterize and shape academic practices. (2000, 113)

No matter how authentic my desires are to undermine the deleterious effects of colonization, I am reminded of its tenacity as I reflect on the bleak veracity of a comment made by a search committee chair. During the dinner portion of a job interview, the middle-aged white woman announced my Dominican “body is fleshly evidence of Christopher Columbus’s legacy.” Her uncouth statement was a passive/microaggressive reference to my “mixed-race” appearance; her white body in what came to be known as the Americas, however, is also fleshly evidence of the spiraling and lasting effects of the 1492 event.

The exploitation of Indigenous people and the subsequent transatlantic enslavement of Africans financed the establishment of IHEs throughout stolen lands (de Sousa Santos 2015; Wilder 2014), the westernization of universities around the globe (Grosfoguel 2013), and the eventual privileging of epistemologies from five countries of the Global North: France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States (de Sousa Santos 2010). Therefore, in referencing decoloniality while writing in English and working at a US university, it is difficult to fully separate my participation in university-based endeavors

from my desire to disrupt such complicity and its materiality. Moving away from a dualistic analytical approach, I represent the tensions and movements between colonizing oppression and decolonizing longings as de/colonizing, where the slash indicates the interchange between these contested positions (Bhattacharya 2009).

The effects of my mother's religious conversion are another example of de/colonial tensions. My grandparents and parents were raised steeped in the Dominican oral tradition, connected to the land and its people's spiritual practices. In her 30s, Mami converted to a form of Christianity closer to the Protestant faiths practiced in New England and the Southern Bible Belt than to her parents' syncretism of African, *Taíno*, and Catholic spiritual traditions. As the emerging matriarch of the family, her younger sisters followed her conversion and eventual migration to the United States. As much as Mami's stories are implanted in my memory, so is the image of her sitting at the side of the bed each night, reading and marking her Bible. Her commitment to Christianity, however, did not mean she negated the intuitive ancestral ways of knowing she passed on to her children and that I continue to depend on. Similarly—and arguably interconnected—her decision to move to the same country that wielded an imperial, pernicious influence in her life (Boveda and Bhattacharya 2019) did not negate her allegiance to her homeland. Today, I am hyperaware of how ancestral and intuitive epistemologies are dismissed as backwards, “old wives tales” in westernized universities (Grosfoguel 2013). At the same time, I also recognize my Christian upbringing continues to afford me (conditional) acceptance in traditionally white US spaces.

My consciousness about how systems of privilege and oppression coalesce in complex and nuanced ways—a construct I call *intersectional competence* when applied to teacher education (Boveda 2016a)—helps me navigate this strange and white territory called academia. In privileging the memories and counterstories of multiply marginalized people at the intersections of anti-Blackness, colonialism, imperialism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of oppression (hooks 1994), I (re)center epistemologies explicitly devalued or erased in the westernized university. Furthermore, it is impossible to compartmentalize my lived experiences, as I am not Black one day, Latina the next, and a woman a third. I carry all of these minoritized sociocultural markers every day, everywhere I go (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1989). Through my understandings of Mami's stories, my complex situatedness, and the education I accessed through US-based schooling, I have co/constructed a de/colonial, Black-feminist onto-epistemic orientation that pushes against the colonial epistemicide Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2015) describes. Interrupted and disruptive, the narratives in this essay do not follow a chronologically linear sequence. Furthermore—and true to my de/colonial ethics—I ascribe as much credence to the experience-based understandings of people like Mami who are traditionally unacknowledged in academic discursive spaces as I do the expertise found in academic sources.

In this essay, I draw parallels and highlight the intersections between Mami's exits within and outside of the Dominican Republic and my navigation of the westernized academy. By sharing these narratives, I track the origins of my critical feminist consciousness both in and out of the confines of formal academic spaces. In centering Mami's stories and engaging in autoethnographic tracings of my exits and reroutings across institutions, I argue that my academic migrations are an enactment of de/colonial processes. I locate an early awareness of my embodied markers of difference and how they shaped my primary and secondary urban schooling. I then offer a counternarrative to a publication that misrepresented my choice to leave an undergraduate institution and reflect on how my critical orientations were entangled in my search for community and quality mentorship in graduate school. Thus, I contend with the paradox of the US academy granting access to theorists who identify with critical pedagogy and intersectionality, while simultaneously exacerbating the marginalization I strive to neutralize as a Black woman with familial ties to the Global South.

