

Bumping up Against the *Pioneer*: Being FIRST

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Abstract: Martin Shiel-Diego is a Spanish-born Geordie and first-gen history and politics student. This, alongside a healthy dose of punk music and ideals, has born a constant fascination with the *why* of identity creation and interaction. In this piece, he seeks to explore both the universal and particular aspects of *what* being first-gen means, and the constant torsion resulting from such an identity. The piece takes the form of a narratively driven polemic, through which he hopes to construct a commonality of understanding between the intersecting facets that constitute the lives of first-gen scholars.

The secondary student nature of 1st gen

In all systems where two (or more) forces clash, there is an assumption that the former proceeds the latter.¹ Within hegemonic systems of domination, this logic extends itself upon these opposing forces, negating the latter. To be black is defined as non-white², to be wo(man) is to be non-man³ and to be first-gen is to be non-student.⁴ To be a non-student is to exhibit certain marked features:

- Fierce (but docile)
- Independent (within limits)
- Restrained (in accent)
- Stubborn (when allowed)
- Thankful (for entry into foreign lands)
- Generative (of “potential”)
- Energetic (at work or study)
- Negativity (when we have the gall to complain)

It is this acrostic that I find encapsulates the particularities of the *FIRST-GEN* student. Caught in constant dialectical torsion between the brave *pioneer*, venturing into the dark, stuffy jungles of the academy, and the image as the *submissive*, a walking negation of our origins. The further a *FIRST-GEN* ventures forth, the tighter the vines of the academy take hold, divorcing us from our beginnings, our accents and languages, our familial-identity and our socio-economic status. In essence, to be *FIRST-GEN* is to exist in a foreign land, where we must learn to condition ourselves and venture beyond the bounds of our “homelands.”

What does it mean to be *FIRST*?

When writing at an undergraduate level—and possibly beyond—there is often a reliance on the thesaurus to both “fluff up” and more properly illuminate the focal point of a given

¹ This notion stems, in part, from a vulgar reading of Hegel, that abstracts his dialectic down to: *Thesis + Antithesis = Synthesis*. This is problematic for a few reasons: firstly, this is Fichte’s model of dialectic, and secondly, it assumes a primacy to the *thesis*, as the preeminent origin point of all subsequent suffixes. See Walter Kaufmann, *Hegel: A Reinterpretation*, Anchor Books, 1966.

² See Frantz Fanon, *White Skin Black Masks* (1952), Grove Press, 2008 and Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like*, University of Chicago Press, 2002.

³ See Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1953), Vol.1, Vintage, 2011.

⁴ From this I do not wish to suggest a commonality of oppression between the identities of black, women, or first-gen. Rather, these are all groups who have their core identity (the *what is* or being) defined as the mirror reflection of an antithetical hegemonic identity, a constant positioning as not-subject rather than subject.

phrase. As such, within the academic space—and outside it—there exists a somewhat common assumption that words exist within associational clusters. For example, the term eponymous—a favourite of mine in first year—is usually presented as essentially synonymous to famous. However, just because the eponymous zebra and the famed horse are both part of the Equidae family does not mean they are the same animal; as any human unfortunate enough to try and ride a zebra could attest to.

Rather, in both the literary and animal kingdoms, the specificities of a discursive term demarcate divisions between seemingly synonymous terms.⁵ As such, whilst there is a certain commonality within the eponymous-famous dichotomy this is not a perfect overlap. Personally, my initial reaction to the terms is very much distinct. My first association with the term eponymous is orange, thanks to Bennett's use of it to describe the perkiness of a character's navel in *The History Boys*. In contrast, famous is a term I initially associate with an idealised stereotype of the ostentatious celebrity, the first to come to mind being Will.i.am.

As such, between these two terms that broadly communicate in the recipient a sense of elevated—recognised—status in something, the personal and definitional specificities of each term alter both its use, and effect, in the recipient of them. Specific choices for words, their inference, commonly perceived meaning and presuppositional baggage, alter heavily the image of the object and its reception by a subject. This is because it is through the very images of objects we create, via language, that we come to recognise a given object.⁶ Therefore, we must ask. What is the baggage that the term *FIRST-GEN* carries? How does this condition the expectations of/upon *FIRST-GEN* students?

