Intersectionality Beyond Theory:

Coming to Terms with our Embodied 'Ambiguousness' and the Courage to Choose the Middle Space

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ABSTRACT

This article emerges from a sustained transnational dialogue between two cisgender female, first-generation immigrant scholars of Japanese origin – one identifying as Nikkei in Sweden and the other as mixed-race Japanese (white) in Canada. Through collective autobiographical inquiry, we explore what we term a middle space – a site of ambiguity, tension, and transformation where intersectionality is both theorized and embodied. We situate our personal narratives within broader structural frameworks to contribute to scholarship that treats intersectionality as both theory and praxis – a tool for critical reflection and social transformation. Guided by critical feminist and collective methodologies, our writing emphasizes reflexivity, dialogue, and the interrogation of power dynamics in knowledge production. Our lived experiences reveal how positionalities shaped by sociocultural and institutional contexts resist binary categorizations of privilege and marginalization. These identities are continuously negotiated and inform our academic and personal engagements. We underscore the importance of collective methodologies in illuminating complex positionalities and advancing intersectional feminist scholarship. By inviting readers into our middle space, we offer a site of intersectional engagement, activism, and reflexivity where theory meets lived experience, and where shifting dynamics of power and identity are critically examined.

KEY WORDS

INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITY, INTERSECTIONALITY, CENTER AND MARGIN, BELL HOOKS, REFLEXIVITY, POSITIONALITY

INTRODUCTION

This article emerges from a sustained dialogue between two cisgender female, first-generation immigrant scholars of Japanese origin: a mid-career scholar identifying as Nikkei (persons of Japanese descent) in Sweden (S) and a junior scholar identifying as mixed race Japanese (and white) and living in Canada (V). Our collaboration began through email correspondence and developed into regular Zoom meetings, where we shared experiences, discussed our research involvement, and critically reflected on our personal and professional lives. Through this process, we developed a collective autobiographical inquiry into how intersectionality manifests in our lived experiences within and outside of academia.

We approach intersectionality not only as an analytical framework but also as a lived experience and form of collective action (Terriquez et al. 2018; Tungohan 2016). We engage with an awareness that lies at the core of intersectionality: that "privilege and oppression co-exist simultaneously, shift according to context, and characterize relationships" (Christoffersen and Siow 2024, 8). Intersectionality needs to be situated at the nexus of intersecting axes of domination within structural frameworks of white supremacy (Mills 2017; Christoffersen and Siow 2024), producing layered experiences of privilege and marginalization. Our positionalities across the contexts of Japan, Sweden and Canada do not fit neatly into binary categories of privileged or marginalized. Instead, we inhabit what we call a *middle space*, a site of intentional engagement and embodied navigation, where we critically reflect on and respond to the shifting dynamics of imposed privilege and marginalization. The middle space is shaped by ambiguity, tension, and transformation – where intersectionality is not only theorized but lived, and where our positionalities are continuously negotiated within institutional and social structures. Intersectionality offers us an opportunity to reflect on and transform our understanding of who is marginalized and who is privileged (Christoffersen & Siow, 2025) as theory but also as praxis (Freire 1970) within the middle space.

Guided by critical feminist and collective methodologies (hooks 1984; Mohanty 2003), our writing emphasizes reflexivity, dialogue, and the interrogation of power dynamics in knowledge production. We draw on our lived experiences to explore how intersectional identities are shaped by broader sociocultural and historical contexts, and how these identities inform our approach in our daily engagements inside and outside academia.

Through this article, we aim to contribute to scholarship that treats intersectionality as both theory and praxis (Freire 1970; Ichikawa & Osanami Törngren in press) – a tool for critical reflection and social transformation. By situating our personal narratives within broader structures, we invite readers into our middle space – a critical site of intersectional engagement shaped by complex positionalities, and a space for both activism and reflexivity.

OUR AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL JOURNEY

This article grew out of a conversation on activism in February 2024 during our regular Zoom meetings, where we began exploring our positions within the structures of Western academia and, in V's case, her therapy practice. We exchanged personal narratives about our anti-oppressive and antiracist efforts, reflecting on our ancestral roots, communities of origin, and intergenerational legacies. This article is based not only on our intentional reflections on positionality, but also on casual text messages and emails about our readings, family events, teaching and daily experiences – the joys, disappointments and excitements of life. We discussed each other's stories, shared insights, and engaged with bell hooks' works, *Choosing the Margin as a Space for Radical Openness* (1989) and *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (2000), interpreting them as a way to make sense of our own lived experiences. The context of bell hooks' lived experience, marked by a clear line between the center and the margin, shaped our understanding of who she came to be, the distance she journeyed to reach that space, and what

remained within her from the place she began. This deep, chronological engagement with hooks' theoretical development and her evolving social location illuminated the critical importance of time, memory, and journey in understanding intersectionality – not as a static framework, but as one that must be continually adapted and interpreted through specific lived realities.

We describe our approach as a collaborative autoethnographic process (Chang et al. 2013), rooted in dialogic inquiry (Wells 1999). Through dialogue and shared writings (Denborough 2008), we engage in personal storytelling and reflection. By examining personal narratives, we use our experiences as tools for critical inquiry (Holman Jones 2005), exploring how individual experiences are situated within larger systemic, historical, societal and political contexts (Smith & Watson 2010).