### **Transnational Interpretations of (Anti)Blackness and Urban Schooling**

During my years in the Miami-Dade County Public Schools, there were only a handful of white students in each of the schools I attended and about two handfuls of white teachers. Colorism and anti-Blackness nevertheless reared their multiple and ugly heads. During my first two years of elementary school, I was an English learner who was often othered for being too "dark-skinned" by Spanish-speaking peers. For example, in first grade, while celebrating the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr., a group of students—each with familial ties to Latin America—taunted me and said that just like King was assassinated, I was going to be killed because I was *negra*. While I faced these anti-Black sentiments in early childhood, my brother was in his 20s and voicing his growing critical Black consciousness. I (re)member his extensive conversations with our family about the discrimination people of African descent faced here and other parts of the world. Counter to Mami's considerable list of descriptors to capture our physical features, in the United States those of us with conspicuous links to African heritage were simply racialized as Black.

My parent's poor employment prospects limited our housing and neighborhood school options in Miami, Florida. Summer visits to my cousins' homes in the Dominican Republic—homes that experienced frequent electrical outages, lacked sophisticated indoor plumbing, and were covered with tin roofs—gave me a firsthand understanding of the pervasive poverty in the Global South and the people who could nonetheless thrive in those conditions. The trips made it clear to me that my cousins' access to a public education system, though an improvement from what was available to Mami, paled in comparison to what I accessed in the United States. My family's life in the Dominican Republic allowed me to interpret our living situation in Florida as progress. By

comprehending and honoring our collective struggles, I refused to succumb to self-pity and avoided the common traps prevalent in my urban community (Boveda 2016c). The repeated telling of stories depicting life before the United States heavily influenced my attitude toward school and an appreciation for the educational opportunities available to me.

When my parents were able to afford a townhouse in a predominantly Black community, it was then, in the presence of African American and Caribbean teachers and students, that I was recognized *at school* for being bright and capable. In fact, from third through fifth grade, my teachers were all Black women, and the trend continued into middle and high school, where administrators were also Black. In those schools, I had English-speaking versions of the types of matriarchs who guided my family. These educators communicated high expectations and exposed me to the words of storytellers such as Maya Angelou, Gabriel García Márquez, and Amy Tan.

I also (re)remember a poignant and unsettling experience replete with the de/colonial tensions I contend(ed) with within US academic spaces. I was a fifth grader and my teacher wanted one of her students to recite a Langston Hughes's (1994) poem "Mother to Son":

Well, son, I'll tell you  
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.  
It's had tacks in it,  
And splinters,  
And boards torn up,  
And places with no carpet on the floor—  
Bare. . . . (Hughes 1994, 30)

The poem reminded me of Mami. I (re)remember how desperately I wanted to recite it in front of my peers. I explained that I had memorized all the words, but my teacher told me I was not the right student to perform it. Never afraid to ask questions, I asked why. I felt her discomfort as she grappled with her words. She told me it was because I did not have the right sound. My teacher, an African American woman, did not feel comfortable having a child with a Dominican accent recite the lines written in African American vernacular English (AAVE). But despite of (or maybe because of) the AAVE, the poem resonated with me. My fifth-grade teacher never knew Mami's story or that the poem was the first piece of literature in which I saw my family's class-based experiences reflected. Thankfully, she relented and honored my insistent request. After I delivered my oration, I (re)remember looking at my teacher's face and discerning that she was not impressed. Although it was clear to me I had not met her US-based standard of Black excellence, I was satisfied and cherish the bittersweet experience to this day.

As complicated and sometimes disorienting as my childhood schooling was, it was at Dartmouth College that I learned most Black and Brown students



in the United States are taught by white teachers. When I arrived at the Ivy League campus in rural New Hampshire, it was the first time I encountered so much wealth and whiteness. I had almost exclusively taken high school honors and International Baccalaureate courses with other Black and Brown students. But many of my new classmates were the only persons of Color in their honors courses. While all the perils of attending predominantly Black and Brown urban schools are well encoded in US discourse, much less attention is given to the experiences of students who are “the only ones” in predominantly white primary and secondary schools. The different affinity groups at the college gave some of my peers an important opportunity to connect with academically high-achieving peers who looked like them. In retrospect, I preferred to be around students who came from large urban cities like New York and Chicago because they carried themselves in ways more familiar to me than students of Color who came from predominantly white schools.

