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Alex & I: narrative and network resistance

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ABSTRACT

For my artistic-research project *Alex & I* (2013–2018), I have discussed the media history and lived circumstances of the now former-refugee, Sanjeev ‘Alex’ Kuhendarajah, to extend his narrative of migration beyond the news cycle. Having worked with images of Alex circulating online, I became interested in his digital profile as one of his many representations; as an actor on social media platforms and as a ‘data body’ (Critical Art Ensemble (CAE). (1998). *Flesh machine: Cyborgs, designer babies, & new eugenic consciousness*. Brooklyn: Autonomedia. Retrieved from <http://critical-art.net/books/flesh/>, p. 145) stored in networked interoperable archives. For this text, I discuss how the requirement of migrants to submit biometric data to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for the purposes of identification is a means of control, drawing on Katja Jacobsen’s (Jacobsen, K. L. (2010). Making design safe for humans: A hidden history of humanitarian experimentation. *Citizenship Studies*, 14(1), 89–103, Jacobsen, K. L. (2015). Experimentation in humanitarian locations: UNHCR and biometric registration of Afghan refugees. *Security Dialogue*, 46(2), 144–164.) analysis of the risks arising from UNHCR’s deployment of iris scanning technology and Joseph Pugliese’s (Pugliese, J. (2012). *Biometrics: Bodies, technologies, biopolitics*. London: Routledge.) work on the genealogies and biopolitics of biometrics. I address Alex’s acts of self-representation on social media, particularly Facebook, as a form narrative resistance, by which he challenges the UNHCR’s modes of ‘institutional interpellation’ (Ajana, B. (2010). Recombinant identities: Biometrics and narrative bioethics. *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry*, 7(2), 237–258., p. 254), but is also susceptible to ‘dataveillance’, data mining and forms of network authority. Drawing on Wendy Hui Kyong Chun’s (Chun, W. (2015). The dangers of transparent friends: Crossing the public and intimate spheres. In D. Allen & J. S. Light (Eds.), *From voice to influence: Understanding citizenship in the digital age* (pp. 105–128). Chicago: University of Chicago Press) concerns about user profiling and data capture on social media, I offer possible modes of network resistance and discuss storytelling as a form of ‘narrative bioethics’ with reference to Btihaj Ajana (Ajana, B. (2010). Recombinant identities: Biometrics and narrative bioethics. *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry*, 7(2), 237–258.).

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My artistic-research project, *Alex & I* (2013–2018), concerns the narrative of migration of the Tamil former refugee and controversial media figure, Sanjeev 'Alex' Kuhendrarjah, who lived as a refugee in Thailand between 2011 and 2017. Alex appeared in the global news media in October 2009 as a self-appointed spokesperson for 254 Tamil asylum-seekers attempting to reach Australia by boat in the immediate aftermath of the civil war in Sri Lanka which had concluded in May of that year. Their small wooden cargo boat, *KM Jeya Lestari 5*, detected by Australian authorities in international waters, was towed to the port of Merak, Java, by the Indonesian Navy at the request of the then Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd. At Merak, the asylum-seekers refused to disembark, initiating a stand-off with authorities and a media spectacle that lasted for over six months (for an account of this period see Fitzpatrick, 2010).

With his command of English and charisma, a legacy of his Canadian upbringing, Alex became popular among journalists. Initially he appeared to garner wide-spread empathy until it was revealed that he had served time in prison due to his involvement with Tamil street gangs in Ontario as teenager. When Canadian authorities swept through their prison system following the 2001 September 11 attacks in New York, they discovered that Alex had yet to be granted Canadian citizenship. In 2003, he was deported to Sri Lanka during a period of cease-fire, a country his parents had fled fearing persecution in 1985 when Alex was three years old.

Alex jumped ship before the stand-off in Merak resolved in May 2010, following a tip-off that the Indonesian authorities sought to arrest him. He lived as a fugitive for a year, intermittently communicating with his followers on social media, which is when I first contacted him. Alex eventually resurfaced in a Bangkok Immigration Detention centre in 2012, announcing his whereabouts with a series of striking 'selfie' self-portrait photographs posted on Facebook.

