

Living Beyond the Boxes: On Being Seen In Our Wholeness

By: Allison Ramdial Ebanks

Identity is never only about institutional roles or academic titles. It stretches across home and work, past and present, public and private, and it often refuses the neat boxes that societies and institutions expect. Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (2012) offers a language for the in-between, for the psychic, social, linguistic, and cultural spaces where contradictions meet and where people learn to live with many coexisting selves and stories (plurality), rather than resolve them too quickly. M. Jacqui Alexander's *Pedagogies of Crossing* (2005) similarly calls attention to the borders that modern life constructs between body and spirit, self and community, nation and belonging, and invites forms of crossing that are political, ethical, and transformative. In parallel, cultural identity scholarship emphasizes that selves are multiple, fluid, and continually in process, even though social and organizational life often pressure people to present a stable and recognizable version of who they are (Hall, 1996).

Forms and categories promise clarity. They ask for a race, a gender, a family status, a profession, a neighbourhood, a faith, a language, a political position. They suggest that once the right box is ticked, the world will know who a person is. Yet, many of the most important questions about identity emerge precisely when lives do not fit these boxes easily, when histories cross borders, when communities are multiple, when bodies and desires do not line up with dominant norms, and when work and care extend far beyond what any single label can hold. These moments of misfit are not failures of identity. They reveal the limits of the boxes themselves.

Boxes are not neutral. They simplify complex lives into administratively convenient shapes. They can help organize rights, services, and protections, but they can also erase, misname, and constrain. Research on visibility and invisibility in work and learning shows that systems of recognition shape what can be seen, valued, and counted, and that such systems often privilege legibility, which is how we are read and understood in the world, over complexity (Sawchuk & Taylor, 2010). In educational and organizational settings, this can mean that some forms of labour, knowledge, and identity are consistently foregrounded, while others remain unacknowledged. Over time, being forced to repeatedly choose the "closest" category can make identity feel less like an open, ongoing process and more like an exercise in trimming away what does not fit.

Legibility shapes how others decide who we are, what we deserve, and where we "fit," whether or not we recognize ourselves in those readings. The boxes we inherit did not simply appear by accident. They were created, often quite intentionally, to sort populations and to manage access: to decide whose lives count, who is important, who gets a say, and who is seen as valuable and worthy. Racial, gendered, national, and professional categories emerged within histories of colonialism, capitalism, and state control that needed ways to classify people, to track them, to extract from them, and to exclude them. In this sense, boxes were designed not only for description, but also for control.

Paying attention to legibility means asking difficult questions about who created these boxes and for what purpose. It asks whose interests are served when some identities are easily recognized and others are treated as confusing, excessive, or “out of place.” It invites us to hold accountable not only the categories themselves, but also the people, institutions, and systems that keep them in place. Rather than only asking those who do not fit to adapt or explain themselves, this perspective turns our attention toward the structures that demand such explanation in the first place. The same categories that can open doors for some can close them for others. Being easily legible as “professional,” “neutral,” or “from the right background” can bring access, safety, and authority, for example, being automatically read as a “good fit” for leadership, being assumed competent in meetings, or being shielded from constant questioning. By contrast, being read as “difficult,” “political,” “emotional,” or “out of place” can lead to surveillance, exclusion from decision making, or being treated as a perpetual outsider whose presence always needs justification. Those who do not see themselves in the available boxes, or who experience their lives as more complex than any single category allows, feel the consequences when the world insists on reading them as if the box were the whole story.

This narrowing also affects how people connect to themselves. If the story about who someone is always has to be short and tidy, it becomes harder to stay in honest relationship with the messier truths, the contradictions, shifts, uncertainties, and longings that do not resolve into a simple narrative. Instead of being something we simply “have,” identity is something we keep working on and reshaping in conversation with other people, in response to institutional expectations, and in our own ongoing inner debates (Hall, 1996). Parts of the self become quieter because they are harder to explain or are not legible to institutions. Other parts become louder because they match what others expect to see. In this sense, the box does not just classify identity. It also helps shape how identity is lived.

