






Under the Mask: Homi Bhabha and Identity in *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*

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This article reads the character Miles Morales, from the movie *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, through the lens of Homi K. Bhabha's writings on intersectionality and identity in *The Location of Culture*. As an individual, Miles struggles to bridge the gaps between multiple facets of himself and only finds a way forward when he embraces all of his identities at once, becoming Spider-Man. The heroic alter ego allows Miles to grow physically confident with his new powers and functions as a tool for personal growth in his civilian life. Miles's journey to become a hero requires him to grapple with the complexities of being a masked superhero, as well as to weave together the masks he wears in his personal life as son, nephew, and student. The balance he finds between them is the sort of existence that Bhabha argues our society needs to adopt in order to progress towards a better future. Miles Morales embodies Bhabha's ideal in the discovery of an existence fused from aspects of himself, in a space both in between and beyond his identities.



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Introduction

At a base level, *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* follows all the tropes of a traditional superhero origin story. An extraordinary circumstance gives a seemingly average person superpowers, and the sudden appearance of a villain with nefarious intentions causes that newly powered individual to rise up to combat that evil and save the day. However, the additional layers this movie adds on top of its surface premise set it entirely apart from other media in the genre. The protagonist, Miles Morales, has to learn to control his new superpowers while grappling with constantly being compared to several other, significantly more competent, Spider-Man variants from different universes. He also must balance the high expectations that his parents have about his academic performance at his new, prestigious preparatory school despite the reality that he is struggling to keep up in the fast paced, competitive environment,

and is unhappy to have moved away from the friends he had made in his local community. *Into the Spider-Verse* is about more than Miles becoming a superhero; it is also about Miles finding a balance between multiple identities at the same time. This theme can be understood through the ideas of spatial theorist Homi Bhabha, who argues that identity should be thought of not as a set of labels that can be interchanged in different settings, but rather as the creation of a single, simultaneous, cumulative entity. Aligning with conventions of the genre, Miles has his heroic moment and saves the day, but that only happens after he has found a way to merge the many parts of himself into one single being—his very own version of Spider-Man.

Within the realm of spatial theory, Homi Bhabha primarily focuses on the space of identity. A person can fit under many different labels, often having a specific answer to what race,

culture, gender, sexuality, or religious sect they identify with. But often, the complexity of the human experience is not so easily classified under a single label. Most individuals inhabit several identities simultaneously and are therefore never quite able to fit comfortably into any of them. On a larger scale, no culture exists in a vacuum, and a completely homogeneous population is impossible. In his book *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha discusses identity as multifaceted: no individual can be fully defined by a single label or idea. He argues that, especially regarding race, the degree to which a mixed person identifies with each aspect of their identity shifts depending on the circumstance. Conflict, Bhabha argues, arises not from the articulation of differences, but rather from trying to fit something as complex as a person into the confines of one identity.

Bhabha goes beyond pointing out that the current system of switching between labels is not effective. He explains that, in the future, all facets of an individual should be thought of as existing at the same time. This would eliminate the dissonance that occurs when a single identity is not reflective

of a person's lived experience and background.

Bhabha's proposed blending of multiple identities aligns incredibly well with Miles's journey towards self-actualization in *Into the Spider-Verse*, and viewers can use Bhabha's theories to better understand the changes Miles undergoes throughout the movie. In particular, the resolution of the central conflict reflects Bhabha's claim that a person's identities must be thought of as simultaneous, overlapping entities in order to progress to a better future. Miles's struggle to balance his personal identities with the baggage that comes with taking on the identity of Spider-Man is what leads him to becoming a hero. Miles finds a solution in the space between his identities: the boundary becoming the starting line for moving into the future beyond. This is exactly where Miles finds himself at the beginning of *Into the Spider-Verse*.

The Starting Line

Miles is introduced as just another 13-year-old from Brooklyn. He has just transferred out of his old school, Brooklyn Middle, to attend the prestigious Visions Preparatory Academy, to the joy of

his mother, a Puerto Rican nurse, and his father, a Black cop.¹ Miles is less excited, as he believes the new school to be “elitist,” and struggles with the fast-paced, stressful curriculum. To escape this pressure, Miles eventually sneaks out of his dorm to visit his Uncle Aaron, with whom he shares a special connection through their shared appreciation for graffiti art. Uncle Aaron takes him somewhere where Miles can put up some of the work in his sketchbook. It is in this place that Miles is bitten by a radioactive spider, which those familiar with Spider-Man will know is what gives Miles his superpowers.

