Construction of Identity in the Liminal Subject

By Ruby Bell

'They pushed us down with all their might,

Took everything we own,

But they forget in all their spite

That from the dirt we grow...'

Stella , my ex-colleague, is sitting on a rug in her allotment and we are sipping chai from plastic cups as she recounts this poem. She left work suddenly last week and we haven't seen her since;, I have come to find out why.

'Do you feel that you were 'yourself' when you were at work?'

'No...no.'

She anxiously stubs out her cigarette and lights another.

'I don't feel I was really me in work. I didn't bring myself into work because... because I wanted to protect myself.'

Stella, in her mid-forties, has chopped off most of her hair since I last saw her. A punky, short cut tied in a bandana,; bright red dress, black docs, and bold eye make-up. She is looking better than ever - more 'her' than ever.

In the allotment, gazing at the trains hurtling past and the birds hopping around on the soil, she voices her fears about the future: Wwhat job will she get? How will she pay the bills? Stella is in a phase of transi-tion. Moving away from one thing to another, not really belonging anywhere. It is a precarious position to be in. But the glint in her eye, the breeze , the of fresh air, the right to say what she likes when she wants to say it, to wear what she wants to wear... she is free.

'I couldn't stay there any longer. I wasn't me anymore.'

Drawing from Arnold Van Gennep's concept of "The Rites of Passage," scholars like Victor Turner have become fascinated by the liminal stage of development in a person's life. According to Van Gennep, one's rites of passage in life follow a sequence of separation, transition, and incorporation. Liminality can manifest in any period of transition, or "life crisis" (Van Gennep 1960: vii). The transition between social positions is completed during a practice of Communitas, whereby the "sacred zones" are cordoned off from the daily activities of society (Van Gennep 1960: 18). Thus, in these spaces, the liminal, Subaltern, or marginal group can practice ritualised "rebellion" against the structural relationships and expectations of the society they exist within (Turner 1969: 112). The liminal period is necessarily in the subjunctive, and so in this separate, sacred space, liminal individuals develop through a contradiction and subversion of the norms of wider societal structure to perform the identity and beliefs that they wish to present in the incorporation stage of their life passage. An outcasted university punk group can thereby practice what Pepper Glass calls, "doing scene," so as to rebel against the structural rules of society in an intimate group setting (Glass 2012). As a university student working part time in an after-school care centre, I myself occupy a liminal period of my life. Using Erving Goffman's idea that personality is performed differently when we inhabit different regions, I became interested in this

interaction between region and behaviour in the way we both present and construct the elements that comprise our identity.

This ethnography herein uses my unique position of liminality in the stage between study and work to investigate the way in which our identity is constructed through a dialectical process between how we choose to present of ourselves and how we change by the interactions we choose to partake in. I will analytically explore how this process of performed personality exists within the pressures of a capitalist work environment. I hope to illustrate this through a comparison of the relationships and presentations of personality in my workplace, in a philosophy reading group which I partake in during my free time, and through interviews with other liminal individuals.

Ollie's Living Room: Philosophical Investigations

Liminality can be described as being "performed in privileged spaces and times, set off from the periods and areas reserved for work, food and sleep. You can call these 'sacred' if you like, provided that you recognise that they are the scenes of play and experimentation, as much as of solemnity and rules" (Turner 1988: 25).

Entering through the little red door, I am crossing a threshold. I am entering a liminal space. The furnishings are soft, the room square. A rug woven of warm threads is at the centre of the room, atop which sits an oval wood table that will be the object of many a demonstration of the material existence of objects and the meanings attached to their positions in the universe.

