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Facing Symbolic Violence *A Cruel Tale of Competitive University Admissions*

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Abstract

In this text, I offer a critical account of the Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR) – a competitive university admissions ranking system – and its impact on historically underrepresented youths’ aspirations toward higher education. Based on case notes recorded over three academic years, I present a fictionalised ethnography of my experiences as an academic advisor in Mount Druitt – a suburb in Western Sydney – on a day when ATARs were allocated to prospective university entrants. Centred on my interactions with five students, this narrative discloses a world of experiences usually hidden from view, foregrounding the irreducible human suffering that dwells in the gap between policy slogans of “raising aspiration” toward higher education in Australia and the prevalent symbolic violence of the education system, a suffering represented by the faces of the young people who bear it.



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Being There

To travel from Sydney's Central Business District to Mount Druitt is to traverse different worlds. The portal between these worlds is the sharp right-hand turn from Sydney's perpetually clogged pulmonary artery – Parramatta Road – onto the creatively named M4 (i.e. Motorway 4). From this point, one is venturing where many who live in Sydney's east and north fear to tread: the western suburbs; the “wild west” where the “bogan [i.e. unsophisticated] westies” live (see Gwyther, 2008; Gibson, 2013).

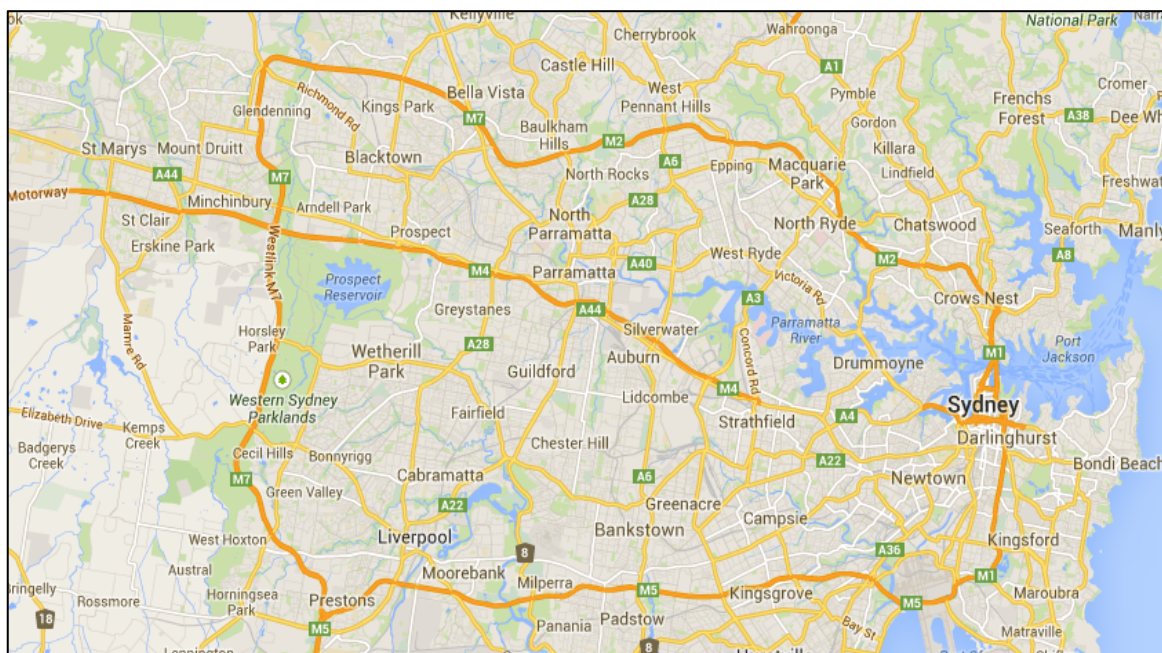


Figure 1: Map of Sydney (Source: Google Maps, 2014)

The cleavage that divides Sydney into two is marked by various social and cultural forces like class, race and lifestyle (see respectively, Pini, McDonald & Mayes, 2012; Nelson, 2014; Gwyther, 2008a). To travel eastward is to encounter all that is popularly represented and promoted both domestically and internationally as “Sydney” *per se* – the harbour, the Opera House, the Harbour Bridge that connects the centre to the north. This is the Sydney of cosmopolitan pleasures, of wine bars, film festivals and fireworks displays, of sandy beaches and hot bodies. To travel in the opposite direction is to leave *this* Sydney and the familiarity of those postcard landmarks for another. No wonder it is treated in the popular belief of its easterly inhabitants as a cultural wasteland (MacDonald, 2005, p.29; cf. Lally & Lee-Shoy, 2005).

