



Snapshots of British Islam (1) - Of pink Chador and black Niqabs

Julie Billaud
October, 2013



These fieldnotes are part of an on-going research on the Islamic legal culture of England. This research, which I started in 2009, aims to capture the new cultural assemblages that have emerged in the European public sphere as a result of the increased visibility of Islam. While underlying the unintended and [paradoxical effects of State interventions](#) in the domain of 'race-relations', it displaces current debates on 'Islamism' from a focus on organised religious movements to one that is sensitive to everyday social practices. I argue that Islam in England can be read as a 'framework', in the sense of Charles Taylor, for exploring the Self, identity and the 'good ethical life'.



Photo credit: Mitra Mermazia

In Birmingham inner city, women's absent presence asserts itself through the increased popularity of niqabs. I recall now this fully covered woman called Aisha whom I met at the Brighthon mosque. She wanted to teach me how to pray and guided me to the women's section, where she could privately show me the moves of 'salat'. From behind her facial veil, I had noticed her distinctive working class accent but I could barely hide my astonishment when she eventually uncovered her face to reveal piercings of various shapes and colors. 'I have done many bad things in my life...you know...very bad things... but now I pray Allah and seek his forgiveness. He is the most merciful, the most compassionate!', she had told me as if wanting to excuse herself for my puzzlement at this unexpected vision of Taqwacore (Knight 2004). She had married a Moroccan man some years ago and had come to Islam through him. As we went to collect our shoes prior to leaving the mosque, I saw her pick up a pair of heavy boots with metal lining, the typical



attire of British punks. My disorientation was now total.

Sonia, another young woman in her twenties I met at a course on shari'ah law at the Muslim College in West London, was on her way to adopt that dress too. Arrived from Pakistan with her family at the age of 10, she obtained an A-level in History and Philosophy from a London University. Her parents were divorced and she now lived in a small house in Barnet with her mother who struggled to make ends meet and her six siblings. She admitted that her family was not very religious and watched episodes of *Eastenders* at weekends, 'like most Brits do'. It was her dissatisfaction with the type of knowledge she had received at University, in particular philosophical discussions around the 'death of God', that made her feel like knowing more about Islam. She was enrolled in various courses, at her local mosque, at the Muslim College and in private women's circles and worked part-time in a retail fashion store. As much as she was aware that wearing the niqab would make her life more complicated, she had gained enough self-confidence in the process of rediscovering her faith to make this ultimate step. And as she tried to explain her choice to me, I found myself amazed by her determination:

I don't need permission from anyone to know what I need to do, what I can do and what I can't do because if I'm doing something within the boundaries of the Sharia, and I'm not harming other people then that should be fine. I'm doing it for the sake of God and why would that be a problem? Why would I need the whole ijma from everyone? Because not everyone will agree on this topic anyway. Everyone is bound to have his or her own opinion.

In contrast with the black color of inner city niqabs, Birmingham city centre exhibits a rainbow of hijabs and the latest trends of Islamic fashion. Even international brands of prêt-à-porter, like Zara and H&M, seem to have been influenced by the global Islamic revival. In the shop windows, an extravaganza of colourful headgears, cagoules and hoods of various designs are displayed.

[Mitra Mermazia](#), a British Iranian artist, captures the transformations of public



life in her city with humour and poetry. In one of her recent performances entitled 'Who's afraid?' in reference to the popular 1930s song written by Frank Churchill 'Who's afraid of the big bad wolf', she walked the streets of the Bullring, in Birmingham city centre, perched on stilts and dressed with an all covering pink chador. Her silent strolling amidst the crowd, towering over passers-by, looking at the distance or at the tops of buildings as if preparing to fly, was meant to convey surrealistic impressions. Her phantomatic appearance triggered mixed reactions: some took pictures, as if confronted by an entertaining clown, while others simply pretended that she did not exist. But altogether, this poetic apparition under the flashy fabric joyfully challenged mainstream perceptions of Islam as a threat to public order, interrogating with humour the machinery of truth that shapes public perceptions with clear-cut certainties.

This impromptus catwalk highlights the power of the public sphere to stage contrasted identitarian performances. Indeed, the public space is primarily a space in which social actors play social roles and present themselves to others (Goffman 1969). Because of the democratic lack that has marked British politics since the 1980s, the public has become an important site of popular expression. The vibrant avant-garde rock scene, the British taste for costume (as the urban tribes exhibiting their exuberant attires remind us), the giant demonstrations against the war in Iraq in 2003, all these manifestations testify of the vitality of the public for voicing popular contestation and expressing identities.

References:

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Featured image: [Princess Hijab](#)

MEET our contributor: Kaius Tuori

Allegra

October, 2013

ALLEGRA: So, [Kaius Tuori](#), we heard that you recently received a new position – Congratulations! Would you mind telling just what is it (and why did they give it to you)?

KAIUS TUORI: Thanks for asking! I was recently appointed as a university lecturer in European studies at the [University of Helsinki](#), my first ever permanent appointment. I would hazard to guess that I was chosen because of my studies in the intellectual history of Europe, where I have been working on issues such as self-definition, identity, invention of tradition etc. My main line of inquiry is in how the past is used as a way to define oneself and how changes in one's identity are reflected in one's view of the past.

