

Grids of Difference and Anonymity / Identity:
Anthropological Tools Useful for Urban Studies, *and More*

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We used “Grids of Difference” and “Anonymity / Identity” (from Anna Secor’s *There Is an Istanbul That Belongs to Me*: *Citizenship, Space, and Identity in the City*) in our classroom discussions to bring light to some significant issues of equality, belonging, and citizenship in the city. (It can be said that the study of the city provides a convenient setting in which to learn about these concepts.) However, when abstracted and generalized beyond the microcosm of our current focus of study, Grids of Difference and Anonymity / Identity become actually quite powerful anthropological tools of analysis. What I argue today is that these anthropological tools which we call Grids of Difference and Anonymity / Identity are useful not just in the large scale of a city, but also on other scales, as well. To develop and support this thesis, this paper will organize around Secor’s grids of difference and anonymity / identity and bring into discussion the settings of recess, and a shopping mall.

Before moving on to the rest of the paper, readers should be made aware of the significance of the thesis which I present. The idea that this tool could be useful on many different levels is both fascinating and significant because not only could it provide new, different, and/or alternative ways of looking at topics in Urban Studies, it could also be used outside of Urban Studies as well. For example, one might consider applying the Grids of Difference tool to a particular topic in a historical study of trashmaking (like in Professor Kucher’s class, for example). It could also be considered in psychology, or sociology, as well.

At this point, it may be useful for the reader to understand what this thing called grids of difference actually is. In *There Is an Istanbul That Belongs to Me*, Anna Secor borrows from Geraldine Pratt and communicates to the reader that “Traversing the city and inhabiting its

places can thus be seen as both negotiating and creating what Geraldine Pratt (1998) calls “grids of difference,” the variously fluid and fortified boundaries of urban space that provoke a range of identity performances.” (Secor, 357) In other words, Secor presents grids of difference as veritable invisible fences and other visible barriers created by the process of moving across or living in the city. ...and actually, Secor goes beyond this simple definition by pulling in the notions that these “boundaries” are sometimes fixed, sometimes not, and that they can often be formed by an informal give-and-take or pushing-and-pulling process which she likens to “negotiation.” (Secor, 357)

This process of negotiation is carried out by adults in much the same way as children at recess: children self-segregate themselves into groups which they feel most comfortable with. (In her work, Secor also mentions comfort, which further makes the playground / recess idea particularly useful as an example.) Moving away from the playground and into the mall however, it is fascinating to see the same forces taking place there.

In the Tacoma Mall, there are a number of different shops and at least four large “anchor” department stores. Although anyone has the right to wander aimlessly throughout the entire mall, grids of difference generally limit the exercise of this alleged freedom. People self-segregate themselves into groups.... The economically privileged (and classy) shoppers find that they are more comfortable shopping in Nordstrom, whereas someone who is more economically disenfranchised may feel thoroughly uncomfortable there and shop elsewhere as a result. As another example, when customers who look like they should be shopping at Hot Topic are found shopping in Abercrombie & Fitch, employees might raise their eyebrows a little,

so-to-speak, wondering why such customers are shopping in a store which sells a style of clothing that they aren't particularly fond of. ...but what about the shoppers who don't always shop at a certain store and don't want to feel too awkward shopping in a new store?

Also in Anna Secor's "There Is an Istanbul..." is a section which brings into discussion the use of anonymity and identity to either "pass" (through anonymity or suppression of identity) into a new group, or to "stake a claim" (through identity or power / space control). In the shopping mall example where a customer wants to be able to pass and not feel too out-of-place at an unfamiliar establishment, that customer may try to suppress some of their identity in favor of anonymity. Following the Hot Topic example, the customer could be in Abercrombie & Fitch looking for a gift for his girlfriend, and to be more successful (aka feel less uncomfortable and out of place), he might do something even as subtle as taking off his trench coat or throwing a more generic hoodie over his shockingly gothic t-shirt. With these types of actions, customers may receive much more favorable service from the employees of each establishment they visit.

By slightly abstracting or generalizing the concepts of grids of difference and anonymity / identity presented in *"There Is an Istanbul That Belongs to Me": Citizenship, Space, and Identity in the City*, these concepts or tools of analysis became useful outside the study (/ scope/scale) of cities – in fact, this paper touched on their use for recess and shopping mall settings. Readers are left with the idea that these concepts are significant and actually useful tools of analysis worth remembering, as they can be used over and over again in more than one specific field of study.

Bibliography

Secor, Anna. "“There is an Istanbul That Belongs to Me”: Citizenship, Space, and Identity in the City."
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