It has also been said that in this vast westerly wasteland lie particularly dark places where “barbarians” dwell (see Bolt, 2010). Mount Druitt, 43km west of Sydney's CBD, is one of those places. The controversial far-right columnist of the *Herald Sun* and the *Daily Telegraph* Andrew Bolt (2010), for example, uses Mount Druitt in an illustration en route to an argument about the criminality of certain migrant populations. Yet despite his extreme views, Bolt does not stand alone in characterising Mount Druitt as an exemplary case of social failure. A cursory search on the internet using the keywords “Mount Druitt news” will uncover a slew of reports across the media spectrum about a chronically disadvantaged neighbourhood with “toxic effects” on those who live there (“Pick Your Neighbours with

Care,” 2004); a region beset by violent crime (e.g. Danks, 2011; Howden & Ralston, 2011; Gardiner, 2012) and outlaw gang activity (Coote, Cuneo & Klein, 2012; “‘Bikie links’ to torched industrial unit,” 2011). While popular media representations of Sydney’s east include the idyllic closing scenes of John Woo’s *Mission: Impossible II* and the obligatory shots of Sydney Harbour or Bondi Beach in Australian tourism advertisements, Mount Druitt is characterised (or caricatured) in stories depicting violent youth criminality and by *Struggle Street*, a documentary series depicting its residents as a troupe of bogans who are drug-addled, unemployed or underemployed, lazy and irresponsible (see Threadgold, 2015).

I was in the final weeks of my PhD candidature in 2012 when I happened upon a job advertisement for an academic advisor and project officer for the Mount Druitt University Hub project. The stated mission of this project, which was based on a partnership between a university and a senior high school in Mount Druitt was to raise awareness about higher education in the region with a view to increasing the participation rates of its young residents at universities. It was around that time that the Australian Government’s drive to “raise aspirations” of low socioeconomic status (SES) students to seek higher education was picking up some momentum (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, pp.13-14). This was undergirded by a policy imperative to expanded higher education attainment for the population as a whole – including an enrolment target for low SES students of 20 per cent (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, pp.13-14).

Before I arrived here on my first day, my experiences were a world away. I had, however, plenty of training, so I felt confident that I was up to the task of working in an area that didn’t figure highly in measures of educational attainment. Armed with numerous theoretical frames learnt from books – what Foucault characterised as ‘little toolboxes’ (cited in McLaren, 2009, p.1) – I arrived in Mount Druitt in mid-2012. Neither being familiar with the area nor what people in the area thought about higher education, I had always made it a point to seek to understand the experiences of those who lived in the area before promoting various options for further study. For although I knew of the many benefits higher education had brought for me personally, as well as the statistics on the average earnings of those with Bachelor’s degrees over those without (e.g. see Cohn & Addison, 1998), I never quite believed the message that university was the panacea for social ills. Perhaps this was because in my postgraduate studies, I had read Wolf’s (2002) compelling argument on the economic improbability of education as a solution to social inequality and Brown, Lauder and Ashton’s (2010, p.7) *exposé* on the ‘reverse auction’ for wages amongst degree holders worldwide. In the back of my mind, the notion of using education as a “fix” for society’s ills seemed to be putting the cart before the horse.

Nevertheless, when a university education was sought in earnest – as it was for hundreds who came through my office door in my time as an academic advisor from 2012-2014 – I did everything I could to facilitate their applications. I quickly realised when speaking to the young people of Mount Druitt was that there was no shortage of desire for higher education, and that despite much being made in higher education and Government discourse on “building aspiration” toward university (e.g. see Bridges to Higher Education, 2012), aspirations seemed high prior to my arrival. What was needed was assistance with *accessing* higher education, which for young people completing high school in Mount Druitt, like everywhere else in Australia, was determined by their Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR).

The ATAR

The ATAR is used to rank most school leaver applicants in Australia with the exception of students in the state of Queensland (University Admissions Centre [UAC], 2009, p.1). Derived from the academic performance of high school students in the final year of their matriculation – for example, the Higher School Certificate (HSC) program in the state of New South Wales (NSW) – and processed via a mathematically complicated algorithm, the ATAR is a single number derived from a comparison of student results from across different subjects:

The Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) is a numerical measure of a student's overall academic achievement in the HSC in relation to that of other students. The ATAR is reported as a number between 0 and 99.95 in increments of 0.05. This measure allows the overall achievement of students who have completed different combinations of HSC courses to be compared. (UAC, 2009, p.6)

When described as such, one is immediately struck by the “magic” of this method whereby a multiplicity of qualitative differences such as individual subject combinations and strengths, extra-curricular activities, familial, social and cultural backgrounds, not to mention the varied experiences accumulated over two years of life, are distilled into a single number in competition with others along a single scale. For me, it always brings to mind Adorno and Horkheimer's (1997, p.7) characterisation of contemporary “enlightened” societies that make “the dissimilar comparable by reducing it to abstract quantities. To the enlightenment, that which does not reduce to numbers, and ultimately to the one, becomes illusion.” The ATAR as the fulfilment of the Baconian dream of *una scientia universalis*. And its justification?

Tertiary institutions are concerned with ranking school leaver applicants. From their perspective, the importance of HSC marks is that they convey information about a student's position in relation to other students. (UAC, 2009, p.8)