Sunlight pours in through the window illuminating the steam from cups of tea that are being passed around the room as people start opening their books and the conversation descends into a lively exploration of the nature of being and postmodern intersubjectivity; of Hegelian dialectical analysis and Marxian value theory; of Tarkovsky's diegetic musical depiction of transcendence. Members of the group are accusingly labelled as Kantian, PoMo, Joycian, or Romantic. But all in fond mockery as the members of the Wittgenstein reading group are really all the same. To glance at the room, it would not be hard to guess the nature or purpose of such a gathering. Twenty to twenty-five-year old males. Middle class, intellectual. Soft floppy hair, tired eyes, cords, and woolly jumpers. English accents passionate with fluency and energy. They are thrilled to have a space where they can share in their zeal for such niche interests.

Communitas is "of the now;" it is "where structure is not" (Turner 1969: 11, 126). Where our thoughts needn't extend into the future or be rooted in the past. An escape from the language and laws of the everyday. Where relationships proceed "from I to Thou," rather than through regulated rules of hierarchical interaction (Turner 1969: 127). In a world that is time-constrained, and rule-governed, we at least have the protection in these four walls to be truly free, to simply talk and be. But if Van Gennep's theory is right, this space, this freedom from rule-bound hierarchical existence, is temporary. We will soon be entering the "incorporation" stage in our life. The young Wittgensteinians know it is so. To observe their behaviour is akin to watching the ritual process of play – of children granted a suspension from the duties and rules of conduct and behaviour of the 'real world' to perform the stages involved in a process of learning, sharing, and interacting.

As in any social group, positions of hierarchy become evident. The positions are dependent on age, experience, prior knowledge of the subject, and existing relations outside the group. Max, a fourth year and Wittgenstein enthusiast, initiated the group. Accordingly, he sprawls authoritatively on the large armchair in a central position. Ollie – a graduate with an extensive philosophical and theoretical awareness, and owner of the house – is on a chair beside him. More philosophy enthusiasts from various corners of the university perch on the couch. I – a mere second year, somewhat floundering in the shower of theoretical jargon that hit me when I entered the living room – take self-imposed exile. Beside the radiator, cross-legged on the floor, safe from the crossfire of debate. I have a timid interest in philosophical analysis, and so the questions often confound me and I feel lost, without much to offer. In my initiation into mindful revelation, I am at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Sebastian, like me, is a new, young member of the group. He is testing the boundaries of his foundational hierarchical rung through loud, oppositional behaviour. He is racing through the remark he is to read out, possibly in defiance of the unofficial authority that is being forced upon him in this informal hierarchy of relations.

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'Woah, woah, slow down!'

Max warns Sebastian by adjusting his behaviour towards him, subtly prompting Sebastian's recognition of the unspoken rules of authority and regulation in the reading group. In Glass's ethnography, Doing Scene, he discusses how these relations "intersubjectively produce [the members'] identity" (Glass 2012: 696). He observes that "a visitor to the house may conclude that there was no authority in charge at all" (Glass 2012: 708). Yet the collectively recognised chief "handled this regulation, flirting between control and openness, with various strategies" such as "jokes and delicate manipulations of space" (Glass 2012: 708).

Along with Max's clear spatial dominance, he is jokingly nicknamed 'Mr. Warner,' rather than by his first name, on the reading group Facebook group chat. If other members couldn't attend a certain week the group would go ahead without them; if Max couldn't attend, it would be cancelled. There is nothing which officially dictates this position of superiority. He is a student like the rest of us, with no higher

title or qualifications, yet it is the nature of this 'scene' that we intersubjectively constitute each other's roles in this unique setting.

Each of us hold a copy of Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations. Reading out the author's remarks one by one, we proceed in a circle, discussing confusions as they arise. Inevitably conversation digresses into an animated debate between a few of the members about Hegel's dialectics, venturing a little too far from the remark we are focusing on. Max attempts to re-centre the discussion:

'Ok, ok! Back to the point.'

