Transitioning Between Spaces: An Intersectional Account of how We are Becoming Academics

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Abstract

In this paper, we, as early career academics, share how our identities and transitioning between spaces contribute to our becoming. Using storyboarding, we draw on intersectionality and liminal theories to examine how our identities and our transition between the liminal and dominant spaces have influenced our identity construction and shaped our becoming. We learn that our identities are in a state of constant construction and that the academic spaces we have transitioned between are, and have been, significant to our becoming.

Keywords: identities, early-career academics, becoming, liminality, intersectionality

Introduction

Ours is a story of three Black, young, first-generation, early-career academics (ECAs) currently employed in a research-intensive South African university. We were permanently employed in 2016, 2017, and 2019 respectively. Before our appointments, Vusi, a Black man, worked as a university tutor. Nosipho and Nokukhanya, Black women, were schoolteachers. We share our story not as a "pity-party or a celebration of victimhood" (Magubane, 2019, p. iv), but to illustrate how we have intensified our zeal for academia and gained tenacity, aiding our becoming. Majorly inspired by the late bell hooks, we find great value in speaking our truth and writing about our experiences: "Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonised, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, making new life and new growth possible" (hooks, 2014, p. 3). Therefore, building on our previous work, this paper will demonstrate how our identities and the spaces we have stepped into in academia contribute to our becoming academics. The question we ask is: "How do/have/are our identities and transitioning between spaces contribute/d/ing to our becoming academics?"

Pre-1994, before South Africa became a democratic country, local higher education institutions (HEIs) were sites of explicit racial discrimination, sexism, and classism akin to the country's apartheid and colonial legacy (Department of Education, 2008). The ushering in of democracy gave HEIs opportunities to take the lead in shedding the "colonial and apartheid baggage" (Department of Education, 2008, p. 6). One impetus to this transformation, amongst other things, was the Employment Equity Act (Republic of South Africa, 1998) which was intended to:

> *Achieve equity in the workplace by promoting equal opportunity and fair treatment in employment through the elimination of unfair discrimination and implementing affirmative action measures to redress the disadvantages in employment experienced by designated groups, in order to ensure equitable representation in all occupational categories and levels in the workforce. (p. 12)*

The Employment Equity Act has been instrumental in balancing racial demographics in academic staffing (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2016). Despite the leaps made, South African HEIs still face many challenges, stalling the transformation agenda. As articulated in *Black Academic Voices: The South African Experience* (Khunou et al., 2019), amongst other things, academics of Black descent, in particular, still experience racial subjectification and practices of exclusion perpetuated by informal institutional cultures (Kiguwa, 2019). Black bodies, especially those of women and the queer community, are still seen as a disruptive element in the academy and, as "latecomers," they are "infantilized as perpetual development projects" (Khunou et al., 2019, p. 2). Black academics experience what Khoza-Shangase (2019) labelled as *intellectual and emotional toxicity*. She described this as a phenomenon "where her ability to feel healthy and safe, accepted and celebrated within this space, where her ability produces intellectual outputs and to engage in intellectual culture, is continually poisoned" (Khoza-Shangase , 2019, p. 42). Additionally, the sector faces challenges of an ageing professoriate on the one hand, and a student body growing much faster than its academic counterpart due to massification (CHE, 2016).

Against this backdrop, the official narratives we had been exposed to before our appointments were that the time had come for the South African academy to usher in new talent. This was seen as necessary for two purposes: redress and changing the academic staffing component in terms of race, age, and gender (CHE, 2016), and the growth of the academy. Our appointments were not only personal victories but, as first-generation academics, we were carrying the hopes and aspirations of our families, friends, and our communities. We entered with a sense of self-affirmation, enthusiasm to perform our duties, to integrate into the academic community, learn, and grow in our profession.

We were aware of some of the demands of being an academic, and believed the opportunities would capacitate us to execute our academic duties.

