

Experiences of a Body Out of Place

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I am a female from Newfoundland, Canada. I am five feet tall and weigh 100 pounds. I have short, brown hair; big, brown eyes; and almost always have a smile on my face. I can usually be found in school (admittedly, sometimes in the office), at the gym, or on a running trail. Guess my age, level of education, and occupation. I am willing to bet you are thinking: '15, maybe 16 years old at the most'; 'grade school'; and 'student'. I am actually a 28-year-old behavioural special needs teacher holding a B.Ed., a B.S.Ed., and have recently completed my M.Ed. I work with students (mainly secondary school males) who exhibit extremely violent and challenging behaviours. Already in my career, I have had the opportunity to be a deputy head teacher of a private special school for students with behavioural and challenging needs, in the United Kingdom.

Appearances can be deceiving. This is a well known fact, yet people continue to make assumptions regarding roles, occupations, and positions based on appearance, and wait to be disproved later, once the receiver of such assumptions has proven him/herself. People, who are on the receiving of these assumptions are, what Nirmal Puwar (2004) refers to as, 'bodies out of place'. Regardless of the qualifications, education, or intelligence of a person in any given position, he/she can be deemed as in, or out of, place in his/her own work environment by outsiders solely based on observable traits such as race, gender, names, body size, speech, and even attractiveness. As someone who is constantly being viewed as young and inexperienced, rather than as a respected educational professional, after reading Moira Gatens' review of Puwar's book, *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place* I felt compelled to reflect upon, and share, my experiences as a 'body out of place'. The theoretical perspective of Gatens' article created my purpose for this paper.

Gatens writes a fantastic review of Puwar's book. The review is short and to the point, yet edgy and extremely touching to anyone who can relate to her experience as a body out of place. Gatens begins with a personal experience to illustrate her frustration with the assumptions made about her by others. Gatens, a philosophy professor, recalls standing in the philosophy department's administrative office one day when a student, being seen to by a male administrative assistant, was trying to get her attention, even though she was otherwise occupied. Gatens sums up the experience with the student seeing only one of the two employees of the university as "appropriate" to help him. The student's assumption that she - the female - was the administrative assistant and the male in the office was simply passing through, is entirely wrong (Gatens, 2007). Why is it, even in today's modern world, if there is a man and a woman in a university department office, the woman is assumed to be the administrative assistant and the man is assumed to be the professor? To the student, the male administrative assistant was a body out of place even though in reality he was simply doing his job. Gatens, on the other hand, while seen by the student as a body in the right place in the administrator's office, is indirectly seen as a body out of place as a professor.

Judith Butler proposes a theory about gender roles in her book, *Undoing Gender*. She explains that the terms and conditions, which constitute a person's gender, are

constructed entirely outside of that person; that the viability of one's own "personhood" is essentially dependent on social norms (Butler, 2004). Basically, we can defy gender stereotypes all we like but it is going to take a while to undo the mental expectations of males and females that have been instilled in society since the beginning of time.

Alfred Lubrano (1989) in his article, "Bricklayer's Boy" discusses bodies out of place on a more personal level – the difference in class between him and his own father. They were, as Lubrano put it, "...related by blood, separated by class". He never understood his father and his father never understood him. They were, however, "college buddies" – his father was redoing the brick work of the college Lubrano attended. They would often catch the subway home together at the end of the day with little to discuss. Society may have expected Lubrano to follow in his father footsteps and become a bricklayer. However, Lubrano studied hard enough, and his father worked hard enough to support him, so that would not happen. Deserving or not of his college degree and occupation as a reporter, Lubrano fits into society's blacklisted group, labelled by Puwar as "bodies out of place".

Gatens also summarizes an incident mentioned in Puwar's book, where a 'black' parliamentarian is mistaken for a member of the cleaning staff and is quickly reminded by a 'white' colleague that the elevator he was currently using was only for Members of Parliament (Gatens, 2007). From Gatens' article, the rest of the story is unknown. However, I would love to have seen the 'black' parliamentarian's reaction, as well as the look on the 'white' parliamentarian's face when both men arrived at the same destination in the building. Gatens then questions what causes so many cases of 'mistaken identities' and turns to Puwar's book for answers. Making such sweeping assumptions says a great deal about bodies; the space they occupy; and the sense of belonging to certain spaces (Gatens, 2007).