Our collaborative autoethnographic process is rooted in hook's framework of memory work: we conceptualized the chronological existence and ongoing development of our identities, bodies, and social locations, what hooks stated as an intentional act of resistance and transformation of present, clearly differentiated from nostalgic or sentimental reflections of past.

> I have needed to remember, as part of a self-critical process where one pause to reconsider choices, location, tracing my journey from small town southern black life, from folk traditions, and church experience to cities, to the university, to neighbourhoods that are not racially segregated, to places where I see for the first time independent cinema, where I read critical theory, where I write theory. Along that trajectory, I vividly recall efforts to silence my coming to voice. (hooks 1989, 17)

This process relates to feminist methods of collective memory work, and the growing body of scholarship that foregrounds lived experience, embodiment, and relational knowledge production. Some of the work that inspired us includes contributions that offer collective autoethnography as a transformative narrative methodology. These works emphasize co-constructed meaning-making, reflexivity, and storytelling as tools for resistance and social change (Karalis Noel et al. 2023), collective narratives of embodied and often silenced pain as a way to disrupt dominant professional norms in social work (Ichikawa & Yoon 2025), and fostering personal and political transformation within feminist praxis through the emotional labor and supportive roles involved in sharing vulnerability through collective autoethnographic inquiry (Suzanne & Reiss 2024).

This process forged collective meanings, highlighting the challenges of navigating our lives inside and outside of academia shaped by various norms and assumptions. We critically yet unapologetically reflect on our positionality, revealing how we have internalized many assumptions about our privileged marginalization.

INTERSECTIONALITY

Theoretical discussions around how our intersecting social identities position us differently in the power structure of society have existed for some time in academia – for example, in Hughes' (1945) concept of "master status" and Du Bois' (1903) understandings of race, gender and nation – contributing to "intersectional sociology" (Rabaka 2023). However, it was Black feminist criticism and earlier work by Black feminists that became foundational, where intersectionality as a framework gained traction (e.g. Combahee River Collective 1977; hooks 1981; Collins 2002). Intersectionality expanded to be applied to the wider academic field and broadened activism in fields like disability studies (Garland-Thomson 1997), queer theory (Butler 1990) and Indigenous studies (Smith 1999).

Intersectionality is an analytical framework developed to examine how systems of power and oppression – such as racism, sexism and classism – interact to produce overlapping and compounding inequalities. The term intersectionality was coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), who emphasized

the interconnected nature of social identities such as race, gender and class. Intersectionality underscores that multiple social categories, such as race, gender, and class, are not isolated but interwoven, mutually shaping and influencing social marginalization and privileges (Collins 2002). Central to Crenshaw's framework is "demarginalizing", which names the experiences of specific groups to understand their particularity (Carbado 2019). Crenshaw's (1989) work highlights how single-axis approaches to discrimination fail to capture the unique experiences of individuals who live at the intersections of multiple marginalized identities. Intersectionality is about recognizing how these intersections create unique individual experiences, not just adding up forms of discrimination – centering the most marginalized rather than including intersecting identities. It requires recognizing "which differences make a difference" (Crenshaw 1989) in every aspect of society. As Collins (2002) further emphasizes, intersectionality illuminates the structural forces that organize and sustain social hierarchies, moving beyond individual identities to address the systemic nature of these interlocking oppressions.

For both hooks (2000) and Collins (2002), this distinction underscores the necessity of recognizing one's positionality within these intersecting systems of power and the relational dynamics between the politics of location and the spaces we choose – center and margin. In other words, intersectionality is not simply a personal choice – it is a necessity because our identities are shaped by structural forces. While we may choose to engage with intersectionality as a framework, the conditions that make intersectionality relevant as praxis – such as racism, classism, sexism, and other forms of systemic oppression – are not chosen. They are imposed through ideological, socioeconomic, and racial structures. This connects to hooks' critique of individualism in Western culture and the idea of "choice", a reminder that marginality can be both imposed and chosen as a site of resistance.

As intersectionality became a widely used concept, many argue that intersectionality research does not align with the original Black feminist theory, often employing additive approaches that overlook the processes of intersectional privileging (Chsristoffersen & Siow 2024; 2025). Here, it is essential to understand the difference between intersectional identities and intersectionality. Intersectional identities refer to how individuals embody and experience multiple social categories – such as race, gender, class and sexuality – within their unique lived experiences and show how individuals occupy multiple positions. Intersectional identities are dynamic and fluid, evolving with shifting social contexts, personal histories and relationships. hooks (2000) argues that engaging with both one's identity and broader systems of power fosters a transformative perspective, challenging dominant narratives and envisioning inclusive realities. She asserts that no-one is always a victim and calls for accountability in identifying "interlocking systems of domination" (hooks 2013, 37) that promote injustice, writing "Loving justice means that we are willing to see the ways racism, sexism, and class exploitation are interconnected" (2013, 138).

Intersectionality highlights how these intersecting identities are not mutually exclusive but mutually constitutive within intersecting power systems, shaping their perspectives and encounters with privilege or oppression, and provides a framework for distinctive analysis of social inequality, power, and politics (Collins 2002, 2012; hooks 2000).