In July 2013, I travelled to Thailand to meet Alex in person where we struck up a rapport that soon evolved into a friendship. I continued to visit Alex regularly while he remained in immigration detention, and began his application to resettle in the US. Following the 2014 Thai military coup, Alex was granted community release and from mid-2015 and lived as an 'urban refugee.' In 2016 he was informed that his application to the US had been rejected. The following year he acquired a Sri Lankan passport and decided to return there in June 2017.

Whilst Alex was still effectively incarcerated in immigration detention, we co-presented discussions in community, cultural and academic settings, using Skype. Following his release we produced a series of photo-portraits of Tamil refugees in Bangkok (see Sivanesan, 2016). I have intervened, extended and elaborated upon Alex's narrative of migration after he ceased to be of interest to the news media across a number of texts and artworks, to understand his story as a minor history.

Alex & I employs 'friendship after Facebook' as a methodology, by which 'friend' is a 'concept' that stimulates hyper-gregarious networked communication (Goh, 2011). Whilst friendship often implies an altruistic sense of affinity, companionship and care, on Facebook it signifies a platform-based action. When one 'friends' another, both users' social networks expand, triggering a range of computational networked-based operations that extract value from these relations. Thus, 'friending' is simultaneously accumulative, performative and exploitative. When myself and many others 'friended'

Alex on Facebook when he was posting from Merak, it could be understood as a public act of solidarity. To remain 'friends' online and then to pursue a friendship 'in real life' is the means by which Alex and I pursue common politics across vastly different circumstances, geographies, experiences and beliefs.

Alex's media performances are often contradictory, irreverent and, arguably, ill-advised, drawing attention and often reproof and disapproval. He can be read as a trickster or jester, a scapegoat for a generation of wayward Tamil youth, a representative of the abject citizens of Sri Lanka, a figure of the 'economic migrant' or more generally a 'bad refugee.' His multiple performances of the self are the means by which he stands out and remains recognisable among an otherwise unknowable and thus 'ungrievable' (Butler, 2009, p. 24) worldwide population of refugees and asylum-seekers.

The work I have made with Alex has often foregrounded portraiture, documentation and the circulation of images online. This text extends from my concerns with Alex's digital profile as one of his many representations; as an actor on social media platforms and as a 'data body' (Critical Art Ensemble, 1998, p. 145) stored in interoperable archives that render him 'machine readable' (van der Ploeg cited in Jacobsen, 2015, p. 148).

Profiling

Biometrics, literally the 'measurement of life' (Ajana, 2010, p. 238), is a method of identification that links identity to the body. Joseph Pugliese maps a 'tattered' genealogy of biometrics as the 'application of mathematics to biology' (2012, p. 48), encompassing a number of precursor technologies of body measurement and individual identification. A notable forerunner to the science of 'biometrics proper' was the development of inked fingerprints in nineteenth century India under British colonial rule. Following 'The Sepoy Mutiny' of 1857 and the subsequent massacre of Indian insurrectionists, the colonisers' sought to develop a reliable system of identification and classification among the hostile population, and to address the issue of British officials not being able to tell 'one Indian from another' (Pugliese, 2012, p. 49). Inked fingerprint records thus established a logic of categorising subjects according to 'race' and their predispositions to criminality.

Pugliese also emphasises Alphonse Bertillon's system of 'anthropometrical signalment', developed during the 1880s in France, as a means of identifying, categorising and keeping interoperable records about criminal populations based on standardised body measurements. The French criminologist established photographic techniques that are still used by police, such as the criminal 'mug shot' portrait and profile (2012, p. 53).

These file-indexing systems of identification based on the documentation of physical body parts enabled the expansion of 'biopower', a term coined by Michel Foucault to describe a form of nondisciplinary power that emerged in Europe in the late eighteenth century. Having established control over individuals, Foucault proposed, sovereign power sought to control 'man-as-species' and thus establish 'biopolitical' means of governing populations through the regulation of life processes (Foucault, 2003, pp. 242–243). According to Pugliese:

Biopower effectively colonises the body, overlaying it with calculatory grids and geometrically inscribing it with formulae that will transform it into an object of knowledge and power. (2012, p. 45)

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee's *Policy on Biometrics in Refugee Registration and Verification* (2010) recommends biometric technologies be used as a routine part of identity management to ensure that refugees' personal identities cannot be lost, registered multiple times or subjected to fraud or identity theft (cited in UNHCR, n.d.).