In her article, "What's in a Name?" Itabari Njeri discusses the assumptions made about her based solely on her name. She describes how disappointed some people are when she explains she is from Boston. Others ask if they can call her "Ita" for short, to which her response is something to the effect that her name requires no short version. Then there are the people who ask her what her "real" name is. Essentially, her name would be accepted by the public if she was either from away, or if they could call her something for short (probably so they could pronounce her name). However, the fact that she is from Boston, and does not "look the part"; what she is calling herself must not be her "real name". We make a number of assumptions, such as the person's culture, religious beliefs, and even social status based on a name, alone (Njeri, 1994). When assumptions are made about people based on their names, they are seen as being out of place within their own body. Amazing how society has the power to make us feel so out of place, even in our own skin!

Gatens (2007) contends that Puwar's book, *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place*, is masterfully written and evocative with original and empirical research. It can, therefore, explain a great deal about the human body, behaviours, and socially constructed spaces. According to Puwar (2004), the human body, in itself, cannot exist as a questionable entity. Instead, it is constructed through social and political practices as being male/female; white/black/Asian/etc; able/disabled; normal/abnormal; and so

on. These very constructions of bodies have a history that drives our thoughts and everyday behaviours. Such ideals have been so entrenched into society, and albeit, our ways of thinking, that these beliefs and actions are uncontrollable. We claim not to make assumptions and judgements, yet the fact that there is conscious effort not to judge a person in a space, is evidence that we are wired to believe certain spaces (occupations, roles, positions, etc) are for certain people only.

Let me ask you something. When I say “successful business person” what pops into your head? My money is on you picturing a white male in a business suit, possibly carrying a briefcase. So scrap the suit and the briefcase and what are you left with? That’s right, a white male. Amoja Three Rivers (1991) boldly states society’s assumptions that people, when referred to in the general sense, are white. Obviously if we meant someone of another race or skin colour we would state it – “That coloured man...” or “The African American doctor...” right? Despite the statistics that four fifths of the world’s population is of colour (Rivers, 1991), white skin is seen as the norm. This norm is the reason MPs, who just happen not to be Caucasian, are assumed to be in the wrong elevator.

On the other end of the race spectrum, is Jeanne Park (1990) discussing the pressures of being Asian in an American school system – where, as an Asian, your “place” is at the top of your class, and, heaven forbid, you slip one space. That would defy all stereotypes about Asian intelligence. Park recalls an elementary school teacher saying to her, “You’re Asian; you’re supposed to do well in Math”. What kind of message is that sending to her, as well as to her twenty or so other classmates?

Not only is the human body socially constructed, but the spaces occupied by human bodies are as well (Gatens, 2007). For every space to be occupied by a body, there are assumptions of circumstances and goings-on for that space. Certain elevators are only for MPs and even if you are an MP but don’t look the part, be prepared to be treated with a little less respect because you have just committed a mismatch crime. Guilty as charged for holding a ‘white elite’ position even though you are not white. Women and non-white bodies in positions that are expected to be filled by masculine white men, while liberating, disrupt the sound relationship between gender, race, and space (Puwar as cited in Gatens, 2007). The previous God-given right for white males to hold elite positions is slowly, but progressively, dissipating. However, our beliefs and actions are taking a little longer to catch up, causing us to make assumptions and judgements about bodies in, and out of, spaces. Gatens (2007) concludes her review stating that Puwar’s research is ‘deeply edifying’ and that her book, *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place*, should be a mandatory read for any person who occupies any space.

I have been on the receiving end of such assumptions more times than I care to remember. While my encounters with ‘entitled elites’ has not been as harsh as others might experience when assumptions are made about their race, my gender and size have generally been the grounds for total strangers to question my presence in a certain social space. In my first year of teaching, I remember a substitute teacher’s attempt to usher me into a grade six bus line on my way to the guidance counsellor’s office after school. She was mortified when I explained I was 23 years old and the grade two

teacher there. My reply was that it did not feel very nice to be scurried into a line of eleven-year-olds with her hands on my shoulders.

During my second year of teaching, I was scolded twice in my first week of work. The first time was when a teacher saw me, from back on, entering the staff room and quickly shouted, "And where do you think you're going young lady?" I was assumed to be a student, based on size I assume, and was quickly being refreshed on where I was, and was not, allowed to be in the school. That was, of course until I explained I was the new special needs teacher. A second time was when I was faxing a letter in the office and the vice principal came into the office, only seeing me from side on, and said, "Excuse me, you can't touch...". My reply was a quick smile and "Good morning, Angela". Both times I was seen as a body out of place.

While substituting on a school sports day, students were allowed to leave early as long as parents were around to pick them up. As I noticed one child's parents outside the classroom door, I dismissed her. The mother came into the classroom, and told me that I had no right to let her child leave; that her teacher needed to okay it first. I explained I was the teacher for the day and her daughter was allowed to be dismissed. The mother apologized as she was under the impression that I was a grade six perfect.

