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FORUM



Student demonstration against fees and cuts, Aberdeen. Credits: <http://anticuts.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Aberdeen-student-left-banner.jpg>

Anthropologists witnessing and reshaping the neoliberal academy

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Ethnographic dispatches from the neoliberal academy

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Ethnographic dispatches from the neoliberal academy

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ABSTRACT: This text consist of four brief ethnographic vignettes, offering personal observations and poignant recollections of the consequences of «neoliberalisation» at University College London, where I was employed for eighteen years until I took up a new position at a German university in September 2014.

I have written four brief observational pieces, responding in the representational mode that is core to our discipline: ethnography. For me this is the most precise and appropriate response to *Anuac*'s call to present neoliberal academia «in concrete, empirical, ideally ethnographic terms», and on the basis of «personal observations». Hence what I am presenting here is a few personal observations and poignant recollections of the consequences of «neoliberalisation» (Shore, Wright 2016) in a London-based university where I was employed for eighteen years, until I took up a new position at a German university in 2014. These short vignettes describe real situations of which I was part, all (but one) anonymized to protect the anonymity of the individuals figuring in the text. I developed this ethnographic reporting format as part of the *Nightlaboratory*, a fieldwork blog which I created together with my student Iulius-Cezar Macarie in 2012, where we have posted ethnographic pieces no longer than two-hundred words depicting the nocturnal city (particularly London) and migrants working nightshifts (<https://nightlaboratory.wordpress.com/>). The purpose of this blog is to offer composed yet evocative portraits of night workers and descriptions of situations we encounter during our nocturnal fieldwork. For this *Anuac* Forum, I have written longer pieces of three to four hundred words. The last one, “Zombies” is based on fieldwork carried out as part of the *Nightlaboratory*, when I interviewed and shadowed a night security guard at University College London in my last months at UCL, before I moved to Germany. The four vignettes are dry and matter-of-fact, and I purposefully refrain from suggesting how the situations that I describe can be reshaped and transformed, as I believe that they speak

for themselves. One can glean from them what alternative futures can and ought to be envisaged, which is what ethnography and ethnographic critique can offer.

Fish tank (2009)

Since the move into a prizewinning and state-of-the-art new building, the school's language teachers are accommodated into open plan offices, with glass panes, not walls, separating them from the rest of the building. They are exposed to the frequent gazes of others, such as the management on the top floor, which looks down on the "fish tank" as its residents soon call it. Although these offices are meant to be "transparent", teachers protect their privacy by patching language and country-related posters on the glass, as well as putting up "quiet zone" warning notes addressed to staff and students passing through the corridor talking loudly. In no other part of UCL – London's self-proclaimed "Global University" that boasts Jeremy Bentham as its spiritual father— is the spatial setup more panoptical and self-censuring than here. Teachers feel watched and try to avoid eye-contact with those looking at them from a distance. «If I want to use a deodorant, I feel people observe me, so I go to the toilet. When we congregate, I tend to think that *they* [the management] think we may be plotting». The offices have no sound isolation as the glass panels are not sealed to the floor, allowing air to pass through a gap at the bottom into the office and from there into the air and light well around which the offices and library are built. To control the flow of air, the windows open automatically, so the climate is cold and drafty especially during winter. Most teachers now tend to avoid the place. They do not socialize as they used to do before, and only use their office to hang their coats when teaching. Neither do the academics assemble, hidden away in small individual offices across the corridor. The language teachers' situation has become more precarious over the years, as the number of students taking languages is continuously dropping. They are paid hourly rates with just a few guaranteed hours on their temporary nine-month contracts. One floor up, another open plan office accommodates the postdocs and visiting fellows: «the unwashed» as a manager once told me quizzically. That was, of course, a joke, but, as I come to think of it, not a very apt one for fish tank residents.