Now perhaps there is nothing new here to be commented on. After all, is the ATAR not merely the descendent of long line of matriculation rankings in Australia with acronyms like TES (Tertiary Entrance Score), TER (Tertiary Entrance Rank), ENTER (Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Rank) and UAI (University Admissions Index) that have terrorised generations of prospective university entrants? As Meadmore (1995, p. 17) points out, Australian States have since the mid-19th century been involved directly with the governing of school populations through the technical means afforded by the examination (also Goodman, 1968). In addition, have there not been numerous education scholars who have critiqued the operations of such a system from different angles? For example, Hodge, McCormick and Elliott (1997) have pointed to the psychological distress caused by the high-stakes nature of Australian matriculation processes with some evidence of its higher incidence amongst female students and those from a lower socioeconomic status background and non-English speaking backgrounds. Dobson and Skuja (2005), from the university angle, have highlighted the inaccuracies of competitive admissions rankings for determining success and the skewing of the numerical score towards schools with higher socioeconomic status students. All these findings are encapsulated in the work of Richard Teese (2000; with Poelsel, 2003), whose damning critique of competitive university admissions rankings were buttressed by large amounts of quantitative data charting how students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds correlated with poor ranking outcomes owing to a lack of

access to resources at school and hence, with little access to high prestige universities and courses. On the ATAR, he argues:

ATAR parades as the mark of an individual's gifts and hard work. But students owe much to their schools. The greater the academic training, individual support and organisation, the higher the ATAR. Students attending well-resourced, mainly private schools have an advantage in their access to “hard options”, marks and ATARs. (Teese, 2015)

Knowing Symbolic Violence

I had encountered Teese's *Academic Success and Social Power: Examinations and Inequality* (2000) and *Undemocratic Schooling* (2003) when I was undergoing teacher education over a decade ago, so I knew what effect socioeconomic status, non-English speaking backgrounds and other factors would have on the ATARs of the young people I worked with in Mount Druitt. During the course of my teacher training and postgraduate studies I had also read the work of Pierre Bourdieu, from whom Teese had derived his theoretical framework. Bourdieu's work was difficult to penetrate, but from the textual density of his writing came a battery of concepts that seemed to explain some of the more pernicious operations of an unequal society, not least the function of schooling and examinations in reproducing patterns of social stratification. Within weeks of beginning work in Mount Druitt, I had already delved into my toolbox to retrieve Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, cultural capital and the educational field to explain to students, teachers, parents and anyone who would listen how systemic factors disadvantaged prospective university entrants from Mount Druitt. Yet despite my intellectual facility with critical educational scholarship, the experiences of being in Mount Druitt on those days in December when students received their ATARs left me disarmed.

I cannot help but feel an intense disliking for those late-December days. Each year, I would sit in my office in Mount Druitt as students received their ATARs from the UAC and either rushed to see me in person or attempted to contact me via the phone or email. By the final minutes of those days, as I lay in bed reviewing the day's occurrences with the clock edging towards midnight, I could count close to a hundred requests for advice in response to ATARs, the tones of which were largely of confusion, panic or depression. It was upon reflection on those days and the young people I had encountered over the course of three years that I picked up on another of Bourdieu's concepts: symbolic violence.

Symbolic violence, according to Bourdieu, is the imposition of systems of meaning and value upon groups in such a way that they are experienced as legitimate (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p.4). It is violence which is exercised upon individuals in a “symbolic” (*contra* physical) way because it usually takes the form of certain people being denied access, treated as inferior or being limited because of the mismatch between their aspirations and “reality” (Webb, Schirato & Danaher, 2002, p.xvi). The legitimacy of such systems obscure the power relations which permit that imposition to be successful. In the education system, the exercise of symbolic violence is conducted through “pedagogic action” such as teaching and discipline, which represents the imposition of particular cultural norms over others (Jenkins, 2002, p.105). However, pedagogic action acquires its power from what Bourdieu calls “pedagogic authority,” which denotes an institutional authority that underwrites the inculcation of particular meanings and values. This authority is commonly accepted as technically competent to evaluate students and distribute “goods” like certificates, awards and indeed, academic rankings. As Jenkins (2002, p.106) explains: “Pedagogic authority becomes more legitimate when the sanctions which it has at its disposal are confirmed, in any given

collectivity, by the market in which the value of the products of the pedagogic action concerned is determined.” In other words, the pedagogic authority of an institution like the UAC is stronger where the ‘products’ it distributes – in this case, the ATAR – is taken to be valuable (e.g. for the purposes of gaining entry into universities and courses of choice). In turn, this pedagogic authority buttresses pedagogic action, which inculcates such cultural meanings and values in students as the need to attend university as a means to a more prosperous life.

Yet again, didn’t I already know the theory of symbolic violence? Had the work of Bourdieu not been sufficient to teach me that symbolic violence is a characteristic of education systems everywhere, and the work of Teese not adequate to prove that this systemic violence occurs in Australia most evidently amongst students from low socioeconomic status and non-English speaking backgrounds? Yes, I did already know these things even before I arrived in Mount Druitt. What I did not know, or rather could not yet see, were the faces of those whom the ATAR machine had done violence to.

Facing Symbolic Violence

According to moral philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, to see the face of another “is present in its refusal to be contained” and hence “overflows images” (Levinas, 1979, pp.194, 297). In other words, to see the face of another person is to be struck by the fact that the other person is exposed to me and expresses her or himself simply by being there is an undeniable reality, one that exceeds the preconceptions of them I may have had prior to the encounter (Critchley, 2002, p.16). The other person is, of course, present in other ways such as through speech, gesture, action or bodily presence as a whole, “but the face is the most exposed, most vulnerable, and most expressive aspect of the other’s presence” (Young, n.d., p.1). While Levinas’s referent is the encounter with the face of the other in a physical sense, it is important to emphasise that the face extends beyond that. The other is not necessarily a set of physical features in close proximity, but rather the means by which the other reveals themselves to the self, which lends itself to an extension to encounters in online and virtual spaces (Sandry, 2014, p.2; Levinas 1979, pp.79-81). Therefore, according to Sandry (2014, p.6), the Levinasian face can be understood as something “more transcendent than physical, which encapsulates all the various ways that the other can reveal aspects of their personality to the self.”