What immediately sets this movie apart from other Spider-Man media is that Miles is not the first boy to receive the radioactive spider bite in this version of the story. Miles’s New York City already has a Spider-Man, Peter Parker, who has been serving as the city’s web-slinging hero for almost a decade. Shortly after Miles gains his powers, this Peter Parker dies, leaving New York City without its hero. Yet, even after Peter’s death, Miles is not the only Spider-Man around. *Into the Spider-Verse*, as the name might

suggest, introduces a “multi-verse” of Spider-People. A group of these extra-dimensional Spider-Men from various universes are accidentally dragged into Miles’s city. This is not a sustainable existence for these Spider-People, as their transplanted bodies cannot stay in a foreign dimension for long without experiencing painful “glitching” and eventually death. Miles must return these Spider-People to their home universes, master his new superpowers, and defeat the bad guy as his city’s new Spider-Man, all while keeping these new parts of himself hidden to avoid worrying or disappointing his parents. But by the end of the movie, Miles has managed to achieve all of these goals, while also gaining a deeper understanding of himself, both in his role as Spider-Man, as well as all of the other, less fantastical, identities that he holds as the civilian Miles Morales.

The movie’s first shot of Miles shows him doodling in his bedroom. If his off-key singing to Post Malone’s “Sunflower” is any indication, this is clearly a space where he feels the most himself and not under any pressure to perform a particular role for other people. Bedrooms and other such

1 See Bendis, Brian Michael. *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man*. Art by Sara Pichelli. Marvel World Wide Inc, 2011. Vol. #1-5.

personal spaces communicate aspects of identity just as much as body language and physical actions do,² especially in an animated medium like this film, where each aspect of the room has been chosen purposefully by a team of artists to communicate something about Miles's character. He has a pretty typical teenage boy's room, with messy clothes and clutter strewn all around, but the room also gives hints to more unique aspects of his character. There are posters, some books, and a few action figures; the shelves he uses for storage space are made of the milk crates that record stores use to hold albums. A large architect's desk table takes up most of one side of the room, where evidence of past art projects and stickers are clear on its surface. Light streams in from large bay windows that face a residential city street. This space represents Miles as much as his actions or words do. He is an artist, a music lover, a bit nerdy, but most of all a normal kid with a bright future just outside. This room, where he's at his most relaxed and most himself, is the best reflection of Miles's starting point.

We are introduced to him in this space, so that the audience can see

what kind of person Miles Morales is—his personality, interests, a bit of his character—all in the span of about a minute. The end of the movie circles back to this location for a similar reason, again showing Miles alone and unobserved in his room. But the contrast in confidence between the boy in the introduction and the one in the finale makes the personal growth and changes he undergoes due to the events of the movie all that more obvious.

Miles is soon removed from the contentment of his private space by his parents calling him down to head to his new school and get settled in the dorms. He has to remove his preferred clothes and literally “change out” of his comfort zone, in order to put on a prep school uniform. It is clear that Miles has not packed yet to move into his school, as he is not ready or willing to make the change. The rush around to do so further highlights his change from a space where he is comfortable with himself into the unfamiliar and fast-paced environment of his new school, Visions Preparatory Academy.

On the walk to the Academy, Miles passes his former school

2 See Lefèvre, Pascal. “The construction of space in comics.” *A Comics Studies Reader*, 6 Nov. 2008, pp. 157–162, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2tvd9s.21>.

where we see Miles switch between different identities, different masks, in response to interacting with different groups. In his stiff prep-school uniform, Miles walks through crowds of his plain-clothed former classmates. He is clearly familiar and confident around them. He speaks to several different “types” of students: he has a conversation with one in Spanish, he exchanges a secret handshake and passes around a basketball with others, and finally he talks to a girl with pink hair who says that everyone at Brooklyn Middle School will miss him. Miles replies, “You miss me? I still live here!” (00:03:59). It is clear that, despite these students being a part of his local peer group and Miles being comfortable and confident among them, he is now considered to be something of an outsider in this community. This transfer into a new identity is visually cued to the audience via the fancy Visions Preparatory Academy uniform. Miles walks through the space that represents his old identity in order to travel to a space that represents his new one. But just as he no longer fits amongst his old schoolmates, Miles doesn’t quite fit in with the new ones either.

