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# La trenza de las fronteras: The cultural worlds first-generation women navigate to access college

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***La trenza de las fronteras: The cultural worlds first-generation women  
navigate to access college***

by

**Katherine Cameron Seifert**

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by  
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The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not  
permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2018

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**LAS FRONTERIZAS, LA FRONTERA, Y LA TRENZA: THREE PORTRAITS OF COLLEGE-GOING BORDERS AND CROSSINGS**

Getting the full ride ...it means a lot because I didn't think I was gonna go to college so now I know I'm gonna go to college. I got accepted, I been on campus, I like it and everything. It's like a better feeling to have. [The tuition award] means a lot to me. I get to build relationships with people that I've known forever ... and a whole bunch of other people, like upper [admin] people. (Alexis, 8/28/17)

I don't have that much encouragement to go to school. So having this space where people actually wanna go to college and they know what it can do for them is pretty great. (Lila, 8/28/17)

[My family doesn't] have that much money, we thought we were gonna need to put effort in taking out loans, that's all scary. But just knowing I have tuition paid off, that's just like it kinda just left me more time to just to think about what I actually wanna do...And now actually applying and all that fun stuff, I would have never known what to have done if it wasn't for the help that I have right now, and the connections I have when I'm going [to college] and throughout my time there, so just knowing that I have that now is just really – my voice is just wavy right now but honestly, it's actually like a Christmas present, like an early Christmas present. (Rebecca, 8/28/17)

These quotes are from young women from racially/ethnically and/or socio-economically minoritized backgrounds who will be attending college next year. While these women come from families who differ in racial/ethnic identification – they are white, black, and Mexican – what they have in common is that their families don't have much money and that they will be the first of their families to attend college. These women are *fronterizas* (Cantu, 2006); they are navigating “this new space, the academic borderlands” (Rendón, 1996, p. 14). They are *fronterizas* because they are navigating the transition from high school to college as minoritized women. Unlike their peers who hold privileged identities, this transition is not natural or expected. As they anticipate graduation, they are simultaneously eagerly and anxiously awaiting college, while clinging to the last few months of childhood. In this way, their experience has been one like that described by Cantu (2006): “*En esta frontera estoy atrapada. No, situada. No,*

*desplegada. No, estacionada. No, aparcada. No, parqueada. No—nada de atrapada o parqueada—estoy como el río, siempre y nunca el mismo. Porque estoy haciendo cola para cruzar—calmadamente, tranquila”* (In this border I am trapped. No, situated. No, unfolded. No, stationed. No, parked. No – not trapped or parked – I’m like the river, always and never the same. Because I’m waiting to cross – calmly) (Cantu, 2006, p. 92).

In some ways, like other first-generation students, these young women have felt at times *atrapada*. Many first generation college-goers face challenges at this border – between high school and college – that these women have faced. They have struggled to understand the college application process, and the costs related to college going (Ghazzawi & Jagannathan, 2011; Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2011). They have low family financial support, fears about the cost of college, and less familiarity with the university than other students (Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2011). However, much of the scholarly claims about first-generation students is not true of these women. In my one and one half years of work with Alexis, Lila, and Rebecca, I have found their experience to run contrary to common claims in the literature. The families of these women are very supportive of their college attendance. They also do not have low critical thinking skills, few social supports, reduced career ambitions, poor study skills, or low implied intelligence (Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2011). They are highly committed, and cope with ample stress day-to-day, even though this may not be the norm (Unverferth, Talbert-Johnson, & Bogard, 2012).

It is not surprising to read such deficit-based scholarship about this population. As Oikonomidoy (2015) points out, “overreliance on existing macro-level categories [about this population] has been critiqued as being prone to a deficit approach. What has been proposed is increased attention to not only the obstacles that students face but also the resources that they

bring on campus, recognizing both the impact of the social structures in shaping their lives and the potential of their own agency for overcoming challenges” (p.110). This study focuses on just that. It examines the obstacles these women face at the high school-college *frontera* and then outlines the tools they have used to grapple with and overcome their obstacles. It examines the borderland that they’re navigating, and asks how they move from present cultural worlds into a new one, centered on college-going. It does this by presenting portraits about the research participants in the form of narrative ethnography. Narrative ethnography is especially useful for this task because it “is about forming relationships; it is about the search for connection within and across borders” (Behar, 1999, p. 476). Since this research is focused on border-crossing, this is a useful tool in highlighting the intimate voices of these women so that readers may engage as “resisting listeners” (Brown & Gilligan, 1993, p. 16). Resisting listeners acknowledge that traditional research tends to highlight dominant voices (those of white males) and seek instead to understand stories of those whose voices have been silenced (Brown & Gilligan, 1993).

Because the narrative ethnography weaves together three stories about women’s transition from high school to college, I call it *La Trenza* (The Braid). In reading *La Trenza*, I hope these young women will identify themselves from my (the researcher’s) “vantage point at which goodness can be apprehended – even as it is marked by mistakes and failure” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 36). Illuminating participants’ goodness is an important tenant of the portraiture methodology I employ, in that the research is meant to be empowering and affirming (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997). This is reminiscent of feminist approaches to research, which have been found to empower participants (McNamara, 2009). A woman who holds minoritized identities and is “struggling for success may not on [her] own have time for the luxury of recognition of achievement or the perspective of situating struggle within a larger construct”

(Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 36), but this type of research may afford her a new look at her own strengths.

Specifically, this study asserts that: Young women with minoritized identities, transitioning between high school and college, participate in a figured cultural world centered on college-going. Of that assertion, it asks: (a) What are the identities, relationships, and resources that construe their participation in this world? (b) What are other worlds in which they participate? (c) What are the effective border-crossing strategies they use to transition from other worlds into the college-going world?

In order to explore this assertion and answer its related question, I draw on the theories of borderlands and cultural worlds, supported by the methodologies of portraiture and feminist ethnographic inquiry. From this inquiry, I discover cultural worlds in which the participants operate – specifically, cultural worlds centered on resiliency, young adulthood, and familial relationships. I examine how they cross from those worlds to a college-going world. The implications of these findings inform the scholarship about first-generation college-going women’s transition from high school to college. I conclude by identifying next steps for studies and practitioners seeking to best support first-generation college-goers in this transition.

Before setting out the literature I use to ground the study, I first turn to an explanation of the particular context of these women’s college-going transition, what I call the RYF program, and my own role and responsibilities. As a new university-school-community “early commitment” or “promise” program, Alexis, Lila, and Rebecca were among the first cohort to cross the high school-college border. It was my job to help them make this transition. For this reason, the insights I develop here are not just scholarly; they have practical consequences for future university programming. By participating in this study and sharing their experiences

crossing between cultural worlds, these women are helping prepare a smoother journey for future *fronterizas* and other supporting adults.



**THE PATHWAY MADE FOR CROSSING: RYF AND MY ROLE AS TRANSLATOR  
FOR *FRONTERIZAS***

The Rock Your Future (RYF) promise program seeks to increase college accessibility for minoritized populations. A minoritized group is one that is “devalued in society” based off lowered accessibility to resources and justification of this inequality (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. 186). RYF is a new community-school partnership between Rockefeller University and a low-income elementary school, Kingstin Elementary School. The federal government defines low-income schools as those which receive Title 1 funding (<https://www2.ed.gov/programs/titleiparta/index.html>), which Kingstin does. Rockefeller is a large research university in the Midwest and is a predominantly white institution (PWI). Approximately ten percent of its students are people of color. Kingstin is located about an hour away in an ethnically diverse, midsized Midwestern city. The district in which this school is housed is less than forty percent white, while the state’s population itself is over 90 percent white. The district provides free and reduced lunch to almost 75 percent of its students. Students who complete fifth grade at this elementary schools and complete middle- and high school within Kingstin’s school district will be eligible for tuition awards at Rockefeller. They will receive between 20 to 100 percent of a tuition award, depending on the number of years they were students at the elementary school. Alexis, Lila, and Rebecca will each receive 100 percent tuition discount.

Last year, I began doing programmatic work for RYF. I wound up in this role as a graduate assistant, via a Peace Corps fellowship program. I was nervous that I’d be ineffective in this community-engaged work because I am not of the community RYF serves. I am a white woman, from an upper-middle class family. I am a fourth-generation college graduate who has

faced very little discrimination and hurdles throughout my life. I thought about trust – how would this community begin to trust me, someone holding such privileged identities?

I thought back to the work I'd done for the previous two years as a Peace Corps volunteer. This work ultimately shaped my work in RYF. During the Peace Corps, I was equipped with a vague task – to work with youth, and increase civic participation by youth in my small community. Obviously, I did not immediately achieve this goal. I didn't speak the language, and more importantly, there was not *trust* between local youth and me.

It took about a year to really feel a sense of trust emerging between community members and me. Once that existed, work options suddenly opened. I felt most rewarded by the projects that my youth group and I led – refurbishing an out-of-use library, teaching younger kids about recycling, promoting gender equality in our small community. I remember sensing that many local adults viewed our work with skepticism because where I lived, youth weren't typically viewed as being capable of civic activism. Adults doubted what 16 and 17 year olds could do, and this doubt seeped into teenagers as well. Some struggled to believe in themselves, but any time we successfully carried out a project they realized their own capacity to give back to their community. I would later observe similar discord between adults and RYF students, and a lack of mutual trust between those groups. I eventually used this experience when mentoring RYF students – when they were frustrated, distrustful, or jaded by adults, I helped remind them of their own self-efficacy and pointed to adults who *did* believe in them and who *would* support them.

A goal of the RYF assistantship I received was to build a connection between RYF, its eligible students, and their community, and I was hired for this purpose because of my Peace Corps experience. Upon my arrival, my supervisor encouraged me to spend my work hours

meeting the organization's community partners – those who worked at Kingstin and YULP (referenced in *La Trenza*), Mrs. Brand and her community organization (also referenced in *La Trenza*), and others. I figured I would know what my work should be when I stumbled upon the right group of people, because that was how I had successfully approached my Peace Corps work. One day, I met the high school juniors. Due to RYF's nascent nature, the juniors eligible for this tuition award had had limited contact with the RYF office. Mrs. Brand had been stressing about this – she knew them from 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and wanted to make sure they got to college. Remembering my Peace Corps experience, and the skill set I had working with high-school age youth, I proposed working with them. My ambiguous goal was to promote a college-going community among them.