In the same critique of intersectionality not aligning with the original Black feminist theory, some scholars also raise concerns around how intersectionality has become colorblind, not centralizing the politics of racism and the racial specificity of being both white and non-white and not recognizing academic activism that emerged from social movements countering racism (Carbado 2019; Crenshaw et al. 2024; Tomlinson 2019). Even when race is included in intersectional research, it is frequently treated as a single axis and reduced to a simple marker of difference, leading to comparisons between white women/black women and white men/black men.

This approach often overlooks and fails to critically address the underlying structures of whiteness and white supremacy (Christoffersen & Siow 2024, 44). Lastly, intra-race intersectionality, also referred to as intra-categorical intersectionality, remains largely overlooked in both racial and intersectional research and discourse. Experiences such as the denial or misunderstanding of complexity among multiracial individuals' identities experiences of racial privilege and marginalization are often excluded from broader discussions of race and intersectionality (Albuja et al. 2020).

As discussed above, intersectionality is a theoretical framework which helps us understand how various social identities intersect and shape experiences of oppression and privilege. At the same time, we cannot forget that intersectionality emerged in the broader space between social movement and academic politics (Collins 2012), and that intersectionality informs and drives action. Tugohan (2016) writes that intersectionality in social movements requires a sophisticated understanding of power, emphasizing an awareness that it is about structural change rather than mere representation. The complexity of the question of "who is the most marginalized" makes it challenging for social movements to set clear agendas and determine appropriate forms of activism. The risk is that different groups may have varying conceptions of social justice, potentially leading to the dominance of one group over another (Tungohan, 2016, 348). This is why Montoya (2021) contends that intersectional positioning itself can lead to marginalization within social movements that aim to combat oppression, due to the tendency of these movements to focus on a single axis of identity or oppression (2). There are many examples of grassroots movements, including the Combahee River Collective, which challenged simplistic, one-dimensional views of oppression, advocating for intersectionality to eliminate inequality through collective action. Some critics of intersectionality misunderstand that intersectionality fragments movements into smaller parts, and in some cases appeals to the "universal interest" that falls back to the hierarchical power structure. Montaya argues that social movement scholars believe that this opens up new and dynamic opportunities for interrogation as to why and how intersectionality fails and why and how single-axis dimensions of identity are mobilized. Intersectionality calls for destabilizing social categories and never dismisses or minimizes the effects of them in society (2021, 3-4).

POLITICS OF LOCATION – OUR MIDDLE SPACE

We use hooks' concept of "the politics of location" (1989; 2000) to encourage an understanding of the spaces from which we engage in cultural practices and political struggles (1989, 15). By "the politics of location," hooks refers to the idea that our identities, experiences, and social positions shape how we see the world and engage with it. We understand location as one's specific position within social, cultural, and political structures. It encompasses the various aspects of identity, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, which shape our experiences and perspectives on marginality and privilege. hooks emphasizes the necessary recognition of opposition and understanding one's positionality in these dynamics, which shapes cultural practices and the ability to envision alternative realities. She differentiates the politics of location from the spaces which we occupy, focusing on how we use our location to challenge and resist oppression. "Space" is therefore seen as a more fluid and dynamic concept representing areas of possibility and potential for resistance and transformation. hooks often discusses space in terms of creating or occupying the margins – space outside the dominant power structures where alternative perspectives and praxis can emerge. Marginality can be both imposed and chosen as a space of resistance where individuals can articulate experiences and create new meanings. This distinction between location and space highlights the potential for transformation and creativity from engaging with one's centrality and marginality (hooks 1989; 2000).

We conceptualize our middle space as a site of possibility where we interpret, position and mobilize

the intersection of our multiple marginalities and privileges. We view center, margin and middle as dynamic, fluid areas that shape and are shaped by our identities and experiences within our social, cultural and political locations. By focusing on the middle space, we advocate for intersectionality as a site of resistance and transformation – one that centers diverse marginality and experiences as essential to the pursuit of social justice, as envisioned by hooks. Montoya (2021) highlights the assets of those at the intersection of multiple marginalities referring to Barvosa (2008):

> Interpretive – the ability to understand and explain various viewpoints; positional – the ability to move within and between groups; and motivational – the drive to address group conflicts so as to be able to claim and live their own multiple identities in peace (Barvosa 2008 in Montaya 2021; 6).

Between us, intersectionality means being mindful about our similarities and differences and recognizing that these differences distinctly shape our individual life experiences (Murphey-Shigematsu 2018, 113). Through our repeated conversations, we relearn, acknowledge and challenge our own assumptions about who we are. Intersectionality enables us to recognize multiple viewpoints, move between spaces and come to terms with our multiple identities.

By choosing to work from the middle space – a space of resistance to binary thinking where we confront our own contingency – we aim to challenge fixed categories, bringing the margins to the center and the center to the margins. Through this middle space, we approach intersectionality not only as an analytical framework but also as a reflective praxis that helps us understand how our identities interact with specific contexts and structures. It allows us to see how we are contingently positioned in both spaces of power and marginalization. In doing so, we intentionally activate intersectionality, resisting alignment with any singular identity or position.