The political scientist Katja Jacobsen (2015) has produced a significant study on accountability and the UNHCR's Biometric Identity Management System (BIMS), by which the humanitarian organisation collects iris scans, fingerprints and facial features to link biometrics to pre-existing registration data. Iris scanning is considered the most reliable form of biometric identification as it is thought that no two iris patterns are alike and that they are less likely to change over time (Jacobsen, 2015, p. 149).

Jacobsen (2015) alerts us to the emergence of the 'digital refugee' with the roll-out of biometric identification by the UNHCR. She observes that the refugee's 'digital body' is an anonymised, albeit identifiable, record of the refugee's physical body stored on networked databases. Although it is a seemingly abstract or 'virtual' representation of the refugee subject, its management has consequences on the 'real' lives of refugees.

As states in post 9-11 contexts have become more suspicious and hostile towards migrants, Jacobsen argues that the deployment of biometrics in identification is often desired by these states to strengthen 'homeland security' rather than 'humanitarian security' or the protection of refugees (Jacobsen, 2010, pp. 154–155). She claims that security based on the differentiation and categorisation of bodies, only some of which are deserving of protection, establishes 'undesirable bodies.' Thus, such processes of biometric identification are a continuation of long histories of monitoring people and record-keeping as a means to differentiate, control and subjugate populations concomitant with establishing normative notions of race, gender, (dis)ability, sexuality, class and age (Pugliese, 2012, p. 2).

The collection and storage of biometric data and the real-time access to these databases enables kinds of monitoring that have not been previously accounted for, giving rise to new ways of 'authoritatively knowing the truth about the refugee's digital body' and associated vulnerabilities which are difficult to challenge such as 'false matching' (Jacobsen, 2010, p. 155). As it becomes compulsory for refugees to submit biometric data to the UNHCR, the worldwide database of iris templates expands. Thus, the risk of error in matching the live iris being presented with a template stored on the database also increases. Given widely held perceptions that technology is more credible in establishing identity than a refugee's testimony or other identifying documents, it becomes more difficult to correct a false match (Jacobsen, 2015, pp. 150–151).

Btihaj Ajana emphasises the role of the technology itself in the creation and establishment of identities. Citing Homi Bhabha, she reminds us that identity is not a 'self-fulfilled prophecy' but is contingent on the ways subjects appear when assuming an image. With reference to Étienne Balibar, she suggest that identities are 'imaginary referents' which are the 'ideal goal of processes of identification' (Ajana, 2010, p. 245). Thus, the privileging of biometrics over other forms of refugee identification conforms identities to the bias of the apparatus, fixes identity to the body and purges identity of its narrative element; that is, one's capacity to recount one's life story (Ajana, 2010, p. 240).

With reference to current practices of data collection, Ajana names a phenomenon of 'recombinant identity,' an 'electronic suturing' by which the subject of authority, arises by

recombining the various strands of anonymised data (2010, p. 248). Analysis of this data, as objects of power and knowledge, are used to inform policy and governance and thereby shape the management and lived experiences of refugees as individuals and populations. The removal of asylum seeker testimonies and experiences from such processes reflects an attitude promoted by the biometrics industry in which 'the body does not lie' whereas the lived account of one's body – one's life story – is treated with suspicion (Ajana, 2010, p. 244). Ajana thus argues, that the inclusion of narrative into processes of identification is a pressing ethical concern.

Refugee for L.I.F.E.

Alex's concerns about having to submit his biometric data to the UNHCR regard modes of surveillance and control; of 'being tracked' and inevitably 'chipped' and thus monitored as a refugee for the remainder of his life.

As refugee and stateless populations swell to unprecedented levels, Alex and his peers are well aware that only a few of them will be resettled. Knowledge of the long waiting periods of refugee determination and resettlement process, the Sisyphean tasks in applying for resettlement and the ways in which certain groups (e.g. ethnicities, see Sivanesan, 2016, p. 37) are deemed more or less in need, has contributed to Alex's anxieties about the kinds of information unknowable to him that can be gleaned from biometric monitoring. As a figure with some media notoriety, Alex is understandably concerned that this information would invariably be used against him. Reflecting on his turbulent relationships with Thai authorities, representatives of the UNHCR and his stunted legal appeal in Canada, he often expresses a belief that his 'negative media reception' has significantly hindered his application for resettlement and life chances. Furthermore, being digitally marked as a 'refugee for life' could prevent Alex from entering certain states even if he eventually attains citizenship, as indicated by the proposed 'lifetime ban' on asylum seekers held in offshore detention by the Turnbull Coalition Government in Australia, 2016 (Hutchens, 2016).