Eventually, Miles is picked up

by his father in his police cruiser, an effort made to ensure Miles makes it to his new school despite his reluctance. In a line that culminates his feelings on the move, Miles says to his father, “I would prefer to be at a normal school among the people.” His father responds, “The people?” These *are* your people.” (00:05:36). Despite his father’s hopes and assurances, as Miles walks into his new school he is visibly excluded from the many groups of students who are to be his new peers. They all look out at him from closed circles. Miles doesn’t seem to fit in socially, not to mention how overwhelming Miles finds the content and speed of the school’s curriculum. He is completely off balance, displaced both physically and socially from spaces where he was comfortable and confident. Despite ostensibly being in a place where he should be among “his people,” Miles is the odd one out. This is a theme we see repeated again when Miles is among the other Spider-People later in the movie.

In order to escape the pressures placed on him at Visions Preparatory Academy, Miles sneaks out of his dorm to go visit his uncle’s apartment. It is implied that Miles is not supposed to be in

contact with this family member, as Miles's father disapproves of him and because Aaron is involved with some criminal or "shady" business. His uncle's apartment is another space where Miles is comfortable. Differing from his bedroom where the comfort comes from being unobserved in his own personal space, this comfort stems from how clearly Miles feels that his Uncle Aaron understands him as a person and how much he looks up to the man as a role model. It is clear that Miles, being 13 years old, thinks that his suave Uncle Aaron is extremely cool and tries to imitate his relaxed confidence. We see one of the first major clashes of Miles's personal identities and a somewhat secret one in this scene, as well. Miles gets a text from his dad reminding him that he should be working on his homework, which is the embodiment of the version of himself that his parents want him to be. If that identity had to be put into words: Miles the diligent student and successful son. Uncle Aaron, seeing that Miles is distressed by this reminder of his responsibilities, asks to see Miles's art and then takes him to throw it up in an abandoned maintenance tunnel after a bit of breaking and entering. This version of Miles is his identity as

an artist and rebellious teenager. It is quite literally because of this clash of identities—because Miles is trying to escape the stress of embodying an ill-fitting role—that he gains his Spider-Man powers in the first place. The inciting incident of being bitten by the radioactive spider that is central to all Spider-Man narratives happens because he can no longer sustain the pressure of being someone he is not, hence his choice to go with his uncle into that maintenance tunnel. It is also relevant that this momentous change happens in the company of someone who constantly encourages Miles to be himself, who "see[s] exactly what.. [he] is doing here" (00:12:42) and sees the "real Miles...coming out of hiding" (00:12:10). Miles's placement at this intersection of two identities is what gives him the opportunity to gain his superpowers. He is a person at a transitional point, which uniquely gives him opportunities to branch off onto new paths outside of the narrative that has been set for him by the world.

Mutation as a Manifestation of Change

Gaining superpowers causes immediate physical changes in Miles. He seemingly grows several

inches overnight, and his perception of the world is literally altered by his heightened senses. Sounds, such as the volume of his internal thoughts and the gossip of his classmates, grow overwhelmingly loud. He is hyperaware of every minute change in facial expression of anyone he passes, and starts to sweat profusely, seemingly without reason. He also gains his “sticky-ness” (a classic Spider-Man ability) finding himself able to crawl on walls and stick to things even when he does not necessarily want to. Like his move to the new school, Miles has been forced to grapple with being thrust into a new space and new identity without his consent and must now find a way to exist while still holding onto aspects of his former life. Bhabha argues that the future of identity will not be organized around individual labels, but instead understood as a single entity that encompasses all parts of an individual’s identity simultaneously; the transformation from kid to superhero forces Miles to undergo this kind of change in identity perception for himself. He can no longer move between different identities with different people or in different spaces, but must find a way to exist while

grappling with all facets of himself at once.