For example, how after the collapse of totalitarian regimes in Europe formerly intense nationalist historians refashioned themselves as Europeanists and began to write history based on a European focus. What has interested me is how strong an influence classical antiquity and its idealization has played in the formation of



European identity.

ALLEGRA: Your fields of speciality are quite broad (history, archaeology, anthropology, law) - would you call yourself: a) a legal historian with anthropological inclinations; b) a historical anthropologist of the law; c) an anthropologist of legal history; d) Who cares? Why?

KT: That's a tough one. Does it matter? Primarily, I would consider myself a bad historian, who dabbles in law, is a novice in anthropology and is useful in archaeology only because of his ability with a wheelbarrow. Right now I am working on getting my larger ERC project on lawyers, totalitarianism and European tradition (see foundlaw.org!) really moving. We have now two post-docs - [Jacob Giltaj](#) and [Tommaso Beggio](#) - and one grad student working [Ville Erkkilä](#) on it, using interesting methodology like psychohistory to analyze the mindscapes of these people... On the side, I am trying to finish for delivery a book long in the works titled *Lawyers and Savages*, which is about the history of legal anthropology. There is so much interesting stuff out there. Right now I am reading about an early Bavarian explorer to Brazil called Carl Martius, who made a fantastic study on the legal traditions of the Tupi, based on ancient Roman law. Or a Swiss nineteenth century legal anthropologist called Johann Bachofen, who formulated theories on the original state of matriarchy based on Greek myth and unreliable reports from Tahiti.

A: What, to you, will be the most relevant issues/themes within legal anthropology (and stuff) in the next foreseeable future? Whose work inspires you just now and why?



KT: That is another tricky one. The definition of relevance is such a nice way of revealing preferences that I have to hedge my bets here. Relevance in terms of political, economic and social issues, I would have to say land rights issues, but mainly because of the ongoing political momentum and the exciting developments that have taken place in the field. However, in terms of pure science and methodology I would say that the most potential is still in the area loosely defined as studies on identity, gender, queer and weird. Beyond the critical fascination on all things outré, I truly believe that to be innovative, science has to have a strong potential to disrupt, question and change perspective. Also, I am a big fan of the stuff perceived as strange and weird. For my main line of work, the biggest inspiration has been [Sally Merry](#), whom I have been fortunate enough to meet when I have been at NYU as post-doc. She has an interesting way of discussing the uses of tradition and identity politics in legal and political disputes.

A: When was the last time you were bored at an academic context and for what reasons? (please disguise any information that might give away the identities of actual persons involved - and for anyone wondering about this particular question, stay tuned to unfolding Allegra discussions on the Anthropology of Boredom!)

KT: Oh, let's not get started on this one. I have the intellectual stamina of a goldfish.

A: If we were stranded on a deserted island and could take just ONE of your texts with us, which should be (and again, why)?

KT: I would probably choose the thickest one, to use as kindle.

