

Blockades, Barricades, and Barriers: Accessing and Navigating Academia from a Multi-Marginalized Positionality

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Abstract

This article is an autoethnographic account of a gender-queer, working-class, woman of color scholar's venture into academia. Through an analysis of race and class violence compounded by gender and first-generation college student status, the author recounts the impact of intersectional identities on both their entry into higher education and their progression through graduate school. The author grapples with the isolation derived from engaging graduate students of color from economically privileged backgrounds. Similarly, they delve into finding community among white working-class academics and having to contend with whiteness and unexamined racial privilege. Further, definitions of work and productivity on the academic landscape are thoroughly examined as well as how a class-based consciousness shaped their professional trajectory.

Keywords

Cultural capital, social violence, work, intersectional identities, economic condition

Your CV reads working class. This is going to limit where you can go.

No truer words have been spoken. This statement, though painful to hear, was said to me during a conversation with a respected senior faculty member of my graduate program. I was preparing for my dissertation defense and discussing what my professional life might look like after graduation. Uttered in kindness, the faculty member very softly said, 'Your CV reads working class. This is going to limit where you can go.' They appeared timid and ashamed to admit that class stigma was present in academia. It was the first time that I heard someone be so honest about classism among scholars. I had experienced classism and stigma throughout my graduate school career and was well aware of the privileges afforded my peers because of family wealth (be it personal or partner). It had not occurred to me that scholars – particularly social scientists

who are learned souls conscious of power and inequity – would be participating in class hierarchies during their review processes. Aside from my state school pedigree, I did not understand how my background class was visible on my CV and would be a hindrance. Hindsight has taught me many things about academia, graduate school, and my professional development. More importantly, it has enabled me to see that my working-class, first-generation college student epistemology¹ shaped the way I approached academia, which is a class-based phenomenon and readable on my CV.

As a first-generation working-class gender-queer woman of color, I was well aware of racism and homophobia within institutions of learning and beyond. I use the term working-class very loosely here. I think a better descriptor would be rural poor. A lot of people in my town did not have running water and struggled to purchase the basic necessities of life. I grew up in a very small town in Texas and poverty was commonplace among my community. My home town was predominantly white and most people worked in three primary industries: chemical production, crude oil refineries, or agriculture. Local residents just filtered into available employment and there were not too many who deviated from that path. One of the unfortunate side effects of white small town life was that the community was not particularly welcoming to people of color, particularly Chicanos. I often found myself the target of hatred from adults and students alike. I was taught very early that I did not belong and was unwelcome in most every place. I would like to say that I sought refuge in books, but that would not be true. I never found what I was looking for – someone like me. I did not find comfort in reading as an escape, because it just exposed another space that was not meant for me – where I did not belong. Every time I looked at a book I just felt more alone.

Learning came easily to me and I never faltered in the classroom. Yes, I endured small-town public school racism and the authorities' attempts to move me into special needs classes. The three students of color in my elementary school, including me, were all in the gifted and talented program yet somehow found ourselves sitting in special needs testing. I am not sure how the three lone students of color in the grade happened to all be marked as special needs, but it happened. I wish that I could say that the three of us had some conceptual framework to have discussed what was happening. That we somehow knew that it was racism. That my parents knew how to protect me from the institutional violence that I was experiencing. Like too many others before and after me, nothing shielded us. We did not have the language as young people. My parents did not know how to protect me since they trusted educators to know what was best because they were educated and my parents were not. I endured the violence of that experience in a deafening, defenseless silence. I cannot pinpoint with certainty if this was the moment that my young-self lost my love for learning, but it was close. Sadly, there is a full body of literature that demonstrates students of color are targeted for special needs classrooms at a disproportionate rate than their white counterparts (Ferri & Connor 2005; Gallagher 1999; Reid & Knight 2006). After all of the standardized testing, the institution offered to move me ahead two grades – deeming that I was bored with the curriculum and needed to be challenged. My parents opted to leave me in the same grade level. They saw how the semester-long series of institutional tests and evaluations had drained me and thought I had been through enough. They

¹ I am consciously using epistemology instead of habitus. See writings by Vandenberghe and others. Their work describes the rationale for my choice of terms.

did not want to put me through a massive grade change into classes with students so much older than me.