Tugohan (2016) notes that there is often insufficient dialogue between academics and activists regarding their interpretations and applications of intersectionality. hooks also argues that uniting theory and practice is essential for a liberatory feminist praxis, as defined by Paulo Freire (hooks 2000, 113–114). We argue that the divide between theory and practice fosters a binary mindset of purity versus impurity, leaving little room for ambivalence or contradictions. Douglas' framework of societal obsession over purity from *Purity and Danger* (1996) conceptualizes societal judgment of activists, showing how cultural norms create dichotomies between the "pure" and the "impure", often delegitimizing the latter as threatening, resonating with the idea that intersectional positions can themselves become marginal in social movements (Montaya 2021, 2). This divide of purity and impurity leads some activists to feel that their actions are more politically correct than those developing ideas and fostering anti-intellectualism among elitist academics who disconnect their ideas from real life. However, this binary perspective overlooks intersectionality, which recognizes that privilege and oppression are interconnected and shape each other, and overlooks how "impurity" can be a source of strength and transformation. Hybridity, the blending of distinct elements, challenges rigid boundaries and emphasizes the dynamic nature of identities and practices (Bhabha 1994; Young 1995). Douglas' framework suggests that what is deemed impure can yield resilience and utility as well as courage in seeing our intersectional positioning in the space between the center and the margin. In today's context, where overt segregation may appear blurred but structural inequalities persist under the guise of invisibility, we propose a more fluid and nuanced notion of the "middle" – a space we have come to occupy within Euro-Western academia. The middle is often judged as impure; however, we argue that it fully embraces our intersectional identities – identities that are contingent, shaped by both privileged and marginalized aspects. Within this space, intersectionality enables us to use education and academic activism as a practice of freedom (hooks 2000, 116). The strength of impurity lies in the complexity of intersectionality, inviting people into a middle space of ambiguity,

ambivalence and flexibility – qualities that enable us to thrive in shifting landscapes of identity and belonging. This middle space accepts our locations of privilege and oppression, where our identities continuously shift. We embrace and accept ambivalence and contradictions in ourselves and in our activism, despite a world that often demands certainty.

By reflecting on our past and tracing our journeys to academia, we deepen our understanding of our intersectional positionalities – how we came to occupy the "middle". Our ambition is to develop an understanding of intersectionality as praxis – one that acknowledges our multiple privileges and marginalities. We critically reflect on how our positions within various social, institutional, and historical contexts grant us privileges in some situations and marginalize us in others.

EXCERPTS FROM OUR PERSONAL ACCOUNT

S's story

Today, I identify as a first-generation Asian immigrant of Nikkei/Japanese descent – a cisgender woman, heterosexual and able-bodied. As far as I can remember, I have always identified as Asian and Japanese.

I started my life in the location of the center, taking everything for granted, never needing to think about oppression. I was born and raised on the northern island of Japan, Hokkaido, originally called Ezo, which was ruled by the Ainu people (the indigenous native Japanese population), until the island was formally annexed and renamed by the Meiji government in 1869. Throughout my obligatory education in Japan, I do not recall any specific history lectures on Japanese settler-colonialism or the colonization of the rest of Asia. I am still actively learning about and acknowledging my history as a colonizer over China, Thailand, Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Cambodia, Laos, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Myanmar, New Guinea, Guam, East Timor and Nauru.

I often overlook my class privilege, being from an academic, upper-middle-class family, which says a lot about my location in the center. My father was a professor and my mother a housewife. As part of my father's post-doctoral journey, we lived in Northern California from when I was 4 to 6 years old. This is when I realized that I was not white. When my parents registered me at the public school, they were advised to give me an "American" name but they insisted on keeping our original names – small acts of resistance. There was no #MyNameIs campaign in 1986. It became part of me to pronounce my name with an American accent: Say-ya-kha. I still struggle to pronounce my name as I should whenever I speak in English.

I pledged allegiance to the US flag every morning in school and thought I was American until we returned to Japan. On my first day back in Japanese school, my teacher corrected my sitting posture, saying, "This is not how we sit in Japan". Teachers introduced me as "S who lived in the US" and my effort to not understand English became unsustainable when it became a subject in grade 7. I felt excluded and began to dissociate from the idea of being "Japanese".

I had a "white" upbringing alongside my Japanese one. My connection with the US continued through our "extended American family" – an Irish-Italian family in the Pacific Northwest. My mother met "mom and dad" on a West Coast trip before marrying my father and the bond persisted. I have had a special relationship with my white American grandparents, aunts and uncle, filled with moments of love: drawings I made with my aunt as a child, my favorite chocolate-chip cookies, being introduced as "our adopted grandchild" and the occasional airmail that always said "Love, Grandpa and Grandma". When I was 11, they visited Japan, which was very special for my Grandpa, who was in the Navy. I stood holding hands with him in Aomori, looking at the Pacific Ocean. He said, "I never thought that I would be standing in Japan during my lifetime, with a Japanese

family that I cherish, holding hands with a Japanese granddaughter." Age 14, I visited Pearl Harbor and, at 16, visited the Hiroshima Peace Memorial for the first time. At 33, I revisited both sites. By then, I had reflected deeply on my identity as a Japanese person and the history of war from both perspectives – as both the colonizer and the colonized.

I have lived in Sweden since I turned 23. Initially, my presence felt temporary but, over time, it became more permanent, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the geographical divide between me and my family in Japan. In Sweden and Europe, I learned new ways in which people perceive me: I am Japanese and symbolize the North in the South/North dichotomy in the European context. I have one foot in the West and one in the East, feeling both visible and invisible.