Alex's fears resonate with Ajana's observation that when one's refugee status becomes a 'badge for life' it risks 'totalising identity' and 'fossilising' one's behaviours and expectations. Such modes of identification may have negative implications regarding how one negotiates and is accepted into a host community and can restrict one's ability to reconstruct one's life beyond the experience of seeking asylum (2010, pp. 255–256).

While Alex is defined as a refugee by the UNHCR and arguably has been stereotyped as being criminal in his earlier appearances in the media, on Facebook Alex is able to subvert, exaggerate, contradict and otherwise address these perceptions. Like many Facebook users, he does so through the reposting of memes and quotes, alongside remarkably frank expressions of his failures, ambitions and motivations. As a 'selfie' enthusiast, Alex regularly posts self-portraits taken on his smart phone in which he presents himself as an entrepreneur and self-made man. In doing so he resists the 'institutional interpellation' (Ajana, 2010, p. 254) used to identify him as a refugee and the media production of such migrants as either victims or threats. Instead Alex projects a particular account of himself that is neither a stereotype nor a statistic. For Alex, Facebook is a platform for narrative resistance where he pronounces his defiant mantra, 'Living in Freedom Everyday (L.I.F.E.)'.

Data capture

Alex first told me about having to submit biometric data to the UNHCR when I visited him in Bangkok in July 2016. He had recently learned that his application to the US had been rejected based on non-specified ‘security concerns.’ Since he was given no details as to what informed this assessment, this decision was near impossible to appeal.

During a Skype conference with a friend in Canada who had offered to help him with some legal matters, we discussed how his earlier media appearances may have contributed to this decision. My friend in Toronto suggested to Alex that he ‘curate’ his Facebook posts to appeal to his assessors. I was surprised by Alex’s blunt refusal, explaining that Facebook was his outlet – ‘a pressure valve’ – where he expressed himself uninhibited.

‘Facebook is for my feelings,’ Alex wrote in a series of exchanges with his estranged mother on the social media platform, posted on his timeline for all his ‘friends’ and followers to read in 2016. Thinking about his ‘no-filter’ approach to social media, it struck me that for Alex, Facebook is platform to self-narrate and debate.

The Merak stand-off occurred as social media was on the rise, alongside the notion of the digital ‘prosumer’, a neologism that conflates the producer and consumer of online content. After journalists arranged for a laptop to be smuggled onboard the boat, Alex began fielding emails, opened a Facebook account, posted videos on YouTube and arranged Skype tours of the boat for journalists (see Shubert, 2010). With internet access, Alex and the Merak refugees gave the world unprecedented access to the ‘refugee experience’. Paraphrasing the words of Tiziana Terranova, they affectively performed their misery as user-generated content (2004, p. 95), alongside communicating with their families and friends and organising with activists and other migrants fleeing post-war Sri Lanka. Indeed, it was on Facebook that I initially made contact with Alex.

Facebook is effectively a social analytics platform that collects and commodifies data about its users, and it is known to have shared this information with government departments such as the United States National Security Agency (NSA) (Greenwald & MacAskill, 2013). Arguably, social media is an expansion and intensification of the ‘social factory’; a term associated with (Italian) Autonomist Marxism to describe the post-Fordist socialisation of capitalist modes of production and the extraction of value from social relations and cultural activities not directly related to work (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Terranova, 2004, p. 75). Indeed, to employ Terranova’s term, on Facebook users perform ‘free labour’ for the social media enterprise as their ‘excess[ive] productive activities’, such as sharing memes, playing games, messaging and ‘liking’ posts, are ‘pleasurably embraced and at the same time shamelessly exploited’ (2004, p. 78).