My high school years came and it was no surprise to my family when I earned a perfect score on the state required high school exit exam. In Texas, it was mandatory for all students take a comprehensive exam that demonstrated mastery over a range of topics. The exam was administered during our eleventh grade year and every student in the state took the same test. I was one of the few high school students in the state that year to receive a perfect score. No one at my high school said anything aside from one teacher who said in passing, ‘You did really well.’ There was no joy or celebration in their statement. It was short and abrupt. As if what I had accomplished was nothing short of a mosquito buzzing around their head. It was not a compliment. It was a slight and meant to diminish what I had done, the same as the silence only worse. By giving voice to their indifference, it lessened the value of my test scores since I saw them as authority figures. They knew education and learning and neither I – nor anyone in my family – had that skill set. They knew best. Shortly after the scores were released, I started receiving invitations from some of the nation’s top colleges and universities to apply for admission. It seemed like an endless list of campuses that were soliciting my application: Fordham, Colgate, Sarah Lawrence Dartmouth were just a few of the liberal arts campuses that sent me invitations to apply to their schools. The aggressive ones would call my home and offer full scholarships if I were to attend their campus. Please keep in mind that I had not applied to any of the places reaching out to me. They were actively seeking me. Phone calls were coming from many campuses around the country for a number of months. My parents did not know how to talk to the recruiters and would avoid their calls. They started screening incoming phone calls because recruiters were calling frequently for the first month after the scores were released.

I did not know what to say to recruiters and did not really understand what was happening. No one in my family had gone to college and I did not know what to do with all of the material coming in: fliers, pamphlets, brochures, repetitive letters. I tried to speak with guidance counselors at my high school since I knew that they were working with students who were applying to college and were available to help. I made multiple attempts to speak with the counselors and begged for their support. For whatever reason, I struggled to find gaps in their schedules and not one counselor seemed to have time to speak with me. After about a month of actively seeking a meeting, I had grown increasingly frustrated, angry, and agitated because I knew that my time was limited to apply to college! There was an application window and I was missing it. I finally received an appointment and was told that students like me do not go to college. ‘I’m not sure you are college material. You should just find a job when you graduate.’ Had I not been so frustrated from having been forced to wait for that meeting, I might have taken what they said seriously. But since I watched classmates that had signed-up for appointments after me receive meeting weeks before I did, I knew that something was very wrong. And that ‘those people’ were not to be trusted. If capabilities were measured by exams, I reasoned, then a perfect score on the state exam meant that I was smart – smarter than most of the people on campus for sure and maybe smarter than most juniors in the state too. What, then, was the counselor talking about that prohibited me from being college material? It was racism – of course. That was obvious to me then just as it is now. I was Chicana and that meant they were reading my name, my body, and my identity through their tainted lens and imposing some stereotype on me. It was a stereotype that they first created and then enforced through

gatekeeping. It was clear to me that what they were seeing was not about me and I knew it! Through their racism, the counselors denied me the basic knowledge of how to apply to college. And I left their offices still not knowing how to do it.

Not only did the high school counselors deem me too *Mexican* to be in college, they actively withheld information that would have enabled me to access the many opportunities that were literally calling my home. Needless to say, I did not go to college right out of high school. I did not know how to apply. Applications are not intuitive and people need to learn the skills to create the required materials. Writing a cover letter, drafting a personal statement, and presenting yourself in print is a skill set and students have to learn how to do those things. For a lot of folks in academia, their parents were able to provide that support to them at home. That is not true for everyone and the institutions are tasked with teaching students these skills. Looking back at my experience brings up a swell of emotions: anger, sadness, frustration, despair. I teeter between rage and tears - mainly. Why would an adult, someone meant to support learning and growth actively stand in the way of a young person and limited their life opportunities. It is unconscionable to me. And I am forced to question how many other students are forced out of college, particularly the elite schools, because someone actively, willfully, and wantonly stood in their way. My high school counselors changed the trajectory of my academic development. Plain and simple. Fortunately, I made it to college a few years later. I attended a community college then a local university where I was allowed to walk-up and fill-out my application on site. The person behind the counter told me how to do it. So, that is how I went to college – with my perfect scores on the state exam.