At one of my favorite Asian restaurants in Sweden, a delivery guy mistook me for an employee, highlighting my unique position. Every time I arrive at Narita airport, I think "Oh my, there are so many Asians here!" and then realize that I am one of them. This is how I feel and embody my middle space today and every day.

V's story

I am a mixed-race Japanese, cisgender, able-bodied woman and immigrant currently residing in the traditional land of Indigenous peoples, now known as Toronto, Ontario, Canada. As a mixed child in Japan raised by a single Japanese mother, our lives were largely lived on the margins, surrounded by others navigating diverse forms of outsider-ness within Japanese society. My mother, who later returned to her traditional farming family but also pursued her passion for alternative living through organic farming (another story of "middle space"), was deeply involved in student activism, the hippie movement and the women's liberation movement. This fostered a circle of friends who formed a vibrant, diverse community, united by their conscious rejection of Japan's neoliberal focus on productivity and the materialism that fueled the bubble economy. Instead, they embraced alternative values, forming a unique, supportive and political community of parents and children who chose to live outside mainstream expectations.

Looking back, I can now recognize the shadow of this alternative lifestyle – the way it often went hand-in-hand with family breakdowns, poverty, trauma and mental-health struggles soothed by alcohol. Many being single-parent, often mother, families navigating economic hardship – reflecting the ongoing challenges single parents face in securing full-time employment within Japanese society. Furthermore, what might appear to be a voluntary step out from the mainstream could be far more complex than it seemed. When individuals are unable to find belonging, acceptance, or safety within mainstream society, alternative spaces often serve as vital refuge offering a sense of community and emotional shelter. Still, what was unique about that marginalization was its deliberate decision not to strive towards the center. This marginalization was seen as a sense of pride and a source of belonging. It was a choice to live differently, to reject conventional aspirations and to find value and meaning outside the dominant cultural narrative and societal race for success. Without over-romanticizing it, I can still see the profound impact this has had on how I perceive the concepts of center and margin. This experience might have shaped my understanding of these spaces in a non-hierarchical way. There is a center and there is a margin; each comes with its own benefits and challenges. Rather than viewing the center as superior, favorable and a desired final destination, I see them as different realms of existence from the margin, each offering different fruits. This perspective of the center and the margin may also arise from my experience as a mixed-race child in Japan who felt like a 'permanent outsider', which made the concept of existing in a center feel abstract and foreign, if not irrelevant.

In my therapy practice, I work with racialized migrant families. In a way, their experience of outsider-insiderness meets me in a middle space – an open and hopefully safe space that can foster healing

and empowerment. I would like to think that this is indeed a space where we, as co-authors, found each other despite our regional (Sweden and Canada) and disciplinary (Migration and Ethnic Studies and Social Work) differences.

HOW WE SEE THE SPACES WE OCCUPY

Through our stories, we explore and acknowledge the social and political locations we are embedded in, and how we approach the middle space – the space between the center and the margin – as an overlapping site of intentional engagement, where collective action is rooted in intersectionality. S is accepting and relearning her history as a majority Japanese, upper-middle-class female, shifting from racial majority to minority. V, a mixed-Japanese individual raised by a single mother and a single mother herself, resists hierarchical structures, differing from S's upbringing. Through her dialogue with S, V deepened her reflections on her own privileges – such as her European roots, able-bodied status, and cisgender identity. This exchange helped us gain greater awareness of how we inhabit the middle space as a site shaped by intentional engagement with the contingency of intersectionality, where privilege and marginalization shift across contexts and our positionalities are continuously negotiated through lived experience. Here, we center our claim that our shared marginality and privileges exist within an ambiguous middle space formed by our intersectional identities. This middle space is a critical site of intersectional engagement, shaped by complex and negotiated positionalities – a space for both activism and reflexivity. Understanding and accepting this space means recognizing intersectionality not only as an analytical framework for examining where privilege and marginalization intersect, but also as a tool for intentional engagement with each other's lived experiences and practices.

UNDERSTANDING OUR POSITION IN THE MIDDLE

We embody unique experiences that highlight intersectionality, manifested in various forms of inclusion and exclusion, discrimination and privilege at different physical and metaphorical social locations, underscoring our navigation of middle space. In understanding our past, hooks' insights into her childhood experience, highlighting the emotional and psychological impact of racial desegregation on Black students, caught our attention. She emphasizes the feelings of hostility, rage, conflict and loss experienced during this period. The story illustrates the pain of being forced to leave a familiar, supportive environment and enter a cold, unwelcoming one. It underscores the burden placed on Black students to make desegregation a reality, often at great personal cost. As hooks writes, "We were certainly on the margin, no longer at the center, and it hurt" (2000, 1). It is powerful to read about hooks' anger at being removed from the center and relocated to the margins. This anger became fuel for reclaiming her place at the center and bringing the margin to the center. Although neither V or S feels the same kind of anger, our conversation led us to our understanding of what hooks argues as "oppositional political struggle" (hooks 1989, 15) and our understanding of our positionality in the dynamics of these oppositional social, cultural and political locations, formed by not always a choice but necessity.