For a few months, Mrs. Brand accompanied me to four different high schools where the 22 total eligible RYF students attended. It helped initially visiting them with Mrs. Brand, because they knew and trusted her. She vouched for me, and as a well-respected community leader, her word meant a lot. I proposed monthly “fun” gatherings around their community, and eventually YULP lent us space for weekly informal gatherings after school. I encouraged the 11<sup>th</sup> graders to come hang out there when they had time. Sometimes a handful of them showed up, and sometimes no one did. Gradually three young women emerged from this cohort and began to build a community – that included me – amongst themselves. Some combination of the four of us would get together every week over that year, and as a result we created something which this research hopes to illuminate. While our community remains loosely bound by the process of college going, something much richer lies just below that purported surface. The identities I hold are different from theirs, but there is trust between us in part because of our similarities. I'm candid about struggles I've had that they can relate to – boys, depression, anxiety, bullying, self-

esteem, peer pressure, etc. We have been creating new selves and new identities as we explore what Holland (1998) terms our “cultural worlds.” Employing portraiture methodology – a highly artistic methodology of scientific inquiry (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997) – and presenting their stories as narrative ethnographies, this research seeks to elucidate what these young women’s cultural worlds are, where they intersect, and how their individual and collective identities are shaped and being shaping by worlds.

In this way, this research is very different from existing literature about young people transitioning to college. While the scholars I cite above employed methods like interviewing (Wentworth & Peterson, 2001), focus groups (Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2011; Terenzini, et al, 1994), program assessments (Ghazzawi & Jagannathan, 2011), and surveys (Unverferth, Talbert-Johnson, & Bogard, 2012), I spent over a year with my research participants, gathering for a few hours almost every week. In addition, we communicated regularly by text in between in-person gatherings. Not all the time spent included formal “data collection,” and I detail formal amounts of data collected below; however, what I hope to illuminate is the unique relationships that emerged between the research participants and me over the course of a year. We are bound in ways that exceed research, which implies that the ethnographies I present are more intimate and detailed than existing literature. Alexis announced recently, “I swear that Katie is like my long lost sister or something ☺☺ she’s more then [sp<sup>1</sup>] a mentor ☺☺” (12/15/17). It is this type of relationship which allows for new knowledge to emerge in academia, as explicated by Campbell and Wasco (2000) who call for the researcher to create “nonhierarchical relationships between researchers and participants where both parties invest their personal identities by sharing

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<sup>1</sup> When I refer to written communication I do not alter the exact wording, spelling, or grammar the students use. I note those errors with [sp]

experiences and information” (p. 786). If they can achieve this, “The advantage of this altered dynamic is increased trust, which may enhance the quality of the data” (p. 786).

At the time of writing, Alexis, Lila, and Rebecca, are three of 12 RYF scholars who have accepted their offer of admission to the university. It is my intention with this research that we understand not just what experiences facilitated these three *fronterizas* in preparing for the transition, but that the information shared here be part of an ongoing process of support to successfully ensure their and their peers’ arrival, on the other side/*al otro lado*, as college graduates.

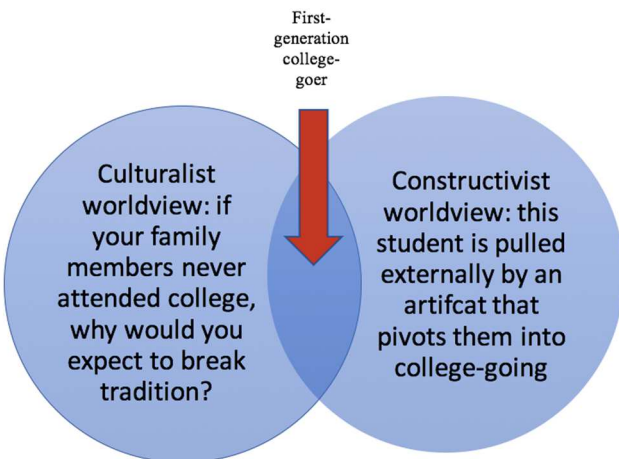
## **THE RESEARCH TERRAIN: CULTURAL WORLDS, TRANSITIONS, AND BORDERLANDS**

To understand how Alexis, Lila, and Rebecca experience the transition between cultural worlds in which they operate and their college-going world, I draw on scholarship about identity and agency in cultural worlds; first-generation college-goers' transitions between high school and college; and theories about academic borderlands. These constructs help us understand the components of cultural worlds and one's identity within them, as well as similar peers' experiences navigating the transition from high school to college worlds. That is important because it allows us to understand the complexities students – particularly those with minoritized identities – navigate, and highlights hurdles they face and resources they use in this transition.

### **Cultural Worlds**

This work is framed by Holland's theory about Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds (1998). Holland's theory of cultural worlds (1998) acknowledges the historic, essentialized anthropological division between culturalist and constructivist worldviews. According to Holland, culturalists claim people's behavior is a byproduct of their cultures; constructivists claim behavior is dictated by one's socially constructed identity. Holland aims to move beyond this binary by seeing both culture and subjectivity in someone at the same time, in that neither is a stand-alone phenomenon. People and sometimes groups exist between their histories and present discourses, and which makes self-direction possible (see Figures 2 and 3). A college-going example of this can be seen in Terenzini, et al's (1994) study of traditional versus first-generation students. In this case, traditional students exist partly in a cultural world in which they never considered *not* going to college, since their parents had. Conversely, for first-generation

students, “going to college constituted a major *disjunction* in their life course. For these students, college-going was not part of their family’s tradition or expectations” (p. 63). For these students, then, college-going cannot be seen in only the culturalist lens, in which the subject “is a bearer of ‘culture’ – historical events and conditions that have been distilled through group processes into culture and passed somehow into her mind/body” (Holland, 1998, p.14). These students exist in a world where they are “improvising” between a (cultural) tradition of *not* going to college, and constructed world in which nontraditional external factors pulled them toward college (see Figure 1). This is a point of tension – a *frontera* – as I explicate in the next section. Indeed, these improvisations are made with the use of “artifacts.” Holland writes about artifacts that serve to “pivot” people into new behaviors and other worlds. Using a cultural worlds approach to my work means asking how RYF, as an artifact, has pivoted the young women into college going.



*Figure 1, Seifert 2018 using Holland 1998*

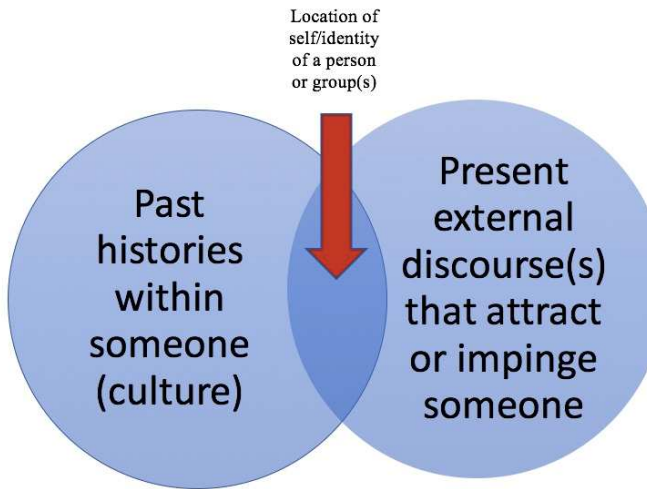


Figure 2, Seifert '18 using Holland '98 1

People exist within figured cultural “worlds” (“frames of social life,” p. 7) which are “historically contingent” and “socially enacted” (p.7). As a result, they make improvisations with the “cultural resources at hand” (p. 4). These improvisations represent people’s agency and have the possibility to change individual and cultural

practices. Figured cultural worlds are “as if” realms” (p. 49). People collectively form and are formed in these realms. They emerge when possibilities are purported. An appropriate example for this study would be, “What if a ‘promise’ was made to a historically marginalized group of students that they could attend college, tuition free?” Or, “What if that program worked to unite that population in a college-going community?”

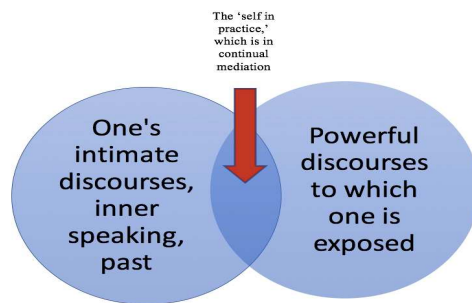


Figure 3, Seifert 2018 using Holland 1998



## **Transitioning From High School to College**

First-generation students, like the ones in this study, are more likely than traditional college goers to be female; have disabilities; and hold minoritized identities (Engle & Tinto, 2008). They face greater hurdles accessing college precisely because their parents/family members did not attend college – parents who have navigated the complex college-going process in turn help their children navigate college-going process, which is an integral resource lacking for first-generation students (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

### **Pre-matriculation challenges**

Scholars claim that families of first-generation students are less likely to support them in college-going because they don't understand college, or feel they would be better served staying closer to home. They also say that families have less financial support to offer, which may impede students from seeking postsecondary education. Additionally, students who have trouble understanding financial aid may feel apprehensive about aid and the costs of college (Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2011).

Scholars also claim that, since first-generation students are more likely to be minoritized populations from low-income families, they are more likely to go to lower-performing, lower-income high schools. As a result, the high schools are unable to adequately prepare students for the academic rigors of college (Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2011). Therefore, their reading, math, and critical thinking skills are likely to be lower (Ghazzawi & Jagannathan, 2011). Additionally, they claim that these students have “lower career ambitions” (Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2011, p. 35).

### **On-campus challenges**

When first-generation students arrive on campus, they are faced with additional transitional challenges. Forbus (2011) claims that they “lack personal skills...that could be a factor in positive academic success in college” (p. 35), and have poor study skills and lower “implied intelligence required for success in college” (p. 35).

Additionally, first-generation students are more likely to work more than traditional students, which can be detrimental to students’ academic success if they work more than 20 hours per week (Engle & Tinto, 2008). They are also more likely to have dependents to financially support. Due to this or low-income backgrounds in general, they may feel compelled to work and focus less on school (Ghazzawi & Jagannathan, 2011). They also are likely to be commuters due to financial constraints, living at home to save money, which decreases chances of success in college (Ghazzawi & Jagannathan, 2011). These factors add up, claim Ghazzawi and Jagannathan (2011), to higher stressors for these students, who they claim have poor coping mechanisms.

Students also face social challenges in this initial transition. They are hesitant to participate in extracurriculars until they feel in control of their academics, which “represents a real loss...because first-generation students actually derive more benefit from their involvement in such activities than their peers” (Engle & Tinto, 2008, p. 21). Additionally, these students face greater senses of isolation on campus due to outsider status as both first-generation and minoritized populations who may face discrimination and feel unsupported by staff and peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

A final on-campus challenge students may face is what Tate (2013) refers to as “survivor guilt” which is “excessive worry about being in a better position than others, particularly parents

and peers” (p. 80). This is especially problematic for first-generation students because it is accompanied by “feelings of guilt, ambivalence, anxiety, and depression [which] are frequently subconscious and can be debilitating if not recognized and addressed” (p. 82). Rendón echoes this idea, describing students’ “losses” and reorganizing of relationships with both family members and friends from home, as students develop new identities as college-goers.