Staff Room: Staff Meeting

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At a staff meeting in my workplace, Barbara sits at the head of the table holding a sheet of meeting minutes. The rest of us are seated around tables arranged in a square, holding paper copies of the minutes. As Barbara goes through them one by one, we can bring up grievances or suggestions we have encountered during the working week. This group is comprised of around the same number as the reading group. My colleagues are mostly middle aged, female, Scottish, and from St Andrews or neighbouring towns. All wear the same primary blue hoodies and polo-shirts with the organisation's logo emblazoned across the left breast. All except for the boss. Barbara's black formal trousers, smart blouse, and black patent low heels, make-up and long nails set her apart from the practically dressed playworkers.

The room has an institutional atmosphere with sparse furnishings and little decoration. Electric strip-lights buzz above our heads, filling the otherwise dark room

with bright bluish light. We sit on blue plastic chairs. People are drinking out of plastic bottles of Irn-bru, Lucozade, or water that they have brought for themselves.

As during the reading group, the conversation has deviated from the prepared agenda into more generalised chatter. This time the content is an interchange of complaints about the behaviour of the cleaner and bickering over the division of labour. Barbara is attempting to reign it back to the issues at hand.

Here hierarchy is formalised by named titles and positions, by duties as well as by pay roles; Barbara is at the top, then Stella, and then everyone else. Again, I am in a marginal position, contributing very little. I only work two shifts a week and am painfully aware of my student status; I am younger and more middle class than the general demographic. Heightening my awareness of my partially self-inflicted marginality, I am wearing a beret and trench coat – an outfit I would wear on a normal university day – as I wasn't working today, while the others are still in uniform. Although technically I am at the bottom of the pecking order, my one-foot-in-the-door position gives me a somewhat elevated status. I am a 'playworker,' but that is not all that I am. I am also a student, a member of a reading group... I am liminal.

In this instance, Barbara plays the same authoritative role as Max. It is this mirror image of behaviour and hierarchy that leads me to ponder the possibility of structures and social relations being identical in all groups. A possibility that roles will simply emerge regardless of the context or the backgrounds and demographics of the members of any closed groups. However, through further investigation into the contrasting nature

of the communally created and negotiated 'scene' behaviour as compared to the formalised 'decorum' of the workplace, I noticed that identity within an obligatory workplace role is markedly different from that which is self-constructed through one's voluntary membership within a 'scene' (Glass 2012: 696).

Ollie

In order to further understand the complex process of identity construction in the liminal subject, I interview Ollie – the owner of the reading group house. Ollie is a recent graduate who has accompanied his girlfriend to St Andrews. While she is completing her masters, he works as a bartender.

He explains his heightened position of precarity and vulnerability as soon as he left the protected position of being a student – in Van Gennep's terms, separation – and moved to Scotland to get a job.

'I actually thought: 'I could get fired at any minute, I could not have a job...' I became very aware when we had problems with our house, 'oh I'm not a student. I'm not in that protected space as a student. I'm a person paying for rent... and in the same way as when you're a worker, renters tend to get kinda fucked over...'

We discuss how this economic and structural precarity is reflected in one's sense of identity during the liminal stage of transition. Especially within a student-dominated town such as St Andrews, the pressure to define oneself made him feel paranoid and self-aware, he started to worry about what it was that truly defined him:

'I'm more a bartender than I am anything else, not having any other formal title – as opposed to being 'a student,' which is a cohesive thing, clearly defined culturally and socially…and I suddenly saw myself working 48 hours there doing nothing and just sort of all my spirit getting dragged out of me.'

This is where his membership of a 'scene' became a technique for survival. He describes how during a mundane workday he was looking out of the window and saw the Socialist Society holding a stall outside the union, and thought:

'Fuck it like 'these are my people!''

He describes how the Wittgenstein and Marx reading groups have given him a sense of purpose to his existence, gave substance to his sense of identity.

'I try and like get up in the morning before I have work, go somewhere and read something, so that I feel like I have a thing, like I have something other than just working all day.'