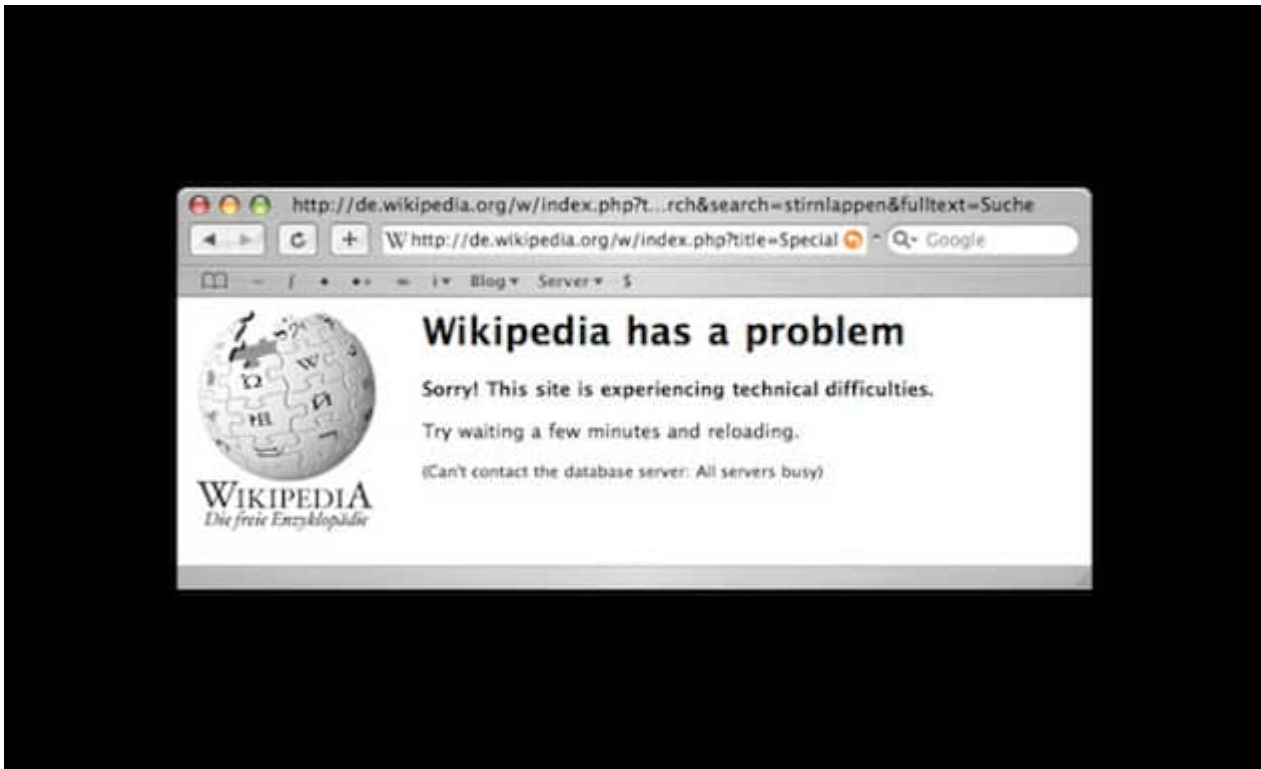


A: Thanks for your time! We look forward to many more fruitful discussions - and of course endless contributions for Allegra!

KAIUS TUORI: Why thank you! I have been stunned how fast Allegra has taken off. There evidently was quite a need for something like this.

Open Access, Wiki-PR and Nietzsche (courtesy of Kelly Grotke)

Allegra
October, 2013



This particular piece of [slow food for thought](#) on a very current theme came via our 'friends' at Facebook - a source we are finding increasingly, and surprisingly, useful for navigating both the 'fast' and 'slow' of 'the now'. What drew our attention was not only the post on 'Wiki-PR', but also the accompanying commentary by Kelly Grotke bringing in [Nietzsche](#). And since it is our genuine pleasure to encounter in Facebook a social theorists besides [Marx](#) or [Zizek](#) (slight exaggeration, but we think you, dear reader, will get our gist!), we felt the need to dig deeper. So please find below first a few quotes from the recent great article from fellow bloggers at the [Motherboard](#) on how PR companies are gradually taking over the "world's go-to resource for information", as well as a great quote from the essay [On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense \(1873\)](#) by Friedrich Nietzsche. Is the era of 'free' information over only so shortly after the 'information revolution', or did it ever exist in the first place? Thanks Allegra friend [Kelly Grotke](#) for the inspiration! (And a clever reader will note that contrary to Allegra habits, all the links to theorist profiles take you directly to - [Wikipedia!](#)).



'Is Wikipedia for Sale? The not-so-free-encyclopaedia' by Martin Robbins

“According to James Hare, head of Wikimedia’s DC regional affiliate, “what makes the Wiki-PR case especially heinous” is the way their blatant reputational whitewashing demeans and frustrates the work of the Wikipedia community. “It’s how their success to date was made possible,” he claims. “I have worked with organizations that had an interest in improving content on Wikipedia related to their work. I and my colleagues at Wikimedia DC consistently advise: be transparent about who you are and who you work for. Wiki-PR acted in gross violation of this basic community expectation, and I regret that volunteer administrators will have to clean up after them.”

The impact of this could be profound. Wikipedia is the world’s go-to resource for information on everything from the Boer War to fifth-season episodes of Buffy. Its reputation rests on the trust people have in its content, a trust that PR firms are degrading even as they attempt to mine it for their clients. We all know that the site is open to abuse, but until now its unique community of editors have prevailed. With ever more pages and more sophisticated ways to attack the site, however, their efforts are increasingly stretched. In a few years, a significant percentage of Wikipedia’s content could be spam.”

On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense (1873) by Friedrich Nietzsche

“Deception, flattering, lying, deluding, talking behind the back, putting up a false front, living in borrowed splendor, wearing a mask, hiding behind convention, playing a role for others and for oneself — in short, a continuous fluttering around the solitary flame of vanity — is so much the rule and the law among men that there is almost nothing which is less comprehensible than how an honest and pure drive for truth could have arisen among them. They are deeply immersed in illusions and in dream images; their eyes merely glide over the surface of things and see “forms.” ”



Image from <http://motherboard.vice.com/blog/is-wikipedia-for-sale>

CANADA calling: Posts & Papers

Allegra

October, 2013



Sometimes things arrive in hordes - or then our eyes have merely been selective lately! Whatever the case, all the below events/positions are located in Canada. Admittedly, the country in question is large, so perhaps too much excitement over this finding is misplaced, but maybe we stick with it anyway. Thus, first, the [Association for Association for Law, Property, and Society](#) has an open call for either papers or panels for the 5th Annual Meeting. The event takes place at the [University of British Columbia](#) in Vancouver in May 2-4, 2014 (and this time and



place alone could present sufficient excuse for attending), and its theme addresses property law and policy broadly construed, with a target audience equally broadly defined. DEADLINE 15 Jan, 2014 (email proposals here alps2014@law.ubc.ca)

The second call is for the annual meeting of the [Canadian Law and Society Association](#), organized at the [Faculty of Law](#) at the [University of Manitoba](#) on June 6-8, 2014. The theme [Law's Encounters: Co-existing and Contradictory Norms and Systems](#) promises equally broad discussions, yet the call gives for certain expected emphasis for Indigenous issues. DEADLINE Jan 15, 2014 (email proposals here mmatesic@yorku.ca)

The last call for papers is for the Northern Frontier Northern Homeland Forty Years On: People Environment and Resources in the North organized at the [University of Alberta](#) on April 29 to May 1, 2014, and it marks the 40th anniversary of the '[Berger Inquiry](#)' related to plans to construct a gas pipeline across tribal lands.