### **Towards an asset-based perspective**

While it is important to understand struggles first generation students face, it seems that many scholars approach this population from a deficit-based stance, as echoed by Oikonomidou (2015) above. Indeed, there are many strengths scholars could also focus on, including these students’ adept ability at cultivating social networks as resources, utilizing formal mentors to assist in the transition to college, and relying on informal supporters during college (Oikonomidou, 2015). Oikonomidou also noted these students’ ability to boundary-cross on campus: “[S]ometimes prompted by their mentors, [they] engaged in active reconsideration of boundaries that existed on campus life and devised techniques to individually break through them and engage in cross-cultural interactions” (p. 124).

Perhaps because she is one of these skilled boundary-breakers herself, Rendón (1996) also takes an anti-deficit approach toward this population. She views these students as resilient, due to the myriad hurdles they had to overcome to access college. She describes the boundary-crossing and identity-reshaping they must do, impressed at their ability to find comfort in the new college culture. She marvels at their “biculturalism” at being able to move between and navigate different cultural worlds (p. 19), and unlike Engle and Tinto (2008, above), she places onus on the institution to reach out to these students. While Engle and Tinto see a “real loss” (p. 21) in these students not getting involved, Rendón argues, “I fear that many student affairs

administrators believe that all students are responsible for getting involved. In reality, it is mainly traditional students who can get involved on their own. Nontraditional students require active reach-out to facilitate their involvement- they expect someone to reach out to them, as opposed to them reaching out to the institution” (p. 20).

### **The Academic Borderland**

Rendón (1996) is a self-described academic *fronteriza*. She writes, “The passage from high school to my home town community college represented a dramatically different life journey that ultimately redefined my family history. But like all of life's passages, my growth came together with loss. As I reflect back on my transitions, I think of the struggles, tensions, and traumas that made the passage at times so difficult to navigate” (p. 15).

Rendón is framing the academic border in which she, and other nontraditional students exist, by Anzaldua’s (2007) borderland theory. It is an appropriate frame because Anzaldua writes about borderlands – *fronteras* – as uncomfortable spaces in which one exists. They are spaces where cultures intersect, and spaces in which people holding different identities – like race or class – exist. This fits nicely with Holland’s theory of identity in cultural worlds, because “Positions marked by these enduring divisions [race, class, gender, etc.], and their expectations of privilege (or not), are features of the worlds we describe...and [are] figured differently in terms of the symbolic capitals particular to each world” (Holland, 2008, p. 271-272).

Indeed, as mentioned above, the academic borderland for minoritized, first-generation students can be a challenging and uncomfortable space – a cultural world – to navigate. Rendón recognizes this discomfort, and refreshingly lauds those who do navigate it, like the *fronterizas* of this study: “A *fronteriza* is a time traveler with mental agility to maneuver environmental

switching. A *fronteriza* negotiates her existence differently from those who are immersed in only one world” (p. 14).

This research seeks to identify my participants’ figured cultural worlds related to college going. I must define their practices and dynamic identities as they relate to these worlds. In so doing, I attempt to “paint pictures” of their past histories, cultures, and intimate discourses, as well as present, external powerful discourses. I must also show how their present identities are mediations between both the socially constructed and embodied self (Holland, 1998). In essence, I am identifying the *fronteras* the women cross to access college, and the identities they have in those *fronteras*, as related to others via their positionalities. And, I ask how they navigate those *fronteras*, so that I may abandon a deficit-based approach and instead (like Rendón) focus on their assets – their “high aspirations. [They] are blessed with resilience and initiative. They have survived living in environments removed from academics...and [have] turned negative experiences into positive ones” (p. 16).

## PAINTING PICTURES WITH WORDS: PORTRAITURE AND NARRATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY

For this study I employed portraiture methodology, a highly qualitative method of gathering data and presenting research. It shares values of phenomenology and ethnographies, but is unique in that it pushes past tradition by combining art and science. It seeks to be authentic rather than reliable, and uses the researcher's "self" as the primary research instrument. One of its main tenants is to speak to audiences broader than the academy, in its goal of being transformative (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

This is why, then, I chose to present *La Trenza* as a narrative ethnography. In so doing, I was able to write in a way not traditionally "academic," in hopes that young people, community members, and practitioners would be able to more easily access these stories. Narrative inquiry

moves away from a singular, monolithic conception of social science toward a pluralism that promotes multiple forms of representation and research; away from facts and toward meanings; away from master narratives and toward local stories; away from idolizing categorical thought and abstracted theory and toward embracing the values of irony, emotionality, and activism; away from assuming the stance of the disinterested spectator and toward assuming the posture of a feeling, embodied, and vulnerable observer; away from writing essays and toward telling stories... The appeal to social analysis... is one useful strategy for making sense of life's ambiguities and uncertainties, but it shouldn't be privileged over other ways of interpreting life's meanings. (Bochner, 2001, pp. 134-135)

The stories I share are not untrue, although I have adjusted some of the details to maintain my participants' privacy. All names used in the story, of both people and places, are pseudonyms that my participants selected. I also refer to myself in the story as "Miriam." Throughout the story, I cite my data to mark when and in what form I received it.

Portraiture is the most appropriate methodology to use for this study for various reasons. First, the study focuses intimately on young women of minoritized backgrounds, and the portraits I create of them are for them. They, and their communities, are the "broader audiences

beyond the academy” (p. 14) that I strive to reach. Next, my research question seeks to understand cultural worlds, which hearkens exactly to portraiture’s goal of “interpreting the perspectives and experiences of the people and the cultures being studied” (p. 14). Portraiture places heavy importance on context, because “human experience has meaning in a particular social, cultural, and historical context” (p. 43) which aligns with the cultural worlds theory I employ. Also, portraiture is based in boundary crossing (p. 37) in that it crosses boundaries of art and science, which relates to boundary crossing by the young women. Using this methodology allows me to focus specifically on this point of transition, in that portraiture itself focuses specifically on the point where art and science transition. Lastly, one of the most important reasons for using portraiture is because my research strives to be transformative and anti-oppressive, which is a goal of portraiture as well. It aims to “challenge the tyranny of the academy” (p. 7) and asks researchers to find the “goodness” in participants. While these women are self-aware and confident, I hope to show them portraits of their goodness that should be illuminating and even transformative (p. 35).

Using portraiture allowed me to employ naturalistic conversation and data collection. Naturalistic inquiry is “studying people in everyday circumstances by ordinary means” (Beuving & de Vries, 2015, p. 15). It is a direct challenge to other forms of research methods common today, like internet surveys, transforming stories into “data”, and publishing in hard-to-access academic journals (Beuving & de Vries, 2015).

### **Naturalistic and Relational Inquiry Method**

My programmatic role with RYF began four months prior to data collection. During that time, three young women naturally emerged as students who were most interested in

participating in programming. I asked if they would be interested in participating in research with me, and they agreed. Hence, I employed emergent sampling (Patton, 2002). The small participant size is appropriate in that this is a micro-study of the lives of a specific population, and while I do not claim that these findings are generalizable, they do help illuminate in intimate detail macro-level realities of similar populations.

During the initial pre-data collecting programmatic months, the participants and I developed close interpersonal relationships. This ultimately bound the study as one of young women, because as a female researcher, close relationships with high school boys would not be appropriate, nor feasible. I would not be able to obtain as detailed information were they boys, and due to long-term programmatic interest and engagement of the women, I was able to use our existing relationships to gain authentic and in-depth information from them.

While I did not initially approach this research with feminist theory as a framework, I ultimately came to understand that feminist theory was inherent in my relational method. “The overarching goal of feminist research is to capture women’s lived experiences in a respectful manner that legitimates women’s voices as sources of knowledge,” explain Campbell and Wasco (2000, p. 783), and indeed, this research seeks to do exactly that. Feminist scholars recognize dominant voices in science which are generally white and male, which silences the voices of minoritized groups. In fact, traditional research often avoids explicitly sharing stories, especially those of minoritized people, as it values hard “data” over lived experiences. This type of research does not acknowledge what feminist scholars know – that the world is comprised of “endless stories or texts, many of which serve to sustain the status quo of power and oppression” (Campbell and Wasco, 2002, p.782). In centering the voices of three young women from



minoritized backgrounds – highlighting their different voices and at times direct quotes – I have come to realize that I was engaged in feminist research all along.

### **Data collection**

Much of my data comes from the 63 pages of detailed analytic memos that I wrote from June through October 2017. Analytic memos are “researcher journal entries or blogs” which allows us to “document and reflect on...how the process of inquiry is taking shape; and the emergent patterns, categories and subcategories, themes, and concepts” in the data (Saldaña, 2009, p. 32).

I gathered almost weekly with participants between July 2017 and May 2018, and recorded those gatherings between July and December 2017. I also wrote and recorded my own personal field notes which helped shape my analytic memos. Ultimately, I had over twenty hours of recorded gatherings, in which naturalistic conversation emerged. Using detailed analytic memoing, I documented those gatherings by listening to each recording and reading my field notes, pulling salient quotes and transcribing those, and detailing what had happened at each gathering.

In addition, I have over 190 pages of personal texts between participants and me. There are also more than 274 pages of Facebook messages that the four of us exchanged, together and separately (i.e. as a group or one participant with me).

