

The Geography of Creative Aspiration: Class, Ethnicity and Mobility in a Global City

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The metropolis has long been a central symbol in the modernist narrative of youth. In the big city young people can break free of provincialism and communal constraint, lose and remake themselves. It is the centre of bohemian life, the place where you can find your subculture, scene or tribe where you can seek validation for being different. Here too, in places dense with crowds and commerce you can make your fortune. But if the streets of London are paved with gold they also carry the prospect of frustration and disappointment. This paper reports on research with young people from Arabic-speaking immigrant backgrounds who have grown up in Sydney's western suburbs but who have developed yearnings to participate in the cultural scenes that operate largely in the city's inner suburbs, places not only of fertile symbolic creativity but increasingly of liaisons between artists and new capitalism. We will demonstrate the processes whereby these ambitions remain largely unrealised.

The Attraction of Inner City Cultural Scenes

Metropolitan journeys may be driven by cultural identifications but are also associated with social mobility (if often indirectly). Much has been written in urban sociology of the role played by artists as the catalysts of gentrification (Lloyd, 2006, Zukin 1988, Cameron and Coaffee, 2005, Ley, 2003, Shaw, 2005). They are, in Ley's terms 'expeditionary force for the inner-city gentrifiers' (1996, p.191). The role of art and creativity has been documented as a necessary vehicle for urban regeneration, often "used within a broader process of aestheticizing space to attract particular forms of capital and culture" (Mathews 2010:662). The overwhelming research on gentrified urban spaces offer "rosy accounts of neighbourhood renewal as an 'urban solution' to the ills of sociospatial decay" (Wacquant 2008:201). Drawn to run-down neighbourhoods by cheap rents and Victorian buildings suitable for studios, there is a certain irony associated with the presence of young artists. Many embrace counter-cultural values and lifestyles, and have contempt for capitalism, consumption, conventional morality and conformist individualism. But their presence helps to make an area cool attracting the middle classes and boosting land values (Ley, 2003). For a place to become cool, requires an aesthetic appropriation which distances and disadvantages longstanding residents from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (Zukin 2008).

Despite the tradition aversion of artists to commercial concerns there is now a copious academic literature suggesting the centrality of aesthetic/symbolic work in the new economy (Shorthose, 2004, Lloyd, 2006). The creative classes, we are told (Florida) are pivotal to the ability of Western capitalism to restructure itself along Post Fordist lines. As labour-intensive manufacturing moves to the developing world the fortunes of nation, region or city depend on whether the politicians and planners can harness the economic potential of intellectual and symbolic innovation to kick-start new capitalism. Artists have suddenly become more central

to economic life than in the past offering opportunities for social mobility that were less available in the past. Lloyd's study (2006) of Chicago's Wicker Park district aimed to 'make sense of the role that the new bohemia plays in the context of flexible, global capitalism'. He suggests that even in the context of globalisation and the new economy gentrification relies on the chemistry between residual communities, bohemians and the venture capitalists of the new economy. Others have that these localised creative clusters tend to encourage the formation of 'creative commons', in which ideas and skills are shared (Shorthose, 2004). However, it is clear that the prosperity and tenure of artists in gentrifying neighbourhoods will depend both on the patterns of access to creative networks that are central to the operation of post-modern capitalism. The challenge for the artistic advance party of urban renewal is to adapt or assimilate to the new gentrified order, to embrace the values of the creative economy.

So how egalitarian are these creative clusters? How accessible are they to people of disadvantaged and minority backgrounds? Much of what is written about the role of artists in urban change and regeneration has little to say about the way certain kinds of art are validated and, more importantly, certain artists are validated and included in the networks, provided with opportunities while others remain marginal. In this paper we take up Butler's injunction for researchers to develop more detailed examination of the processes whereby the differentiated spaces of cities are 'lived' in terms of practices, style and cultural tastes (Butler 2007). Others (see Zukin, 2008) have researched how cultural distinction and power operate within neighbourhoods between emergent artistic and longstanding socially disadvantaged communities. However, little work has been done on the way creative clusters are constituted and made exclusive. Our interest is in the obstacles confronted by aspiring artists and creative workers from minority backgrounds who wish to migrate from unfashionable suburban areas into the gentrifying inner city spaces, to become part of modish cultural scenes.