Alluding to Shortt (2015), we refer to our place of work as the dominant space. This is the space where we assumed our roles. We naively expected the dominant space and its practices to capacitate us to reach our optimal academic abilities without any foreseen shortcomings. We assumed we would be mentored to develop competence to fulfil our institutional duties and achieve our professional aspirations in an environment that would sustain our enthusiasm and commitment (Lumpkin, 2014). There were opportunities for capacitation; however, to our surprise, they were laced with exploitation, ageism, classism, sexism, and bullying. We soon noted that the dominant space was far from neutral (Puwar, 2004). It was defined through power relations, influencing how different identities take up and experience the space (Puwar, 2004). Our fledgling experience, which we had believed would be enhanced by stimulating and rigorous practices, instead made us feel alien, like impostors, a situation that Puwar (2004) described as being a body out of place. This experience was similarly shared by bell hooks (1994) when she attained her tenure—for her, receiving tenure sent her into a "deep, life-threatening depression" (p. 1) as she struggled with envisioning her trajectory in the academy. For ourselves, individually and collectively, learning of our appointments evoked happiness; however, the experiences after that left us in a state of frustration and a sense of unmet expectations.

Criss-Cross and the In-Between

Muddled in our feelings, with no sense of belonging in the dominant space, we retreated to our liminal space, as expanded in the sections below. Oblivious to the fact that we could have found the links between our doctoral studies, we later identified the potential use of our doctoral theories, intersectionality, and liminality theory, which became a lifeline in our writing for publication. In this paper, we employ intersectionality theory—a feminist framework by Crenshaw (1991) and Collins and Bilge (2016)—to understand contradictions, complexities, and ways in which our multiple identities intersect and contribute to our becoming academics. We also integrate liminality theory—an anthropological framework initially developed by van Gennep (1960) and extended by Turner (1972, 1977) —to understand how our transition from the dominant space to our liminal space assisted us in our becoming academics.

González and Collins (2019) noted that intersectionality emanates from the idea of a crossroads where different paths converge. In higher education, intersectionality is driven by the idea of "serving the formation of equitable societies and challenging inequalities through interrogating policies as well as strategies" (Nichols & Stahl, 2019, p. 1256). Intersectionality theory is critical in this paper because it focuses on identities and includes the intersection of structural systems, power, and resistance, which are often prevalent and at play in higher education (May, 2015).

Liminality theory has also been used in identity research and its construction. Shortt (2015) defined liminality or the liminal space as one that is on the border of two dominant spaces where a person does not belong fully to either of the spaces. The understanding of identity construction within organisational spaces was described by Beech (2011) and Ybema et al. (2009) as a mutually constructive interaction between individuals and their society. The construction of identities is developed in the interactions between the individuals' understandings of themselves (their self-identity) and how they are perceived in society (their social identity), as will be demonstrated in this paper through the exploration of our own identities. Noble and Walker (1997), when deconstructing identity, argued that liminality involves "significantly disrupting one's internal sense of self or place within a social system" (p. 31). Liminality can thus be understood as a reconstruction of identity, implying that the reconstructed identity is purposeful to oneself and the society into which it is integrated (Beech, 2011).

Drawing the Story to Our Intersectional Lives

"Qualitative research writing is a process, a becoming" (Ely et al., 1997, p. 8). It allows the writer to probe into the intricate web of their feelings, thoughts, and experiences, which represent a canvas of who one is while opening room to embrace and experience who one wants to become (Causarano, 2022). Therefore, it is important for us to engage in our becoming through writing to discover meaning and making sense of our experiences in a manner that might yield positive fruits for ourselves as ECAs and the academy. Our collaborative work has always been driven by a desire to reflect and learn from our experiences. This desire gave us the impetus to pause and lean on a self-study methodological approach to engage in our reflections and aid our learning. To present our data, we have used storyboarding to share our story. Storyboarding is an extension of the narrative research process (Lillyman & Bennett, 2012). It allows the researcher to present their data in an illustrative expression that may not be fully captured in words or may take longer to bring the expression through. It allows the researcher to use pictures and words to create a visual representation of the story being told (Lillyman & Bennett, 2012).

In developing our storyline, we relied on our past papers and photographs as triggers to facilitate remembering and to evoke hidden memories so the depth of our stories could be enhanced (Greenburg et al., 2012; van Schalkwyk, 2010). This activity became a premise to begin our conversations. Storyboard "is itself a way to go deeper in a discussion" (Mitchell et al., 2011, p. 229), which is significant in collaborative work because there are multiple experiences. In addition, Love (2014, p. 54) stated that "the storyboard is rich with action and dialogue." Thus, our conversations/dialogue led us to share our experiences and, from these, uncover our identities and use them to find zones where they intersected. We reflected on how these identities and intersections have aided our coming together for collaborative work, transitioning, and becoming academics.