Table 1: Timeline for the inquiry

<b>General RYF Timeline</b>	<b>1<sup>ST</sup> RYF Cohort Timeline</b>
September 2012: President of Rockefeller announces the initiative	
January 2013: President reinforces commitment at Kingstin Elementary School	January 2013: 8 <sup>th</sup> graders at Kingstin first learn of their eligibility for RYF
January 2015: Kingstin's school district and Rockefeller sign a Memorandum of Agreement	
May 2015: The inaugural cohort of 5 <sup>th</sup> -graders is officially enrolled.	
June 2015: RYF Program Assistant is hired	
September 2015: First Community Alliance meeting	
February 2016: Kingstin teacher liaison teams plan for enrollment of second 5 <sup>th</sup> -grade cohort and for yearly grade-level artifact and portfolio activity	
	March 2016: Secondary counselors inform current 10 <sup>th</sup> -graders (aka 8 <sup>th</sup> -graders enrolled at Kingstin at the time of the initiative's announcement) of their eligibility
April 2016: On-campus visits are made by 5 <sup>th</sup> -graders. Focus groups are held at Kingstin with teacher leader teams	April 2016: Handbook distributed & meetings are held to further inform 10 <sup>th</sup> -graders
May 2016: Fifth graders are enrolled and surveyed. Parent surveys are conducted with fifth grade families	
June 2016: Second 5 <sup>th</sup> -grade cohort is promoted.	
August 2016: Peace Corps grad assistant (me) begins work	

Table 1. (continued)

<p>September 2016:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The RYF Volunteer Program is established and Rockefeller students start volunteering Kingstin.</li> <li>• Updated professional development and leadership work began with Kingstin teachers.</li> <li>• A video series is developed about multicultural education for pre-service teachers placed at Kingstin.</li> </ul>	<p>September 2016: A cross-unit meeting held to begin planning for recruitment and retention of the 11<sup>th</sup>-grade cohort</p>
	<p>November 2016: I met three of the eligible 22 RYF students for the first time at a RYF event. Proposed to Mrs. Brand that she assist me in establishing contact with all of the students</p>
<p>January 2017: First RYF mini-conference held at Rockefeller</p>	
	<p>February –March 2017: Coordinated in-school visits at each of the four high schools the students attended. Made face-to-face contact with 20 of the 22 eligible students and proposed informal monthly/weekly gatherings</p>
	<p>March 2017: First informal “fun” monthly gathering at Mrs. Brand’s community organization</p>
	<p>March-May 2017: Using YULP’s space, I invited any of the 22 to informally gather with me once a week. During this time, Alexis, Lila and Rebecca emerged as the most interested participants</p>
	<p>June 2017: Officially began data collection</p>
	<p>July 2017: Overnight campus visit to RYF</p>
	<p>August 2017: Resumed weekly gatherings with research participants and began recording all gatherings</p>
<p>October 2017: Second group of undergraduate volunteers begins work in Kingstin classrooms</p>	<p>October 2017: “Application Night” is hosted by Rockefeller for 12<sup>th</sup> grade RYF students needing assistance with FAFSA or applications to Rockefeller</p>

*Table 1. (continued)*

November 2017: Tuition award letters are sent to all 6-9 <sup>th</sup> grade RYF students	
	August –December 2017: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continued collecting weekly data and gathering monthly with larger group for “fun” activities</li> <li>• Lila, Alexis, and Rebecca create a mentoring group for 3<sup>rd</sup> grade girls at Kingstin</li> </ul>
January 2018: Second RYF mini-conference at Rockefeller	January 2018: Alexis and Rebecca come speak at mini-conference about their experience with RYF
	Spring 2018: Continue weekly 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade girls mentoring group
	May 2018: RYF 12 <sup>th</sup> graders graduate high school

### **Data analysis**

After each weekly meeting, I wrote detailed analytic memos (Saldana, 2009) about our meetings while listening to the recordings and pulling quotes from them. I did not transcribe all recordings but instead pulled salient quotes from each and transcribed individual quotes into memos. I also organized all written messages exchanged between meetings. After data collection ended, I qualitatively coded all memos and written conversations (including Facebook messages and text messages). I used thematic coding (Saldana, 2009) to pull themes related to identity, high school, college, transitions, and world(s) in which the women operate, etc. I organized these based on which emerged most frequently and focused on analyzing themes that arose most commonly, while still noting the lesser themes. This was an appropriate method to use because thematic coding allowed me to look for explicit and implicit cultural worlds shared by participants in the data. And, it was appropriate for portraiture because it ensures the scientific validity of the research, which is an important tenant of this methodology (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997).

### **Trustworthiness and quality**

To ensure trustworthiness, I was engaged for prolonged periods of time and persistently observant (Glesne, 2016). I continuously reflected on my own bias (Glesne, 2016), which is also an integral aspect of portraiture. I member checked with the participants and included rich, thick description (Glesne, 2016) which is also required of portraiture. This member checking included numerous check-ins with participants in which I shared the writing I'd done thus far and asked for open-ended feedback.

Continuous reflexivity and awareness of my positionality and privilege was paramount to this research. I was positioned within the research and findings as required by portraiture: “The element of self [of the researcher] is at play in all parts of the implementation of the methodology – forging relationships, determining context, searching for coherence, defining expression, and balancing a unified representation” (p.35). Indeed, the researcher shifts “from being the one defining and controlling the experimental conditions to being the one learning to navigate new territory” while the participants are the “guides... authorities... [and] knowledge bearers” (p. 43). My salient identities important to remember included being a woman (especially due to the intimacy the participants and I share as a result of womanhood); my age (the participants view me as young, but still an “authority figure”); the power I hold as the adult and researcher; my whiteness (the majority of my participants are women of color); and, my status as mid-SES (since all participants identify as low-SES). This was relevant for my research because the researcher is the primary research instrument in portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997) and I am positioned in the final product – i.e. I am not a silent, observing voice but rather an active co-constructor of knowledge alongside these participants. I also highlight in this writing that I have built close relationships with the participants, which readers may consider a

“limitation” of the study, in that it is possible I have developed biases and thus can’t “see” my participants as “clearly” as a more objective researcher could.

Ethical considerations included ensuring that my participants remained deidentifiable as they shared private and personal information with me. I have done this by providing pseudonyms for each of the participants and all the locations, which they elected. It was also important that I continue working with them programmatically even after data collection was complete, so that they did not feel that I entered their community, took something from them, and left. I hope this writing highlights that the knowledge disseminated here was co-constructed with the participants, as I am indeed continually learning from them.

**TEXTURING *LA TRENZA*:****THEMATIC ANALYSIS**

As I read and reread the data, I looked for topics that arose repeatedly, especially those that all three women shared. I then grouped the topics that arose most frequently into themes, some of which contradict themselves. I include these themes to help shape the portraits of the young women – connections to these can be found in *La Trenza* and are annotated as such to assist the reader in making connections between the “science” of the research inquiry and the “art” of the narrative ethnography.

**a) Diffidence:**

The women share common insecurities. They express concerns about their appearances, sometimes referring to themselves (although not one another) as “ugly” or “fat.” They express fear of not fitting in places, be it presently or in college. They often consider themselves “awkward” and express that they don’t have many friends. They question their own intelligence, and consider themselves “smart” in some fields but not others, or consider others “smarter” than they are, or do not feel smart at all. Such feelings are not uncommon for young women – Brown and Gilligan (1993) document ways in which girls, transitioning from childhood to adolescence, express or silence feelings about themselves and their relationships with others. They claim that such feelings and behaviors – as well as acts of resistance – emerge, in part, because girls are learning to grapple with being oppressed in a patriarchal society.

The young women also experience feelings of guilt, sometimes because they receive the tuition award while others (friends, family members, peers) do not. They also struggle with jealousy – they feel that others may be jealous of them, their tuition award, and/or their

successes, and also express jealousy of others – people with more money, stable families, people they think are “smarter” than they are, and people who don’t seem to have to work to be successful. These feelings are highlighted in *La Trenza* in myriad ways. One example is when Rebecca expresses conflicting feelings of gratitude and guilt at receiving the tuition award. She is excited to “get out” but feels guilty that her older sisters didn’t have the same opportunity. This hearkens to Tate’s discussion (2013) of “survivor guilt,” when first-generation college-goers worry about family members and peers who are left behind.

b) Self-efficacy:

On the other hand, each woman expresses self-efficacy in various areas. They are proud of themselves for their academic successes and for the obstacles they’ve overcome, which echoes Terenzini’s (1994) findings that first-generation college-goers used internal strength to succeed in the transition from high school to college, and ultimately felt great pride at the successes they’d achieved in this transition. The young women also demonstrate academic perseverance despite feeling that some around them (peers, family members) do not care about academic success. They feel that their success makes them anomalies, within their families and communities. We see this expressed in *La Trenza* with both Alexis and Lila, who talk about how those around them – Alexis’s peers and friends, and Lila’s sisters – don’t place importance on academics, and yet both young women continue to persevere despite this messaging. Rendón (1996) found perseverance to be prevalent as well in similar populations, in her discussions of resilience, initiative, and high aspirations. The young women are proud of their engagement in their schools and community, particularly of the volunteering and mentoring they do. This is also



highlighted in *La Trenza* when each of the three women talk about how important their mentoring group is to them and discuss reasons for creating the mentoring group.

c) Family:

Family is very important to each woman. All strive to succeed in college and beyond in part to be able to provide their families better lives. All are first generation college-goers, and as such may feel that their families do not understand how important education is, or that they can't comprehend the struggles they've faced to succeed academically. All feel protective of their families and at times they feel a discord between taking care of themselves and being close with their families. All have fears around "leaving" their families to go to college. We see this in *La Trenza* when Alexis shares her fears about leaving her mom behind, who she worries might get sick or taken advantage of by drug users. Both concerns and supports related to family are echoed in the literature about first generation college-goers. For example, Rendón (1996) shares her own experience as a first-generation college-goer, and when she was planning to leave for college her mother begged her to stay and got ill when she left. But, families are also crucial supports, as Terenzini (1994) acknowledges. He found, similar to this study, that "The sense of debt to parents for their support was greater" for these students (p. 65) and writes about families as being both assets and liabilities. These conflicting roles echo the complex relationships Rebecca, Lila, and Alexis have with their families.

d) Marginalization:

Each woman holds minoritized identities and they frequently reflect about these identities. They reflect on the racism and sexism they experience, and how being "poor" affects

them. The election of Trump was hard for all of them. They face unique challenges: Lila is white, in a multi-racial family. She experiences sexism and identifies as poor but feels that people of color have it worse than her. Rebecca stresses about deportation of undocumented family members, and Alexis identifies as black but her entire family is white. They all have qualms about attending a PWI. Interestingly, the data suggests that the women and I increased our critical consciousness as we worked together.

Most first-generation college-goers hold minoritized identities, especially as people of color and/or women (Engle & Tinto, 2008). It is not uncommon for people of color to have qualms about attending PWIs; they experience feeling less faculty support and more discrimination on campus (Engle & Tinto, 2008). And, low-income students face the added challenge of needing to work more than mid-SES students to support themselves, which can also hinder academic success once on campus (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Like this study, Oikonomidou (2015) found that similar students use effective and complex strategies to navigate the boundaries they face as minoritized people, although she found that once some boundaries had been navigated others emerged, which is evident in *La Trenza* as well. For example, the women initially haven't put much thought into attending a PWI, but once they have contact with undergraduate students of color on campus, they become hyper-aware of their status as outsiders on campus. This is especially true for Rebecca, a Latina, as echoed by Oikonomidou's recent findings, from 2015, who noted that Latino students viewed xenophobic sentiments as "direct threats" (p. 121). Again, these are added stressors compounding the challenges these young women face in academic success.