All of the above incidents were minor and certainly laughable once the situations had passed. As I became older and more serious about my teaching career, assumptions that I was a body out of place started to become more frustrating and offensive. While working in the United Kingdom, I took on the role of deputy head teacher (similar to a vice principal) to cover a maternity leave, and was then offered the job permanently for the following year. While in the role of acting deputy head, I was required to attend deputy meetings ever so often. I remember walking in to those meetings only to have several other deputies look at me with inquisition while others were sociable enough to ask if I were actually a deputy head teacher. The fact that I was a foreign teacher; was young for a deputy anyway; and looked even younger than I was, left many of them puzzled. Throw into the mix that the school I worked at was a private all-boys school for behavioural and challenging needs, and I had almost everyone in the room staring. Some of them began to see that I was actually a fair, yet firm and consistent disciplinarian and teacher. Others, I think, never did take me, or any of the issues I raised in meetings, seriously. I worked extremely hard to get into a deputy position but when it was time to return to Newfoundland, the battle began all over again.

I realize schools vary in their cultures. All schools do not operate the same way. There is great variety and differences between and among schools. The schools in Newfoundland and Labrador are no exception. It is a general knowledge that to find a place to teach in St. John's is extremely difficult. I was particularly interested in finding a substitute teaching position in schools where my skills may appropriately be applied. With a behavioural background and extremely effective classroom management skills, I felt confident that I would be able to substitute almost anywhere. I was sadly mistaken. As other teachers may have also experienced, I was actually told by one vice principal on a substitute-teacher orientation night that I wasn't exactly the type of teacher they were looking for as their students were extremely challenging and they needed someone who could take control and enforce firm boundaries. How did she know that I

was incapable of doing those things solely based on my appearance? I wonder if she had carefully read past my contact information on my resume, whether she would have seen that I had spent three years teaching children between the ages of six and fourteen in extremely challenging contexts. I was probably exactly what they were looking for. They just could not see what was right in front of their eyes. Instead, I was quickly dismissed based on, what I assume was, my five-foot-tall, 100-pound, female appearance.

When the vice-principal realized I had something to offer, I eventually got a break. My name got passed around a little and, when a behavioural itinerant got put off on sick leave for two weeks, her principal called me up and asked me to fill in for her. Owing to the nature of an itinerant position, I worked for an entire week without even seeing the principal of the school out of which the itinerant worked. I contacted him through email and telephone. Into the second week, the principal asked if I could come in and meet with him. When I showed up at his office he said, "Can I help you?" I told him who I was and apologized for being a bit early. He stared at me for a while and then said, "Oh." Another pause while he looked me over again. Then he said, "This is your resume?" I replied, "Yes. Were you expecting me to be a brute of a woman?" He smiled and shook his head, then asked me to sit down. A complete mismatch of body and space exhibited here. All I could think was, 'Thank goodness I was asked to do the job before he had a chance to look at me'. I now work for this man. I teach in a behavioural unit in his school.

My most recent experiences of appearing to others as a body out of place are the reactions I get from my new junior high, and high school students and their parents/guardians during intake meetings. The principal introduces me as the student's teacher and immediately, the parent's jaw drops and the student grins from ear to ear. However, my students quickly learn that I am not a pushover and that I do not tolerate unacceptable behaviour. As for the parents, they eventually are put at ease once their child's behaviour begins to improve. I am not a miracle worker but I am much more than my petite exterior lets on.

While people tell me that I should be flattered that others think I am so young and petite, in my occupation I find it quite offensive. Prior to being heard out or proving myself, I am immediately dismissed as I am often assumed to be young, naive, inexperienced, passive, incapable of leading, and therefore, ill-respected in the education field, based on my physical appearance. Being labelled "cute" may be sought out by some women but I see the term as extremely debilitating to my professional accomplishments.

Everyone's experiences of assumptions and judgements cast down from 'deserving elites' is going to be different in nature. However, it is important to share them as doing so creates knowledge and sensitivity in schools surrounding this type of literature. Sharing these experiences can also empower others in similar situations to ensure they continue to prove themselves as deserving of the positions that they currently, or some day would like to, hold. If we only have access to those forms of recognition, which "undo" a person in a given space, recognition will become, and remain, a site of power with the forever differentiation between who qualifies for those places and who does not

(Butler, 2004). Everybody has a place and that place should be decided by no other body than the one that occupies it.

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