During my freshman year, I was involved in both the Black and Latinx student organizations and served in the role of liaison for both groups. A narrative from a peer who entered the same year I did—and who chose to keep her name anonymous in an edited volume about Latino/a students’ experiences (Garrod, Kilkenny, and Gómez 2007)—attempts to capture what it was like to engage in groups like *La Alianza Latina*:

First, it is no secret that there are not very many Latinos at Dartmouth, and of those few, even fewer who have anything more than superficial contact with their culture. Second, the pressure to fit into mainstream college culture is powerful and affects everyone. Due to some European ancestry stemming from the days of “conquistas and colonizations,” a good percentage of Latinos have features that make them look white, and many of these kind of Latinos pass themselves off as white. It’s not that they deny their culture or lie about it; it is more that they just go along with the assumptions people make from their physical features. (Garrod, Kilkenny, and Gómez 2007, 146)

After a year of navigating between those two communities, I prioritized spending time with other Black students. By my sophomore year, I requested to live in the house we called the AAm (short for African American), which was officially named after Malcom X.

When outside of these spaces, I felt like a fish out of water. I distinctly (re)member a time when I walked down Main Street and abruptly processed I was at a predominantly white institution (PWI). It was my first time seeing snowfall, and I suddenly felt overwhelmed by whiteness: white snow, white buildings, and white people seemed to envelop me. I felt like a brown figurine in a snow globe. It was not only the physical differences that jarred me. I had to learn a different way of being. For example, I learned that the straightforward, sincere, and upfront conversational style that is highly valued in the transnational and urban communities I come from is considered “confrontational” and “aggressive”

in academic white spaces. On the other hand, an indirect communication style that would be considered scheming and inauthentic in my neighborhood was thought to be polite and civil at the PWI. In order to persist, I quickly learned how to give white people the benefit of the doubt. Unfortunately, that generosity was not always reciprocated. More than once I heard statements like those made by my white freshman housemates: “you know how Mildred can get.”

### Education as a Path for Freedom, Not Elitism

During a language study abroad trip to Brazil, I was introduced to Paulo Freire’s (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The book inspired me to become a teacher. Reading Freire’s ideas about critical *conscientização* and pedagogy—concepts informed by literacy campaigns in rural Brazil, Frantz Fanon, Karl Marx, and his Christian faith—all resonated with my transnational experiences and Mami-informed de/colonial longings for education. Freire was also a gateway to bell hooks (1994). When I returned to campus after the trip, I volunteered at a local elementary school, but was frustrated because so many of the students were children of faculty members. I wanted to serve and learn with the types of communities my family and I came from. After completing my sophomore year, I decided to return home to finish my undergraduate studies at a local teacher education program. For one, Dartmouth only offered Education as a minor. Most importantly, I disabused myself of the notion that I required an Ivy League degree to validate my intelligence or worth. I clearly (re)member delineating those reasons to others when explaining why I decided to transfer out of the college.

Right before I left for the study abroad trip that so heavily influenced my professional trajectory, I met Nathan at an event hosted by the church I attended in Miami. I happened to be on holiday break when he decided to visit the congregation. We exchanged contact information and kept in touch. I felt I had more in common with Nathan than I did with my college peers. His focus on spiritual growth and servant leadership seemed to be in contrast with the career(ist) pursuits of the young men who were part of my social circle at Dartmouth.