## e) Hardships:

The words “busy” and “bullying” emerged frequently in the data. The women constantly feel busy and exhausted by both school and work. They also mention “anxiety” and “stress” frequently. Some struggle with mental illness, which they feel affects their day-to-day lives and their ability to function. They talk about “trauma” and “abuse” which they’ve experienced in their lives. All have lived around adults struggling with smoking, drugs and/or alcoholism, as highlighted by Alexis’s story about her mother’s former drug addiction and drug selling. This is not unusual for this population, as Tate (2013) found. In fact, he explains, it is these students’ history with trauma and/or drug-addicted family members and peers that feeds into their “survivor guilt” once they access college, because the first-generation college-goer then asks herself why she should succeed when others “failed.”

Interestingly, when asked to reflect on hardships they face, all three women are hard-pressed to list any, because they feel they have overcome many of these struggles, and also feel lucky and supported by their families and community at present.

## f) Negative peer behavior:

The women reflect on others – and at times themselves – who “party,” drink, do drugs, and have sex. They are not engaging in that behavior at present, either for lack of opportunity/desire, or because they made a conscious decision to abandon those behaviors in order to achieve ambitions. We see this in *La Trenza* with both Lila and Rebecca who question why people their age drink and feel glad they’re not put in those situations. Terenzini, et al (1994), noted similar situations in their interviews of first-generation students. They found that

When a student knew high school friends who were also new students (or friends or siblings already enrolled) at the same institution, these precollege friends functioned during the early weeks or months of college as a bridge from one academic and interpersonal environment to the next. Such earlier acquaintances provided (and may themselves have received) important support during the transition. (p.64-65)

Indeed, we see this to be true in the data when Lila expresses gratitude that we gather weekly with the RYF girls because she feels it's good to be around peers who are also preparing to go to college (8/28/17). However, Terenzini (1994) also found that high school friends could be "liabilities," citing students who talk about their friends who "party" and try to distract the college-goer from academic success.

g) Moments and spaces:

There are particular events in the women's lives that emerge frequently in the data as being pivotal moments. Those include the announcement in 8<sup>th</sup> grade that they would receive the tuition award, the beginning of our gatherings last year, leaving YULP, and the overnight campus visit they had at Rockefeller (all highlighted in *La Trenza*). They also individually talk about certain events that shaped them, such as the death of a grandparent, a sister's pregnancy, or moving out of home.

There are also certain spaces that are very important in the women's lives. Those include Kingstin, YULP, and their neighborhood. Lila refers to her home (where she doesn't live) as "that" house throughout the data. Also, many of the most intimate conversations the women and I shared were while driving, so cars are also salient spaces.

The concept of specific spaces and events being important markers in the women's lives hearkens to Holland's (1998) concept of "artifacts" that serve to "pivot" a person or group into new action, or perhaps into a new cultural world. For example, when YULP fell apart (as detailed in *La Trenza*), Lila and Rebecca found themselves without that programming and safe space each week. But, shortly thereafter we met and began gathering weekly. Perhaps the YULP drama served as an artifact that pivoted those women into forming a new group, with new (college-centered) programming with which they could engage weekly, instead.

## COLLEGE-GOING AND CULTURAL WORLDING

Having identified and explicated shared themes in the lives of all three women, I now answer the initial research questions using that thematic analysis: (a) What are the identities, relationships, and resources that construe their participation in this world? (b) What are other worlds in which they participate? (c) What are the effective border-crossing strategies they use to transition from other worlds into the college-going world?

### **Identities**

Identities, according to Holland (1998) are the positions people (or groups) have within a cultural world. They are not static and are always changing as one becomes more experienced within a world, and different people place different “salience” (p. 115) on the world in which they navigate. Identities have four key contexts: first, they are “practiced” within a figured world (p. 271) in which (as explicated above) a person acts according to both culture (past histories) and social contexts (external relations). This allows us to place ourselves “in degrees of relation to – affiliation with, opposition to, and distance from” others (p. 271).

The second context of identity is positionality – the social position one holds, compared to others. Positionality is shaped by factors including race, gender, socioeconomic status. It is important to note each woman’s intersectionality (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012) in discussing their positionality. Intersectionality highlights “the reality that we simultaneously occupy both oppressed and privileged positions and that these positions intersect in complex ways” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012, p. 115). Intersectionality helps explain the position of these women – for example, as a mid-SES white woman I am oppressed as a woman, but not as a person of color or a person from poverty, whereas Alexis is oppressed as a black person, as a woman, and as person

from poverty. Intersectionality is a crucial component of identity, and in this case it allows us to see the women's micro-level challenges as systemic macro-level issues (explicated below). It also alerts us to the very complexity of identity as it relates to college-going.

Holland's third context of identity is the "space of authoring" (p. 272) in which improvisations are made, based on tools at hand and external discourses that attract or impinge someone. And, the fourth context is "making worlds" (p. 272) in which someone/a group creates new worlds – for example, when a minoritized person who never anticipated attending college decides to attend college, they are creating a new world for themselves and similar peers of college-going.

- Alexis is a key figure in the college-going world we've created. She was the first student to reach out to me and offer to assist in planning events with the other RYF group members. She has strong relationships with many of the members and can be counted on as a leader in the group, since many of the students like and respect her. She can be intimidating as well as protective of others which ensures her status as a leader. When we work with our mentoring group, she is viewed by the kids as the cool, fun one. She is hyper-aware of what's happening and isn't afraid to correct problematic behaviors, but generally jokes around with the kids. She is almost always the one to take charge in planning what we do at mentor group. Alexis is positioned as the most minoritized of the three women because she is African-American, is the only of the three to actually live in the neighborhood, and attends what she (and others) consider to be the "worst" and "most ghetto" high school.

- Lila hasn't had much contact with the RYF cohort aside from the few (like Rebecca) who were involved in YULP. When we first began meeting, she seemed intimidated by Alexis, who admittedly didn't like her at the time. As our meetings became more regular, they developed something akin to a friendship. Lila is the only white student in the cohort and as such feels like an outsider. In addition, she's the only RYF student who attends Waterbridge. Her white identity makes her question whether she "deserves" the tuition award. She does not get along with many of the male RYF students as she has felt bullied by them since childhood. She generally participates in the suggestions that Alexis and Rebecca make but generally doesn't go out of her way to plan and implement programming. At mentor group, she admittedly assumes a more child-like role and tries to act on the kids' level, and often seems to blend into the group of kids. Lila has the most privilege of the three women because she is white, she lives in an affluent part of town, and attends what is considered to be the "best" high school.
- Rebecca is very introverted and as a child used to cry a lot. As such, the RYF students seem to feel protective of her, especially Alexis. Rebecca admits she feels protective of Lila, especially when they are around the RYF boys. While she may be shy, she does not hesitate to stand up to them or other bullies. Since she does not live in the same neighborhood as the other RYF students, she rarely sees them. She enjoys gathering with Alexis and Lila frequently, because as an isolated introvert she doesn't feel close to many people aside from her family, and she even feels different than her extended family, including her cousin who is in her RYF cohort. While she feels diffident at times for being different and "sheltered," she is confident in her community outreach abilities and has a strong moral compass. When we work with our mentor group girls, Rebecca is the



voice of reason, much more than even I. She is strict and stern when no one else is, and makes sure rules we've implemented are followed. She shines as extremely mature in these moments. Rebecca is minoritized less than Alexis but more than Lila. She lives in a "good" part of town and attends a high school considered by others to be "ghetto" but not as bad as Alexis's school.

### **Relationships**

All of the young women are especially adept at forging and taking advantage of relationships with people who could be helpful to them as mentors and role models. All three talk about various adults in their lives who "mentor" them – I am one of them. Alexis also has other adult mentors, such as women at her internship and former teachers. She doesn't hesitate to text us to ask for advice or share her struggles. She also has strong relationships with school personnel, like teachers, coaches, and her principal, who all encourage her to be her best. Lila and Rebecca maintain strong mentorship relationships with YULP leaders, especially Rebecca who is very close with Ms. Garcia and regularly calls and spends time with her. These adults are important in their college-going world because it ensures a strong support system of adults on whom they can lean when others, like peers or siblings, are not serving as exemplary role models (for example, they skip class or don't pay attention, continue to use drugs and drink, or party, lack educational ambition, or are teen parents). Lila also has strong relationships with the parents of the friend with whom she lives, and they are great supports of her academic ambition, as they both attended college and can help her with that transition, and they provide a quiet home where Lila and their daughter can focus on their studies.

Family is also crucial in this college going world, although it is complicated by various factors. All three women will be first-generation college students, which means that while their families are very supportive of them attending college, they may lack all the knowledge and resources about college-going that is helpful in the transition between high school and college. Alexis has extended family who assist her financially with certain college-related costs, and her mom is proud of her academic achievements and is already preparing to send her daughter to Rockefeller; however, this is complicated by the fears Alexis has about leaving her mom “behind” and alone (referenced in the story). Lila has older siblings who are teen parents, who have always told her that school isn’t “cool” and have teased her for caring about academics, while her mom and grandparents have relied on her to continue doing well because she is the “good kid” of the family. Rebecca’s parents are adamant that she do well academically, but she faces similar pressure as Lila because she has an older sibling who flunked out of Rockefeller and they place a lot of pressure on Rebecca to do well. They are very protective because of this desire, which translates to a fear she has of being “free” at college. She is also afraid to leave her parents behind because of concerns about documentation and deportation.

## **Resources**

RYF itself has been a central resource in the college-going world that the women and I created. They would have existed in a college-going world had I never contacted them, but it would have looked different. Previous to our initial contact, resources the women had included their schools and YULP. YULP worked with the young women – including Lila and Rebecca – to promote college-going, by providing them a scholarship fund from a young age. However, the women’s involvement with YULP ended at the same time they needed to start seriously thinking

about college preparation, which was shortly before I met them. As a RYF representative, I was able to coach them through Rockefeller admissions requirements, along with the support of an Admissions representative from Rockefeller. During this time, their high schools held after-school ACT prep, and the entire district set aside one day when every 11<sup>th</sup> grader took the ACT during school hours. Mrs. Brand also proved to be an invaluable resource during this time, as she supported me in contacting the students and offered the space of her community organization for us to gather (YULP also supported us with space). RYF and the Admissions department ensured that the students got to visit the campus after their junior year, and the Admissions department coached them through the application process. Community members sent me scholarship opportunities which I passed on to the students, and the young women – Alexis and Rebecca in particular – asked me to edit scholarship essays and serve as a recommendation. Rockefeller itself made RYF possible, as it was tasked with finding the funding for the students' tuition, and so every resource that went into the creation of RYF ultimately helped construe the students' participation in our college-going world. In addition, the support of families and other adults were instrumental resources, as were the young women for each other. In fact, our weekly meetings and mentoring group have been a resource, because as Lila explained, "Having this space where people actually wanna go to college and they know what it can do for them is pretty great" (8/28/17). Lastly, the women are themselves perhaps their own greatest resource because their tenacity, dedication, and perseverance have ensured they succeed.