This also affects how people connect to one another. Meeting others primarily through categories, for example race, job title, social role, or political stance, can make it easy to assume that their stories are already known. The box can stand in for the person. This shuts down curiosity, flattens difference, and limits solidarity, especially when experiences do not match the scripts attached to those labels. Scholarship on racialization and participation in higher education shows how such processes can leave people moving through spaces where they are simultaneously recognized and misrecognized, included and held at a distance (Arday, 2017; Arday & Mirza, 2018). One challenge of representation is that labels do not simply describe people. They often create new divisions among those already divided, turning categories into boundaries that are hard to cross.

Liminality offers another language for this condition. To live in the in-between is often to stand in a doorway where old identities no longer fully fit and new ones are not yet clear. Work on academics’ experiences of “perpetual liminality” describes how people in ongoing organizational uncertainty find themselves doing unresolved identity work, feeling both connected to and distant from their institutional roles (Jessen et al., 2021). That space can be unsettling, but it can also open up possibilities. In these in-between spaces, people may question the identities they have inherited, try out new ways of describing themselves, and build relationships that do not always follow the usual categories.

Being seen fully is something deeper. It means being met as more than one story, more than one label, more than one role. It means having room to be contradictory, to change, to grow, and to not yet know. It means that others do not panic when parts of a person do not match their expectations. It means that relationships, communities, and workplaces can hold all the threads, joy and grief, strength and vulnerability, certainty and doubt, without forcing them into a single pattern.

To have the complexities of identity acknowledged and supported is to live in spaces where curiosity is welcome, where questions about self are not treated as problems to fix quickly, and where people can play with language, expression, and connection. It looks like friendships, families, communities, and workplaces that do not just tolerate difference, but welcome the way each person carries multiple histories and futures at once. It feels like breathing more easily. It feels like not having to prepare a “smaller” version of yourself before entering a room. It feels like knowing that when more of who you are is brought forward, your belonging is not put at risk. To acknowledge full selves, then, is not to demand total visibility at all times, but to create conditions where complexity does not have to be hidden in order to survive (Sawchuk & Taylor, 2010; Hall, 1996).

From Anzaldúa and Alexander, another question emerges: how do we make the borders of our labels and categories more porous? Porosity does not mean ignoring difference or pretending that history, power, and social location do not matter. It means loosening rigid boundaries so that people are not trapped by the names they have been given. It means allowing identities to move, breathe, overlap, and change. Anzaldúa’s concept of borderlands identity and mestiza consciousness treats hybrid, in-between locations as places where new ways of thinking and relating can emerge, rather than as something lacking (Anzaldúa, 2012). Alexander’s work on crossings reminds us that any liberatory project has to pay attention to how borders, national, sexual, racial, and spiritual, are kept in place, and to imagine practices that move across those lines with care and responsibility (Alexander, 2005). Making boundaries more porous might look like building communities that honour mixed and shifting locations, telling stories that move across several belongings instead of simplifying them, and creating supports designed for people whose identities are layered and changing, not for neatly categorized subjects.

Beneath all the boxes and categories, what might change in how people live, love, create, and share responsibility if more of us were able to show up as whole, complicated humans, and be held that way? Perhaps the work is not to become more legible to the box, but to loosen its hold. Perhaps living fully means moving toward one another without demanding that anyone become smaller first. Perhaps the in-between is not a failure of identity, but one of the most fertile places from which to imagine freer ways of living, learning, and belonging.

Some reflective questions emerge from this:

- What parts of yourself have you felt compelled to minimize in order to appear coherent or legible in professional spaces (Hall, 1996)?
- What would it mean for your department or institution to acknowledge not just your role, but your full self?
- What would support look like if it were designed for people with layered, shifting, and in-

between identities rather than for neatly categorized subjects (Arday, 2017; Arday & Mirza, 2018)?

- When have you felt fully met in your work, and what conditions made that possible (Sawchuk & Taylor, 2010)?



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