Wendy Chun observes:

[I]t is through our actions as friends—our liking, our retweeting, our posts and so on—that we are more effectively profiled and our consumption is carefully tracked and crafted by governments and also corporations. (2015, p. 106)

Regarding practices of data capture and storage across social media platforms, Chun raises two logics for incorporating the body into archives, citing the writings of photographer Allan Sekula. The first, derived from Alphonse Bertillon concerns identifying the individual via their bodily features. The second, derived from eugenicist Sir Francis Galton ‘sought to identify the hidden type driving the body’ (Chun, 2015, p. 119). Chun argues

that these processes have become inseparable as social analytic platforms seek to tag and identify individuals, group them together with others who exhibit similar patterns of behaviour and predict and influence their future behaviour ‘that conforms to, and that confirms and optimizes, statistical network analyses’ (Chun, 2015, p. 120). Indeed, targeted advertising, prompts, suggestions and user experience design are ways in which platforms such as Facebook can via algorithmic means restrict, influence and predict behaviour and prolong the time people spend on their websites. As such, networks can be understood as having decision making capabilities, a degree of authority and even agency.

At the time of writing, Chun’s comments are especially relevant, given the revelations about the activities of the data analytics consultancy Cambridge Analytica. The company are alleged to have ‘harvested’ the profiles of an estimated 50 million Facebook users, then used this information to target groups and individuals in order to shape the outcomes of the 2016 ‘Brexit’ campaign for the UK to leave the EU and Donald Trump’s US presidential election campaign the following year (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018). This unfolding political drama demonstrates how information derived from activities on social media may be exploited by those seeking to consolidate power.

Control

In recent years iris scanning technologies have been installed into ATMs and incorporated into point of sale services in refugee settlements in Jordan, allowing refugees to withdraw money and pay for goods at selected stores. Here, UNHCR representatives have argued that iris scanning as a means of identification is a ‘fraud proof,’ efficient and dignified means of delivering funds to those requiring assistance (Dunmore, 2015).

In the case of urban refugees in Bangkok, it is a condition of their community release – or ‘bail’ as Alex calls it – that they must report regularly to the UNHCR, regardless of whether they are regularly accessing its services. Although the UNHCR states it provides financial assistance to refugees in Thailand, Alex claims they receive no direct cash assistance from the organisation (Kuhendrarajah, 2015). Under these circumstances, iris scanning identification processes appear as an instrument of control, to ensure that those recognised as refugees and asylum seekers remain in proximity to immigration authorities as a condition of their registration and the proper procedures of resettlement.

One of Jacobsen’s criticisms of the deployment of iris scanning technologies in refugee identification is its experimental nature. She aligns it with histories of experimental technologies being tested on peripheral and marginalised populations before being introduced to ‘more valued citizens’ in metropolises (2010, p. 89). Jacobsen raises further concerns given that these systems are funded by ‘donor states’ invested in limiting, tracking and controlling the flow of asylum seekers and refugees in an era of increased securitisation (2015, p. 115). With the emergence of the digital refugee, it could be argued that organisations such as the UNHCR and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) have become more concerned with the management of refugee bodies and statistics, rather than managing the process of resettlement and the welfare of vulnerable people.

The outsourcing and development of these technologies and services by commercial entities entails a risk that data collected could be linked to other databases and shared among organisations that do not best represent the interests of migrants (Jacobsen, 2015, p. 156). Such risks are exacerbated by technological developments, such as ‘iris at

a distance' cameras which would enable authorities to scan individual's irises without consent or knowledge (Jacobsen, 2010, p. 99).

The uptake of fingerprint and iris scanning security measures in domestic devices such as smart phones and tablets invariably expands the databases of such information and simultaneously normalises the capacity of commercial entities to mine users for data. As biometric identification and data mining become absorbed into the conditions of participating in society, people are made vulnerable to those with the capacity and will to act upon information derived from their data bodies.

Having been coerced to comply with UNHCR monitoring procedures, when Alex vents his frustrations and concerns on Facebook it is a means of narrative resistance. However its terms are of data capture, 'free labour' and ultimately what media theorist Jeremy Beller describes as the subsumption of life (and indeed the universe) by processes of 'digitization', 'informationization' and 'financialization'; the governmental capabilities of internet-based platforms (Beller, 2018, p. 93).

Writing at the onset of information society Deleuze (1992) noted that:

The numerical language of control is made of codes that mark access to information, or reject it. We no longer find ourselves dealing with the mass/individual pair. Individuals have become '*dividuals*,' and masses, samples, data, markets, or '*banks*' (Deleuze, 1992, p. 5, italics in original).