We recorded the conversations of our storied lives because, for us, these stories were the gateway between our lived experiences and the social realities that shaped our academic lives (Bell, 2000). We used these stories to make sense of who we are and who we wanted to be (Andrew, 2007). Through these stories, prompted by our triggers, we identified three significant spaces to compose our storyboard and outlined them. These spaces (labelled below as Spaces 1, 2, and 3) assisted us in compartmentalising our experiences, also linking them to each collated frame in our storyboard. Vusi then sketched the different events we had shared through our stories. When creating the storyboard, we were concerned more about the metaphorical representation of our experiences than about the quality of the drawings (Mitchell et al., 2011). We adopted a similar approach to that of Ball (2020), where our storyboard was a medium to represent our intersectional identities and the meanings we attach to each of these spaces as we transition and become academics. As our work was collaborative, the storyboard was appealing because it allowed us to give an account of the meanings we collectively ascribe to our experiences in terms of how our identities and the transitioning through spaces contributed to our becoming academics (Ball, 2020; Labacher et al., 2012).

Chartering Academia: Our Exhibit

Our storyboard below illustrates our past and present experiences as ECAs in academia. It details the transformation of our former identity to the current state of our academic identity. Each set of collated frames represents a specific mindset or context in which we once found ourselves. Titled "Chartering Academia" (Figure 1) we unpack how we transitioned between the dominant and liminal spaces. Through this storyboard, our reasons, our current positionality, and our aspired trajectory are illustrated.

Figure 1: Chartering Academia
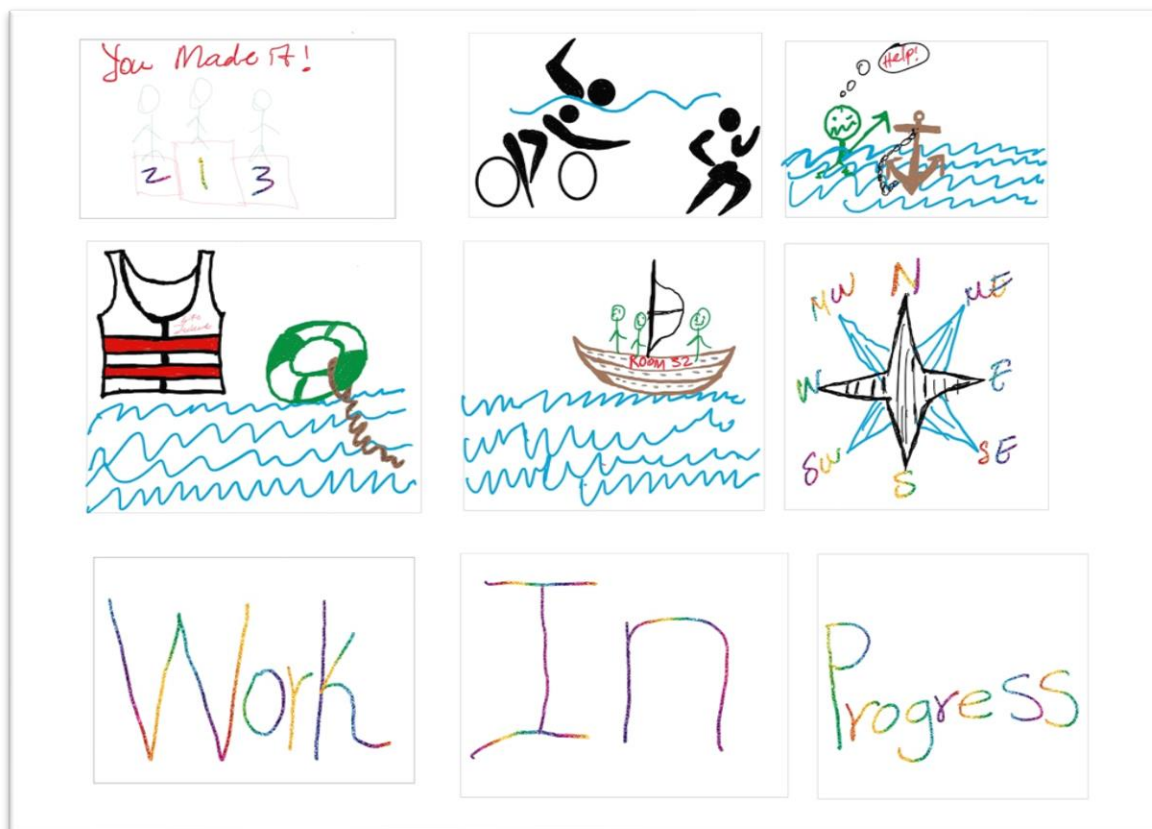
A triathlon is a demanding athletic activity that consists of three rigorous sports performed consecutively in a sporting competition. Often this multisport activity is entered by persons with considerable experience and training in each sport who have further displayed excellence in their performance. Equating our academic experience to a triathlon (Figure 2) may seem exaggerated. However, reflecting on our novice positionality and the demands of the academy, we realised an academic triathlon is what we had entered.