DEADLINE Nov 15 (email proposals here cindy.mason@ualberta.ca)

Finally, the [Carleton University](#) of Ottawa offers two tenure-track assistant professorships. The first one is for Indigeneity and the Law, the second for Criminology and Socio-legal Studies. DEADLINE for both is Dec 1.

Let there be papers & applications a plenty!



From 'REAL' Reality to 'UN' Reality (Part 2/5)

Miia Halme-Tuomisaari
October, 2013



In UN treaty body proceedings members of the bodies regularly mention - after they are done with elaborate rounds of welcomes, thank yous and appreciations toward the state presenting its periodic report - that whereas they have been happy to receive statistical information and specific figures in the report they ultimately wish to achieve something more: to be exposed to 'real reality'.

This plea, articulated in diverse forms, appears in fact so systematic, and yet it



forms such a dramatic contrast with what treaty body proceedings could be considered to *actually* encapsulate that with the present field notes I attempt to recover all of the minuscule details through which 'real reality' is transformed into 'UN reality'.

The Human Rights Committee convenes in the surprisingly small conference room located on the first floor of the Palais Wilson, the original headquarters of the League of Nations prior to the construction of the much larger premises of the Palais du Nations located further up the hill. Today, in addition to treaty body sessions and other conferences, the beautifully renovated Palais functions as the headquarters of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. The conference room entails the usual features of any UN gathering: a podium, a round seating arrangement for the experts who are the main protagonists of the sessions, additional seats at the centre of the room for state delegations, rows for the audience at the back all equipped with headphones and microphones along with wonderfully comfortable lush leather armchairs with the UN press secretaries and members of the UN Congress services located at the back, and finally the booths of the interpreters on two levels. Opposite to the interpreters is a large filing cabinet as visible embodiment of the enormous quantities of documents that used to accompany the Committee's sessions; the futility of this once essential construction is concrete embodiment of the fact that slowly but surely also the UN is moving toward a paperless working environment.

During the sessions only people belonging to three categories have the possibility to make oral statements: members of the Committee, state delegations or members of the UN Secretariat - with the obvious exception being formed by UN translators attending to simultaneous translations. Although the purpose of the last group is to merely convey what the speakers of the three previous categories is communicated 'as is', without any personal additions, it could be easy to dismiss this category of a 'voice'; yet relevant things of course always occur in translation and thus their contribution is a very relevant to the unfolding of the sessions. The other category whose voice is struggling to come through is formed by the representatives of NGOs who are not entitled to speak in the official



program, but who are today given both a slot - closed from 'the public' - in the official program to address the members of the Committee prior to the presentations of states, as well as a - closed - slot in the informal program for lunch hour meetings with the same purpose.



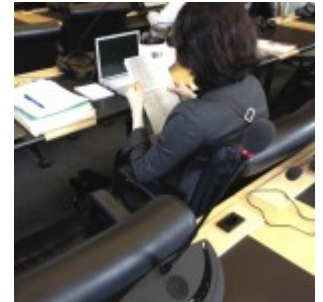
That 'real reality' is far away during the sessions of the Human Rights Committee is communicated by the organizing of the sessions as a whole: true to their quality as international conferences, the sessions of the Human Rights Committee consist of a series of highly formalized and carefully choreographed sessions which last a pre-determined length. Although the sessions are 'public' by their definition, this does not mean that just anyone could walk in from the street on a whim: all those present are required to have badges issued on the basis of pre-approved forms. In principle a badge will be issued also to interested outside observers such as scholars; in practice certain 'delicacies' apply. I will discuss them in more detail later. To enter into the session a person is also required to enter through security and be accompanied by an identification document, commonly a passport.

When one participates in the proceedings as an observer, one sits at the back of the room, listening to the proceedings via headphones. Attempting anything different results in is a truly surreal experience: without headphones one hears only the most silent uttering of words from someone speaking at the front of the room whose face one will likely not see. One cannot identify facial expressions or gestures, neither hear any differences in the tone of voice used. Also the name of the person speaking, particularly if the person belongs to a state delegation, will be unavailable as it is usually mentioned in passing with general introductions. In every sense of the word the presentation of states become anonymous presentations of the state, totally depersonalised. The sound space is occupied by vague echoes of sounds coming from infinite headphones, either reproducing the original speech of the person talking, or then one of the numerous simultaneous translations that the interpreters offer non-stop while sitting in the glass-booths

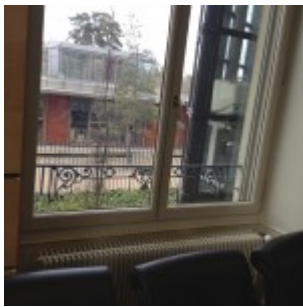


located on the side. Present is also rhythmic clacking of keyboards as audience members – those not lulling in their seats, inspecting their phones or checking their Facebook statuses – proceed to record the sessions.