Security alert (2010)

Students occupy the Jeremy Bentham Room in response to cuts to higher education and the rise in tuition fees, also demanding the full living wage for

cleaning, catering and security staff. In front of the school's premises students gather, many of them unable to enter the building as they are stopped by security guards who ask for IDs (which the students do not tend to have with them). Staff is treated more leniently and allowed in. Doing their best to look intimidating the guards seem rather confused and helpless, not ready to challenge any staff unwilling to show an ID. An administrator sends around an all-staff email: «Because of a college security alert, at the time of writing (11am) the door is locking when closed, allowing access only to staff via the ID card reader. Some students may not be able to enter the building, so this may be the reason for some absences this morning». After entering the building (without showing my ID) I respond to that email: «Thanks for sending this message around, it seems we are living in interesting times, barring students from the university premises. Can I ask what this is all about? Do we have a right to know what the security threats are? Is it the students?» One academic backs up my query by asking why students, who don't normally show IDs, are now being asked to do so, and yet another one writes in an email: «we have not been informed of a genuine threat to security and can only suspect that this is intimidation directed toward our students. This creates a hostile environment for work. I am headed home and will not return until the "security" presence is withdrawn». Some colleagues knock on my office door to say «well done», but without expressing their support publicly, while the majority keeps silent. Later that day the school's front doors are reopened without any further explanation. One colleague informs us at the end of the working day: «I think you should all know, if you don't already, that the UCL authorities have threatened the student occupiers with legal action if they do not vacate the Jeremy Bentham room».

Rocking the boat (2012)

In a court room not far from Heathrow Airport, Australian citizen Trenton Oldfield, and a dozen or so sympathizers listen to the sentence read out in front of him by a judge. Trenton is convicted to six months' prison for disrupting the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race in protest against government cuts and a culture of elitism in the UK. On 7 April 2012, perceiving the boat race as a symbol of upper-class privilege that deprives the less well-to-do of educational opportunities, he jumped into the Thames, disrupting the race for 25 minutes. Police pulled him out of the water, nobody got hurt, he only put his own life at risk. After he served his sentence, his application for a spousal visa is rejected, his presence in the UK being declared «not conducive to the public good». After twelve years of residence,

married to a British citizen with a small daughter, Trenton receives a ruling by the Home Secretary (and Oxford alumni) Theresa May that he is to be deported back to Australia. He appeals against this decision, and several academics, artists and activists rally to his support. In a character reference for the court I wrote: «Trenton's protest gave voice to his concerns through direct action, meant to energize the public debate around these issues. He did this out of a sense of moral duty, without causing physical harm to anybody, which elsewhere in Europe would not lead to such a draconian punishment followed by the threat of eviction. He may have crossed a boundary, but he has served his sentence, and he should be allowed to continue asking these critical questions through which he makes a larger contribution to British public life than most of us».

Zombies (2014)

A private security guard sits at the entrance of the School's library six nights a week, after the university introduced 24-hour opening times during exam term, serving its rapidly growing cohort of Chinese students many of whom work through the night. There are no librarians present whatsoever, security guards take care of students' safety and well-being. Most of the guards are on zero-hour contracts and when doing nightshifts they often work from 4pm until 9am. «We are the left-over of society», says one security guard whom I accompany during his nocturnal round through UCL premises, passing through tunnels and corridors and listening to the noises of machines that operate during the night. He tells me that it is important to listen, because anything can go wrong, such as explosions, breaking in, and water dripping. Noises are the warning signals as you can't see much because of the dark. The older buildings make sounds by themselves: they have «character», as he explains. But that's creepy when you get tired: then your mind starts playing tricks. Many guards drop the “graveyard shift” as it is sometimes called, as «it is too spooky» at night, they hear strange noises and see all sorts of things. They tell that there are ghosts around, as the UCL Main Quad was built on an old cemetery. The Rockefeller Building, an old structure across Gower Street, makes squeaky sounds and has a morgue so it scares the shit out of them. The Cruciform Building's name makes them think that there must be something wrong with that building too. It also doesn't help that Jeremy Bentham's Auto-Icon, a wooden cabinet with his embalmed body and wax head, is located in one of the corridors near the Provost's office, and that quite a few zombie films such as *The Mummy Returns* (2001) were shot at

UCL, bringing in extra revenue for the university. Because of that there is a high turnover of night-shift security personnel. The guard with whom I talk also tells me that he only gets a few hours of sleep as he commutes large distances and needs to be back at work on time for another 16-hour shift. He takes pills as it is hard to get a proper rest.

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