It is important to note that race and class do intersect. There are profound consequences for those who live at the intersection of these two phenomena. Yes, racism is real and devastating and horrible. Yes, classism for white folks is real and horrible and alienating. These are true statements in and of themselves. When you put the two together, we are talking about a startling reality that works to limit access in profound, unconscionable ways. Folks of color encounter racism at most every pass, particularly if they are young. They have to endure the social and institutional violence that accompanies being of color in institutions of learning (and everywhere else). That means that we are turned away by gatekeeping mechanisms that work against us to limit our opportunities. When you compound that with class bias, then we are talking about populations of people that not only endure racism, but also, as a whole, lack the knowledge and skills to access institutions of higher learning. This is particularly true for first-generation college students. For families that have not accessed higher education, they are truly at the mercy of institutions protected by gatekeepers. Some families might have a working class background and have limited cultural practices that come with economic privilege or comfort, yet have had the privilege of a family member getting a college degree. Information that can be shared within a family with or without economic wealth, even if they are of color, can interrupt some structural violence. If you do not have access to that information within your family or the institution, then you are left without any recourse to acquire that much need information. You are abandoned without any information on how to access institutions of higher education, or much of anything else. It was a vicious behavior that is not often discussed or engaged.

My path changed course while I was pursuing my master's degree. I had fumbled into a graduate program after finishing my bachelor's, because I could not find full-time employment. I worked

full time in retail while pursuing an undergraduate degree. I had the traditional mindset of working-class folks, or immigrants, that saw education as a means of increasing employment opportunities (Ray et al. 2001). I took whatever classes fit my schedule and I worked as hard as I could to complete my degree as quickly as possible. Learning was less important than my degree. And since classes were not particularly challenging, I took – on average – 21 to 24 credit hours a semester as well as winter and summer classes. I finished my degree in just short of three years without much effort. I happened to not secure a professional job upon graduation and decided to pursue an advanced degree, because I thought that it would help me find a better employment. My graduate application was much the same as my undergraduate – a quick something that was looking for students to build a program. I suspect that any paying student would have been admitted. While in graduate school, I partnered with a lovely woman of color who was from an educated family. Both of her parents had gone to college, and her mother had nearly completed her PhD. I learned from her the skills that the institution refused me and that my family could not provide. We spent weeks discussing personal narratives and research statements. She taught me the importance of networking and encouraged me to send emails to potential mentors to introduce myself and ask about their research. Yes, we were both still contending with racism. I remember distinctly her crying one day after she called a school in Oklahoma where she had applied. She wanted to confirm that they had received her application package since she really wanted to attend that school. The office administrator told her that they did not receive her materials and that she had missed the deadline. My partner knew for a fact that they had received her application since she had used priority mail and requested a signature from the person receiving her package. The person that she was speaking with on the phone was the same person that signed for her package. She said as much to the individual, but it did not matter and her pleas went unheard. ‘They are doing this because my last name is Gonzales, she cried.’ It was hard not to read the situation like that. Together, we chose to move north in the US to leave southern racism and I decided to pursue my PhD. With her help, I finally learned how to submit an application to a university. I had my heart set on one school and she on another. As fate would have it, I was accepted into her dream school and she into mine. And so it went. We parted ways and attend our respective institutions.

I arrived at my new campus in the North East, a region far removed from my small-town Texas roots. I had only been outside of Texas once before moving north to start my PhD and had no frame of reference to understand much of anything. People moved and talked so differently and I was very much a stranger in a foreign land. Meeting my PhD cohort – comprised of eight people – did not ease my concerns in anyway. It only heightened them. They had all attended the elite schools that solicited my applications years before and I had learned – from my partner during my master’s degree – that they had received a much better education than I did. Each person in my cohort thought quicker, spoke faster, and had an air of confidence that I just did not possess. When I did speak, my southern drawl marked me as less than (Evans Davies 2007). I did not have the elegant tones that come from the Carolinas or Tennessee old money. I had a gritty Texas drawl that is found among the poverty stricken and it read every time that I spoke. I was poor, brown, queer, and definitely out of place. I sought refuge among graduate students of color hoping that I would find community and people like me.