In a collection of oral histories of Black women, Leah Threatte, a senior during my freshman year, reflected on the challenges she faced dating at this institution:

For me, a lot of it was, by the time I got to be a senior, related to social isolation. I didn’t have a boyfriend the whole four years. I didn’t date and not for lack of interest. I felt that directly related to the social scene there and the lack of . . . I felt like we were all brothers and sisters in the Black community, so nobody really dated within the community it seemed. I felt very invisible to most of the men in the white community. I was looking for a hetero relationship

and didn't feel like I had a lot of options. On top of that, not even like "Oh I can pick and choose from these, I don't like these choices. . . ." But truly, "I feel invisible here." And that was generally what a lot of my heartache about being at Dartmouth came from. Academically, I liked the school. I liked my friends. I didn't mind the rural setting. All of those things were fine for me. It really was the social piece. (Garbutt 2018)

Like Threatte, I saw the romantic and social dynamics at Dartmouth were difficult for Black women. In addition to the invisible-ness she identified, I (re)member clandestine flings and toxic—even traumatic—affairs that gave me pause about socializing.

I married Nathan shortly after I transferred out of Dartmouth because I respected his spiritual fortitude and strong sense of integrity. Lori Patton and Michelle McClure argue that for Black college women, "spirituality is one of the most significant factors that contribute to their strength" (2009, 42). Their finding not only reflects what sustained me during those first two years I attended the PWI, but also a source of frustration that intertwined with my departure and decision to get married. Like Threatte, I was able to fit in "academically." However, as I gained a greater understanding of the ahistorical and detached ways of knowing reinforced in the westernized academy, I recognized my time at Dartmouth left me *spiritually drained* and socially undersupported.

My decision to leave an Ivy League school to become a special education teacher and get married was a scandal at home and on campus. I was on the Dean's list, and people did not understand why I was "throwing away" such a great opportunity. In a kinder example of the type of reactive communications I fielded, I received an e-mailed note from an African American administrator who reached out after my departure:

Greetings and hope you are well. I was talking with [La Alianza club sponsor] and he told me that you were no longer at Dartmouth. I was quite surprised . . . shocked!! How are you? I hope that you're continuing with school. Do you plan to return to Dartmouth or did you resign from Dartmouth to finish at another school? [La Alianza Sponsor] said that you were taking classes at Florida International University. Do you like it? Sorry for all the questions. Fall term is in full swing. Homecoming is next weekend. The '06's are here and there are many students of color. It feels good. The '06's are very active in the AAm and in La Alianza, so meetings are quite lively.<sup>3</sup>

In her note, the administrator communicated surprise, but by highlighting the "many" incoming "students of color," she hinted at the same social isolation Threatte described in her reflection.

I knew I had made the right choice. Mami also understood that however irrational or impulsive my decision appeared to outsiders, my moves were informed by logic, faith, and a sound intuition. Both then and now, I see that

my exit was motivated by a strong sense of self that rebelled against colonial and elitist notions linking my value as an Afro-Latina to my participation in prestigious, predominantly white spaces. Knowing the Latin etymology of prestigious, *praestigium* (i.e., illusion), captures how I continue to feel about the semblance of expertise conferred by IHEs.

In retracing my memories, I also see how the 44-year age difference between Mami and me engendered my preference for the company of elders, and especially elder women. By the end of my freshman year, all of my closest friends were seniors at Dartmouth. I enjoyed spending time with them because they had been at the institution the longest and seemed most confident. Once they graduated, it became harder to bond with the younger students on campus. I now acknowledge that I walked a thin line between my developing critical feminist awareness and a judgmental, impatient disposition toward my peers. Additionally, the few connections I made with faculty members were superficial and centered around academics. Once the cohort of seniors I developed a bond with graduated, it became more difficult for me to justify how staying would serve my growing desire to work with vulnerable populations.

### A Chance Encounter and the Revelation of Duplicity

In 2012, at a session of the American Education Research Association (AERA) annual conference, I had the pleasure of bumping into a Latina professor, a sociologist, whose course I took during my freshman year at Dartmouth. By this time, I was a doctoral student and the mother of two young children. Prior to that chance meeting in Vancouver, the last time I spoke to her was in 2002 when I scheduled a meeting to let her know about my academic transfer. I (re)member sitting in her office, telling her why I was leaving to pursue a career in teaching; for years, I believed she understood my decision.

