Chapter 19. Taking Up Space to Take a Position

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I grew up in the 1980's with my mom and brother in the basement of my grand-parent's home in Kansas City, USA. Our family ethos was very working class, and I was the first to go to college. As a child, I had an older brother who had no problem speaking out, but I was praised for being a "good girl," making life easier for everyone by spending my time writing comic books in a quiet corner rather than rallying against authority.

As I grew up, I internalized the urge to conform to others' expectations and blend in by following the rules. When I did have to stand out, say for a speech in communications class, visibility made me uncomfortable. The surveillance from others made my heart race. I didn't want to tell others what I thought. Maybe I would say the wrong thing! Decades into life and now working non-tenure track at a university, the safety of blending in is still enticing (but admittedly also a privilege often afforded to my body). There is comfort in listening to others instead of speaking out. There is comfort in putting one's head down to "just do the work," and sometimes it can be easier to just stay quiet and agree to what others say.

But being invisible at a university only gets one so far. Not only is academia an industry that privileges public writing and the "right" bodies who stand out, but, as I have learned, student engagement also relies on layers of visibility. When I create a list of readings and solidify them in a written syllabus, this reflects my own beliefs, pedagogy, and positionality and is a first layer of being seen without me even opening my mouth. When I do talk about these materials, like say, why I chose research surveillance or chose a reading about workplace privacy and gender, I give away a second layer of visibility by further revealing my own background and positionality as a first generation, white woman from a working-class family who grew up hearing my grandpa talk about management's watchful eye as he transported pesticides around a factory. Finally, when I ask my students to engage with this coursework that I crafted, to share their own perspectives, my visibility encourages them to be visible. I ask them to tell me who they are.

It is in this space then, positionality is disruptive, especially to trying to be unnoticed. To take a position is to take up space and be seen. While understanding or asserting one's positionality can be a struggle for those frequently praised for not taking up space such as women (Bordo, 1993), like when I was praised for doing what I was told, those from working-class backgrounds (Warnock, 2016) like my family who generationally did what their parents did before them without

question, or those working in precarious academic positions (Burton & Bowman, 2022) like me that find it easy to blend into the department rather than make waves, I find that taking a position and being seen is essential for making informed decisions, choosing the best materials, connecting to the students, and creating critical engagement. Without making myself visible, I can't expect others to do so, too, which really makes the classroom a dynamic place when we're comfortable. It is only when I articulate who I am, however, that I can begin to understand those around me and ensure that there is space for them, too.

References

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