The outside world is blocked out, distant, and seemingly non-existent, a sensation intensified by the screens that on occasion emerge to block the sun sneaking into the venue through the windows located in its three different corners. Suddenly a motor-bike races outside, or perhaps children shout in the school yard located next to the Palais; otherwise all signs of the ‘real reality’ outside the windows is erased. The ‘UN reality’ inside is finalized by the lulling sound of the air conditioning system, which completes the strange, detached sentiment of the proceedings.



As a new session of the Committee begins, for the first few days it is marked by a sense of enthusiasm and concentration: people arrive to the sessions punctually, very few people leave the conference room while the sessions are still running for impromptu coffee breaks or personal chats, and most of the audience maintains their focus on the events at hand with only the occasional representative of the UN secretariat touring the room to check up on practical matters; whether the microphones of the interpreters are working, or the schedules of informal NGO meetings are still current. During these days expressions in the seminar room are sombre and attentive with every participatory detail highlighting the importance of the ceremony we are all jointly bringing to life. For these fleeting few days it becomes possible to see, meet the archetype of ‘the international human rights community’ in reality: a group of concerned world citizens who have travelled great geographic distances to participate in a ceremony to improve the world.



By day three this archetype starts to become fader as the community becomes increasingly transformed into that 'real people': people for whom it, alike all other people, simply remains impossible to remain solely focused on the intricacies of the ceremony at hand, and who seek retreat to their 'real reality' outside via modern technologies - replying to new emails, checking newspaper websites for updates on world events, updating their Facebook statuses. Some also use this rare opportunity to sit still to continue work on outstanding publishing commitments, editing texts and drafting new ones. Even fewer still relish the rare opportunity for a rest, even a nap.

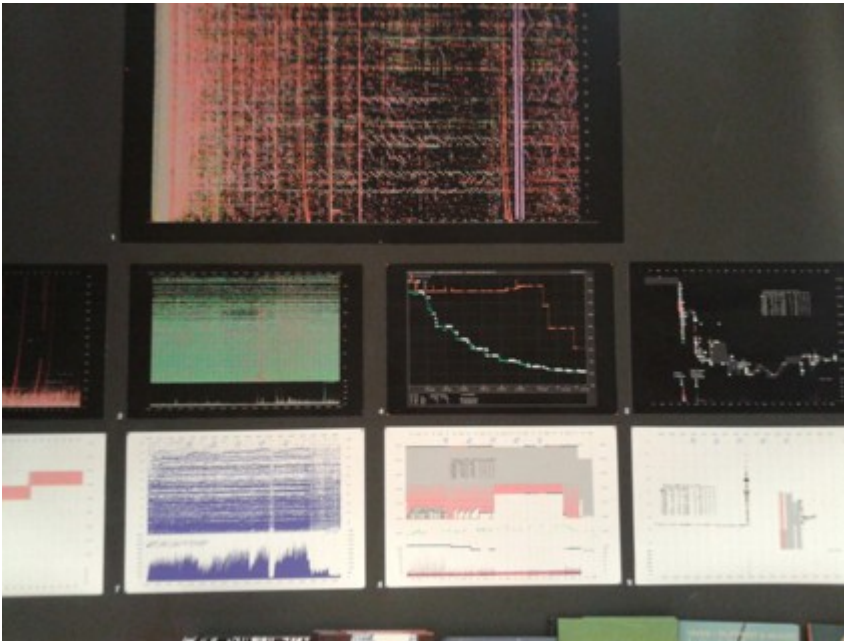
As the session continues in the following weeks, it slowly becomes characterized by a more relaxed atmosphere. Since the number of participants for the Committee's sessions is relatively small - the lowest number of people I counted as being in the room at one time was under forty - security guards at the gate recognize most regular participants, and sometimes ease on the formalities of presenting a badge or passport, perhaps even welcoming the observer to proceed straight through the metal detector. By week two people start sneaking into the conference room late, one can catch recently acquainted audience members exchanging their experiences from the previous night in Geneva, with the occasional Committee member sneaking in the formally forbidden snack or Coke. At the podium the liturgy continues as state delegations change: the endless litany of legislative reforms, policy initiatives, committees, communications, plans, follow-ups - all continuing their work to construct the seamless tale of progress, only shortly again to be disrupted by the interventions of treaty body members, or 'colleagues' as they are addressed by the chair. The 'International' is in action and in full swing.

These fieldnotes are based on my ongoing project examining UN human rights monitoring for which I am currently conducting fieldwork at the 109th session of the UN Human Rights Committee. My earlier notes discussed [arriving at the UN](#), and my explorations continue with a [search of entertainment at the UN](#).



Money Machine

Allegra
October, 2013



If, like us, you find yourself lost in translation each time you are confronted with the world of finance, why not start educating yourself with...a novel? Yes, a novel! And to kill two birds with one stone, you'll become a nicer person as [a recent scientific study](#) published in *Science* journal asserts that reading literary fiction can greatly improve our emotional intelligence.

Well, you may develop cynicism instead of empathy after reading this disconcerting piece enigmatically entitled *6*, deprived of author's name and published by Brussels based editor [Zones Sensibles](#). Sadly, the book is currently only available in French...but considering its success (40,000 copies sold in 6 months), we can expect an English translation soon.