Frustrated Aspirations – Migrant Youth, Creative Clusters and Sub/cultural Distinction

This paper draws on life history interviews conducted with twenty young people from Arabic speaking, working class backgrounds who have developed creative ambitions. Some persevere with those ambitions while others abandon them. All of them experience existential pressures associated with encountering elitism within the artistic and creative industry networks to which they aspire to belong and which are located in inner urban areas, well away from the unfashionable working class suburbs in which they were raised. In Australia these central metropolitan areas are where much creative industry activity takes place (Brennan Horley and Gibson, 2009)

Many of our interviewees first experienced a sense that they are culturally marginalised when they enrolled in art colleges in the inner city areas (where most such establishments are located). B grew up in Western Sydney of Lebanese descent and attended a government high school where artistic leanings were exceptional. After enrolling in art college he quickly became conscious of the social enjoyed by his fellow students privilege, and their cultural pretensions. He took a photography course and described it as

very wanky very Paddington[a thoroughly gentrified district close to Sydney's CBD] umm not about taking a good photo but about concepts and stuff...I just found it really problematic and really subjective. I just didn't like it. ...like loads of private school kids who go there

because they have heaps of money and they know they won't have to try. Like they can try their hand at being a photographer but if that doesn't work out they don't have to worry too much because they'll have something else to fall back on.

M, from a similar background while still at school persuaded his father to pay for him to undertake a weekend course at a prestigious drama school close to the city.

I did a 2 year course [on Sundays] and I met a lot of wanker kids who were from the [middle class] north shore who were really really privileged like I was kind of like out of my league and I didn't learn about class issues until I was 22 so I wasn't aware of those class factors... I was a kid I thought the differences were cultural and now I would say the differences are class based

In Australia, as in many nations in the western world, migrant workers are hugely overrepresented in low paid and precarious occupations. In these circumstances there is a complex entanglement of class and ethnicity, a conflation of racism and class prejudice.

This is illustrated in the testimony of P who undertook a journalism course in a city university. He describes his experience of enrolment in his first year and being immediately identified as an outsider:

I walked over to the journalism section and the subject coordinator ... she said 'hello, aren't you supposed to be at the engineering department?' I was like, what! Like playing the stereotype card straight away, you know, Arab Lebanese guy...and I was like 'no no I'm here to study journalism' she's like "what's your name?" So I'm like P and I started speaking and she goes "you're from the western suburbs aren't you?" and I'm like what! Like how did you know? She goes "I can tell by your accent. You will get nowhere in this industry with that accent. You have to do this, you have to do that" ...ah get voice training. Like get that Anglo kind of accent, ... [because]she said "it's very competitive" and back then I was a bit taken back like 'what! I just spent a year studying my arse off to cop this?'

P internalised the message communicated by the lecturer to the point of seeking to rid himself of the traces of accent and other forms of presentation that mark him as an outsider. For most of our interviewees the experience of being identified as different, as an outsider came not just from people in authority but also from peers. F attended a city art college and was unable to mix and be accepted by his fellow students

...they were all Gothic, hippie artistic in their own style and look. I was the only one there wearing a collared shirt at one point. I stood out at as weird... It was a culture shock. You know I thought maybe there is something wrong with me. Maybe I'm not normal. I actually saw the counsellor at one point.

Despite their participation in non-conformist subcultures, P's fellow students did not accept him. Their involvement in resistant sub-cultures clearly did not predispose them to challenge or undermine the lines of class and ethnic distinctions (on the contrary...).

Once faced with such invigilation the challenge was to withdraw, to abandon the creative ambition, or to make the move to the inner city and seek to adapt. E grew up in an unfashionable area but decided to move to the inner-city to pursue his ambitions in creative industries and ingratiate himself with those who make up the networks that are central to realising his aspirations:

... I lived in this little studio ... which was all mouldy and I've been living now in an apartment with one other friend for a couple of years... if you wanna have a career in it [the creative sector], yeah totally you got to move out, make those connections go to the right parties, hang with the right people work your way up.