Even though we were all folks of color, I had never felt so isolated or alone. The graduate students of color were warm and inviting, but I clearly did not belong with them. Most, if not all,

of the members of the community identified as working class yet they had a full range of social and personal resources that I could not fathom. I had no means of comprehending what they were able to do. They knew how to access institutional support and leverage ‘being of color’ into any number of opportunities that supported marginalized students. I had never before met anyone able to access structural mechanisms *because* they were of color. Most everyone I knew from my life in Texas was turned away because of it. I was in absolute shock and could not comprehend how they were able to negotiate the system. It just came naturally to them and they did it with ease. I had never felt so alone, so inferior, or so incapable. I was devastated. Yes, we were all of color, but there was a huge cultural divide between us that I just – no matter how hard I tried – could not identify.

I heard many discussions among the graduate students of color about how they were struggling financially to pay to attend all of the conferences, that it was a huge strain on their budgets. I was struggling to pay rent and did not understand how many of them were attending one conference a month. They said that they were working class! How could they afford to do that?! I grappled with what was I doing wrong and blamed myself for not working hard enough to be able to keep-up with my job as a student. I later learned that the graduate students of color – most of them – identified as working class as a show of solidarity, a means of connecting with economically disenfranchised people. It was an affinity group for them – not their life experience. Most of the graduate students of color were from wealthy families, one of whom owned several rental properties in NYC. She and her siblings all went to elite liberal arts colleges and her parents paid for her education – and her siblings – and supported her graduate work by supplementing her living expenses. This was a fairly common phenomenon among the graduate students of color. Most, if not all, were from middle or upper class backgrounds. They had the institutional knowledge and cultural capital to access a full range of services available through the university and professional organizations. Moreover, they had financial support from their families and did not have to labor in low wage jobs to survive. Their faux working-class identities – despite having financial comfort – rendered me (a true member of the working class) and my experience invisible.

The underlying assumption about folks of color in academia is that we are from working class backgrounds. The unfortunate reality – like most stereotypes about race – is that it is not true. Most of the folks of color in academia are from middle-class, or higher, backgrounds just like the white population. How could they not be? Economic condition is such a huge predictor of most everything: educational outcomes, imprisonment rates, health outcomes, life expectancy, and so on (Hashimoto 2011; Howe et al. 2013; Lutz 2007; Starfield & Emanuelle-Birn 2007; Yun & Moreno 2006). This is also true for someone’s ability to integrate into the ivory tower. We know that working class white folks struggle to integrate into academia (Mazurek 2009; Muzzatti & Samarco 2006; Schell 1998, Warnock 2016). The struggle for working class folks of color, especially first-generation, is compounded by class – not lessened by color. Working class people of color have a comparable frame of reference to that of working class white folks (Linkon & Russo 2016) – we do not have information or the skill-base to ask for support like white academics. White folks talk about this in their work engaging what it is to be working-class scholars (Warnock & Appel 2012). What makes people think that working-class people of color are not struggling with the same stigmas around asking for help and support? For folks of color who make it into academia, the majority of them are from middle or higher class

backgrounds and their knowledge of and willingness to engage with structural supports come from their class privilege – not their color!

It took a few years, but I finally found someone more closely aligned to my sensibilities. My closest friend in graduate school happened to be a gender-queer, white working class person from small town as well and we were both enrolled in PhD programs at the same university. We had many things in common and we had a fantastic relationship, although I did have to work with them on their racism and ideological whiteness. Despite having a shared class background, my dear friend was fully supported by their department and was given guidance and resources from their advisors and broader campus faculty while I received none of those things. My friend kindly shared with me what they were learning while ignoring the fact that I was being excluded from knowledge shared within our university. It was hard on our relationship at first, because I wanted them to see the ways in which I was being marginalized. They could not recognize how their racial privilege yielded benefits that I was denied. I became disheartened and finally gave up on trying to help them recognize my experience and just accepted the precious information. After a short period of time, my friend began to see me as competition for campus and professional resources. They quit sharing institutional knowledge with me. And I was again without information, without support, and without a compass.