V recognizes that her past and current affiliations with various centers and privileges come from the location of power. As a PhD student at a prestigious university in North America and a former social worker at the Japanese government office, she has occupied central locations in both academia and social work. On the other hand, her internalized marginality still connects her closer to the margin, where she feels home. V is shaped by her intersectional identity as a racialized, first-generation migrant single mother, an English-as-an-additional-language-speaker in an anglophone Canadian university and a low-paid, contract-based employee in the Japanese government – a precarious situation known as "government-made working poor." These intersectional identities are often the most marginalized in different contexts. Despite the privileges and power of

being affiliated with institutions of power, she often felt confined to the lower end of the hierarchy. This is why, even when she is situated in positions of power – at the center – her identity renders her closer to the margins, or rather, the margin lives within her, persisting regardless of the spaces she comes to affiliate with or occupy. However, in her everyday therapy practice, she experiences a constant dilemma: the unsettling sense of profiting and making a living from people's suffering. This feeling is particularly strong when working with those living on the margins – newcomers, single parents, racialized women, and people with precarious status and belonging to Canada – with whom she feels a deep sense of connection, far more than she does in academic spaces.

Listening to V's story and her upbringing, S sees a similarity in V and hooks' experience, looking at the center from the marginal space. S interprets V's feeling of marginality as stemming from her upbringing, rooted in the social and political context she was located in, which was outside hierarchical structures, and influenced by her mother's choice of activism. V's space of marginality was not always a matter of personal choice, but more about what options were available – formed through ideological, socioeconomic, and racial structures that shaped her lived experience. Contrary to V, S has often found herself in positions of power, looking at the margin from the center. This location was not a matter of personal choice either, and rather a structural necessity – shaped by ideological, socioeconomic, and racial positioning. Having lived in the Western world for much of their life, authors experience marginality yet also recognize the privilege of being able to claim and navigate white spaces without being questioned. This privilege is not self-selected, but socially and politically conferred.

Our experiences reveal that no one is permanently located in either the center or the margin; rather, intersectional identities are contingent and relational. The spaces we occupy – whether of power, oppression, or resistance – are fluid, shaped by how "similar enough" we are perceived to be (Ahmed 2007; Osanami Törngren & Shinozaki 2021), and how our experiences are recognized in relation to other marginalized identities. V shared that our experiences show that choosing the middle space is not just a temporary transition but a distinct and enriching identity. Our stories illustrate that intersectionality is not only a framework for understanding structural positioning, but also a necessary praxis for navigating the shifting terrain of identity, belonging, and recognition. Intersectionality, in this sense, is not only a tool for reflection and resistance, but a necessary response to the contingent and imposed realities of privilege and oppression.

THE FLUIDITY OF SPACES WE OCCUPY

This space in the middle may offer possibilities for transformation both towards the margin and the center, but it is also where we feel pain. The middle space is not neutral or safe and should not be mistaken for comfort or passive acceptance of privileges that come with passing or blending in. As hooks reminds us, transformation begins with identifying and reflecting on one's own starting points. This self-awareness within the middle space is crucial to our efforts to challenge dominant power structures and to transform norms and practices in ways that embrace intersectionality.

We continued our discussions on the locations we are called into, the necessity of negotiation, and the spaces we choose. We understand being called in from/into the center or margin not merely to describe an invitation, but to signal how our intersectional identities position us in relation to structures of power and expectation. Being called in refers to moments when we are drawn, sometimes voluntarily with choice, sometimes through obligation or necessity, into roles, spaces, or relationships that reflect shifting dynamics of privilege and marginalization. V is called in from the margin and S from the center, but both choose to occupy the middle space when we can. V envisions a location without a center, margin or hierarchy – one with fluidity and interconnectedness – though she wonders if it is her relative

privilege and stability which enable her to envision such a space. S feels more comfortable in recognizing her oppositional position in the location of power and marginalization.

Together we delved deeper into the questions of whether this comfort reflects a yearning for the location of the center and emphasizes hooks' reminder about the importance of the spaces we occupy and the relative power we use in them. The location of the center should not be a place in which to exercise privilege and perpetuate oppression. hooks (1989; 2000) acknowledges her struggle to maintain marginality while living in the center, questioning how power is used and abused there, even by those on the margin. She notes that, before desegregation, the Black community had power that it was later deprived of by white control. hooks warns that women of color may harbor resentment or compete with one another, engaging in internalized racism and aligning with white people by harboring negative feelings towards Black and other marginalized people. This competition for power and internalized racism can lead to self-hatred, misdirected anger and harm towards each other instead of challenging oppressive systems (2000, 57).

When S is called into the location of the center, she consciously strives to see the oppositional space of the margin and the center, choosing the middle space as a place of resistance. In lectures and public debates in Sweden, she often highlights her positionality in different social and political locations across contexts and uses herself as an example to emphasize the importance of centering race in understanding inequalities and discrimination. Her Black Swedish friends remind her that she has the privilege to do so because she is not Black, underscoring the importance of her privileges compared to those who are the most racially marginalized. She tries to be conscious and mindful of when to speak and when to step back, a process that can be painful – such as being told that she is not a person of color and does not belong. This also hits deep into V's thoughts, as a person identifying as mixed Asian.