Needless to say, I was excited about our reunion at AERA. During our brief chat, the professor mentioned that another Dominican student referenced me in one of her books. When I asked who it was, she demurred, stating she could not share those details because of confidentiality concerns. I later found the following passage, written under a pseudonym, which mentioned *me* by first name:

During a Latino reception I felt someone tap me on the shoulder. I turned around to face a petite, dark-skinned girl. . . . We were two immigrant Dominican girls who almost two decades earlier had been born in the Caribbean and had somehow ended up an Ivy League college as a result of hard work, luck, and some serious financial aid. As we chatted, we spotted another girl who wore a deer-in-the-headlights expression that resembled ours. It turns out that Mildred and I were right: the girl we spotted, [redacted due to ethical concerns], was half African-American and half Dominican. (Garrod, Kilkenny, and Gómez 2007, 145)

The author went on to describe her frustrations with Dartmouth and its lack of support for Latinx students. My mention concluded with the following dismissive comment:

By Junior year, Mildred and [redacted classmate's name], the other two Dominicans in my class were gone. Mildred left sophomore year to get married. I know that her decision was based greatly on how little support she received in her academic endeavors. She had a baby last year and graduated from a community college. (145)

I was hurt and deeply disappointed to see my name attached to a characterization of my college experience filled with inaccuracies. For one, I was depicted as someone who did not have support for my “academic endeavors,” when in reality I had excellent grades, served as an assistant teacher, and had an academically fulfilling experience at the school. It was through Dartmouth, for example, that I was able to study in Brazil and first read about critical pedagogy. Although I can identify numerous ways PWIs failed and continue to fail multiply marginalized students, the chapter does not reflect how for women like me, fitting in academically is not enough. My agentic exit was not a result of academic struggles but instead an outcome of a critical awareness of the spiritual cost that performing for elite institutions exacts.

Other inaccuracies about me, such as the detail that I was born in the Dominican Republic, are confounding. Those particulars could have easily been corrected, especially considering I was one of the editors' former students and that the author spoke to me after I left Dartmouth. My classmate's account stated I graduated from a community college, but I never attended one. I transferred to a research-intensive university where I eventually earned my bachelor's, my first master's, and a doctoral degree. Yet even if I had been born in the Dominican Republic, attended a community college, and never pursued graduate school, I do not understand the purpose of including those details other than to forward my classmate's exceptionalism for graduating from Dartmouth. “Fortunately,” she claims in contrast to the two of us she names, she “survived the Ivy League minority experience” (Garrod, Kilkenny, and Gómez 2007, 145).

My former classmate punctuated her perception of my tragic denouement by referencing my young family. Writing to an English-reading audience, she evoked an image historically associated with poverty and many other tropes about “the other” in the United States (i.e., the young immigrant/Black/Brown mother [Collins 1999; Chavez 2013]). Even if she placed the blame of my departure squarely on Dartmouth, the author of the chapter and the editors of the book simultaneously put forth an uncorroborated and classist description of me and my choice to start a family. Neither I nor the other Dominicans mentioned were the intended audience of a chapter ironically entitled “*Orgullo Dominicano*.”<sup>4</sup> Those involved with the chapter used my exit to advance the idea that

only one of three Dominican women (more specifically, the one who was not “dark-skinned”) could graduate from Dartmouth.

Unlike the other chapters in the book, the author chose a pseudonym because she wanted to protect her family’s privacy. When I reached out to the editors to express my desire that the chapter be retracted from the book and to ask that it stopped being assigned as a course reading, I questioned why I was not granted the same option of anonymity. Why was I not approached about this chapter? Why was nothing done to seek my consent in a (mis)representation that applied such a reductively stereotyped lens?

In her response to my request, the professor who initially brought the book to my attention said that I was only “very briefly” mentioned and she did not think it was an “unflattering” portrayal. “We hoped and believe that the book is inspirational and celebrates the resilience and success of Latinx students.” She also expressed an inability to account for the factual errors in the narrative. Instead of taking direct accountability for what happened, she included the other editors, two white men, in our e-mail exchange and said one of them worked directly with my former classmate. In response to my sense of betrayal, she asserted that the narrative was “a statement concerning the lack of support that institutions of higher education offer to students of color.”<sup>5</sup>

It is precisely the detached and individualistic approach to teaching and scholarship rewarded in the westernized academy—one that encouraged a student to highlight her own exceptionalism while simultaneously advancing an unverified, oversimplified account about another student’s critical exit—that epitomizes the disconnection problem I faced during my time at that IHE.<sup>6</sup> Whether it was because she did not care enough to remember why I left or because she was too consumed by addressing the competitive demands of the tenure line, ultimately, I felt exploited by a woman of Color I cared for. In the final communication with my former professor, I shared *my* hope that she would learn from this experience, as it is her name, in addition to mine, that is attached to my former classmate’s specious memories.