After receiving his powers, Miles then meets what will be the first of many Spider-Men, his universe’s Peter Parker. This Spider-Man is your traditional confident, quippy superhero, and has been serving as the city’s web-slinging hero for almost a decade at that point. It is important to look at how Spider-Man’s physicality, his movements on screen, are depicted, as the hero’s movements are directly connected to his comfort and confidence in himself. As Scott Richmond put it in his article, “How to Look at Superheroes: Ilinx, Identification and Spider-Man,” the fluidity and dynamism of Spider-Man’s movements are indicative of the level of self-actualization, confidence, and comfort in their own skin that that specific Spider-Man has reached in his personal life. We see several other instances of Spider-Men who consistently move fluidly and with confidence, especially visible when they swing through the city via their webs and during fight sequences. With the exception of Miles, all other versions of Spider-Man we meet in this movie are shown to be extremely competent in their abilities. However, until the

moment Miles is able to become his own unique Spider-Man by infusing the persona with elements of his own personality and preferences, Miles remains somewhat of a bumbling hero physically. He does not have any immediate instincts for how to fight crime, and his attempts to try to emulate his idea of what a hero should be results in him falling off a building and breaking an important device that is needed to defeat the movie's villain. He doesn't know how to web-swing, which is showcased when he meets his first Spider-Man from an alternate dimension and he attempts to swing away to escape the police; he runs into buildings, cars, people, trains, and a snowman, respectively. He is uncertain, both with who he is as an individual and who he is as a hero, and that shows in his movements on screen. This lack of coordination and control over his enhanced body connects directly to Miles being the only Spider-Person in the film who has yet to find a balance between his identities as a civilian and as a hero.

Miles also has an entirely different powerset from other Spider-People, being able to turn invisible and electrocute people alongside the traditionally enhanced strength and senses. He doesn't

even have his own costume, having to get by with an ill-fitting, cheap imitation of the classic red and white Spider-Man costume that he bought from a department store. To be fair to Miles, he has only had his powers for two days at this point, but it is still a noticeable difference when compared to the other Spider-People he meets, each of whom has a professional and unique costume of their own. Miles tries desperately to reach the competence levels of these other Spider-People, trying to fit himself into his idea of what Spider-Man needs to be. There is a comedic beat in the movie where Miles copies the contemplative pose of one of the other Spider-Men, as if doing so will help him be a better hero (00:45:44). Only after Miles works to play to his own strengths, using his invisibility and trusting in himself, is he able to assist in saving the day. Rather than trying to copy what he thinks Spider-Man should be, Miles succeeds because he finds a way to combine aspects of his personal identity with the hero identity.

Following the paths other Spider-Men have taken will not work for Miles, as he is a unique person separate from them. The role of the original Peter Parker's Spider-Man will always be an

ill-fitting costume on Miles, both literally and as an identity Miles unsuccessfully tries to live up to. This mirrors Bhabha's argument that sticking to a single identity is not only impossible, but also actively harmful to the individual who tries it. The conflict that results from the clash of Miles's multiple identities and his inability to fit the mold of Spider-Man prevents him from defeating the antagonist of the movie. It is a matter of literal life and death, where Miles's success as Spider-Man will decide whether or not one of the Spider-people will have to sacrifice themselves.

The "glitching out" that the non-native Spider-People suffer from functions as another example of Bhabha's warning about the negative effects of trying to force yourself into an identity that does not fit. The explanation given for the glitching is that the foreign Spider-People's "atoms are [not] real jizzed about being in the wrong dimension" (00:42:05). They literally cannot exist in an ill-fitting universe and are being physically rejected from it. This conflict also serves as a central motivation for Miles to gain control over being Spider-Man quickly, since, along with defeating the villain of the movie, if Miles cannot master his

role one of the foreign Spider-People will have to stay behind in Miles's dimension and see their own life come to a painful end.

A Leap Into The Beyond

A repeating motif in this movie is having to take "a leap of faith" in order to progress as Spider-Man. This applies to the hero's ability to web swing through the city, his primary mode of transportation and fighting technique. It also applies both to Miles's skill with his powers and Miles's personal growth in his civilian life. For Miles, his success as Spider-Man, and as a person, depends on his tolerance for the unknown and his willingness to jump into that unknown toward an uncertain future. It is interesting that the movie phrases it as a "leap," as it mirrors Homi Bhabha's thoughts about how the future of identity should be approached in the modern era. Though he puts it through the lens of dealing with cultural differences, some of the wording of his explanation feels uncannily close to the motifs of the movie, especially his use of "beyond" and "movement":

Social differences are not simply given to experience through already authenticated cultural tradition; they are

the signs of the emergence of community envisaged as a project—at once a vision and a construction—that takes you “beyond” yourself in order to return, in a spirit of revision and reconstruction to the political condition of the present.