Figure 2: Space 1: Academic Triathlon

Entering the academy during its ongoing transformational period in South Africa was significant. Nokukhanya and Vusi were timber[2] of the university. Initially, as timber, there was a sense of comfort and expectation of the continual nurturing we had received as students. Yet, in contrast, we had to confront the challenge of negotiating with senior academics who were once lecturers, now colleagues.

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[2] Timber: a term used within the university that identifies the students who have graduated from the university and have re-joined as academic or professional staff.

Nosipho joined from another university, which presented the slightly different challenges of being a complete outsider. Nonetheless, we were eager to learn and grow in our identity as academics.

The priority for academic work is set out in four key performance areas: teaching, research, community engagement, and administration (Debowski, 2012; Foote, 2010), which we came to learn about through seminars, induction programmes, and voluntary service in school committees. This scope was not well outlined and understood at the time of our arrival. Realising the extensive labour and our limited capacity, we were somewhat overwhelmed by how we could ever optimally perform the duties we were employed for. The realisation fostered subconscious thoughts of being an impostor. This meant that a sense of doubt constantly undermined our attempts to prove ourselves in the execution of our duties. Whether or not this attitude was evident to our colleagues, it was further met with salient or subtle acts of bullying in ageism, classism, and sexism, among others.

In the early days of our career, we were given workloads that had no currency. For instance, we were given more teaching, and administrative duties than supervision and research (Mbatha et al., 2020), which are critical for establishing one's academic profile and yield monetary rewards that enable academics to pay publishing fees and attend conferences, amongst other things. In the neoliberal academy, the game at play is publishing in top-tier journals, working solo to make the most points (McKeown, 2022). Those with the most points move to the next level and compete for grants (McKeown, 2022). Overall, those who can compete at these levels can bring financial resources to their institutions and are rewarded with less teaching, more money, and prestige (McKeown, 2022).

The high workload was overwhelming for us teaching in the era of massification. The time to focus on the other three key performance areas (supervision, research, and community engagement), was depleted by the enormous amount of teaching and administration. Subsequently, an overwhelmed ECA, buried in a high workload, unable to engage in the activities needed to run the academic triathlon, plummets into frustration and self-doubt, leaving little to no capacity to continue the triathlon assertively. In one of our papers, where we addressed the importance of liminal spaces for ECAs (Ndlovu et al., 2021), Vusi shared his experience about engaging with fellow academics in a seminar. Despite the fear that lurked within, and silencing the inner voices that validate the "PhD is the licence to talk" narrative, Vusi boldly voiced his concerns at the seminar. As outlined in our article, Vusi's voice was heard, and he received assistance in the liminal space with other ECAs and not at the seminar with senior academics. Reflecting on this experience, we understood that issues of infantilisation and classism were at play, whether intentionally or not. Though Vusi's concern was valid, he did not receive the assistance he hoped for from the seminar—leaving him despondent, without help, and thus, a debilitated ECA. How was Vusi supposed to continue the triathlon race without the assistance he needed at the time?