V, drawn to the locations of the margins, leans towards the space of marginality as spaces of connection and resistance. She uses her privileges in her social location to provide her therapy practice, integrating critical, anti-oppressive and anti-racist principles into therapeutic work. This approach grapples with contradictions, as mentioned earlier, such as the ethical tension of profiting from individuals' suffering rooted in systemic inequalities. Some view the hybridity of critical theories, activism and therapy as impure, but V sees it as part of resistance, though not a solution or replacement for societal and systemic change. From her privileged social location, she faces the oppositional struggle from the middle space.

We navigate and perceive middle spaces differently according to which locations within intersectional oppressive structures we lean towards. For both of us, the middle space embodies the bittersweet experience of being a "permanent outsider-insider" (Collins 1986, 14), a concept describing individuals who navigate both inclusion and exclusion within dominant and marginalized spaces. While they may affiliate with certain communities or institutions, they often remain at the periphery, bringing unique perspectives while facing barriers to full acceptance. This duality creates a tension whereby belonging is partial and marked by constant negotiation between connection and distance, necessity and choice. Belonging can occur in the center, as a mono-racial or mixed-race individual, a cisgender female or an able-bodied person – but it is never absolute. This is the courage of inhabiting the middle space – to acknowledge the conflicting feelings of privilege and marginalization, and to choose to remain present in the tension – not to compete with one another, but to engage with internalized racism, sexism and ablism.

OUR OWN SURVIVAL IN ACADEMIA

hooks writes, "Our survival depends on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and center and an ongoing private acknowledgment that we were a necessary, vital part of that whole" (2000, 21). We wonder: Is there an awareness of the

middle space as a necessary part of the whole? Are we seen?

S holds firm to academia as a place for transformation and resistance. Navigating the fluidity and invisibility of being drawn toward the center – sometimes unconsciously, sometimes with discomfort – S reflects on the oppositional power dynamics at play in academia. The more recognition S receives, the more doubt emerges. Do I want power? Do I want to be seen? What do I know of the margin? Am I just palatable? These questions interrogate the politics of location and the complexities of occupying a space shaped by both privilege and exclusion. Here we remind ourselves of hooks' critiques of the emphasis on individualism in Western culture, a tendency that can undermine collective struggle and solidarity among women. Citing Zillah Eisenstein, hooks argued that a focus on personal achievement and success can detract from the broader goals of feminism, which include addressing systemic inequalities and fostering community support. Instead, hooks advocates for a balance: individuality should be recognized and valued, but not at the expense of collective action and community-building (hooks 2000). Reflexive conversations with V help S to understand how societal boundaries create and sustain privilege, and how we may move between spaces while confronting the reality of choice and location (hooks 1989, 15). V's acceptance, affirmations, and presence strengthen S's ability to acknowledge her location as part of the necessary whole – leaning toward the center, while remaining oriented toward the margin as a site of accountability and transformation through the middle space. As long as there is a separation between margin and center we can be a necessary, vital part of that whole.

V holds a skeptical view of academia as the center of impact creation. In social work, where field-based and lived experience-based knowledge are valued, she sees activism and social impact emerging outside academia. She believes that the center is defined by output (impact on lives) rather than input (resources and power). Over the years, she observed colleagues leaving academia while others, including herself, returned to academia, frustrated with the limitations of field social work and hoping for broader social justice impacts from academic work. In social work academic activism, clinical practice can be seen as "impure". V, with her mixed identity, feels less pressure to conform to purity and believes in the middle ground – the hybridity of clinical work, critical theory and activism. Her choice to return to academia while continuing clinical social work allows her to explore the challenges and rewards of the middle space, embracing contradiction, frustration, doubt, ambivalence and impurity but also integration, reflection, connection and transformation. We reflect here on the words of Murphy-Shigematsu (2018, 209):

> We may realize that we are not one of those few exceptional individuals who have the capacity to act and to inspire others on a larger scale. Yet each of us can take a stand by choosing how we want to be, making our mark.

Moving between these spaces, the center, the margin and the middle through academia, is not without pain. Remaining in the middle space is not a retreat from marginality or a move toward comfort. We face isolation, dismissal and discouragement. The challenge lies in how we use our intersectional power and privilege in the middle space and continue to engage in self-reflection. It is a conscious effort to engage critically with both privilege and oppression, to protect and uplift marginality even when we ourselves embody privilege. We come to an understanding that occupying the middle space is not always a choice for us, but a necessity.

ACTIVISM AND SOLIDARITY

What do our similar yet distinct understandings and embodied experiences of the margin and the center – and the reflexive conversations that foster our awareness of middle spaces – reveal about our intersectional identities and our activism and work in solidarity? Both of us inherit an intergenerational legacy rooted in activism and radicalism – not in the sense

of extremism, but as Davis articulated, radicalism as "grasping things at the root" (1983, 19). However, our first encounters with activism were shaped by different contexts: S's perspective was influenced by her upbringing in an academic upper-middle-class family, while V was immersed in grassroots student activism, the Women's Liberation Movement, and the hippie movement in Japan through her mother's community. These divergent beginnings shaped how we engage with activism and how we understand our place within it.