Part of my process with this autoethnographic mapping—and other projects for which I rely on vulnerability as a de/colonial methodological move (Boveda and Bhattacharya 2019)—is to remind myself who my audience is. Although I am writing in English and sharing this essay through a publication housed at an IHE, I centered Mami and the communities I referenced while sharing my memories and interpretations. As tempting as the rewards of the westernized academy may seem, it is an unethical betrayal to promote myself at the cost of the dignity of (my) people who have historically been shut out of the spaces I now navigate.

## Return to the Ivy League and the Guidance of Black Feminist Theory

Just as Doña Clara managed to find the right words to convince Mami to return to her house when she expressed a desire to leave, I also allowed myself to be persuaded by glossy recruitment materials from the Graduate School of Education at Harvard. Printed phrases such as “Education Is a Civil Right” and “Idealism Welcomed Here” on brochures captured my imagination. As I battled daily with the encroaching forces of state and federal pressures on community P–12 schools, I felt compelled to further my education. After six years of teaching, I saw the expulsion of the type of culturally sustaining activities my primary teachers once assigned me in favor of corporatized test preparation materials. I maintained my passion for teaching and learning but developed an indignation about increasingly top-down education policies. “Instead of stigmatizing the school and putting more pressure on students,” I once offered, “let’s talk about the social issues that are going on, within and outside and around the school” (Chen 2009). Months after making those remarks to a reporter, I submitted my application to the graduate school. Although my desire to influence P–12 policy and practice initially motivated my pursuit of graduate studies, the dearth of tenured or tenure-track faculty of Color at Harvard convinced me of the importance of pursuing research, theory, and inquiry. It became clear that *who* was framing the problems of public education was related to the neoliberal solutions enacted by school leaders and policy makers.

During my second stint in the Ivy League, I was better prepared to deal with westernized institutions. Once again, there were times I found myself at odds with some of my colleagues’ values. For example, women are the foundation of my matriarchal family. Just as my grandmother, mother, and aunts took care of us, today my sister, cousins, and I are expected to uphold the next generation. As such, I could not empathize with other graduate students who were mothers and expressed guilt about their professional endeavors; in my family, women had no choice but to work (see also Téllez 2013). On the other hand, my critical feminist migrations are entangled with socioeconomic/class mobility that most peers have not experienced. As a result, I started to gain better insight into why Doña Clara would take such great lengths to keep Mami by her side. I simply could not have maintained all aspects of my home if it were socially encouraged for my partner to opt out of his share of domestic and child-rearing responsibilities. Yet the times I hired home care workers to lighten our load, I was far more concerned about how these “working-class” women perceived me than how my colleagues judged me as a professional wife and mother.

In graduate school, I recognized behaviors similar to the elitism that repelled me during my undergraduate studies. Seeing again how some Black and Brown students capitulated to the white gaze was especially perplexing. There were four separate instances when I spoke up in class—like the time I noticed most assigned readings were written by white men—that students of Color

pulled me aside and advised me to temper the unsettling remarks. Did they fear my words would bring too much attention to them? Were they concerned for my safety and well-being? Having witnessed what happens to outspoken minoritized people, some of us seemed to internalize colonizing narratives about how people of Color should behave at PWIs. Other peers would thank me for speaking up against master narratives about urban schools, but then stay silent when privileged students and faculty kept making deficit remarks about minoritized communities. Whatever the reason for their reticence, I continue(d) to be emboldened by Audre Lorde's (2012) reminder that silence will not protect us. I was most mindful of the consequences of not representing the communities that shaped me.