Through sheer grit and determination, I collected my senses and turned my attention to, what I have heard referred to as, academic climbing, the benchmark of success in academia. Academic climbing is one of those coded phrases that hints at productivity, but something more. I did not have the subtle delicacies (Bourdieu 1984) that a middle class, or higher, background affords or the guidance of a learned advisor or peer. I had no consciousness that ‘something more’ existed let alone how to engage with it. I approached academia, specifically the concept of productivity, through my working-class understanding of labor – blue-collar grind it out work. So, like any good blue-collar worker, I set my sights on completing a job that required a series of benchmarks that defined success. I sought advice from those few senior scholars who acknowledged me and asked what defined productivity. I collected their statements and compiled a list of how success was measured: publications, presentations, and grants. As the first person in my family, immediate or extended, to receive a college degree let alone enter a PhD program, it was imperative that I meet each benchmark and set an example for my family. I was task-driven, goal-orientated, and committed to institutional definitions of success. So, I dug in and went to work. I read full bodies of literature from theoretical inception to variable trends and evolutions so that I could write informed articles. I attended workshops and trainings while I was presenting at a conference. I started reading old grant applications that had been funded by major granting agencies so that I could learn how it was done. You name it. If I could find the time in my sixteen hours a day, seven days a week schedule, I found a way to do it. Little did I know at the time that – depending upon one’s class position – there are vastly different definitions of work and productivity (Rothe 2006).

For me, my class-based ideology defined work as labor that produced outcomes that were measurable through money or could be quantified in some way that demonstrated productivity. I needed to have something tangible to show for my time and energy. I had to survive financially and grow my CV at the same time, which required strategic planning and a conscious use of my resources. In my mind, that meant that I needed to start teaching classes since it would both

allow me to gain experience in my field, show productivity on my CV, and help me survive financially. So, I hit the adjunct wheel and started running a desperate race in an attempt to catch up with and surpass my peers. I did not come from elite institutions and knew that I was behind my colleagues, both in terms of skill and prestige. I thought that teaching classes would help me catch up since teaching a stand-alone course was held in such high regard in my department. Only the most respected graduate students were gifted the honor of teaching stand-alone courses. Graduate students had to apply for every position during graduate school and were measured on our CVs similarly to the academic job market. I was under the delusion that our value in the academic marketplace was based on our work – my working class definition of work.

For nearly all of my graduate school career, I struggled to receive graduate student research or teaching appointments in my department. I had a growing body of publications, had received small grants, and was presenting at conferences. Yet, I still could not seem to catch-up according to my department's measurement of work. I watched my peers get positions and even accolades for all of the 'work' that they were doing. In my mind, they were not doing anything. They just lounged around celebrating themselves and their minimal accomplishments. I had *more* of 'everything' that counted on the metric of success and still could not break in. It did not make any sense to me! I thought at first that maybe it was racism or homophobia that was limiting my opportunities. I am sure that those phenomena had something to do with it, but they are hard to measure. Most of the people receiving appointments were straight white men. They made up the majority of my department so that filtering process had already happened. I think we had nine people of color out of 100 graduate students, and about six of us identified as LGBTQ. I was the only gender-queer person of color². Even with those numbers, I noticed folks of color getting appointments and even queer folks. Was it because I was both a person of color and queer? Was the combination of two visibly marked identities limiting my ability to access department support? Something was happening that I just did not understand. Why was my application not good enough to warrant an appointment? I read it as a lack of effort of my part so I leaned in harder and worked more – because I thought that it was my fault and that I was not doing enough. I had a very small amount of time that I gave myself for a social life outside of graduate school. I surrendered that time to community service and found ways to do community service that would allow me to integrate research and presentations. And that, ultimately, became the extent of my social life. To use a Texas colloquialism in regard to football – I left it all on the field. I gave all of my time, energy, thoughts, everything that I had to benchmarks of success in graduate school.

After years of leaning and grinding, I finally graduated and was ready to enter the job market. I was very proud of all of the work that I had done in my graduate career, although I never managed to get any accolades or appointments from my department. Somehow I had finished on time – and in some instances ahead of my colleagues – despite having no institutional support. With a 50% attrition rate in my department, finishing was an accomplishment in and of itself. And I was finishing in great form and had a full body of work on my CV to demonstrate my productivity. I was relishing my accomplishment when I sat down with the senior, respected

² There are variations in the LGBTQ community. Gender-queer refers to people that do not adhere to US normative gender presentations. They are visibly different, because they do not follow the cultural norms of gender. They are a small subsection of the LGBTQ community.