In common representations, finance refers to greedy traders, the power of Goldman Sachs, a capitalism that has lost touch with the real economy and is locked in frantic and dangerous speculation. Yes. Certainly. Except it's not. And not only that. And maybe not even that at all. *6* puts aside such stereotypes to give us a totally different vision.



And if Wall Street was not on Wall Street, but on 1700 Mac Arthur Boulevard, Mahwah (New Jersey), in a huge air-conditioned warehouse consuming as much energy as a city of 10 000? And if the real masters of the Stock Exchange were not traders but unscrupulous algorithms acting at the speed of lightning? And if, through the manipulation of money, machines were taking power over humans? And if, in fact, what was going on was the “Rise of the Machines”, as indicated in the book’s subtitle?

At this point, the reader wonders if she is reading SciFi. Except that operations realised automatically by computers on the stock exchange has become a reality.

As 6 explains it in a cheerful tone, but through careful documentation, an invisible change has transformed the world of speculation in the last three decades : nearly 70 % of transactions are now carried out by computers, and the market power is acquired primarily by mastering the best algorithms . They must avoid the pitfalls of their opponents, namely detect small changes in stock prices to buy and especially to act quickly, at the speed of a millionth of a second. “Being able to show TV cameras puppets in front of screens is useful to reassure the man in the street and hide the reality: the market is now no more than a network of impenetrable machines” asserts the author, who humorously presents himself as a machine, in an interview with [Le Monde](#). His real name is Alexandre Laumonier, anthropologist, editor and [blogger](#).





But the system has become uncontrollable. Not only is it totally disconned from the real economy, but it is constantly on the verge of collapsing. This prospect worries the creators of algorithms themselves, these Frankenstein of modern times: one of them, [Thomas Peterffy](#), heckled the Annual Congress of the World Federation of Exchanges in October 2010, declaring : “In the last twenty years came computers, electronic communications, electronic exchanges, dark pools, flash orders, multiple exchanges, alternative trading venues, direct access brokers, OTC derivatives, high-frequency traders ... Reg NMS in the U.S. — and what we have today is a complete mess.”

The disaster is near - if not already there. But by then, we will have the pleasure of reading this excellent book. And reflect on the very timely theme that runs through it, reminding us of a Latourian motif: is it only in the financial world that machines outweigh humans? Have we produced ‘things’ that we are no more able to control?

AND- if you feel this read did not fully satisfy your thirst for deeper understanding of the financial world, here are slightly more serious references:

Riles, Annelise. 2011. *Collateral Knowledge: Legal Reasoning in the Global Financial Markets*. Chicago. University of Chicago Press.

Ho, Karen. 2009. *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street*. Duke University Press.

Graeber, David. 2012. *Debt: the First 5,000 Years*. New York. Melville House.

Keith Hart & Horacio Ortiz. 2008. [Anthropology in the Financial Crisis](#). *Anthropology Today*. Volume 25, issue 6.



Gudeman, Stephen. 2008. Watching Wall street : A Global Earthquake. *Anthropology Today*. Volume 25, issue 6.

Anthropologists engaging with finance : [a discussion in Cultural Anthropology Online](#). *Fieldsights - Theorizing the Contemporary*. May 2012

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FILMS

An interview of Graeber on Democracy Now on the global debt crisis and the Occupy movement.

Inside Job - The award winning documentary 'Inside Job' [2011 | US] by Charles Ferguson is the most insightful and illuminating amongst a number of such attempts that deal with the global financial crisis, which is wrecking lives and economies across the world to this day. Watch [here](#)

Susan Bibler Coutin on the future of political and legal anthropology

Allegra
October, 2013



Susan Bibler Coutin is the president of the Association of Political and Legal Anthropology. A few weeks before the annual meeting of the AAA in Chicago, Allegra sat with her for a (virtual) chat.

A: Dear Susan, It's great to have you onboard Allegra as a contributor! Before we get going with our discussion, could you introduce yourself in just a few words to anyone who might not yet be familiar with your work & engagement with legal anthropology?



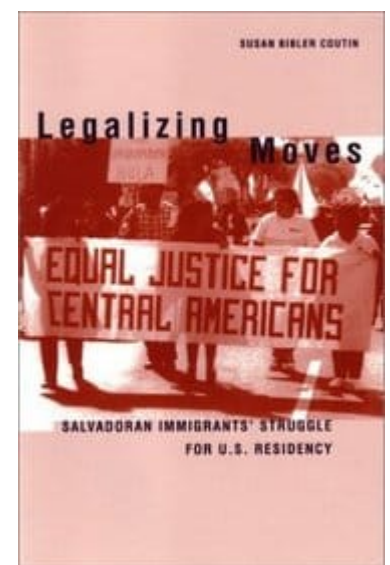
S: I am a [professor in the Departments of Criminology, Law and Society and Anthropology](#) at the University of California, Irvine and am the current (2011-2013) president of the [Association of Political and Legal Anthropology](#).