There were also challenges of attitudes towards ECAs, which we understood to be negative and some even demeaning. Although not directly linked to academic duties, upon reflection, we understood that they stifled our growth process and impeded the ability we believed we had to thrive in the academy. Below are some highlighted experiences we have gone through that contributed negatively to our becoming academics and affected our progress in the triathlon.

We were called *izingane za Dean* [the Dean's children] (Mbatha et al., 2021), suggesting that we were token appointments because of our age (Naicker, 2013). We also had some of the older colleagues belittle us by making comments such as "you are of the same age as my child" (Mbatha et al., 2020, p. 33). Through this lens of perception, we believe it became easy for them to give unsolicited advice and ask us to run errands that were not work related. Despite the national imperative of attracting young

academics (CHE, 2016), we found that some of our colleagues did not think we had gained sufficient pedigree to be academics.

Nokukhanya had a demeaning experience with sexist undertones. She repeatedly received benevolent sexist comments from male senior colleagues within the discipline who referred to her as a "rose" (Mbatha et al., 2021) and further remarked on her sense of fashion, commenting that she looked better in dresses than in pants. Whether innocent or not, these comments are sexist and made within the context of the academy, a space filled with intelligent people. It is sufficient to agree with Wright et al. (2007), who highlighted that within the academy, "what you experience is very tacit, unwitting . . . sexism, that is a structural system used to exclude you from certain opportunities as opposed to people being blatantly . . . sexist" (p. 151).

Plunging in self-doubt and low self-esteem, the impostor syndrome found fertile ground to set in because we saw ourselves as incapable and unfit to be in academia (Mbatha et al., 2021). Despite this, an inkling of hope remained that the academy could be better than we had experienced. This hope was kept alive by supportive senior academics who made us believe we still could be greater than what we were. That inkling of hope became a signpost that drew us into Room 32 (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Space 2: Room 32, Our Rescue
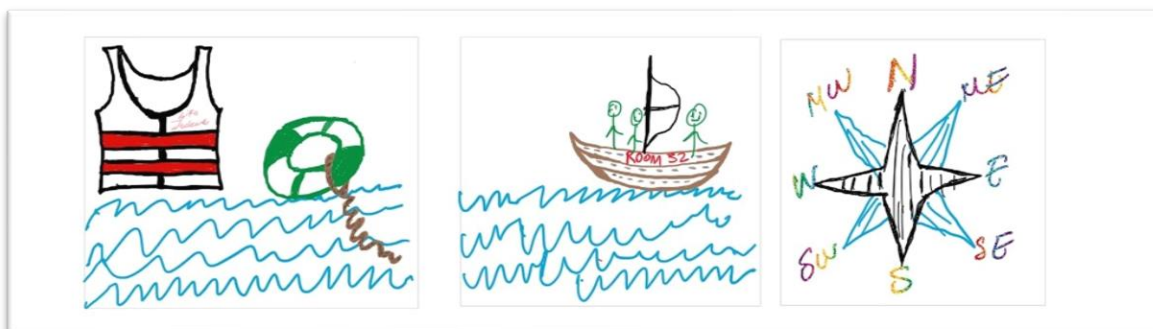
Room 32 is an unattractive, neglected physical small room. It is located in a building on the periphery of campus that primarily houses the janitorial staff and students' recreational and extra-mural activities. This is the space we retreated to after our deplorable and discouraging experiences in the dominant space. Room 32 was our liminal space. In 2017, we met with our Dean in the School of Education, and discussed expectations and support avenues for academics at our rank (Mbatha et al., 2020).

Retrospectively, from Room 32, we understand the meeting with our Dean to be our first rescue, even though, at the time, we were unaware of this. The Dean's message was a beacon of hope for us. The message was clear: "Becoming an academic is not smooth, straightforward, linear, or automatic" (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2016, p. 225). However, what was emphasised was: "It should not be crippling. Nor should success, however, it is defined, come at the expense of individuals' (or families') physical and mental health or happiness" (Sutherland, 2018, p. 2). The Dean's message ignited us. We realised that there were individuals who were interested in our growth. Our glimmer of hope flickered a bit stronger.