FIRST is a victorious term. It conjures an image of the vanquisher, the defeater, and the winner. The *FIRST* across the finish line, a *FIRST* in that essay you were super proud of, the *FIRST* to get into uni. To call someone *FIRST* is to congratulate them, to point out their great success at scrambling to the top of the pile. Therefore, to be a *FIRST* is to exhibit a constant, haunting, image of victorious responsibility—to not disappoint those who've helped you up through the glass ceiling.

This is especially true when the term is used for *FIRST-GEN* scholars. Many of us, during our time in high school attended fast-track schemes which during COVID took the form of webinars with progressive academics. During these, there is a repeated stress placed on the importance of the importance of *FIRST-GEN* voices, pioneering examples of a possibly more equitable academic institution. These voices are invigorating; they provide a sense of pride and worth to students from within the institution. The university is a site of identity creation⁷ and educational electrification that traditionally excludes *FIRST-GEN* communities from the hegemonic idealised image of the student. As such, the importance of these programmes—and any activity—that breaks the caricaturised mould of who can enter these places is crucial in fostering, and altering the experiences of those students who undermine it.

⁵ See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Discourse*, Routledge, 1981 and Jennifer Milliken, "The Study of Discourse in International Relations: A Critique of Research and Methods." *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1999, pp. 225-254.

⁶ It is thus through recognition (the reactive impulse) that action must proceed, as if you do not recognise something (as a thing in some manner) there is no possible way to interact with it. A falling tree, with no-one there to see.

⁷ The #RhodesMustFall movement in University of Cape Town provided lengthy discussions on this topic and its relation to black students who fell outside of the University's dominant framework. See *The Johannesburg Salon*, vol. 9, 2015.

Personally, one such scheme resulted in my reading of Yvette Kopjin's work on the difficulties of oral history in a cross-cultural interview.⁸ Reading this piece was eye-opening, resulting in my frequent quoting of it—in the most tangential of manners—whenever possible. However, more importantly, the reading of this work and discussing of it with academic voices that validated the *FIRST-GEN* musings gave me a real sense of my capacity. The capacity to *do* and to be the *FIRST*. Yet, alongside this, these meetings gave me a great sense of gravitas, the great *pioneer*. During the meetings provided by stuffy institutions, like Durham, there was often talk about “university life” which would boil down to a mixture of admonishments by the lecturers, warnings, and reassurance that it “wasn't as bad as you think.” When listening to this advice my eyes would glaze over. I'd be lost imagining the cobbles of the bailey that flow between the historic buildings containing a great multitude of possibilities. During my first few months at university, I spent time upon those cobbles piecing together the back-alleys and shortcuts that dot the bailey, mentally mapping my new *terra nullius*. The wilderness of the idealised academic world; a boundless opportunity for developing, thriving and *pioneering*.

Part-time job, study and sweat: the *FIRST-GEN* experience

I'd like to imagine the last two years of higher-education have prompted the *pioneer* within me; a bona fide Robinson Crusoe or James Cook. Alas, I think this may be an over-imagined fantasy. Rather—like all *FIRST-GEN*—I feel I may stand in the middle of the torsion. A case that may illuminate this is my first university job, because, like most *FIRST-GEN*, I was forced back into the workplace—kicking and screaming—by the harsh reality of having no money left. So, I bit the bullet and got a job doing morning shifts in a supermarket. Whilst at work I felt the dichotomy of *pioneer-submissive* in its fullest effect. My Monday shift, during winter, would begin bright and early at 6am. Waking at 5 o'clock on a Monday is fun for no-one, yet, on the moonlight cycle there I'd feel an immense rush; a pride to think that whilst my peers were tucked up snug-as-bugs I was out forging my own way—progress, the pioneering *FIRST* to wake.