### **Resilience in the Face of Oppression** (see Figure 4, below)

As mentioned above, each young woman holds a marginalized identity. Per Holland's (1998) theory, these identities represent past histories and cultural discourses that have shaped

the women's internal discourses. There have been moments when each have been made to feel that they are undeserving and/or do not belong. Lila, a white woman who grew up poor, often feels that she does not fit in with her wealthier peers. She expresses jealousy at their seemingly easy, uncomplicated lifestyles. She also has a long history of being mistreated by men; for example, the YULP male students have treated her unkindly for as long as she can remember. Rebecca recalls the first time she realized she was being discriminated against (detailed in the story). She also expresses living with stress and fear because her parents taught her from a young age not to trust people like police, because they could face deportation. Alexis faces racist media daily, and even experiences racism within her family; for example, her white mother "told me that white people was here first In America And that black people are racist" (text, 11/1/17). An obvious example of oppression they all faced is detailed in the story, when their elementary school principal told them all that they would never be successful high school graduates.

Additionally, all three young women are attracted by an external discourse which motivates them to action. This discourse tells them that if they succeed academically and obtain college education, they will "get out" and be able to provide better lives for themselves and their families. They hear this message from encouraging school personnel, from mentors like YULP staff, and from their families.

Their identities, then, are found where these intersect. They participate in a cultural world of resilience, in which they continue to feel and face oppression, and also are moved to action by a desire to succeed. At times, the fact of oppression serves to make the young women more resilient. For example, when Alexis's male peers tell her she's stupid, she is more motivated to show them that she can succeed (10/27/17). Rebecca uses her experience being discriminated

against to shape the art she creates, and dreams of a career in which she teaches others about the beauty and value of diversity (9/18/17).

Another facet of the world of resilience is one of mental illness (referenced above, under themes – (e) Hardships). Lila and Alexis admit to struggling with anxiety and depression, and people in their lives also struggle with mental illness – in Alexis’s senior year, two people she is close with tried taking their own lives. However, this also serves to propel them forward, as evidenced by Alexis writing: “I’ve attempted to commit suicide and have self-harmed, but the last few years have been much better partly because I know I am going to college. This gives me the motivation to further my life. My depression is ongoing but has never stopped me from achieving my goals, neither has my finical [sp] struggle. These obstacles make me the strong woman I am today” (11/28/17).

These experiences echo what scholars have found regarding feelings of stress and otherness that minoritized, first-generation students face. However, these women actually use these stressors and discrimination as a tool, which echoes what Rendón observed but not what others – like Unverferth et al (2012) claimed when they suggested this population has poor coping mechanisms for the high stress they face.

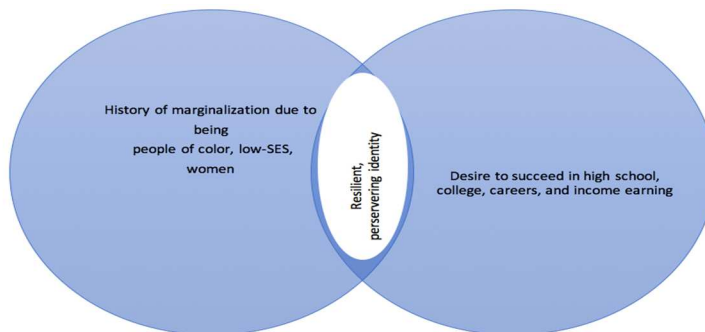


Figure 4 -- Seifert 2018

**Young Adulthood** (see Figure 5, below)

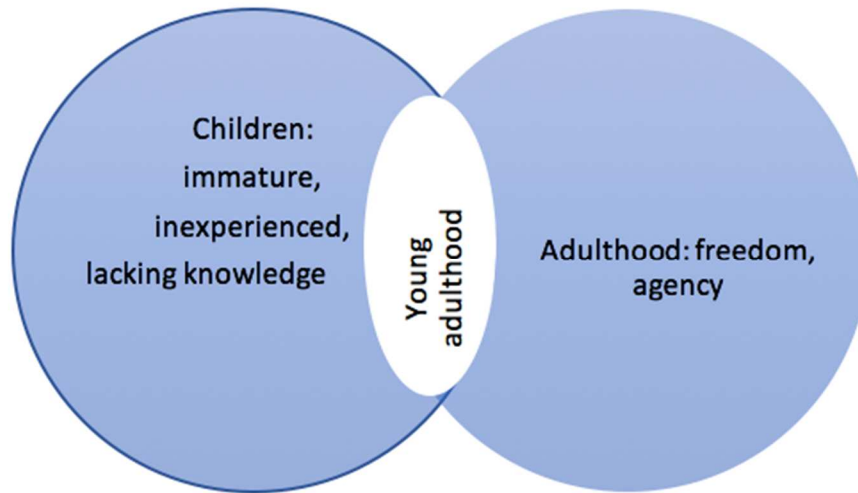
Another cultural world in which the young women participate involves entering young adulthood. In this world, they are constantly toggling between their historic and cultural roles as “children.” Some adults or older peers treat them as less-than due to being young, while others, like Ms. Garcia and other mentors, encourage them to practice self-efficacy. These internal histories are complicated given that each of the women often take on the role of responsibility for their families. Lila, for example, says that “You would expect my sisters to take on the older sister role but I have to be the older sister all the time” (8/15/17). All of the young women disdain adults who have talked down to them. Rebecca and Lila experienced this when problems with YULP emerged. Lila says that “adults weren’t being appropriate...Like abusing power.” She explains that one of the youth tried sticking up for herself “but she didn’t have any power...they blatantly called us children...They were just like manipulating us” (9/11/17). The two women talk about this incident as a life lesson, “one of the hard ones I learned” (Rebecca). Lila writes, “Maturity comes with the ability to make mistakes, not simply age[.] And accept them...Adults can be children - they don’t always necessarily know more than those younger than them” (2/15/18, FB).

On the other hand, the present, external discourse (Holland, 1998) which mitigates their behavior in this world is that of adulthood. Again, this is complicated because the women have historically been wary of many adults. Rebecca expressed fear of freedom upon leaving home to attend college (7/26/17) but simultaneously appreciates being treated as an adult – for example, she feels closer to her mother “‘cause she trusts us more” but is very irritated that her dad is “overprotective...He doesn’t trust us” (9/25/17).

An additional tug in this cultural world is one in which the young women simultaneously bemoan that time is passing by so quickly, and feel sad when reminded that they'll be graduating soon, while also expressing their desire to be done with high school already. They are eager to be at college, and sometimes say they "hate" school and can't wait for it to be over, but also have nostalgia about both the present moment and previous school years.

They navigate this cultural world of young adulthood, then, in various ways. They are at once very mature and responsible, in that all are the protectors of their families. They also revert to immaturity from time to time; for example, Lila admittedly acts like a child when she's around the 3<sup>rd</sup> graders she mentors. Both Rebecca and Lila ponder their status as "good" girls, who don't party, drink, do drugs, or have sex. Lila spends a lot of time thinking about boys and relationships but refuses to engage in physical intimacy with them, and thinks that people who have sex at a young age (like her sisters), or people who do drugs/drink are immature (see page 14 of the story). Interestingly, Alexis agrees with this, despite her history with these behaviors. She writes, "My friends are smoking and I'm not. Be proud but this is really a big accomplishment for me...I need a job. I'm just tired of smoking... im just not tryna stress out about a drug test...I'm just like I don't wanna go through that worry lol & yeah I've been reached my point...I'm not risking myself. I actually am not influenced" (9/9/17). Later, she also tells me that "I wish i never had sex that was the dumbest shit ever. Hype is unnecessary [.]. Not even worth it like my mom said no rush at alllllllllllll...I guess I'm experienced with all the first love/smoking/drinking now instead of being 20 and heartbroke and drinking and shit like that when my life is already made yanno?...that's why I pass on certain shit cause I've already done it" (10/9/17). So, the young women are grappling with what maturity and adulthood looks like. They are trying to determine if adulthood includes things like sex and alcohol, or if maturity is

marked by abstaining from those things. As they grapple, they all stick to their own set of morals, which they view as ageless – for them, youth does not imply any less wisdom or morality than adulthood.



*Figure 5 - Seifert 2018*

### **Familial relationships** (see Figure 6, below)

Historically, all the young women have viewed themselves as good daughters, grandchildren, and sisters. All three express protectiveness of their families. Rebecca is protective of undocumented family members, and is especially protective of her mother. She is also protective of her parents who she claims are poorly treated by her older sister, who she wishes would stop taking advantage of her parents. Lila, similarly, is protective of her younger siblings, who she fears will be badly influenced by her older sisters. This feeling increased when she moved out of her mother's house last year; she worries that in her absence her older siblings will continue telling the younger siblings that weed and smoking is "cool," and that the younger



siblings will begin cursing (which she abhors). Alexis is very protective of her mother. She's an only child and the two of them live alone together, far from her mother's family. Her mother is older, so she worries about her health, and she also has a history of drug use and selling, so she worries other drug users will try to take advantage of her mother.

One sees ways in which these young women have played very adult roles in their families. Rebecca talks about doing chores at home, and having to teach her older and younger sisters how to properly wash dishes. Lila, the first of her family to go to college, maintains excellent grades and behavior so that her grandparents and mother won't have to stress about her, like they had to stress about the older sisters who are both teen parents. Alexis kicks drug addicts out of her house who try to scam her mother, and works various jobs to be able to help her mom out financially.

These relationships are complicated by the external pull of independence, freedom, and self-preservation. Lila exemplifies this most starkly at present. She left home to go live with a stable, middle-class family junior year. She constantly reflects on the dichotomy she feels – on one hand, she knows that living with her friend is good for her academic ambition and safety, and is grateful to that family. On the other hand, she feels “homesick” away from her family and then feels guilty for that feeling, since she thinks she should feel more “grateful.”