Room 32, a space, undefined and without any prescriptions, firstly gave us refuge. Reflecting, this was our site of the second rescue. Drawn together by intersections of being young, Black ECAs engaged in their doctoral studies, having similar experiences, and having a shared ambition to thrive in academia,

Room 32 gave us the impetus to recalibrate. Our collaboration cushioned us against "the hegemonic, individualistic, competitive, and demanding landscape of academia in neoliberal university settings" (Brewer et al, 2021, p. 78). In Room 32, we allowed ourselves to be initiates again, on our terms. Land et al. (2005) and Allan et al. (2015) explained the liminal space as a psychosocial space—a mindset. During this time, the initiate understands their positionality of being the initiate and thus pursues learning everything for the role employed. Given Land et al.'s (2005) and Allan et al.'s (2015) psychosocial stance, our liminality was both a state of mind and a repositioning within the dominant space. We used Room 32 as a liminal space to shed and unlearn (Vinz, 1997) the intellectual and emotional toxicity that Khoza-Shangase (2019) wrote of. Not only did Room 32 provide a refuge for us, but it also offered the possibility for reimagining our becoming academics and beginning the work of rebuilding ourselves.

We effectively transitioned Room 32 into a study room with a healthier mindset and growing self-esteem. We met weekly to write together because we were still working on our doctoral studies. We assisted each other by sharing calls for papers and conference calls, reading each other's academic work, and role-played our presentations for our doctoral proposal review and conference presentations to refine our scholarly output to the academic audience. We regularly shared scholarly thoughts, giving and receiving advice from each other on issues related to teaching, research, and our doctoral studies. Organically, the space was evolving into a place of academic development.

Fulfilling his word to support ECAs, our Dean established the Accelerated Academic Leadership Development Programme, a project committed to developing ECAs. With this project came more opportunities for teaching relief, national conference attendance grants, mentorship from senior academics, and, our highlight, the opportunity to visit Columbia University, Teacher's College (TC). We identify this programme as our third site of rescue. Travelling to TC meant leaving Room 32. Nevertheless, we were travelling together.

While at TC, we began unpacking our experiences from Room 32, finally understanding that our relationship was a critical friendship established on values of tolerance, care, and empowerment. Our critical friendship was a life jacket that kept us afloat with mutual affirmations and kept our professional identity alive. With this mindset, we decided to maintain our practices from Room 32 even though we were at TC. The maintenance of our mindset led us to an evolved meaning of Room 32—as an embodied space. Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga (2003) described embodied space as allowing the space to be occupied by the body— giving the body a psycho-spatial experience that connects the body to the space beyond physical limitations (Mbatha et al., 2020). How we experienced Room 32 was no longer limited to the physical space but also expanded to our state of mind and self; we carried Room 32 in ourselves albeit not being in the physical space. The behaviours and practices established in Room 32 were no longer limited to the physical Room 32. However, they were now embodied within us and could be emulated wherever we were. This mindset charged our enthusiasm, which offered abundant possibilities for our becoming academics.

Reflecting on our transitioning to Room 32 as a liminal space, we understand our decision to have given us a fighting chance of survival, of becoming academics. Our changed mindset opened us to new opportunities that we fully embraced when they came. With the teaching relief privilege awarded to us, we could advance our doctoral studies, cultivate our writing skills for publishing, and refine through continuous conversations our reimagined identity of becoming an academic. We also took the opportunity to attend national conferences. In this opportunity, we leapt ahead and were successful in presenting individual papers and collaboratively held a panel presentation. Our panel presentation allowed us to share our work about the pleasures, pitfalls, and possibilities of being an ECA. We were

received warmly by the audience. We were given accolades and honest feedback, which deepened our thinking and contributed to our confidence in viewing ourselves as academics.

The programme had also selected senior academics within our school and from TC to assist us in our academic journey. These mentors acted in the ways we had initially expected from the academics in the dominant space—now available to us and willing to assist. Gradually, our experiences were changed. The toxic clench of the dominant space had lost its grip. Our view of becoming academics was validated by the support we received, which armoured our thinking, protecting it from the ongoing toxicity of the dominant space.

