

Positionality Paper

CMNS 304W Communications in Everyday Life

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THE STORY

Just a few short months ago, we got the news that our previous landlord would be looking to sell the townhouse that we have been living in. Seven beautiful, easy, difficult, long, short, even ugly years of life in the Guildford, Surrey area. Around us was a culture of an extremely fast-paced world. I can still remember loud engines plaguing the quiet evenings; every time that I entered our gated complex I remember a quick greeting to other Asians in our community. Other immigrants? Or even other children of immigrants? I am actually not too sure. But what I can explain is that we were alike; we were all minorities in a community of immigrants looking to just get by in the world. Just a two minute walk away from the front door of our old home was an Asian plaza, complete with southeast Asian cuisine and an Asian supermarket. Although I had not personally connected with my heritage, I did feel at home because of the people around me, and the environment I was in. What I felt everyday walking home from the bus stop a block away filled me with joy and happiness. This place instilled values of love and acceptance living in the world as a visible minority. However, it all changed after we moved places.

Because our landlord decided to sell the house we were living in, we could not stay at our place in Guildford. Gone was the comfortability of an Asian community with the scent of home cooking and freshly baked pastries of my parent's country of origin. Within a few short weeks, that was all gone. Although where I live now is a short stone toss away in the suburban community of Fleetwood, the familiarity of southeast Asian culture is no longer apparent. Moving to an entirely different area, with different people, a different demographic, suddenly dropped into a culture that I was not a part of originally, I became marked by my community. I was the outsider trying to become accustomed to an established area. Southeast Asian culture is prevalent, but no longer the main attraction. In place of the Asian supermarket is now a Fresh

Street Market, screaming western civilization. However, now that I am a part of this new community, and now a deviant in this neighbourhood, I see myself as someone willing to accept the challenge and take on this new area despite the uncomfortability and unfamiliarity.

I have realized the faults in my own identity with respect to my cultural background. My parents are first generation immigrants who came to Canada from the Philippines 30 years ago. I have also never set foot in their homeland either. However, I am constantly surrounded by memories of their childhood: some amazing homestyle Filipino cooking, jars of fermented fish used as condiments for saltier foods, and perhaps even sometimes being scolded by my parents in tagalog. I do not really identify as a Filipino person, although the colour of my skin and physical features say otherwise. Being immersed in southeast Asian cultures for a number of years gave me a little taste of what my parents might have lived in for almost their entire lives. Sometimes I even forget that I am Filipino, an aspect of my identity that only arises at the most convenient times. My Asian cultural identity is buried underneath the colonized aspect of my identity, in the sense that I know very little of my cultural background. It seems that while I was exploring the Asian plaza around me, I acted like something that I was not. I do not speak my parent's native tongue, nor do I have their same mannerisms. But I was accepted by them and their community as well. What I noticed about my own experiences in my old community and in my new community is that I have to keep putting on a performance for the people that are around me because that is normal. My performances in the communities that I have lived in and are a part of have shown me that to be unmarked meant having to constantly put on a performance to be accepted, and to be accepted means needing to act or to perform in a certain way to be seen as 'normal.' My place in my community as a marked individual describes the power of the

performance; performativity from the perspective of a deviant shows that being normal itself must also be a performance.

THE PERFORMANCE

Erving Goffman writes that performance is activity; it is an act that a participant does in the presence of other participants with the goal of influencing the other party (1956). In his definition, it is implied that a performance is done as a means of controlling the situation in order to influence its definition (1956). Goffman writes that “control is achieved by influencing the definition of the situation ... by expressing himself ... [to lead them] to act voluntarily in accordance with his own plan” (1956, p. 2-3). By conducting a specific performance in the presence of others, the individual is influencing the definition of a situation in their own interests. The performance is part of an individual’s outward appearance that, when done, can influence the definition of a situation. In my old community, I found myself putting on this performance of being outwardly Asian when I was surrounded by many immigrants. Despite being the one born here, I was the one who wasn’t normal -- I was marked, and I was the deviant.