My research has examined social, political, and legal activism surrounding immigration issues, particularly immigration from El Salvador to the United States. I am currently working a book manuscript that examines the experiences of 1.5 generation migrants, that is, individuals who were born in El Salvador but raised in the United States. Based on interviews with 1.5 generation Salvadorans in Southern California and in El Salvador, this book explores the power and limitations of nation-based categories of membership. With Justin Richland (UCI and University of Chicago) I am also conducting NSF-funded research regarding archival practices in immigrant and indigenous advocacy. This project examines how the production, retrieval, and circulation of records and files figures in Central and Native Americans' efforts to secure recognition, whether as immigrants or in the form of tribal status, and thus seeks to make visible the regulatory practices that shape the lives of some of the U.S.'s most exceptional, and thereby vulnerable, populations.

A: Clearly there is something 'in the air' at the present moment as the launching of Allegra coincided almost exactly with the call by APLA for new experiments in publishing formats in the field of legal anthropology!

S: What is "in the air" is the recognition throughout the American Anthropological Association that our current subscription-based publishing model may not be sustainable. Libraries are curtailing their subscriptions while editorial costs are increasing. APLA's journal, *PoLAR: Political and Anthropology Review*, has been identified as a relatively low-cost journal that has strong potential to expand its reach, so we are well-positioned to approach the new publishing world creatively. We have already created a [PoLAR spillover page](#) for features, such as author interviews, that can accompany the hard copy of our journal, as well as [PoLAR virtual issues](#) that bring together previously published and current articles around such themes as transparency, occupation, and NGOs. The virtual issues enhance *PoLAR's* visibility and





accessibility while also showcasing the ways that political and legal anthropological work speaks to issues of broad interest to scholars in and beyond anthropology. Additionally, we have created a digital [fellows program](#) to contribute to training the new generation of scholars in alternative publishing formats, and we encourage any Allegra readers who are interested in this program to consider getting involved. Finally, we have tried to make our [website](#) more dynamic through more frequent posts, including regarding Allegra.

A: Why do you see that there is a need for such experiments in specific? What kind of hopes do you invest in an experiment such as Allegra?

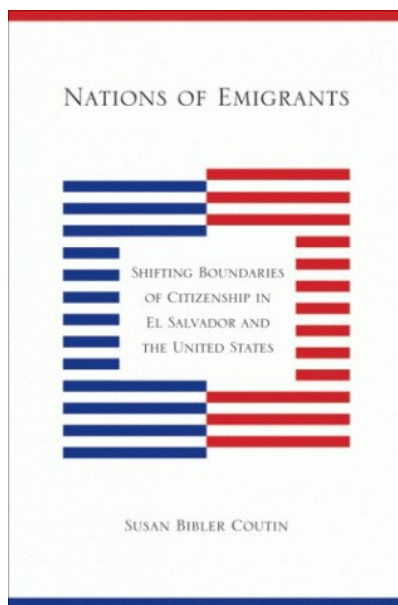
S: There is a great need for political and legal anthropologists to disseminate their work in multiple formats, including those that reach the broader public. Political and legal anthropologists have considerable expertise regarding a range of issues - human rights, political violence, legal technologies, financial forms, to name just a few - that are in the news every day, and we can contribute our expertise to deepening public understandings of these issues. But only if we put our work in a format that the public is likely to read. The 2012 APLA business meeting therefore featured a conversation with Catherine Besteman and Hugh Gusterson on the topic of public engagement. In 2013, we will be hosting a workshop on genres of public writing as well as a conversation about expanding anthropology's reach. The Allegra experiment is very consistent with these initiatives, and so we are pleased to be involved.

A: To us Allegra is linked to certain changes we see, not only in scholarly publishing, but also a certain transformation in our joint understanding of 'knowledge' from a pre-defined, static entity into a more collaborative, fluid process. Do you see such a transformation process as ongoing, and if so, what kind of outcomes do you see it as holding for both scholarly work and publishing more generally?

S: I guess that I've always seen "knowledge" as fluid and collaborative. For example, my approach to teaching is to mutually explore a topic along with my



students. Likewise, any given publication is the best analysis that the author can provide at that point in time, in conversation with existing and previously published work, and in anticipation of future directions. What *is* true, however, is that we can make more of these conversations transparent, for example with retrospective author interviews regarding their previously published work, or by including summaries of “author-meets-readers” sessions (or even creating such sessions “virtually.”)



A: Given that we now have with Allegra this ‘space’ at our disposal – a space in which we could virtually do whatever – what kind of visions do you have in mind in specific of what this could mean?

S: I think I’ve just given examples: virtual author-meets-readers sessions, retrospective interviews with authors, blogs, discussions of things that students need to know how to do (such as grant-writing), bibliographies, reviews, commentaries.

A: AND – on the other hand – given that Allegra was created with the view to open a space deprived of some of the formal constraints of academic journals, this could also end up being its downside. In other words, this freedom could turn this experiment into an inaudible hubbub. What would you recommend to avoid such a pitfall?

S: That indeed is the challenge. As the information available to readers and interlocutors expands, it is difficult to wade through. Searchable threads might



be a good idea.

A: In the current dire professional circumstances with bad news coming from all fronts - the instability of academic positions and the increased pressures for scholarship to yield to 'extra-academic' pressures such as policy oriented 'relevance' - what kind of a message would you want to send to aspiring scholars on how to keep their spirits high & why to choose scholarship as their path in life?