Being there in Mount Druitt on those late-December days and encountering the faces of those that had been impacted by the efficient algorithmic ATAR sorting machine was personally confronting. If the face, following Levinas (1979, p.200), is that which best expresses the being of others and in so doing, “imposes itself, but does so precisely by appealing to me with its destitution and nudity... without my being able to be deaf to that appeal”, then the discomfort I felt was proportionate to my inability to effectively respond to their appeals for help. In the midst of my helplessness regarding *their* pain, I got to see what I had hitherto not seen about the symbolic violence: the young people, embodied beings of flesh, blood, feelings and aspirations, who were its fodder.

To make this point about the faces of particular young people is to remind us that there is an irreducible suffering that dwells in the gap between totalising policy slogans of “raising aspiration” toward higher education and the prevalent symbolic violence in the education system. It also seeks to affirm the subjectivity and agency of those caught in this gap. For despite its statistical proofs and perspicacity, Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic violence can lead to individuals being read as hapless victims under the weight of prevailing structural arrangements, leaving little room for political change (see Jenkins, 1982; also Ranciere in

Bingham & Biesta, 2010, pp. 10-11). By contrast, for Levinas (1979), “the face speaks” (p.66) and by speaking, interrupts all totalising systems and ways of comprehension by demanding from us an ethical commitment and response.

At the same time, I acknowledge that the words I deploy will inevitably be inadequate to represent my own lived realities, let alone those young people I have known. It is, nevertheless, an attempt to write from the field in a way that is “adequate to the situation” (Taussig, 2010). Rorty (1989) elaborates this rationale well:

[D]etailed descriptions of particular varieties of pain and humiliation in, for example, novels or ethnographies rather than philosophical or religious treatises [are the] modern intellectual's principal contributions to moral progress... Such books help us to see how social practices we have taken for granted have made us cruel. (pp.192, 141)

In what follows, then, I will offer a fictionalised ethnography of a late-December day when ATARs were released, interspersing my own observations and thoughts with the stories of five composite characters based on multiple, spliced cases of actual persons. There is thus a dual condensation I have deployed in crafting this narrative: firstly, by representing the students I have encountered over three years in the figures of Jay, Arlene, Ahmed, Beatrice and Karl; and secondly, by crystallising three years of late-December days within the narrative of a single late-December day in Mount Druitt when ATARs were released. In so doing, I am unashamedly seeking to make an ethical and political point by putting speaking faces on those “absent Others” (Sparkes, 1997) who are the objects of symbolic violence, inviting those who read it to respond. As Humphreys and Watson (2009, p.43) have pointed out, the “truth” value of such a fictionalised ethnography lies in its ability to inform practice. I have, as can be expected, assigned each character pseudonyms and interwoven details from multiple cases to protect the identities of individuals. Nonetheless, despite being fictional, theirs are stories that could be true as they derive from real people with real histories, real events, real emotions expressed in real conversations and indeed, with real faces (see Davis & Ellis, 2008). Such a method of fictionalisation, as Clough (2002) explains:

[O]ffers researchers the opportunity to import fragments of data from various real events in order to speak to the heart of social consciousness – thus providing the protection of anonymity to the research participants without stripping away the rawness of real happenings. (p.8)

This sensibility runs closely with a strand of ethnography exemplified in the impressionistic storytelling of James Clifford, Michael Jackson and Michael Taussig. For Clifford (1986, p.6), ethnographies are “fictions” not in the sense of being untrue, but because of the partiality of all cultural and historical truths; given that all writing is a systematic and exclusive rendering of reality, ethnographic writings should be properly regarded as fictions in the sense of “something made or fashioned”. This foregrounds the process of writing as always already deliberate, creative and partial. Jackson (2013, p.14) concurs on this, drawing on a pragmatist view of storytelling to suggest that: “All stories are, in a sense untrue. They rearrange and transform our experiences. But these arrangements, like the essays and explanatory models we produce in the academy, may serve very different interests.” The apogee of this sensibility can arguably be seen in the work of Taussig (e.g. 1997, 2012), who freely mixes fictional and non-fictional elements in his ethnographic writings to produce stories that are at once insightful and fantastical. Rather than seek to pass off his stories as more “real” or “objective,” he foregrounds the creativity of writing by pointing out that:

If you assume, as I do, that reality is really made up, then you are automatically launched into this wild project conflating fiction and non-fiction. The only choice you've got is whether to acknowledge this or not, whether you will exploit the joints and seams, or not, and whether you will allow the sheer act of writing itself to seem a self-conscious activity... (Taussig & Strauss, 2005)

In this vein, I have chosen to use a fictionalised ethnography as a rhetorical device for communicating the situation because of its potential for “bringing to life” experiences traditionally conceived of as hard to articulate (Clough, 2002, p.15). Here, in the context of the seemingly unstoppable ATAR machine and its impact on young people’s aspirations in Mount Druitt, I am reminded of De Certeau’s (1980, p.42) characterisation of stories as “intense singularities” that erupt “noiselessly and surreptitiously” within the very scene where technical rationalities are dominant. For the reader, then, such stories also offer a “portal” through those ruptures into different worlds of experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2006, p. 375). Ultimately, however, it remains a self-narrative encompassing my impressions of other people’s stories (see Hayler, 2011, pp.5-31). It is, in short, an attempt to restage my encounter with the young people of Mount Druitt, how they appeared to experience receiving their ATARs, and how it felt for me to face them.