The Socialist Society are of course one of the very few university societies that are non-university-affiliated, so it was lucky he'd read Marx! Although it is of course a dialectical process between who we are in the workplace and who we are outside of the workplace. Does Ollie read Marx as a sort of cognitive therapy, to understand the effects of the alienated conditions of the workplace? Does he perceive his social interaction as unfulfilling because his interactions and relationships are dictated by the rules and structure of the labour environment? Does Stella seek respite in her allotment 'scene' because of the institutionalised indoor, unnatural conditions of her previous workplace?

What illuminated this conflictual nature of liminality was a conversation between Ollie, Max, and I before the reading group one week. Ollie was venting his frustration at an unjust expulsion of a fellow worker. A virulent Marxist, he found himself checking what he said in response to his boss' decision at work. Not only would his observations have been received unfavourably by management, putting him in a dangerous position as an employee, but his theoretical analysis of the dire situation of workers in a low-paid job under capitalism would have been completely unhelpful and in fact alienating to his fellow workers. This led him to the terrifying thought that we compromise an essential part of our being the minute we leave the protected stage of liminality.

'We can all be workerists while we're at uni…'

He further found himself selecting certain elements of his personality to project more deliberately while in different environments. He explained how he tends to reserve the more academic, bookish side for his university friends or say, at the pub with the other Socialist Society members. At work he then 'puts that part back' while bringing forward his goofy sense of humour to ingratiate his work colleagues.

Goffman describes this as the performative nature of our personalities. Any place that is "bounded to some degree by barriers to perception" (Goffman 1959: 109) will dictate a different decorum. This is often self-regulated in an attempt to impress. For example, we alter our speech and dress depending on who we are socialising with. However, in the workplace it becomes official – prescribed through the contract we enter into in employment. Our dependence upon the relationship we share with those who employ us means our survival, to an extent, relies upon our

ability to perform within their rules of decorum. This includes "mode of dress; permissible sound levels; proscribed diversions, indulgences and affective expressions"(Goffman 1959: 113). If we curtailed our performance of identity wholly to such limitations on expression, our spirits would surely be crushed. Thus, we maintain a "backstage", where the formalised decorum of the workplace is "knowingly contradicted" (Goffman 1959: 114). This is an attempt by workers to "buffer themselves from the deterministic standards that surround them"(Goffman 1959: 116). This clandestine neurological compartment is where Ollie maintains his Marxist ideology in a low-wage, frustrating, and alienating job; where I stifle swear words when working with children.

Conclusions

When the cerebral region of the performer clashes against the spatial region in which the performance is taking place; "the performer will find themselves temporarily torn between two realities" (Goffman 1959: 140). This conflict of identity performance is what caused Ollie to question his commitment to workerism, for me to write this ethnography, and for Stella to quit her job. From my ethnographic investigation I conclude that to an extent, we are always liminal. The liminality emerges not at a certain stage in our lives, but in the space between necessary and voluntary existences. This is where our identity is constructed. The transitional and marginalised nature of the liminal position in our rites of passage that Van Gennep observed illuminates the reciprocal process of identity production between such spaces. In the 'safe spaces,' both in our minds and outside the workplace, we have free thought and non-restricted actions.

It is the interaction between these spaces and more rule-regulated regions where our behaviour is constrained to the official codes of interaction and behaviour between customer/worker, employer/employee, etc. In safe spaces such as 'scenes' and during Communitas identities, roles, and hierarchies do emerge naturally but have a liberated nature and are negotiable. We often feel oppressed by the decorum of the work environment, which is why we protect the sacredness of our liberated character from the ruthless and alienating laws of institutionalised environments by 'knowingly contradicting' these laws in the back stages of our brains, and creating safe spaces for these thoughts to emerge. But it should not be forgotten that the workplace does alter our identity, almost in proportion to our more deliberate identity construction. It is one's experience as a worker that forms the effort to resist against the submergence of our personality into a work role by creating and partaking in 'scenes.' Thus, the process of identity formation is dialectical and reciprocal, and always, always liminal.

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