(Bhabha)

Bhabha is saying that existing in the boundary between identities and leaping to a point beyond them is key to progress. Miles leaps beyond the uncertainties of his abilities as a hero and the uncertainties of his worthiness to take up the mantle of Spider-Man for himself. Miles’ leap takes him into the future where he is able to beat the bad guy, use his powers with confidence, and save the day, all in one fell swoop.

The Costume

Visually, Miles’s Spider-Suit becomes strikingly different from the other Spider-People he meets, in order to better reflect elements of his personal identity onto his superhero identity. As mentioned previously, there is already the original, traditional Spider-Man existing in Miles’s universe. He wears the classic red and blue spandex suit with black webbing details and white, expressive eyes that audiences are familiar

with. This is what the costume of Spider-Man that Miles wears at the beginning of the movie is based on, which was sold in a costume shop along with other merchandise for his universe’s first Spider-Man, Peter Parker. Miles dons the costume of another Spider-Man, only to find the outfit ill-fitting. Despite being assured “it always fits, eventually,” copying the identity of someone else does not help him to become a better hero. (00:32:16). The next Spider-Man costume we see is the costume of Peter B. Parker, a version of the previously mentioned Peter Parker, from an alternate universe. This costume is very similar to the traditional Spider-Man costume; however this Spider-Man is going through what basically amounts to a midlife crisis, so not only is this Spider-Man noticeably chubbier and less muscular, but he is also often wearing sweatpants over his costume. This trend of the Spider-Man costume reflecting the wearer continues with every subsequent Spider-Person Miles’s meets: Gwen’s Spider-Woman costume includes ballet shoes, Spider-Noir’s costume is in monochrome black and includes a fedora and trenchcoat, and even Spider-Pig’s costume has white nose holes

resembling the traditional white eye holes to better express the fact that he is literally a pig under the mask. It is clear that the details of what each hero wears nods to aspects of their identities outside of Spider-Man. The costume is not just the person under the mask, nor is it just the mantle of the hero it represents: it is a combination of both. It is something that surpasses the strength of either identity on its own. That is why it is only when Miles spray paints the classic red and white Spider-Man suit over, creating a version that is almost entirely black except for some red spraypainted accents, that he gains a hold on his abilities and can save the day. This suit is Miles and Spider-Man as one. When he accepts all parts of his identity and merges them into this new version of Spider-Man unique to himself, Miles is finally able to competently use his powers, save the other Spider-People, and defeat the villain to save the city as its new hero.

Conclusion

Miles holds several identities, even before he gains his powers as Spider-Man. He wears the mask of a dutiful son, a student at a prestigious preparatory academy,

a precocious artist fond of graffiti, and a likeable peer to his old friends at Brooklyn Middle. But none of them seem to exist at the same time and Miles cannot seem to fit comfortably into one. Even in the extraordinary circumstance of gaining superpowers, Miles remains out of place as he doesn't quite fit among the rest of the Spider-People due to his lack of experience as a hero. It is only when Miles blends facets of all his identities together, becoming a Spider-Man that is unique to himself, that he can find success, not only as a hero, but in balancing aspects of his personal life. He is shown to perform better at school, both socially and academically, and he has a better relationship with his family.

The conclusion of the movie places us back where we began, in Miles's bedroom where he is free to be himself, but even at this moment he seems more relaxed and at ease than at the beginning of the movie. He lies in his bed, smiling with his arms crossed behind his head. When Spider-Gwen calls out to him through a portal. Instead of being daunted by his call to action as Spider-Man, Miles looks ready to meet his destiny head on. Unlike at the beginning of the movie, he is not forced out of this comfortable

space; he exits it willingly.

Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse is a movie all about striking a balance between different spaces, both the multi-verse, where several instances of Spider-Man seem to exist alongside each other, and also in the civilian realm, as Miles juggles several different identities he holds through different spaces. Through the lens of Bhabha's ideas about spatial identity, Miles appears the perfect example of a person who has taken the leap into the unknown, beyond the need for labels and single identities. It seems especially fitting that the final installment in the franchise, set to release in 2027, will be titled *Spider-Man: Beyond the Spider-Verse*. The intersectionality of Miles's multiple identities, the masks he wears both as Spider-Man and as a civilian, allows him to be happier and more fulfilled. As Bhabha predicted, Miles's journey to self-actualization succeeds because he takes that leap of faith into the unknown, into the "beyond."

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