Rebecca also lives in a complicated familial world. On the one hand, she values family immensely and would prefer to be at home, spending time with her mom and sisters, than anywhere else. She expresses a fear of “freedom” once she leaves for college, and when her cousins or older sister go out to dance and party, she has no interest in joining them. But, the pull of the world around her is also strong. She loved studying abroad over the summer and hopes to do more of that. She knows once she gets to college that she will want to stay there to study,

even though her mom begs her to come home on the weekends. She hates how overprotective her dad is of her, and hates what a heavy drinker he is. (She and Alexis both hate that their parents smoke cigarettes.) This conversation (8/28/17) exemplifies their desire for self-preservation:

Rebecca: “Yeah I get it that you love your mom and it’s hard [this is directed to Lila.] I love my dad, I love my sister, but honestly if it gets to the point where I can’t deal with it [her dad’s drinking] no more, I just have to leave them alone ’cause honestly I’m hurting myself more if I just care about them.”

Alexis: “I think when you go to college it’s gonna get better for you. ’Cause then you’re not gonna be around them that much and you’re gonna realize how much you guys miss each other. That’s how me and my mom’s relationship’s gonna be because I can’t stand my mom 9 times out of 10. So when I go to college it’s gonna be better.”

Alexis, then, also has a complex relationship with family because she views her mom as “simple-minded” (text, 10/21/17). Her perceived racism/homophobia, drinking, previous sexual partners, and lack of knowledge about college bother Alexis, but she also values her mother more than anything in the world (2/22/18, text).

As mentioned above, scholars generally claimed that families of students like these women are unsupportive of college-going, which I did not find to be the case. However, the tensions that Rendón (1996) writes about I did find to be true: “The family both generates problems and provides an effective place for intervention. A student's leaving home requires the family to reorganize, creating turmoil and putting pressures on both children and parents not to separate. Children, as well as parents, are placed in a position of having to deal with loss. Parents may express their loss by highlighting their dependency and placing guilt on the child” (p. 18).

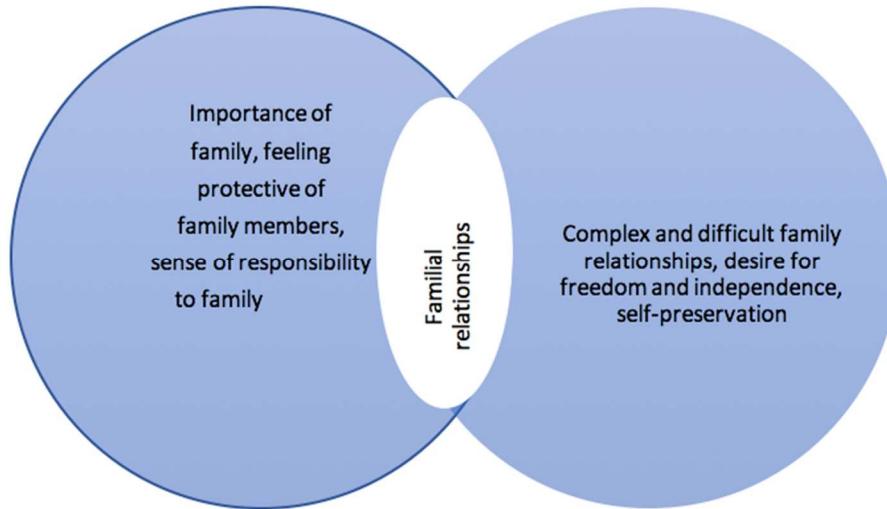


Figure 6 - Seifert 2018

### Border Crossing From Those Worlds to College-Going

a) Above, I alluded to border crossing strategies the women use to cross between the resilient world in which they operate and their college-going world. Indeed, their resilience has helped shape our college-going world in that a main motivation they share regarding college going is to better their own lives and those of their families. They acknowledge that many of their struggles exist because of their minoritized identities. Indeed, in an essay Alexis recently sent me, she wrote

My hardships have shaped me into who I am today...My father makes me strive harder for my goals in life. I want to make him regret abandoning [sp] me and my mother, being successful is the best revenge. Growing up in Section 8 housing doesn't give you much of a variety of a good community. Living around [my block] and being in the hood has impacted me. Seeing all of the violence and even some of my friends end up in jail, joining gangs, and dying really *makes me strive to get out of the struggle and give back*. Even though I may live in the hood, its something I would never regret happening. When there isn't violence you can meet the sweetest and most life-changing people. My community is bent, not broken and giving back every time that I can is something special to me. [text, 2/11/18, emphasis added]

Indeed, all three women share similar stories and ambitions. Lila watched and experienced abuse at the hands of various men, and when her sisters became pregnant she was even more motivated to avoid the path they'd taken and was determined not to repeat in their footsteps or in those of her mom. And, all three use their lifelong experience with role models and mentors to cross into the college-going world. For example, during their summer overnight stay at Rockefeller, they absorbed the info that the undergrads shared with them (detailed in the story), made observations the following day about being students of color at a PWI, and continued planning for that experience by generating ideas about how they plan to deal with future oppression on campus.

These findings contradict what many deficit-based scholars purport – that similar populations don't or can't succeed because of the oppression they face. Other scholars, however, found that this population is particularly resilient and armed with self-efficacy in part because of the discrimination they've grown up with (Rendón, 1996; Oikonomidou, 2015). Indeed, Prasad et al (2017) found that “even when students lack a high level of pre-entry embeddedness [in the university] (i.e., they do not have strong ties), those with higher levels of grit and *self-efficacy* should be less likely to leave, exhibit less withdrawal behavior, and perform better” (p. 30, emphasis added).

b) Boundary crossing from the world of young adulthood to college-going proves to be complex. The women's young adulthood world is marked by responsibility for family, and all three young women have fears about leaving their families to attend college. However, when that fear emerges they remind themselves and each other that in the long run college will prove to be beneficial for them and their families.

Their young adult world is also marked by peers, friends, and family members who are ambivalent about academics and who focus on other pursuits, like drug use, drinking, and sex. The young women grapple with this differently when transitioning to the college-going world. Both Rebecca and Lila use their older siblings as motivation to act differently – Rebecca doesn't go out, party, or have boyfriends like her older sister does, who flunked out of Rockefeller. Lila abstains from sex, drugs, and drinking, because her older sisters are teen moms who tell her school isn't "cool" – she doesn't want to turn out like them. Alexis used drugs, drank, and had sex when she was younger, but doesn't anymore because she sees friends and peers doing it and thinks it holds them back. So, all three young women observe others in their young adult world who are engaging in behaviors that seemingly hold them back, which motivates the young women to behave differently in order to transition to the college-going world.

Of course, the young adult world will also exist in college, and the young women are preparing each other for this. Rebecca's older sister warned her that guys at college just want to have one night stands, and Rebecca vows: "Yeah I'm just gonna stay in my dorm." Alexis agrees, adding "[Romance] don't exist anymore. It doesn't exist. It's called Netflix and chill and then you get pregnant" (9/25/17). Alexis also knows that Rockefeller "be having lit-ass parties...[but] you can get raped in there" (10/9/17). And, Lila vows not to drink until it's legal for her to do so, wondering "why would you want to do that [drink] when you can hurt your brain cells and then you might not learn?" (10/2/17). The young women, then, use foresight to prepare themselves for elements of young adulthood in college, and use agency and goal-setting to avoid behaviors in which peers engage.

Young adulthood is also marked by an attachment to childhood, and this creates a tension when transitioning from this world to college-going. At times, the women struggle to use their

own agency to access information about college-going, instead relying heavily on adults to provide the information for them. Admittedly, I fed into this “hand-holding.” Here, my role as both researcher and mentor became complicated, because at times when posed college-related questions by the young women I would go out of my way to ensure I received answers and resources for them, when I could have encouraged them to use their own agency and seek out answers themselves. But, as the researcher I was aware of each woman’s distrust in many adults – in fact, Alexis asked me to promise to still informally mentor them their first year in college so that I could “stand up for” them in case anyone at the university tries to “fuck with” them (1/19/18). This transition, then, is a balancing act for all of us (myself included), especially given that all three young women are first-generation college goers. As a fourth-generation college graduate myself, accessing information and resources about college has never been a personal challenge, and due to my close relationship with the young women I feel protective of and responsible to them, but we are all learning to practice agency by finding resources beyond simply the ones I can provide.

However, scholars like Rendón (1996) might argue that the “hand-holding” I did was not unhelpful behavior. Above, I mention how she encourages university admin to lend more of a helping hand to this population. She encourages

a new role for faculty, who are not accustomed to working closely with students. It means that we must actively reach out to students to help them get involved... I am talking about reframing higher education to accommodate border crossers. I am talking about using our privileged positions as faculty and administrators to provide leadership to make change happen. (p.20)

c) The world of familial relationships serves sometimes as an asset to the college-going world and other times as a hindrance. It is most obviously an asset in that all the families want the young women to succeed and attend college; however, not all know how to appropriately assist

in the college-going process. As mentioned above, one tool the women use to cross into the college-going world when families are unable to assist is reaching out to mentors and other knowledgeable adults to access knowledge about the college-going world. This is one example in which RYF helps the women border cross from the familial world to the college world. When the women do have family members who have accessed the college world, they are able to use them as resources as well. For example, Rebecca's sister warns her about men's intentions in college, and Lila's "adoptive" family (the family with whom she lives presently) has helped her with every step of the college-going process, from getting her to apply before other RYF students did, to paying her acceptance fee.

When family is a hindrance, the women find other tools to cross the border. They remind themselves that they are knowledge-holders now, exemplified by conversations like this (from 8/28/17):

Rebecca: "My dad be like 'you best be doing good in school' and then he says like 'you don't do anything around the house.'"

Alexis: "My mom didn't even graduate school! And she be on my ass."

Rebecca: "He [dad] didn't even graduate! If he went back into school he'd be in 6<sup>th</sup> grade right now."

Alexis: "My mom would not even be in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. She be talking about 'how you gonna request somebody to live in your dorms, you can't request who you live with.' I'm like girl you never even went to college, you didn't even apply for college, what the hell you talking about."