That Late-December day

Jay

“Do you really think it’s true, that I can go to uni?” the stocky teenager quizzed.

“Why not?” I responded in my usual affirming manner albeit overlain with a mild irritation with the heat. “If you are willing to put in the effort, I don’t see why not.”

I first met Jay when he knocked on the door of my office on a blisteringly hot summer afternoon and I must admit, he did not strike me immediately as the scholarly type. (Yet, as I often counter to myself, what does the “scholarly type” even look like these days anyway?) Jay slumped down on one of the seats in my office upon invitation to enter, his uniform slightly dishevelled and sweaty from six gruelling hours of a school day edging forty degrees Celsius. Yet it appeared that the vagaries of school and the scorcher were not enough to wear away his cheeky smile. This small sign of defiance lifted my deteriorating energy levels towards the end of a workday, one burdened with the additional task of avoiding the assault of unbearable heat. I sat two seats away in my usual spot: an old camping chair flanking my office bookshelf. Strange I know, but it was comfortable. From there, settling into a familiar position, I launched into my usual line of inquiry.

“So, tell me what you are interested in doing when this is all done?”

“I want to do something in business.” Jay was quick to respond.

“Cool.” I affirmed instinctively, although I remember thinking about the irony of this oft-used word in the sweltering Australian summer. I wanted to probe a little further for the purpose of clarifying both for myself and Jay the influences that may have led him to this realisation about business: “So how did you come to be interested in this?”

“Well, I do Business Studies at the moment and I really enjoy it and I’m not bad at it. So, yeah, I thought it would be good to keep going on that. My dream is to start my own business, ay.”

“Great! The main thing is that you enjoy it, you feel challenged and you feel that it’s what you want to pursue.” I sounded like a parody of a stereotypical humanistic psychotherapist, if indeed such a stereotype existed.

Jay and I sat there for the next forty minutes discussing the details of the types of undergraduate business courses available at universities across the Sydney region and their relative merits, not least the ATAR cut-offs for entry for the previous year. What did Jay expect to achieve in this regard?

“I reckon I’ll get around 60 to 70.” He opined. “My marks at the moment are around that, so I’m hoping I’ll get that.”

Over the next nine months, Jay would be a familiar face in my office, dropping in about once a fortnight to chat about university life. Often, Jay would turn up with friends in an attempt to urge them to think about applying to university too. His ever-present grin made me feel like we were running some sort of conspiratorial scheme.

“Nah, I don’t want to be a loner at uni sitting there all by myself!” He explained of his evangelical zeal in the presence of about five friends who he’d brought to my office in the hope that I would encourage them to also seek out a path in higher education. “And plus it looks like it’ll be heaps good.” I found this particularly surprising and heartening in equal measure, especially considering that no one else in Jay’s family had much contact with higher education beyond the popular television sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*.

In the time of Jay’s frequent visits, I also learnt more about his family background. Jay is the youngest of three children of parents who fled Iraq in the wake of the sectarian violence following the Second Gulf War. His family had received numerous death threats after the fall of Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein, which they strongly attributed to their identity as Chaldean Christians. After spending two years in a Syria as refugees, Jay’s family were finally resettled in Australia. Less than three years later, Jay would be a completing high school and applying for university admission, much to the delight of his family.

“My parents are just happy that I’m thinking about going to uni. They think it will give me a better life than theirs. I have heaps of cousins who just don’t do anything. So maybe if I go to uni, they will see that it is something they also want to get into.”

At 9.11am on that late-December day, Jay walked into my office and slumped down on the chair that he had since made his own from that first day. He looked sullen. The cheeky smile was no longer there.

“I got mostly 60 plus and one 70. So when I got my HSC results yesterday, I was cheerin. Nek minnit, ATAR 39. I’m sorry man, I don’t think I’m going to uni anymore.”

The words hung in the air for a moment, but in my thoughts they weighed like a millstone around my neck. Perhaps I felt the weight of the situation because Jay felt the need to apologise to me. To me! Should I not be the one apologising to him? I felt a strange shame in that moment as we both sat in our familiar places, as if I were responsible for his ATAR, as if I had enjoined him to undertake an impossible quest, as if I had by my very presence woven unrealisable aspirations for him that amounted to what Lauren Berlant (2011) has termed “cruel optimism.” And yet he apologised to me.

Arlene

Arlene walked into my office not 10 minutes after Jay left. Her anxiety had obviously taken over by then.

“Shiiiiit, what am I going to do?” She asked through the mass of blonde hair that partially obscured her face.

Precocious and disposed to being hopeful despite her life experiences, for Arlene higher education seemed a sort of golden ticket to a better life.