Knowing that I had southeast Asian roots, I had to put on this performance of an immigrant, or at least something close to it. Reflecting on my previous community, I constantly had to put on a performance to influence those around me because I was the one that was not normal, nor was I truly a part of their community. In order to circumvent this, my performance was done with the goal of influencing the ‘normal’ people around me. In order to be accepted by the wider community and not be seen as an outsider, this performance of mine was integral. Even though it was simply a performance, the values that I have today were instilled through those performances. I had to influence the situation in my favour so that I may be seen as ‘normal.’ Normal, as described by Eviatar Zerubavel, is the majority (2018). In my case, the community

that I was living in, I was not seen as normal. Even as I walk around this new place I call my community, I am still plagued by the idea that I am not normal because not only are there less Asians, but there are also many more white families. Zerubavel cites Somerset Maugham, and writes from a perspective that describes normal as a “moral and political category that serves to elevate some families and delegitimize others” (2018, p. 35). To be normal is to be ‘better’ than others. Being an immigrant in a southeast Asian community is normal, and anything else is met with disgust. For me, being normal was the performance. The polar opposite of being normal is deviance.

To be deviant means to mark oneself in the greater community, Zerubavel writes that being a deviant, or marked, is to be “abnormal” (2018, p. 37). Being unmarked, on the other hand, becomes commonplace as they are the “standard or touchstone against which marked ones are characterized in terms of the extent to which they deviate from them” (2018, p. 37). Unmarkedness is normal; it is the measuring stick which all are compared to in terms of their difference. Coming from an immigrant family, we were a part of the ‘statistical majority’ which Zerubavel mentions. But I can safely state that I was not a part of that statistical majority. I was born thousands of miles away from my parent’s home country which means that I have no ties to their birthplace. I was deviant in Guildford because I was not an immigrant, but rather I was born here, in Canada. Having no ties to the Philippines, I was ‘white-washed.’ In other words, I was marked.

I could tell when I walked into a Filipino family store that I was known as ‘white-washed’ because I did not speak the native language; their glaring eyes touched my body and I could tell it was a look of disgust. Their demeanour changed from joy and happiness at meeting one of their own into more closed off body language. In response, I had to take their

perception of me as marked and abnormal and influence the situation: I started to speak with an accent, using all the tricks that were taught to me by my aunt and uncles that also immigrated from their home country. In this way, I needed to put on this performance of being an immigrant that lost their accent in order to be accepted and viewed as normal. As soon as I started that performance, their stature changed, becoming much more respectful to my presence, going so far as to crack jokes as if they were one of my aunts and uncles. The need to outwardly express very basic cultural Filipino values such as strong respect for our elders, deep respect for our elders, even openly gossiping becomes a performance, rather than an integral part of my identity as a person.

David Inglis writes about how the spaces we live in shapes our values and cultural beliefs (2005). He writes about rationalized culture, the spaces we visit in our everyday life, and how we act in those spaces rationalizes the culture that surrounds them by the physical design and cultural values (2005). In my case, the immigrant community that I was a part of reinforced and rationalized the southeast Asian culture that was so prevalent. Even in this new community, the stark contrast of a western culture seeps into my everyday interactions. I no longer perform as the son of immigrant parents, but rather as a familiar face who was born in a western country.

THE REFLECTION

This performance allowed me to be accepted by the immigrated southeast Asian community, to be seen as normal in their view. Even more so as I live in a different community, I am still marked, but in a different way. Instead of being marked as an immigrant individual, I am a deviant in every way possible. This current community has no Filipino roots to speak of, so being a white-washed Filipino who only knew what it meant to be in an immigrant community, now again being a marked individual in a different way. I am a deviant now in every sense of

Zerubavel's definition, in that I have no ties to my current area, but instead I am completely marked living in a dominated white community having to constantly put on this performance that I am not a child of Filipino immigrated parents to be accepted by them. In Goffman's writings of the 'performance,' I constantly need to act differently in order to change the definition of the situations that I am in; to not be seen as abnormal, I need to put on a performance as normal. In Inglis' writings on space, my performances in these spaces have informed my values: they have become commonplace and an integral part of my identity. With the need to constantly put on a performance to be perceived as normal, what I have learned through them is that these values are so important to the community that I live in that they must become part of my everyday identity. These performances are so integral to my identity because they help me to understand the space I am living in, as well as the values that make up this unique community.

Works Cited

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