Thankfully, I developed stronger bonds with faculty and peers in graduate school than I had during my undergraduate studies. I was not alone in the opinion that Harvard could do better. By the end of my master's program, for example, I was surrounded by a collective who were similarly frustrated by the lack of tenured critical scholars (Jan 2011). With their support, I told the dean that the recruitment materials advertising idealism were a farce. Furthermore, students and professors from the Education Policy and Management program awarded me the Intellectual Contribution/Faculty Tribute Award. I also received symbolic and emotional support from a few Black and Brown faculty at Harvard. In general, they seemed to enjoy the way "I kept it real" and "spoke truth to power," but when it came to providing insights about how to navigate higher education, it took direct asks to find substantive mentorship. The relationships I established, however, facilitated my comfort with requesting guidance about what it takes to pursue an academic career.

The path to mentorship in higher education was not a straight line. I was fortunate to have faculty who demonstrated their commitment to equity concerns and who encouraged my contributions. Nevertheless, there were times the experiential mismatch between myself and more senior members of the academy were blatant and hurtful. Even when I attended an Hispanic Serving Institution for my doctoral studies, most of the tenured and tenure-track faculty (including all four members of my dissertation committee) were white. I had a moment of clarity about the racial composition of my committee when I was asked about the status of my dissertation revisions hours after video footage of Philando Castille's death was released to the public. While the emerging and established scholars of Color I knew were reeling from the images, my white committee members seemed unaffected. Proximity to people of Color did not always result in empathy because of their limited embodied experiences with intersectional oppression. Fortunately, I could turn to Black feminist writers, such as Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberlé Crenshaw, who validated my perspective even when those around me did not relate to me.

Reading Freire during my undergraduate studies drew me to a career in education and afforded me a critical, de/colonial lens to pedagogy. Finding



intersectionality and the writings of Black feminist scholars, however, helped me express the complexity involved at the intersection of identity differences in the United States (see also Boylorn 2014). In these autoethnographic tracings, I shared how a range of markers such as ability, age, gender, geopolitical locations, language, marital status, nationality, race, religion, reproductive choices, and socioeconomic conditions all shaped, and continue to shape, my disposition toward academic endeavors. I take delight in bell hooks's unapologetically lengthy descriptor of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. By unearthing intersectionality—theoretically through scholarship, and in practice through (re)remembered engagements with Black women like the matriarchs of my family, educators in Miami, and women I befriended at IHEs—I found an epistemic framing that embraced complexity and was compatible with my de/colonial and working-class sensibilities. I also turned to professional organizations and social media hashtags to locate like-minded thinkers who “provided me a dynamic space that brought intersectionality to life” (Boveda 2016b, 60). These communities give me the periodic relief I need to continue engaging in de/colonial processes within the imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchal academy.

## Conclusion

Mami realized the value of living in Doña Clara's house, despite recognizing their exploitative servant/mistress dynamic. I, too, acknowledge the opportunities I gained during my westernized academic training. At the same time, I refuse to be exclusively tied to the master's house, as his tools will do little to assert my freedom (Lorde 1979). In this contribution to the growing testimonio and counternarrative literature (e.g., Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. 2012), I enacted my desires to de/colonize epistemic hegemony. Thus, I cited Mami as a knowledge maker whose perspective and practices were central to my navigation of academia. The westernized performance of binaried, absolutist interpretations is not the only way to understand the world. It must be acknowledged that the decision to enter IHEs is itself a type of exit for de/colonized women. We have to weigh whether sacrificing the familiar dis/comfort of our homes is worth seeking out opportunities in more privileged, strange, and hostile locations. Exposure to the existing ways of doing the academy will repel some critical feminists, punish those who choose to stay, and transform others into believing that the prestigious illusion is within itself a means to promoting equity. These risks are heightened for those who are not aware of the genocides and epistemicides linked to the expansion of the westernized university and the colonial forces of Eurocentric epistemologies around the globe. A lack of awareness about the histories of IHEs would leave unsuspecting women to conclude that an institutional misfit is a sign of a personal failure.