The philosopher was attentive to shifts in the means of production from factory-based commodities towards information-based and affective services offered by corporations, as a 'capitalism of higher order production' (1992, p. 6). Such developments, he argued, marked the replacement of the 'disciplinary societies' theorised by Foucault with 'societies of control.' The 'deformation' of once enclosed institutions, such as the family, school, factory and prison was an indication of the 'dispersive' paradigm that is our present, in which work, family, social relations and cultural practices range across 'open circuits.' As such relations are transposed as code, Deleuze argues that the 'operations of markets' have become 'the instruments of social control' (p. 6). This condition, Beller (2018) claims, is intensified as ever more data is collected and contributes to the algorithmic trading of financial products. As market speculation determines the allocation of resources globally, it indicates a computational-media-recursive process driven by algorithms that effectively shapes the world. With this in mind, I find it poignant to read Deleuze's prediction:

It is true capitalism has retained as a constant the extreme poverty of three-quarters of humanity, too poor for debt, too numerous for confinement: control will not only have to deal with the erosion of frontiers but with the explosions within shanty towns or ghettos. (1992, pp. 6–7)

Having installed code as a system of domination, societies of control exacerbate polarities between the rich and poor and can more finely craft the agencies of the individual and the mass, further fragmenting subjects into machine-processable 'dividual' bits. '[S]cattered body-bits' suggests Pugliese (2012, p. 95), referring to the way biometric technologies segment and anatomise the body into discrete parts that define the whole, transposing corporeal attributes to digital data as 'synecdoches of the subject.' Deployed as a 'technology of the border' (Pugliese, 2012, p. 159), biometric identification governs points of entry into states, restricts the movements of targeted groups and individuals and limits their access to civil society. Indeed technological-biometric controls prove that the border

is not simply at the physical point of entry to a state, but a condition that is embodied. The refugee's biometric body is surrendered to authorities who 'freeze' an impression of the subject in time; 'cleaving', in the double sense of the word, the body and the subject. Thus, if a person's fingerprint or retina pattern changes due to events or purposeful manipulation, it would trigger a false match with the scan stored on the database, casting doubt over the body being presented before the apparatus. By emphasising the coherency of the body as that which determines identity, and by extension personhood, biometric identification insists on a narrative consistency that complies with machinic-computational systems; that the body part being presented conforms to the person as they are defined on the database, regardless of the experiences that fit outside of these categories or those that have transformed the person since they were first scanned.

Resistance

Alex has told me that his activities on social media are in part an effort to ensure that his friends and followers abroad do not forget him. Given the kinds of profiling, behaviour-crafting and 'social engineering' that occurs on Facebook, however, it is hardly a platform free from controls. While the capacity to self-narrate might be understood as a means of problematising or resisting institutional forms of identification and assessment, as Chun emphasises, the algorithmic procedures of social media platforms are not necessarily interested in what we say. Rather they are often most interested in our behaviours, what we do, and in conditioning and making our behaviours more predictable. Thus, Chun argues that a new network politics must occur on the level of behaviour or habit (Chun & Grusin, 2017).

Flooding or jamming a network with activity is a foundational strategy of net activism, initially conceived as 'virtual sit-ins' by groups such as the Electronic Disturbance Theatre (Wray, 1998). These Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) actions remain the basis of the kinds of 'cyberattacks,' utilising server 'stress tester' tools, organised by groups such as Anonymous and that are outlawed in jurisdictions that include the United States, Europe and Australia (Sauter, 2014). Yet Chun argues there still remains across social networks the possibility to act communally and thus instrumentalise the network as a weapon, given that online 'a hug from a mob is indistinguishable from a denial of service attack' (2015, p. 127).

Perhaps then, Alex's 'oversharing' of personal information on Facebook could be understood as a technique of flooding his timeline, and hence those who follow him, with surplus affective content. While a 'like' or an emoji response could hardly be considered a mindful acknowledgement of Alex's circumstances, by provoking a response, even reflexive 'likes' registered by Facebook have the capacity to keep Alex visible to his friends and their networks. If carried out strategically, such posts have the potential to be newsworthy.

A striking example of Alex's effectiveness on Facebook occurred in 2012. After living as a fugitive for over a year, Alex announced his whereabouts with a series of selfies taken on a mobile phone smuggled into a crowded immigration detention cell in Bangkok. These images garnered the attention of his many followers and prompted the journalist Lindsay Murdoch to visit Alex in Bangkok and to publish one of these images in the Fairfax media (Murdoch, 2012). The journalist effectively amplified Alex's post which exposed the conditions in which undocumented migrants were being held; however,

the publication of these images caused Alex significant trouble with Thai immigration authorities. This episode highlights the dilemmas refugees face in wanting to be visible and hence knowable, but selectively so, for fear of triggering disciplinary and discriminatory action by authorities.