member of my department and heard the news about my CV and readable class-based deficit. During a very brief introductory conversation, they asked, ‘who have you worked with and who do you know?’ At first, I was taken aback by the question since it did not have anything to do with my labor. I answered with poise and confidence, ‘Well’, I said, ‘I’ve worked with this one person, because they were all that I needed.’ He had so much to offer, why would I go anywhere else I thought to myself. I did not have time for luxuries or chit-chat. I needed to work. With that, this individual examined my CV and marked my class disparity. According to all three markers of academic productivity – research, teaching, and service – I had hit my bench marks and exceeded my colleagues. I had a number of single-authored publications, had presented at conferences, and received fellowships and grants. I had also managed, despite all of it, to be the instructor of record for 67 classes. Yes, it required me traveling to multiple campuses each semester and I – basically – taught a 5/5 for the bulk of my graduate school career. I needed to survive which meant that I had to work. And it was my class-based understanding of productivity and that highlighted my working-class background – aside from the huge number of classes that I had taught.

My classmates took campus jobs so that they would have more time to connect with faculty. My limited understanding of academic institutions meant that you taught classes if you wanted to be on the academic side and worked on campus if you wanted to be in administration or student affairs. I did not realize that administrative or student affairs positions enabled graduate students one of the most precious commodities – networking. I could have taken a campus job so that I could make connections. It would have been those connections that would later help secure me campus resources and departmental respect. And it was that respect that would eventually turn into letters of recommendation, fellowship opportunities, stand-alone courses, and eventually tenure-track job offers. Networking was the language that I did not possess – the social capital that comes with connections with senior faculty and administrators (Warnock 2016). The wages between their campus jobs and my adjuncting were essentially the same. What they received by working on campus was priceless in comparison.

Upon graduation, I joined the faculty at a satellite campus within the same university system where I received my PhD. I was – I believe – the only anthropologist hired in the university system that year and I was thrilled and grateful to have the job. It was a teaching position, but I had taught so many classes at that point I was an old-hand. I thought that I would easily transition into my new appointment. While at my new campus, I learned for the first time how profoundly my class background had limited my understanding of academia. I realized very quickly how desperately I had lacked guidance during my graduate career. My new colleagues in the department moved very slowly and seemed to relish every word that they said – both spoken and in print. I remember my graduate school advisor saying that he sometimes spent 10 minutes thinking of a word while he was writing before moving onto the next. At the time, I thought that it seemed extravagant to spend some much energy on one word. Who has that much time I thought?! Well, professors do. And that was the class rub. I learned that ‘being’ a professor was part of the equation that I had not learned in graduate school. While I was working, my peers were learning how to ‘be’ professors and it was an elegance that I did not possess. I quickly learned how to project ‘professor’, although it never felt comfortable and was counter-intuitive to my epistemology.

I am now three years out of graduate school and starting the second year of my first tenure track position. I am at a teaching institution and my CV is teaching heavy. I am encountering much the same situation that I did in graduate school. I have the requisite publications, presentations, and grants of someone three years out. I also happen to have taught 100 classes. Yes, I have continued teaching a 5/5. I still need to survive. That has not changed. What has changed is me. I have long since shed my southern Texas accent. I have lost all reverence for the Ivory Tower and those who occupy it. I no longer have imposter syndrome or feel a deficit of any kind. I do not take anything for granted – not that I ever did. What I do more now is pause and wonder. There is something just beneath the surface of most every interaction in academia and I now know to look for it. I take a few extra minutes to contemplate what is not being said and how that will influence the outcome. I look at those around me and chuckle (quietly of course) when their egos are visible and guiding their behavior, because I know that it is just their class talking. I have grown into a quiet-confidence that comes from years of work, struggle, and – ultimately – success. My academic career and professional trajectory were changed a long time ago during my high school years. There is no altering that experience or the path that it set me on. Nor is there any recreating or rectifying my graduate school experience. I did the best that I could with the tools that I had. Yes, some members of academic search committees grimace during a job interview when they see me via Skype with my short hair and tie. I am not at all surprised when I do not get a campus visit. I am sure that some people pass my CV over when they read my last name. All of these things are true. What is also true is that despite all of the barriers and roadblocks put in my way – I am still here and still standing strong. And I have no illusions.

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Author Bio

Dr. Foiles Sifuentes has focused her research on the role of structural and social violence in the creation and maintenance of marginalized populations. Currently, she is working on a critical assessment of nation-states' use of internal checkpoints and white only enclaves to impose difference on the local people in the Texas-Mexico borderlands.

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