“I really want to go to uni. I don't want to be like some of my friends who just hang around doing nothing all day.” Arlene declared that first time she walked into my office. “I want to study psychology to work out why so many people are so fucked up, and then I want to study law so that they get less fucked up. I mean, it would be alright money too, right?”

I remember being unable to repress a smile on hearing about her motivations for pursuing university admission. The public image of Western Sydney will one day be kicked down by people like her, I hoped.

“If it all works out and that's what you decide to do, I'm sure you'll be in a good position to work out the money stuff.” I had my doubts about the oft-propounded correlation between quantities of higher education and income, but heck, I did not feel like it was the appropriate time or place to be discussing economist Alison Wolf's (2002) compelling analyses of the vagaries of certificates as positional goods in the labour market or graduate unemployment. Surely, I figured, Arlene's aspiration for further study did not hurt.

“Good!” She asserted with a mixture of relief and delight. “Because I don't want to be one of those girls who relies on her boyfriend. That's so ratchet. And they treat you like shit.”

“I'm sure you'll be fine, Arlene. You'll be ok.” I tried to be reassuring. One of the apparent side effects of Arlene's formidably imaginative mind combined with her life experiences in disappointment was the intense anxiety that dogged her, visible only occasionally in the momentary gaps that appeared in her usually strong, assertive persona.

Arlene did not seem ok on the morning of that late-December day and clearly, her anxiety had been raised to such an intensity that the gaps had been torn agape, the steely young woman who had sought my assistance (*not* help) over the past 8 months was now rendered unstable by a few numbers that had so perforated her mettle. I could tell by her red, tired eyes that she had been crying.

“Really, help me.” Asked the young woman who now pleaded for my help. She seemed desperate and I couldn't help but feel confronted by an unfamiliar person.

“Of course.” I reassured her.

“I was cheering last night because I thought my HSC results were good. I got 60 plus and 70 plus for all my subjects plus 80 plus in Legal Studies. I was stoked.”

“And you should be. They are good results.”

“But then I checked my ATAR this morning and I got 50.5.”

I moved quickly to encourage her. “That's ok, Arlene. We can work out some options with that ATAR. It's actually not that bad you know?”

“Yeah, whatever.” She declared in a manner briefly reminiscent of the confident, pre-ATAR Arlene. “I tried so hard. And for what?” She continued. “Even if I get into uni, I'm not

going to get into the course I want. And even if I somehow get in, I'm going to be the biggest dumb-arse there."

"Really? You think so?" I asked in a way that didn't obscure my incredulity. Arlene did not reply, however. She just returned my gaze with a slight huff accompanied by a wry half-smile. The unspoken response was clear enough, though: Arlene had not only lost some confidence in her abilities, but also in my judgment of them.

Ahmed

I must admit to enjoying Ahmed's company. A young man whose gentle tones betrayed a sharp wit that while acerbic at times, was nonetheless always checked by a deep concern for those around him.

Ahmed first dropped into my office on a blisteringly hot morning the year before after making an appointment to see me. He had just officially commenced his final year of schooling and wanted to discuss some possible directions that he could take in higher education.

"Do you have anything in mind?" I queried.

"I love reading books, like novels. Pretty useless, ay? Haha!"

"Not really." I retorted. "Are you aware of the literature courses available at different universities?"

"What, you mean I can actually read books and talk about reading books and that?"

And so from that initial encounter, Ahmed and I worked together over the course of an academic year to canvass all the possible options for him to pursue his love of reading novels further. I remember clearly the first time we looked at the prospectus for a large university with a well-established English program together. The look on Ahmed's face expressed a mixture of wide-eyed discovery and barely containable excitement.

"Bro, this is exactly what I want to do."

"Then let's help you get there." I rejoined.

Ahmed took the prospectus home that night and I never saw it again. I could only imagine the Khoder household - a gracious family whose members had narrowly evaded bombings in Afghanistan and endured the arduous passage to Australia as refugees not more than a decade ago - gathering around the glossy publication proudly as Ahmed explained what he hoped to pursue. At the risk of sounding arcane, it was apparent to me from our subsequent conversations that Ahmed had encountered some sort of a vision.

Ahmed stood at my office door just after 1pm on that late-December day. He managed to muster a smile, barely.

"So Remy, I got a really shit ATAR."

I had by then dealt with over 40 other university applicants from Mount Druitt in person or over the phone. One part dispirited by the wave of disappointment that had swept into my office that day and one part livid at the system that had given rise to it. I tried to attend to Ahmed without sounding curt.

"Tell me."

“I thought I did alright when my results came out. But, yeah, now I don't even want to remember what I got, bro. My mum was so happy. She was so happy I was going to Uni not like some of my cousins. Now...”

Ahmed paused briefly, but long enough for me to reflect on how the depth charges of the ranking system had scuttled his buoyant hopes. My office that day had been a shoreline littered with the debris of washed up expectations. Was I the Hertz horn of Mount Druitt, a curious protuberance in this sea of young explorers bearing glossy prospectuses of a new life on the far shores of higher education?

“Nah, you know what, fuck it. It's not even worth saying.” He decided.

“No, Ahmed, please just tell me. I'm sure we can work something out.”

“It's alright. I'm alright.” He said as he backed his sturdy frame out of the doorway that he'd occupied. The smile he brought to it had by now been retracted.

I attempted to bring him back across the threshold: “C'mon, please...”