Chun notes that with the abundance of activity on social media, information only becomes valuable or worthy of attention when it is 'liked,' 're-Tweeted' or otherwise elicits a mass response (Chun, 2015, p. 118). As such, network processes do not only seek to know us individuals, but seek to group us with other users who exhibit similar preferences and behaviours. She claims that 'value is not generated by one 'you,' but by a plethora of 'yous:' by the very interconnections between the various yous'.

Chun explains that the 'yous value' generated by multiple users does not constitute a crowd, but rather a profusion of discreet entities or 'yous.' Following Chun's lead, the multiple profiles that we generate across various social media platforms are not necessarily discreet but are both singular and plural depending on the kinds of information that network operations seek to glean. Given that Facebook owns popular messaging and content sharing platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp it is possible that it correlates different logins to the one individual. Furthermore, as other online services encourage users to login with their Facebook or Google accounts, it allows these major internet corporations to track their users across a range of web-based platforms.

Having followed Alex in the news and social media for several years, I have noticed that he has registered multiple Facebook accounts during different phases of his life. While this might not be particularly unusual, it does complicate the indexical 1:1 relationship and real name 'authenticity' that Facebook seeks to establish between its users and their profiles (Drake, 2015). With multiple accounts Alex is able to 'like' and repost the same content from different profiles, is potentially able to communicate to different selected groups of friends and to produce complex and even contradictory narratives.

Media scholars Brunton and Nissenbaum (2015) argue that obfuscation is an important method and strategy of resisting networked surveillance and data mining by deliberately adding ambiguous, confusing or misleading information. It is a means of hiding sensitive information out in the open. By oversharing personal information across a range of profiles Alex is potentially able to antagonise his estranged family and friends, 'troll' his adversaries, attract the attention of different groups of users, stimulating and obfuscating network processes. Oversharing across social media platforms and in defiance of Facebook's authentic user policy brings together means of narrative and network resistance.

Narrative bioethics

In her critique of the current biometric processes for the identification of refugees, Ajana argues for an ethics that is attentive to migrants' capacities to self-narrate and articulate the uniqueness of their experiences and thus resolve the 'hiatus between ethics and (technocratic) politics' (2010, p. 256). She refers to the practice of narrative bioethics 'as a form of ethics that takes the notion of narrative as both the ground and the object of ethical reflection and moral justification when addressing issues surrounding life and its technologies' (p. 250).

Ajana (2010) and Pugliese (2012) discuss how biometric technologies of identification collapse and conflate the 'who' and 'what' elements of identity. These are inherent to the

questions: 'who are you?' and 'what have you done?'. Such questions frustrate Alex because his media-established reputation often precedes him. He has said to me that people assume the worst of him before they have met him, so he might as well be that person and Alex often plays up to this stereotyping, presenting himself as a hyper-masculine 'gangsta', a trope of North American Hip-Hop culture and South Indian popular cinema. His performances of the self are not without humour. For example, in his 'mugshot' photo-portrait on his UNHCR identification card Alex wears a sarcastic grin as a caricature of a compliant 'good refugee.' Alex's irreverent approach to his representation in these official documents can be read as an act of resistance to bureaucratic authority, systemic prejudice and control. In doing so, he instrumentalises his refugee identification card as a 'weapon of the weak,' a form of everyday resistance undertaken by subordinate groups who are unable to openly organise politically, as described by anthropologist Scott (1985).

Alex's refusal to be a 'good refugee', to be quiet, compliant and obedient despite the consequences, demonstrates a stubborn 'willfulness'. It is a trait that implies 'willpower', which Sara Ahmed suggests is something a responsible moral subject is supposed to cultivate and strengthen (2014, p. 7). While Alex exhibits endurance and determination in his pursuit of freedom, as Ajana observes, the emphasis on the capabilities of the individual belies the logic of late liberalism that privileges self-interest. It is the kind of thinking that assumes that the precarious and often 'illegal' status of the migrant is the result of life choices and the 'irresponsible conduct of autonomy' rather than systemic failures or prejudices (van Munster cited in Ajana, 2010, p. 248).