The experience of this sort of transition and the pursuit of these networks can often raise contradictions between identity and aspiration that are too difficult to manage. N's experience of working in a creative industry was short-lived and exposed her to a process of social and cultural pressure that disturbed her sense of self and of attachment to family and community. From a working class Palestinian immigrant family she found a job at an online music business in Sydney's fashionable Eastern Suburbs and was excited at the prospect of a creative industry career. However, she soon found that glamorous job in an area far removed from the culturally diverse working class area from which she came required more of her than just a dedication to daily tasks. Her employer would often make criticisms about her dress and presentation and the fact that she continued to live with her parents in Sydney's western suburbs:

I was in ... a place that was obviously so socio-economically way out of my grasp to start with.... And she kept trying to mould me into her little protégé and told me that I had to move out of my house... Find a nice law student who lived in inner city to live with... when she (her boss) left Dandenong, which was the hole of holes apparently, she didn't speak to any of her friends, and that's how she made it. So I have to do the same thing to make it like her. ... To a certain degree I can't swallow changing that much of myself

N was not prepared to burn her bridges with family, friends and community. Like other interviewees she described being a victim of tacit evaluations of her speech and habits of life that served to exclude her from the place-based networks that were pivotal to her career ambitions. In the end N resigned her job and has pursued a career outside the creative industries where there are fewer pressures to undergo the sorts of radical reconstruction of self. E also experienced similar cultural invigilation but has tried in his working life to walk the tightrope between residual and emergent identities

I think finding a balance is awesome, like here's the thing if you leave [the western suburbs] and become [an inner city] person then ahh it kind of changes you I think. But all the art I ever want to make, I feel like I want it to stay true to where I'm from ...and I don't, I'm not interested if it doesn't appeal to a certain, like [an inner city] market

E is the exception in choosing to persevere with the mainstream creative ambition and remaining in the areas where creative clusters are located. Other interviewees have pursued (often precarious) careers in the community arts sector in western Sydney where their cultural minority background is valued. Numerous public grants are allocated to projects designed to encourage second-generation immigrant youth to participate in cultural production – music, fine art, film/video etc. M, for example, now works with a community cultural organisation in a training role where he is largely involved in encouraging young people from minority backgrounds to produce artistic representations of being 'in-between' two cultures. This interpellation of young people primarily as ethnic subjects provides only a limited form of recognition and empowerment. It provides them with a limited role but one which will always make them marginal to the cultural mainstream. Having experienced being looked down on M is contemptuous of the condescension of those middle class artists/ creative workers who wish to mix with those from minority and disadvantaged backgrounds

I've worked with so many pretentious ah stuck up [people] ... who have come to me and said we want to work with wogs... the fact is that there are a lot of people who want to engage in multiculturalism and want to engage in ethnicity but it actually when it actually comes to them they can't handle it...there is a big community of people who work in Newtown who love coming out to Bankstown to work with wogs... And they're usually Anglo, middle class and privileged backgrounds ... and usually live in share houses and they'll almost look down on you for having an almost normal life. Like they'll slander you for being married at 23.

This form of engagement, therefore, is temporary and conditional – rich kids taking a walk on the wild side. It provides the middle class with exposure to rough marginality but they bristle at anything resembling cultural conformity. In order to appear legitimate to the eyes of the visitors, the Middle Eastern background cultural workers have to present themselves as outsiders free of the symbols of suburban convention.

Conclusion

This paper has described the sense of frustrated aspiration experienced by young people from working class, Middle East immigrant backgrounds. They make sense of these frustrations in geographical terms. They encounter cultural elitism, and the feeling of being judged as inadequate, when they make the inward journey from the disadvantaged western suburbs of Sydney to those districts – Newtown, Surry Hills, Bondi – which have become metonyms for creative industries and lively artistic scenes. The forms of marginalisation they describe are not simply economic – lacking the money/ family support to pay steep rents and to subsidize the artistic lifestyle – they are also aesthetic. Most find that they are required to reconstruct themselves – modes of speech, dress, habits and attitudes – so as to distance themselves from family, community and ethnic cultures. Ironically, despite the apparent edginess of inner city culture, young people's scenes have the effect of reproducing unequal class relations albeit through new symbolic repertoires. The ostensible rebelliousness actually masks a conservatism that serves to exclude young aspirants from immigrant backgrounds just as effectively as would the operation of older forms of class privilege. In the flexible post Fordist economy that is increasingly central to global cities, networks are increasingly important to vocational and (more broadly) life opportunities. Yet admission to these place-based networks is by no means meritocratic. Exclusion takes place subtly and informally but has the consequence of barring the entry young Arabic-speaking adults to places, vocational and opportunities that are central to their ambitions.

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