“I can't.” He muttered as he walked away. I haven't seen or heard from Ahmed since.

Beatrice

I heard the ring of my work mobile phone several times in my satchel as I drove home on the M4. My little red car performed this journey twice a day like a lone blood cell careening out to Mount Druitt, a capillary in this sprawling city. The M4 is a symbolic as much as it is a physical space, representing the primary artery from the heart of the city that embodies “where the action is” out to the periphery, where the famed Opera House or Harbour Bridge appears as distant as it does in glossy brochures for overseas visitors.

Trying to be a conscientious driver and one who did not wish to gain any(more) demerit points on my driving record, I picked up the phone only when I had arrived home.

“Missed Call: Beatrice.” It kindly informed me with an option to return the call, which I took.

It rang twice and was interrupted early in the third.

“Hi Bea! It's Remy. You called? What's up?”

There was a silence long enough for me to question whether the call had indeed reached its destination.

“Hello? You there?”

“Yeah.”

“What's up? You called?”

“Yeah.”

“How'd you go today?” I asked. I didn't want to, but like a good empiricist I had by this time developed a certain expectation for the types of conversations I would have on this day. Still, I hoped it was otherwise.

“Alright. I got 70.” Her voice sounded different, but everyone's voice sounds different on the phone, I figured.

“70?” I repeated. I had visualised the number as Bea intoned it. It seemed a healthy number against the backdrop of the others I'd hitherto encountered that day.

“That's awesome! Well done!”

“Thanks, but it's not enough.”

“Not enough for what?” I felt slightly affronted by the notion that this number was somehow inadequate, this number that for a brief moment I thought would be a piece of salvific good news to my dispirited soul.

“For... you know, what I want to do.”

I recalled Beatrice's beaming face after she had listed law as her preferred course a few months prior to that day. She was an intelligent young woman and the decade older of two children of a single mother, Kat. They were like sisters when together, I observed when they were both in my office about 7 months ago, each understanding the other's vast quantities of humour couched discursively in a mixture of Slovak and English as well as non-discursively, as if each could read the other's thoughts by the most subtle of gestures. I admired the mettle of both of these women. Kat impressively worked two jobs to sustain the household while Beatrice herself worked up to 30 hours a week unpacking boxes at the warehouse of a large supermarket. The labours of her mother's life had no doubt been the undercurrent that propelled Beatrice to the top of her Legal Studies class. She wanted to do Law because, as she put it to me once: “The law shits on people who don't know how to work it.” Beatrice had that potent mix of intellect with passion forged by personal circumstance, the same type that could plausibly have led to bitter resentment and a life in street gangs earning her keep, as appeared to be the way taken by many with similar circumstances. Yet here was Beatrice the prospective law student with an ATAR of 70.

“You've done really well.” I was quick to remind her.

“Yeah, but I'm not getting into law.”

“Still, you'll be able to do something else at Uni first, then apply to do law afterwards.”

“I know. I really wanted to do law. I worked my arse off...”

“I know you did.” I affirmed.

“I have a friend who goes to an academically selective high school in North Sydney and we do the same subjects. I beat him in every single one we did, but he got a way higher ATAR than me, like 90-something. That's bullshit!”

“I know it is.” I again affirmed. Most residents of Sydney are well aware that North Sydney is ‘north’ not only by virtue of its geography. In Beatrice's virtual presence at that moment, geography really did feel like destiny.

“So what's the point of working like hell to get 70? He's going to be sitting in the law class and I'm going to miss out.”

“Well...”

I resisted responding immediately despite the instinctive urge to reinforce the usual platitudes: of course there's a point to working hard; of course 70 is a great ATAR; of course it's unfair; of course you'll do something else and come to law via some other means. I sat there in my car silently for an extended moment and let Beatrice's situation dawn on me as she waited for a rejoinder. I noticed the heat from the mobile phone starting to be uncomfortable against my ear.

“Strange,” I muttered to myself, “how come I didn't feel that until now?”

Karl

It was long past 11pm and I was utterly exhausted, my body feeling the ache of those spirits that had fallen like overripe fruit brought down to earth by the weight of their expectations. A gardener does not determine whether a tree bears fruit; there are too many other factors that mitigate against such hubris: subtle climatic conditions, the position of the tree, the quality of the soil and the presence of parasites. What the gardener does however is tend to the tree that they have been assigned, watering and fertilising it in the hope that when the time is ripe, others may harvest the fruit from the tall branches. If left too long unnoticed or disregarded, the fruit fall to the ground. Many will be unsalvageable after this: the fall too fast and the ground too hard against their skins. There they will lie ruptured, broken open as food for mould, ants, worms and maggots before being swept away as refuse or, at best, piled up to rot as compost in the hope that they may be nourishment to other plants.

I have never found the elusive “work-life balance” so often propounded by the gurus of contemporary lifestyle. How does one easily leave work when so much of our vital energies - physical, mental and affective - are spent there? So there I found myself lying in bed checking my email on my mobile phone; I have no doubt that in this solo act I was joined by millions of others who were doing the same in bed.

“You have 1 new email.” It kindly informed me.