Ukuhlehla kwenqama akusho ukubaleka kusho ukuthatha amandla. This is an isiZulu[3] proverb that can be explained in the following way: "When a ram moves back during a fight, it does not mean defeat, but it is to gain more strength." That is how we now describe our retreat to Room 32. It was not to run away from the demanding, rigorous, and toxic environment. Instead, it was to cultivate our skills and increase our capacity. Currently, embodying the practices of Room 32, our envisioned academia, which we are emulating in our collaboration, is best expressed in the concept of academia as a marathon. Although carrying some similarities to triathlon as an endurance sport, the marathon allows us to pace ourselves better and support each other in the race without the compulsion of finishing first. The aim is to finish together, which is possible in a marathon. In pacing ourselves, Room 32 provided room for us to crawl until we developed the ability to walk. Our walk was surrounded by the support of multiple opportunities, which eventually made it possible for us to walk by ourselves. Such support has brought intellectual and emotional affirmation (Canham, 2019)—efforts that have validated our belonging.

Our transformation from crawlers to runners is also attributed to the self-study methodology and artistic methods. Engaging in self-study as a practice informed our research engagements (how we write and generate data together), how we interact with each other as critical friends, and how we pursue success in the academy. Self-study and artistic methods like storyboarding have amplified our voices as we find the confidence to express ourselves through the methods.

Figure 4: Space 3: A Marathon Instead

Yomantas (2021) urged us to have the agency to reclaim our dreams. She drew on Glennon Doyle's New York Times bestseller, *Untamed*, to encourage academics to "return to the wildest, truest versions of ourselves who are released from societal expectations and norms" (Yomantas, 2021, p. 304). Kopano Ratele (2019) also ignited ECAs and asked, "If you do not think and feel and behave as if where and how you live matter, why would others think and feel that you matter?" (p. 25). Rosalind Gill (2009), in sharing multiple experiences from various academics about the toxic neoliberal workplace

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[3] AmaZulu (plural) are one of the ethnic groups in South Africa with isiZulu as the language. We are employed in a university located in KwaZulu-Natal province.

environment in academia, urged academics to think of ways to resist partaking in the toxic culture in the academic workplace. Reading these words as ECAs who have experienced the toxicity within academia and witnessed the results, we take them as encouragement to hold steadfast and pursue our current path of "doing" academia.

Conclusion

We began our paper with a concern to respond to the following question: "How are our identities and transitioning between spaces contribute/d/ing to our becoming academics?" We used a storyboard to illustrate three different spaces and discussed how our identities transitioned as we moved through them. We illustrated and storied how we made our transitions from entering the academy, finding a life jacket in Room3 2, and becoming a "work-in-progress." A storyboard provided opportunity for us to create and share a visual representation of our story and transition. We have also illustrated how our transitioning between the dominant and liminal spaces has contributed and is contributing to our becoming academics. We used intersectionality and liminality theories to illuminate and analyse our transition, and demonstrated the growth of our academic identities through the exegesis of our published papers.

In the engagement of our experiences, we turned the spotlight onto ourselves and became the site of inquiry (Samaras, 2011). Our social cohesion and transformation emanated from approaching research as a practice and ourselves as sites of inquiry. Connected by our intersectional identities, we restored ourselves and reshaped our identities, making the embodied liminal space fertile for our professional development. Franklin (2012) encouraged researchers to use artistic methods, especially when working with self, because researchers also need to awaken their human consciousness—and artistic methods offer possibilities in achieving that. Our experience of creating a storyboard was empowering and therapeutic. The process allowed us to revisit our past experiences without lamenting or self-pity, but with acceptance and assertiveness. In our data generative conversations, we released any remaining distressing emotions we once felt about our positions as ECAs. We took accountability for our actions, deepening our restored sense of confidence and self-esteem, ultimately reaffirming our belonging in the academy. With an awakened consciousness and depth of knowledge in ourselves, we began to engage with research boldly, finding our authentic voice and unafraid to transgress against conventions of this is how it is done and how it *should* be (hooks, 1994).

We believe there are multiple possibilities for transformation and deeper insight that can be attained through studying the self. Ours is one of many stories that present this, and we implore other emerging scholars to find their authentic voice as they navigate through the various challenges in the academic triathlon because the processes of self-study methodology and artistic methods (such as storyboard) present various opportunities of emancipation from subtle and salient imperious practices.

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