Self-narration also suggests the skill of the individual in crafting an engaging story, but it implies an other to whom one tells their story to; an interlocutor who shapes a narrator's account of themselves and thus the experiences they choose to emphasise or occlude. When Alex appeared as a media figure, I found in his story of post-war Tamil experiences something I could relate to, largely due to his Canadian upbringing and familiarity with (Western) media motifs. Yet, as Judith Butler argues, for these narratives to be recognised and understood they must conform to certain social norms which exceed the narrator (cited in Ajana, 2010, p. 253). Such norms are impersonal, indifferent and set the conditions by which our stories are told. As Ajana elaborates, stories 'must go through the sieve of many social and linguistic conventions to be deemed worthy of recognition' (2010, p. 253).

Thus, my task as a concerned interlocutor is to coax out a story from Alex's public appearances, his anecdotes or posts on social media and our face-to-face conversations, and 'discursively frame' them within contexts of systemic oppression and indifference, exploitation and control, so that he may be understood as a sympathetic figure; as being 'grievable' (Butler, 2009, p. 64). I began writing this text when Alex was still an urban refugee in Bangkok. Now, as I finalise it, Alex has lived for several months as a citizen in Sri Lanka, embarking on the next chapter of his life. In my attempts to 'get the story straight' I have succumbed to a process of repeating, revising, re-ordering and following the leads that Alex's experiences suggest. The story remains unruly, as though it has a will of its own, and as Ahmed warns: 'To be identified as willful is to become a problem' (2014, p. 3).

Storytelling

Stephen Fitzpatrick who broke the story of the Merak refugees in 2009, told me that he thought Alex would try to predict what journalists wanted to hear and then attempt 'to

be that person' (Fitzpatrick, 2013). Alex has also told me that in Merak, he was persuaded to be a spokesperson by prominent people in the 'Tamil diaspora' levelling claims of genocide against the Government of Sri Lanka in the final stages of the war. Once details of his criminal history were publicised, they ceased their direct communications, having only a passing interest in his circumstances after he failed to fit into the role of the defiant 'Moses figure' of the Tamil cause, leading his people to freedom. I recall these anecdotes to note, as many others have already done, how circumstances shape a narrative; that the story a migrant tells to immigration authorities, differs from what is told to journalists, to 'friends' on Facebook or in personal communiques. Narratives are as such 'made' by the conditions of their telling, and so Ajana raises the obvious provocation: 'What if the story is not only a "made story" but also a "made-up story"?' (2010, p. 254, italics in original)

Even if the intention of giving an account of oneself is to be truthful, it is impossible to discuss or be attentive to everything that has happened. Certain details are invariably overlooked while others are accentuated with recollection and retelling, or events may be simply misremembered, invariably marking some discrepancy between what is recounted and what actually occurred. But what if the story is told to deliberately mislead? Fitzpatrick (2010) notes that in Merak, Alex quietly admitted to him that he had 'made up stuff' about downtrodden Tamils. If he was lying to the media, did he then lie to the UNHCR? What if he was lying to me? Perhaps even more than stories told to give an honest account, lies are told with intentions that reveal something about the conditions of their making. Addressing this ambiguity that seems to destabilise her advocacy of narrative bioethics Ajana claims that:

It is as though hide-and-seek is the name of the game that permanently entertains the relationship between storytelling and the truth of one's being. (2010, p. 254)

Alex & I is an uneven collaboration of networked co-narration. Arguably, my emphasis on storytelling shifts its register to techniques of rhetoric and drama, not simply as a means of entertaining, but as a way to recall and think through. Approaching Alex as both a friend (after Facebook) and a minor historical figure, narration is a way to navigate and comprehend ephemeral and inaccessible archives, unpack their underlying power dynamics and trace the transient allegiances of a recent era. While some may argue that storytelling is a means of myth making, for me it is a way to make meaning. Alex is a figure with whom I can identify with and against as I negotiate my position in post-war Tamil discourses. Together, we voice objections to institutional and systemic forms of violence against migrants, which include criminalisation, racialisation, managerialism and indifference. Leveraging Alex's acts of self-expression and resistance into cultural and academic arenas, *Alex & I* is in the often repeated words of Milan Kundera, 'a struggle of memory against forgetting' (1999, p. 4).

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