I tapped on the icon with my thumb to bring up this new email. It was from Karl, a school leaver I had worked with for 7 months. He was quiet but not shy to get involved in school and community activities. He had helped with the logistics for fundraising events at school and was part of a community hip hop dance troupe, not bad considering street gangs were once his major preoccupation. Initiated at 12 by his older brother, Karl had a store of harrowing tales about being a young adolescent drug mule, getting thrown off a second balcony that was “fortunately” overlooking a pool and being chased by a group of over 10 men with knives and clubs for three blocks only to be rescued by a kindly grocery store owner. Karl had since managed to move in with his father in Mount Druitt away from the suburb where his brother and friends lived. I sensed he felt strongly for them and missed them greatly, but his determination to complete school and attain a better life through higher education seemed to override these.

The email eventually loaded on my phone:

Hi Rem!

I dunno how to explain this, but im going to try. I got a shit ATAR >.< 45 to be exact. Lol... Sucks right? I put down Bachelor of Policing as my first option and Diploma of Policing as my second one. I dun think I will get in but. I really wanted to do policing and Im not sure what to do now. I have not told my brother yet because I don't want to upset him you know. He thinks that ever since I moved away that I have been working hard, and I have been working heaps!! I got 70 plus for Legal. But if I tell him I got 45 he will get really sad because he will think that I moved away for no reason. Like after all this time I couldn't even get into Uni. It's so fucked. Sorry for the language man. It's just I feel so lost now.

I just wanted to thank you for all your help this year. You really tried and I appreciate it heaps.

Cheers bro,

Karl

“You ok?” My housemate asked as she walked past my bedroom door.

I didn't answer for a while. I was still imagining Karl's face. My housemate looked like she was walking a tightrope between concern and not wanting to compel me to speak. I'm not sure how long I kept mum before I finally blurted: “You know what sucks?”

“What?”

“I feel like I'm setting these young ones up to fail. I feel like I am feeding them a dream and then watching them build up to it before falling hard. I feel like a cheat.”

She looked at me with eyes that at once suggested sympathy and disbelief. I moved to flesh out my point, but I could not. I wanted to express how I'd kept myself so busy talking about higher education that I hadn't stopped to reflect on my work. I was like a gardener too busy ensuring the trees were well-watered and fertilised so that they may produce more fruit, wilfully ignoring the forlorn fruit that lay around the base of those trees. I'd finally stopped to look around me, taking that step from what Sartre (1956) calls non-thetic to thetic consciousness – the reflexive moment we think about what we are doing as we do it. I sat there imagining myself in the presence of all those I had worked with and how many had their aspirations sunk that day. I wondered whether they would get much sleep that night. The digital clock on the screen of my phone informed me that we had stumbled onto a new day. I hadn't smoked in nearly a year, but I really felt like a cigarette then.

Going Somewhere

...the face presents itself, and demands justice. (Levinas, 1979, p.294)

If you ever decide to travel from Sydney's CBD to the outer reaches of Western Sydney along the M4, you will encounter the Light Horse Interchange before arriving at your destination (see *Figure 2*). To be honest, it is an imposing concrete structure whose sheer size and complexity has always impressed me and freaked me out in equal measure. The Light Horse Interchange is a four-level stack interchange that connects western Sydney to four key (and equally creatively named) motorways that form what is known as the Sydney Orbital Network: the M4 stretching east into the Sydney CBD; the M5 across the southwest; the M2 across the northwest; and the M7 looping transversally to join the M2 in the north to the M5 in the south. In addition, the Light Horse Interchange also has a separate bridge for pedestrians and cyclists that transects the M4. Soaring over the crisscrossed motorways is a 55 metre steel torch-like lighting tower designed to be visible when lit to travellers up to 2 kilometres away, as well as providing light for the interchange.



Figure 2: The Light Horse Interchange in Western Sydney (Source: NSW Roads and Maritime Services, 2013)

On that late-December day, as I hurtled down the M4 from Mount Druitt towards the Sydney CBD, I remember wishing that the education system could be designed like the Light Horse Interchange: a structure that simultaneously connects people across Sydney and facilitates travellers going in different directions, as well as accommodating those who use different means to get to their desired destinations, all the while bathing the travellers in a bright light that illuminates their paths. When I recall the faces from Mount Druitt represented by the figures of Jay, Arlene, Ahmed, Beatrice and Karl, and the violence done to their aspirations toward higher education as a result of the narrow road of competitive university admissions rankings like the ATAR, I wonder what Sydney – that deeply divided city – may be like if its societal institutions like schools and universities were more like that impressive interchange.

2014 was my final year in Mount Druitt. Today I teach and research in an education faculty that trains prospective teachers, some of whom will work with students like Jay, Arlene, Ahmed, Beatrice and Karl. This is one of my reasons for writing this account; it is an invitation to act. Following Levinas (1979), I take it that the encounter with the face of others cannot be reduced to a relation of comprehension or knowing, as if knowing about symbolic violence and its extent amounts to an ethical or political position. Rather, the faces that speak and demand justice should trigger a responsibility to act in response (Atterton & Calarco, 2005, pp.29-30). This undoubtedly involves the political struggle for the reform of institutional arrangements such as the ATAR that currently limit the life opportunities of young people under the guise of meritocracy. Yet, as Levinas (1981, p.159) also reminds us, in our struggle for large-scale political and institutional solutions, we should never lose sight of its basis in the irreducible ethical obligation we have to those we face.

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