The dualistic, Cartesian mind-body divide privileged in the westernized university marginalizes intuitive, spiritual, and feminine ways of being and knowing. Although these knowledges are increasingly (re)remembered (see Dillard 2016), they are most often portrayed as obstacles to the intellectual enterprise. In my own experience, I chose to trust my ancestral intuitive epistemologies, even at the cost of derision and misrepresentations by others. There were times when exiting was the only way I found reprieve from the messaging that my people's ways of being and knowing are deemed inferior or rendered invisible in academic discourse. The migrations I made were not only inspired by a need to escape; within the movements themselves were generative forces that reflected critical feminist desires for liberation. To support and sustain critical feminist scholars from historically marginalized communities, I argue that institutional representatives must center the inherently and historically colonial function the academy has in relation to these communities. This explicit and well-communicated understanding is an important foundation in attempts to address the negative drivers and consequences of minoritized women's academic migrations.

Having mapped out my navigations across IHEs, I offer two points to consider for representatives and gatekeepers who desire to identify, cultivate, attract, and sustain critical feminist scholars. First, it is critical for the faculty and staff who make up IHEs to encourage multiply minoritized women to identify what aspects of their de/colonial knowings have helped them move forward, despite the systemic obstacles they face. As my narrative shows, the path toward becoming a critical feminist scholar starts well before a woman's first undergraduate experience. In my case, my path was set by women who had no formal education and were making a way for me long before my birth. Although Mami did not use any of these terms, I can delineate the many ways a Black, skinny, unschooled servant girl from the Global South enacted and embodied the role of a critical, Black feminist, de/colonial thinker. Similarly, even before becoming aware of words like intersectionality and pedagogy, I developed a sense of self that informed how I responded to those given charge of my schooling. Making space for self-explorations in course assignments and calls for papers is helpful as it provides built-in incentives to engage in these vulnerable explorations.

Second, college and university representatives can promote de/colonizing faculty-student and student-to-student collaborations by honoring mentoring (in the case of students, near-peer mentoring), recognizing the onto-epistemic possibilities of exploring intergenerationally embodied marginality, and showcasing those engaged in ethical practices of inquiry that favor lateral, co-generative epistemologies (see Boveda and Bhattacharya 2019). Like-minded peers and substantive mentorship were sustaining forces for me. However, when highlighting stories that feature the excellence of multiply minoritized women,

those who desire to advance critical feminisms must avoid featuring narratives of exceptionalism and individualistic triumphs. Emphasizing the exceptional other delegitimizes community-based ways of knowing and becoming. Westernized and imperialistic institutions perpetuate the myth of meritocracy with incentives that reward detachment and competition rather than engagement and collective effort.

As women of color are increasingly sharing their stories about academia (e.g., Castaneda and Isgro 2013), it is evident that the decisions to (dis)engage with academic institutions are entangled with complex identities and intersectional experiences. I primarily focused on my relationships with other Black and Brown women because their diverse reactions to my movements were most salient to me. In telling what was written about me once it was assumed I had forever exited the academy, I bore witness to a warped replication of a hegemonic, colonizing subject-object dynamic. For too long, scholars—even those who espouse equity agendas—have acclimated to invasive predatory behaviors. Mami's stories, along with lessons learned in my journey to becoming an academic, teach me to be constantly vigilant, making sure I do not inadvertently adopt Doña Clara's self-serving ways. By being in community with intersectionally competent colleagues and mentors, I circumvent becoming inconsiderate or oblivious to how the motivations of the westernized university drive exploitative power relationships (Smith 2012). Rather than focusing on providing more access to conventional ways of doing academia, I demonstrate the de/colonial sense-making women living with multiple marginality can offer those who promote critical feminist ideals.

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## Notes

1. “I am also suggesting here that the work of constructing identities is deeply embedded in acts of memory and of (re)membering. Memory can be thought of as a thing, person, or event that brings to mind and heart a past experience. But (re)membering is both the ability to recall that experience (or think of again) and the ability to put it back together again (to re-member)” (Dillard 2016, 51).

2. Clara is a Spanish name. Ironically, Clara is also the feminine form of an adjective that means fair-skinned.

3. Name withheld, e-mail message to author, January 30, 2003.

4. That is, Dominican Pride.

5. E-mail message to author, January 22, 2018.

6. The second editor responded in an e-mail communication. He offered an apology and acknowledged the concerns I expressed on behalf of myself and others portrayed in the chapter. I accepted his apology. Unlike the other coeditors, he works outside of the academy.

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