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VISIBILITY AND CONCEALMENT: Anthropology in London Day, University College  
London, 17 June 2013

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# conferences

## VISIBILITY AND CONCEALMENT

*Anthropology in London Day,  
University College London, 17 June 2013*

Every year, the anthropology departments of London's universities hold Anthropology in London Day, a one-day conference showcasing their talent. Organized by Goldsmiths at University College London (UCL), and well-attended by students and academics from around London and further afield, including Cambridge, Kent, Manchester and Oxford, the 2013 theme was 'Visibility and concealment'.

Morning panels addressed the broad themes of 'Illegality', 'Crisis, inequality and reciprocity', and 'Knowledge and efficacy', while the afternoon session consisted of panels focusing on issues surrounding 'Public and private spheres', 'Invisible agents', and 'Fieldwork and methodology'.

Awareness of the power differentials between ethnographer and research subject was central to several of the papers on offer. These sought to reveal links between the hegemony of neoliberal capital and non-democratic forms of state control. Indeed, the ways diverse people in different ethnographic contexts act within and come to terms with oppression, reminded the audience of the continuing need to reveal social complexity and the role of agency in our theorizing.

The issue of the methods by which we undertake and disseminate our research was also important. As the plenary speaker Pat Caplan noted, and as roundtable discussants revisited, although writing may be the most 'natural' or common method for disseminating anthropological knowledge, this does not necessarily mean it is the most effective method, especially outside the academy. Television, radio, internet, film, and documentary all have their own limitations, as well as their own ethical tensions. The consensus was for a critically reflexive and ethically grounded combination in attempting public engagement whilst remaining faithful to the fine-grained theoretical nuances and rich ethnographic descriptions that comprise the discipline's strength and are necessary for its success.

Further, as other papers also showed, every successful attempt at revealing some significant aspect of human sociocultural life inevitably conceals something else equally important. For example, while some research (such as questions of state brutality or quasi-legal life choices) may require the concealment of the ethnographer's true motives to some social agents, *actual* investigation of these same issues may demand the total revelation of the researcher's interests to others. Issues of trust, ethics, and methods thus go hand-in-hand. Alongside this, questions about which aspects of research can be revealed (as well as where, when, and to whom) must always take into account reflexive engagement

with those aspects which can never – or only partially – be revealed.

Anthropological research, methods, and writing cannot be disentangled from ethics. This went right to the heart of some of anthropology's most pressing and deeply engaging issues. Presenters spoke openly about their personal concerns and questioned their own attempts at coming to terms with its strengths, weaknesses, and contradictions.

The opening plenary had a strangely synthetic quality. In making visible their latest research endeavours, both Caplan and Pinney spoke about how anthropological engagements, by their very nature, conceal as much as they reveal. Caplan confessed to the co-creation of an ethnographic film, something she had not revealed to her colleagues before. She discussed the significance of historical processes in how people understand anthropological representations of their lives. Pinney, on the other hand, revealed aspects of central Indian urban history otherwise concealed in a public photographic studio. When this studio flooded, Pinney rescued and restored film negatives, revealing the private lives of several decades of central Indian society. In doing so, Pinney questioned the ethics of publicly using similar documents in academic inquiry: if originally intended for private representational construction, Pinney asked, how does their public dissemination make visible aspects of both self and society that those photographed would prefer concealed?

The day ended with an interesting roundtable discussion. As well as nicely summarizing the conference's recurring themes, the musings of the roundtable (comprising Allen Abramson, Mukulika Banerjee, Eric Hirsch, and Nici Nelson, with Gavin Weston as chair) provided some thought-provoking and controversial reflections.

Hirsch highlighted the quality of papers presented, particularly from post-fieldwork PhD students and young academics. He also noted that 'visibility' and 'concealment' had become powerful analytical tools beyond Melanesian anthropology, with young theorists deploying its findings on much wider and diverse ethnographic material, which he considered beneficial for the discipline. Nelson highlighted the connections between writing, ethics, and methods, as the conference's major themes. She indicated that all aspects of the anthropological project, from the conceptualization of research all the way through to the dissemination of its results, are fraught with the tensions and contradictions between visibility and concealment. Indeed, it is the continual negotiation of these tensions which, Nelson argued, frame, strengthen, and hinder ethnographic research.

Abramson dwelled on a recent event where two academics questioned the place of anthropology in the contemporary policy and media worlds and accused anthropology of lacking

engagement with popular, policy, or other mainstream discourses. This rankles. However, as Abramson noted, anthropologists should regard provocation as an incitement to rethink our projects, our methods, our outputs and, indeed, the shape and scope of our discipline itself. We have to be honest about our discipline and its biases, strengths, and weaknesses.

Indeed, what of the history of anthropology and its position within, or at least alongside, the power systems of colonialism, neoliberalism, and other forms of empire (Negri & Hardt 2000)? Banerjee's confession of her work with the British military establishment was not only controversial, but came as a palpable shock: one could literally feel the mood change with the dawning realization of her admission. In her own words, she is attempting to remove 'the institutional racism' of the military establishment and to 'humanize' those the military deal with. In a nutshell, to make the military think more like anthropologists (a learnt skill, after all). This opened just as many questions as it answered and concealed as much as it made visible. Banerjee said she did not have to sign a confidentiality agreement. Not revealed, however, were the financial, logistical, institutional, or other kinds of support she received from this arrangement. Moreover, when asked about her approach should different militaries be involved (e.g. if a Pathan military establishment were to want her advice in relation to the invasion or occupation of Britain), Banerjee's response was telling: she refused to answer, ostensibly on the grounds that the question was rooted in counterfactual logic. Her response reminds us of the one-sided power differentials at play: since it is impossible to anticipate the outcomes of our actions, is such a determination to march exclusively with 'our' military not closer to dancing with the devil than Banerjee cares to admit?

In summary, Anthropology in London events continue to provide an engaging forum. This 2013 event revealed the strength and vitality that London's anthropological community brings to their field. All in all, a resounding success. ●

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Hardt, M. & A. Negri 2000. *Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

## HUMAN-ELEPHANT RELATIONS IN SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

*University of Canterbury, 7-8 May 2013*

This symposium brought together researchers from eight countries representing no fewer than nine disciplines across the natural sciences, the humanities, and the social sci-