However, this elated state was short lived. Usually ending at some point between 7-8am when my morning coffee began to wear off. Instead, the *submissive* would set in as the first-wave of RaHS—Durham's affectionate term for our hegemonic upper-caste of students—would rock up. I've collated a few of the repeating thoughts from the encounters below:

- **Accent:** During work, my accent would go through cyclical rotations beginning with hilarious jabs that it was too “southern” by the stock-delivery driver, followed by confusion on the part of the RaHS that it was too “northern” in the waking hours of their day. This was hard to balance, making me unsure of when I should stress a long “o” or when to replace a hard “a” sound with an “ar” sound.
- **Pomegranate Seeds:** I was surprised by their popularity, we sold them for £4 a pack and I'd have to restock the shelf once or twice a shift. What an inconceivable luxury.
- **Fairtrade Bananas & *Guardian* vs *Telegraph*:** Our prime purchasers of fairtrade bananas were professors, alongside this morning purchase they'd also pick up their chosen “educated” newspaper, my running mental tally places the ratio at roughly 2:1 in favour of the *Guardian*, which is unsurprising.

⁸ See Yvette Kopijn, “The Oral History Interview in a Cross-Cultural Setting: An Analysis of its Linguistic, Social and Ideological Structure” in *Narrative and Genre: Contexts and Types of Communication*, Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompson, eds., Routledge, 1998.

As my shift carried on towards my 11am finish I'd breathe a sigh of relief, and promptly hide in the bathroom for the last few minutes as to not be given some final, herculean task. However, my day was not over. Instead, I'd have to quickly cycle back, have a deodorant shower, change and grab my laptop ready for my mid-day Chinese history seminar. An after-work seminar is a stressful event. Primarily because due to my short turn-over time I'd usually be amongst the last to arrive; placing me in the top-left chair of the room. Forcing me to crane my neck backwards like some sort of academically inclined owl if I wished to participate in any discussion. Sadly, this was the first of the challenges that would engender the *submissive* element to *FIRST-GEN* seminar life.

Due to the short change-over and reliance on a bike to traverse Durham's mountainous terrain I would often arrive covered in a healthy layer of sweat. Understandably, this was a concern for a few reasons.⁹ Smell is an under-discussed phenomenon. It is one of our core 5 senses; our principal avenues as human subjects by which we can relate to the world. Specifically, it is an exceptionally visceral trans-corporeal sense,¹⁰ that spreads from and attaches to the person, altering how they are perceived. For example, if you have the misfortune to step in a turd left behind by a dog and their inattentive owner, your most visceral reaction does not come from the tactile squish during initial contact, but rather, the all-pervading smell that sticks itself to you.

To smell dirty (or "inhuman") embodies in someone a division; positioning them at a stinky, secondary level—beneath their perfumed and deodorised peers. In the tight space of the seminar, this creates an innate sense of *submission*. My only option, when at my most pungent, was to minimise my presence. Increasingly reticent of the sneers echoing in the room and a sense of being excluded from any discussion.

During one exceptionally muggy day, we had a seminar discussing the vandalising of the Old Summer Palace by Anglo-French forces at the close of the 2nd Opium War. This led one of my peers to recite his last visit to its ruins, prompting a broader conversation about visits to China—something a surprising number of the class had done. As the conversation drifted away, into mutual statements of their awe at the scale of devastation wrought against it, I felt restrained. I had glanced at contemporary photos (and old paintings) myself on the Wikipedia page on the walk up to the seminar room. However, this did not give me a full grasp of them. What good is a still image, splayed out over a cracked phone-screen in comparison to standing upon its soil? To read about something and then have to discuss it with someone who has experienced it changes a conversation. It granted their opinions a sense of gravitas, and mine, a naivety. To me the discussions became alien; built upon a common knowing which I was positioned away from. Instead, I sat and stewed—which certainly didn't help the stench.

Another fun challenge resulting from the interplay of work, study and some admittedly poor time management, was a tendency to heavily skim read. As with all students, the capacity to skim read is crucial for cutting through the tense foliage that is pre-reading. However, managing it in my sleep deprived state was a challenge, with one such hilarious case being the terms *xing* (human nature) and *xing* (sexuality). The fascinating interplay of these terms, served not only as a reminder of the importance of the specificities of words, but also, a great obstacle. Differentiating the two terms on three hours of sleep was a toughie, even with the darkest of coffees. Moments such as these are bitter-sweet; as you work in a daze your mind tends to

⁹ One of which is that one of my favourite professors had to deal with the stench without comment, for that, I am deeply, deeply sorry Nick.