Again, when the young women are hindered by family members, they find tools to cross the border. Lila uses the community we've created, and previously used YULP's college-promoting community, to rebel against her older sisters who tease her for caring about school. She explained,

[My sister] was like school is pointless and you need street smarts, books don't matter...both of my sisters are telling me this and my older sisters like I'm supposed to look up to and stuff...My parents of course are like saying 'go to college' but they kinda take the attitude like 'we got these two [the older sisters] to worry about, you're good,

you know what you need to do'... I don't have that much encouragement to go to school. So having this space where people actually wanna go to college and they know what it can do for them is pretty great. And I have also my friend [who she lives with] and she's obsessed with [Rockefeller] so I thought that was a great kinda coincidence. (8/28/17)

An additional complication in crossing the familial world to the college-going world is the fears the young women have about leaving family behind. To cross this boundary, the young women remind each other that they will have better lives, and provide their families better lives, by attending college. Another tool they used, inadvertently, included a campus visit and overnight stay to Rockefeller, facilitated by RYF. Prior to that visit, Alexis had been feeling very fearful about leaving her mother and was even debating staying at home and attending community college instead of Rockefeller. However, immediately after the campus visit she wrote me saying, "Thank you for yesterday, it made me super excited about college, I've made my choice to live in the dorms. I really do appreciate it.. thank you" (7/28/17). In this way, we can see that RYF is a tool – Holland's (1998) "artifact" – that helped pivot the women into the college-going world. Alexis reiterates what RYF means to her elsewhere, expressing that the tuition award means "The rest of my life. Growing up around here I felt like college, I was not gonna go but getting the full ride and learning and...just realizing all this stuff was just— it means a lot because I didn't think I was gonna go to college so now I know I'm gonna go to college" (Alexis, 8/28/17).



## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Each young woman has a unique identity in the college-going world we've created. Their identities are continually shifting, which aligns with Holland's (1998) theory about an individual or group's identity in a cultural world. They are positioned within this world based on social identities each hold, and they hold distinct identities as low-income women who represent different races. As such, they face different forms of oppression (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012) and different barriers to college-going. Their identities in this world allow them to make new worlds, and learning about RYF in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, 10<sup>th</sup> grade, and again last year served as an "artifact" to "pivot" (Holland, 1998) them into applying for and acceptance to Rockefeller. This is akin to Terenzini's (1994) concept of college-going as a "disjunction" in these women's lives: as first-generation college-goers, college is not the norm for them. They are navigating between historic messaging that tells them they won't go to college, and an external pull to attend college to better their own lives and those of their families.

The young women utilize many strategic relationships to help them succeed at present and beyond. Specifically, all three are adept at relying on responsible adults and mentors who support them in academic pursuits. Oikonomidou (2015) also found that mentorship was particularly helpful for similar populations, and Terenzini (1994) acknowledges that certain relationships (with family and friends) can be "assets" while others are "liabilities." Indeed, these young women experience both assets and liabilities – they navigate a cultural world in which there are both supportive and obstructive relationships, and they must continually choose to realign themselves with those who support their academic ambitions.

The women exist in various cultural worlds in which they are continually border crossing. They exist in a world where they are resilient in the face of oppression – they are marginalized as

young, low-income women (of color), and while these forms of oppression are shown to be traumatic (Tate, 2013), they continue to persevere using resources at their disposal. Those resources include critical-consciousness raising, amongst themselves and other peers; RYF and the promise of tuition-free college; mentors and family members; school personnel; and the self-efficacy that they've spent their lives cultivating.

The young women also exist in a world as young adults, in which they are learning to navigate leaving childhood. As Brown and Gilligan (1993) note, this is a particularly challenging time for girls, so it is important to contextualize this world by gender, acknowledging that women face different challenges than male students do.

They also exist in a world of complex familial relationships, echoing the findings of Terenzini (1994) and Rendón (1996). On the one hand, they are protective of their families, who are generally supportive of their college-going; on the other hand, they have fears around leaving their families "behind" for college. And, they have had to seek additional support in college-going because their parents, who did not attend college, lack college-going knowledge.

The women, then, border cross from those worlds to the college-going one, using myriad resources and skills. However, a limitation of this study is that it is being written a few months shy of the women's high school graduation. Therefore, we don't know what those first few months at college will look like. The scholars I've referenced in this study claim they will be underprepared academically, and I cannot know if that is true. I do know that they are excelling in high school with excellent grades; does that mean they will also do well in college? Scholars also claim that they have poor study and stress-coping skills; from what I know of the young women, they are always busy with study, work, and extracurriculars. Does that mean they will be successful at studying, working, and getting involved on campus? Again, it is too soon to tell.

Plenty of scholarship offers suggestions for improving the success of first-generation students. Engle and Tinto (2008) encourage colleges to: focus on the first year (when they are most likely to drop out); closely monitor student progress; provide supplemental instruction and learning communities; connect first-generation students with one another; encourage engagement in extracurriculars; and create a campus-wide “culture of success,” at all levels of the university.

These are, of course, good suggestions. Many, if not all, of the aforementioned suggestions are already in place at Rockefeller. Does that mean that all first-cohort RYF students will succeed in college? Will Lila, Rebecca, and Alexis succeed?

My findings echo what much of the literature says about first-generation students. However, this study isn't solely about first-generation students. Rather, it is about three young women. My findings cannot be generalized to all first-generation students. That said, it should serve to highlight micro-level challenges representative of macro-level realities, and in so doing ought to affect macro-level changes. The individual and unique hurdles they've faced in accessing college reflect systemic college-going barriers for first-generation students. The women experienced racism on campus, and feel that Rockefeller isn't doing enough to address this racism. Despite their tuition award, they are fearful of additional costs of college-going and question whether it's “worth it.” Their low-income high schools have not adequately prepared them to navigate college. These challenges represent larger-level issues. Racism is rampant across institutions. College is only one expense low-SES people face in gaining upward societal mobility. Public education is inequitable nation-wide, and underserved schools are underprepared to assist all students in college going (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Rockefeller, and similar PWIs that seek to increase success of first-generation students of color, should implement a few key actions which Alexis, Rebecca, and Lila have all suggested

over the course of our work together. First, it is not enough for Rockefeller to just be aware of racism on campus. Rockefeller should be doing much more to combat it, specifically by educating white freshmen about white privilege and their role in systemic oppression. As I write this, the women have four months before moving to campus, and Rebecca recently told me (4/9/18) that she is getting “cold feet” because she keeps hearing about how racist the Rockefeller campus is and isn’t sure she’ll be able to handle it. She told me about recent communication with a friend who is new at Rockefeller who confirmed Rebecca’s fears – she told her that peers regularly walk past her dorm room using the term “nigger” (4/9/18)<sup>2</sup>. This is unacceptable, and Rockefeller should mandate an in-person class about white privilege, oppression, and social justice the first semester of every students’ freshman year.

Rockefeller should also implement a mentor program for incoming first-generation students, and for students of color. The young women have requested mentors repeatedly, particularly because they feel that having seasoned mentors of color will help them navigate the racist campus climate. Lastly, Rockefeller should make a concerted effort to ensure that all its available supports for similar student populations are concisely and clearly disseminated to students before they arrive on campus. Over the course of this research, I came to realize that Rockefeller does indeed have many supports in place – for students of color, for LatinX students, for first-generation students, for students with disabilities – but that information about these supports does not exist in one, easy-to-access and understand place. How can students know to look for such supports when they may not know what to look for? If Rockefeller were to consolidate this information and disseminate it to students before their arrival on campus, it

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<sup>2</sup> I was unsure here if I should use the full word – which Rebecca had used when telling me the story – or simply the “n-word,” so I asked Rebecca. She responded via text: “i’d use the actual word since the affect [sp] of it on people still using the word at this time brings up that “what?” moment” (4/17/18).

might make that arrival a little less scary, and it would highlight to students that Rockefeller *is* trying to support them, despite other negative messaging the students may have received.

What I realize when I reflect on the feminist research I (inadvertently) did, it is true that “the process of research is of as much importance as the outcome” (Campbell & Wasco, 2000, p. 783). Indeed, McNamara’s (2009) words about feminist research resonate with me when she writes, “My story is clearly part of the tapestry being woven in the qualitative research process...I have begun to explore how I am changed by the research process” (p. 164). Unlike McNamara, I am not solely concerned with the research process; my research was borne of my programmatic role. Inherent in both programmatic and research work, however, was *trust*. I couldn’t have been successful in recruiting the RYF students and creating a college-going community if we didn’t trust each other. Reading about similar populations begs the question – do those scholars trust the students they “study”? The deficit-based tone of much of the scholarship suggests that they do not trust that these students can succeed, which reminds me of the young women’s wariness of adults, authority figures, and people with privileged identities. Alexis and Rebecca, for example, express deep gratitude to Rockefeller. Simultaneously, as detailed in the story, they’ve felt that Rockefeller has tried to “trick” students of color into thinking that this PWI is a place of acceptance and diversity. It would be prudent for scholars to follow Rendón’s (1996) cue: acknowledge hurdles students face, but also marvel at their resilience and deftness as *fronterizas*. It would also be helpful if institutions like Rockefeller were transparent toward prospective or incoming students of color – not to scare them off, but to warn them the challenges they may face at a PWI, particularly in this era where the racist climate of the U.S. is so openly hostile.

I have spent time in this programmatic-research role as a *traductora*, a translator. I've translated the university to the young women, and now I am translating the young women to the university. I am not just talking about their grades, their families' income, or their ethnicity. I am telling their stories that they have entrusted me to tell. I am following McNamara's (2009) suggestion:

once trust and credibility are established, these must be solicitously maintained; the role of the participants, who are effectively co-researchers in feminist ethnography, should be continuously affirmed; likewise, the researcher must collaborate with participants, both from the outset and throughout the research process, in determining what is reported and how the findings might be disseminated...as an empathic and collaborative form of investigation, feminist ethnography often places both the researched and the researcher in a relationship of some intimacy. (p. 173-174)

I encourage practitioners and researchers to focus on relationships and trust, between students/participants and the practitioner/researcher. I encourage adults to see young people as knowledge-holders, as people with self-efficacy and resilience, as *fronterizas*. It can be challenging as someone in a position of privilege – like me, a white, middle class, suburban researcher – to avoid viewing first-generation students of color from a deficit perspective. It can be hard not to enter communities with a prescribed “fix.” It can be difficult to be honest, transparent, and patient, because trust takes time.

Ultimately, strong relationships and programmatic efforts that are community-based and community-supported can have wondrous outcomes. Other institutions should note what an excellent tool (or, as Holland would say, “artifact”) promise programs like RYF can be – one that can truly help pivot a student from a challenging position of marginalization to one of motivation, resilience, and hope for a bright future.

I hope students, more than anyone, read *La Trenza* and identify themselves in the characters. I hope they see first and foremost their own strength, resilience, perseverance, and

dedication, because I've learned that young adults like Lila, Rebecca, and Alexis often are so busy that they don't have time to reflect about their own "goodness." I hope that the stories highlight myriad tools the young women use in everyday life to achieve their goals. These young women should serve as examples to students everywhere of people who face adversity but who take opportunities presented to them and "border cross" into bright, challenging, scary futures.

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