Migration to Canada and Sweden brought different experiences of marginality which also shaped how we engage with activism and solidarity. For S, the move intensified her sense of marginalization both physically and emotionally. For V, it brought emotional proximity to the center in a racially diverse city, yet she remained on the margins due to language fluency, socioeconomic status, and migration background. Our Japanese-ness also places us in other divides – more often privileged than marginalized, more often dominant than oppressed – which shape our activism. Though our racial experiences in Japan differ, we now share experiences of being racialized as non-white, and racialized identity as Asian – neither Black, Indigenous, MENA, nor white. We are "falling between the cracks of that divide," as Okihiro (1994, xi) describes – sometimes seen as "just like Blacks" or "almost whites." This ambiguous othering is a lifelong experience for V as a mixed-race person, but a new realization for S. The racial ambiguity experienced by people of mixed roots often leads to "chameleonization," a coping strategy involving adaptation to different racial or cultural groups (Daniel 2002; Root 1996; Shih & Sanchez 2005). While this adaptation has been framed as a vulnerability, V reinterprets it as a source of strength and possibility – for her own survival and for her broader commitment to intersectional identities, activism, and anti-racism. S has formed a deeper understanding of flexibility in ambiguousness – not in terms of racial and ethnic identification, but as an Asian woman navigating Japan, Sweden, and the U.S.

We realize that while some aspects of our location are continuous, we also choose spaces that differ from our original privileged contexts. This layered perspective enriches our understanding and highlights the flexibility of our identities. Often, societal categories push us toward the center or margin, limiting our agency (Jenkins 2008). As Japanese American civil rights activist Yuri Kochiyama reminds us, "life is not what you alone make it." (Kochiyama 2004, 6). As discussed earlier, our middle space is shaped by both necessity and choice, shaped by contingency. This ambiguity allows us to see marginality in the "basement" (Crenshaw 1989), where intersectionality reveals itself as a dynamic interplay of privilege and oppression. hooks (2000) critiques feminism for excluding those close to power and for racial hierarchies perpetuated by white women. She calls for solidarity rooted in difference, not sameness: "We can be sisters united by shared interests and beliefs, united in our appreciation for diversity, united in our struggle to end sexist oppression, united in political solidarity" (67).

This is where we find purpose in the middle space – committed to solidarity that does not erase difference but works through it. Our activism is our consciousness to intentionally move between spaces, paying attention to who calls us, where we are anchored, and how we can move intersectionality beyond theory to identify and uplift those most marginalized. This involves knowledge dissemination, networking, and leveraging our privileged positions in terms of class, nationality, and proximity to both privilege and marginality – a middle space where we are confronted with the choice to resist and the necessity to surrender.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Our presence in the middle space is shaped by both intention and constraint. While we speak of "choosing" it, we recognize that this choice is often shaped by intersecting systems of power and identity (hooks 1994). Navigating between margin and center reveals the complexity of our intersectional identities, where privilege and oppression coexist

and shift with context (Christoffersen & Siow, 2024). Acknowledging the middle space becomes a form of collective action, a commitment to understanding intersectionality not as a collection of single-axis categories, but as a dynamic relational framework. It is not about selectively foregrounding one identity but about committing to a praxis that centers the most marginalized voices and lived realities – including our own – while recognizing our privileges.

In doing so, we challenge traditional understandings of these categories as fixed and oppositional. Instead, we propose a middle space that reflects the fluidity of intersectional identities and the shifting nature of power and marginalization. We aspire to destabilize the binary by occupying the middle space through both choice and necessity, and by holding each other accountable for perpetuating existing structures – guided by hooks' (2000) view that power itself is not inherently negative. The middle space is not always chosen, but it is necessary for us to embody intersectional identities and the burden of privileged marginality. Activism, for us, is not about occupying a space but about showing up as individuals with unique intersectional identities. It is the power to use our privilege to connect the center and the margin, feeling "right where I am" (Murphy-Shigematsu 2018, 184).

While our approaches may differ – V focused on bringing the margin to the center, while S focused on bringing the center to the margin – we ultimately aim to cherish each step we take: past, present, and future. We recognize our differences in the social and political locations we feel comfortable with, and share a common space of marginality within spaces of resistance, bearing the burden of choosing to be in the middle, between the center and the margin. With a hope that our very presence itself can be a disruption (hooks 1989, 22). We grasp our ambiguousness as a "space for radical openness" (hooks 1989), which allows marginalized experiences to become sources of insight and change. Intersectionality allows us to understand diverse perspectives, navigate different spaces, and reconcile our multiple experiences and identities.

Murphy-Shigematsu (2018) writes about gratitude as a peaceful realization – appreciating being where we are, moment by moment. The autoethnographic process gave S the opportunity to express long-held thoughts, instilling the courage to publish them as an academic text. V reflects on the transformative power of serendipity in finding a sisterhood with S, renewing hope in the possibilities that academic activism can foster. As hooks (1994) suggests, sharing our narratives and linking embodied knowledge with academic information increases our capacity to know and claim knowledge. These moments exemplify how we engage with intersectionality and inhabit the middle space – not as a theoretical abstraction, but through our lived experiences in a relational and transformative process. We hope our reflections invite readers to engage in dialogue and critical reflection – not only to understand their intersectional locations, but also to recognize how their presence in the center, the margin, or the middle space may be shaped by both choice and necessity. In doing so, we can collectively create space for openness, accountability, and transformation.

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