¹⁰ See Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, Indiana University Press, 2010.

wander. I would at one moment be congratulating myself on my capacity to keep working under duress, and the next lamenting the inconceivable number of times I had to reread a given sentence or phrase. Truly unsure if my inability was symptomatic of my incapacity, or a sign I needed to try and change work shifts.

My final observation of the post-work seminar returns to the great British haunt: the accent. In the spoken form, some regions of the north use the term *treat* (said t-r-e-t) to indicate the past-tense for *treat*. For some reason, at no point in the last 20 years had anyone told me this was a specific quirk of the north-east. I'd supposed it to be a universally understood—and phonetically superior—way to indicate past treatment. Alas, due to my ignorance of its spatially-constrained use I made a bit of a fool of myself when using it in some written pieces for the seminar. I must ask, why hadn't anyone told me this before? I'd have saved myself some embarrassment and possibly a mark or two.

How should we *FIRST-GEN*?

The *FIRST-GEN* journey through the uncharted territory of academia is a fun, if tiring one. It begins with immense elation—the pride of your parents that their child has “done it”—followed promptly by a bump in the road. This bump unsettles the pioneering explorer, destabilising their mission of discovery and progress. This is the expected result of existing within a space where the image of *you* as a student is a mismatch to the institutionally expected ideal. In essence, to be *FIRST-GEN* is to colour beyond the lines, to subvert the demarcated space constructed for someone else, to be an unmappable explorer trapped upon a mapped topography. This bump may come in several forms; from accent and linguistic barriers, to racialised othering and lack of provisioning for “non-standard” lifestyles. For me, the earliest I remember the bump was during freshers, when my mild Geordie accent's undulation and sharp “a” sound provoked great confusion. Resulting in the repetition of the oft heard phrase:

“I'm sorry, but could you repeat that?”

These bumps and elation exist within our experiences of university from the offset. A constant state of facing odds and then greater odds. Constantly being David, never Goliath. Our experiences always sit between these points. The grand torsion present in our *FIRST-GEN* lives positions us between constant elation in our victory against the uphill struggles we face, and, a constant reflexive submission when we recognise each of the victories to be followed by another in our Sisyphean journey up the hill. With each roll of the boulder, we stray further from our origins. What was once familiar and homely becomes plasticine. The very process by which we educate ourselves removes us from the impetus origin point for such education. It is this sense of constant struggle against a congealed blob, mixed within our other identities and interests, that sets us apart and makes us powerful. To be constantly aware of the future bump, hoping it doesn't destabilise the boulder too much—you wouldn't want to have to start at the bottom again would you?

As such, whilst we all share this label as *FIRST-GEN* this is far from our limit or boundaries. Rather, it intersects, interweaves and interacts with all the facets of our existence which constitute us as *us*. I hope that through this piece, and the others in the collection, some sense of the unity of *us* may be constructed. This unity is not a physical one, nor, a joint set of bullet-pointable features, rather, it is a joint understanding—a commonality of experience.

Being *FIRST-GEN* shares within us a *Fierce* nature born through grit and graft. A crucial capacity for *Independence* marked by our pasts and mobilised in our presents. These capacities

are electrified by our *Stubbornness*, which builds and strengthens us. To be *FIRST-GEN* is to constantly exhibit these traits as we venture forth with immense *Energy* and mark out the great *Generative* potential found within us. However, alongside these forces of motion and pioneering there are bumps, submissions and catastrophes. To be *FIRST-GEN* is to be a stranger in a strange land. One where we are expected to be *Thankful* for the chance we have been so generously provided. One where we must *Restrain* the markers of our identities that are presumed to make us “lesser.” This state of *Negativity*, of kowtowing and deference mark us, bind us, and constrain us. However, these are not limitations, rather they are the very specificities of *us* that should be most proudly proclaimed.