S: Scholarship takes many forms and is not limited to academia. Anthropologists can be ethnographers of institutional cultures, organizational settings, and the surrounding contexts in which they are situated, wherever they are placed. Writing also takes multiple forms, not only scholarly monographs and journal articles, but also reports, memos, blogs, records, letters, op-eds, proposals, forms and many other types of documents, whether virtual or concrete. The records that anthropologists create will be valuable, wherever they are housed and disseminated.

Warm thanks for your engagement - and we look forward to many more discussions in our joint experiment!

'Good' celebrity: more harm than good?

Allegra
October, 2013



A while back our contributor [Antonio de Lauri](#) drew our attention on the myth of the 'good poor' and how we may have collectively thought to have left it behind us. We were wrong, he concluded.

"It has simply multiplied. A controversial rhetoric of the good poor, the good migrant, even the good woman, nowadays constitute the main plot of humanitarian actions and good Samaritans' reports, articles and books." It turns out that he had his eye on the pulse of the moment if judged by the heat that one of the archetypes of the 'good celebrity' has received recently, namely U2 frontman Bono. In a blog article titled '[Elevation](#)' published in the [Guardian on June 18th, 2013](#) author and columnist [George Monbiot](#) argues how "Bono's positioning of the west as the saviour of Africa while failing to discuss the harm the G8 nations are doing has undermined campaigns for justice and accountability."

Monbiot's stinging text continues by noting how "It was bad enough in 2005. Then, at the G8 summit in Scotland, Bono and Bob Geldof heaped praise on Tony Blair and George Bush, who were still mired in the butchery they had initiated in Iraq. At one point Geldof appeared, literally and figuratively, to be sitting in Tony Blair's lap. African activists accused them of drowning out a campaign for global justice with a campaign for charity. But this is worse. As the UK chairs the G8 summit again, a campaign that Bono founded, with which Geldof works closely, appears to be whitewashing the G8's policies in Africa."

The main point becomes: "Bono can't help Africans by stealing their voice. Because the U2 frontman and others like him are seen as representatives of the poor, the poor are not invited to speak"

Ilan Kapoor's latest book, entitled [Celebrity Humanitarianism](#) (Routledge, 2013) argues that 'bling' charity legitimates, and indeed promotes, neoliberal capitalism and global inequality. Far from being altruistic, 'celebrity humanitarianism' is significantly contaminated and ideological: it is most often self-serving, helping to promote institutional aggrandizement and the celebrity 'brand'; it advances



consumerism and corporate capitalism, and rationalizes the very global inequality it seeks to redress; it is fundamentally depoliticizing, despite its pretensions to 'activism'; and it contributes to a 'postdemocratic' political landscape, which appears outwardly open and consensual, but is in fact managed by unaccountable elites.

Relevant points with which we can hardly disagree. What do you think, dear Allegra reader: the good celebrities – doing more harm than good?

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Image credit: Hangthebankers.com



(Slow) Food for Thoughts: Ingold on Anthropology, Art and Self-Transformation

Allegra
October, 2013



[Tim Ingold](#) has been a great source of inspiration to us recently, adding many 'food for thoughts' to ALLEGRA's slow cuisine. Since good products should be consumed without moderation, here is a video link to a recent talk he gave at KU Leuven.

Link to the video of the lecture: [here](#)

Comparing the work of anthropologists with the work of artists, Ingold declares:

"I believe that the real people who are doing anthropology these days are artists. Anthropologists have for the most part of them settled for something else. What they call ethnography".

In Ingold's view, the purpose of anthropology is not to convert ethnography into data, as grist to the mill of scientific generalisation. Rather, to practice



anthropology is to join with those among whom we work, in a speculative inquiry into the possibilities and potentials of human life in the one world we all inhabit. Anthropology, in this sense, is not a positive science but an art of inquiry.

He goes on:

“The only way you can know things is through a process of self discovery. To know things you have to grow into them and let them grow in you so that they become part of who you are. It is by paying attention to what the world has to tell us that we learn. (...) In this sense, anthropology is transformational. It is ‘studying with’ and ‘learning from’. Ethnography is a ‘study of’ and ‘learning about’.”

Arriving at the UN

Miia Halme-Tuomisaari
October, 2013



This is finally it! I unlock my bike, hop on and start making my way down the hill in the direction of the lake. Shivering slightly from the damp morning air, I pass the Cornavin station, and make sure that I am not caught in the tram tracks going in all directions across the road.

For a moment I hesitate if I am heading the right way, but then I begin to recognize familiar places; although it has been a few years since my last visit to Geneva, the centre of the town is so small that it is easy enough to find one's way around. In just a few more minutes I am navigating through Paquis, thinking how, despite of liking the city much more in all other aspects in my present visit, this area truly remains a 'dump' as I have heard locals describe it affectionately. I make one final curve to the left, and see the Palais Wilson on my right.



I chain my bike at the fence going around the Palais, and pause for a moment to admire the building: it is every bit as beautiful as I remembered. I proceed toward the security booth located at the gate, holding my passport tightly in my hand and hoping that my badge has arrived there as promised. It has not. Disappointed, for a moment I fear that I will end up wasting too much time sorting the matter out, and thus miss the opening of the session. This prospect does not please me - I am here to watch the *entire* session from start to finish in order to get the full picture of what a session of the Human Rights Committee looks like. Fortunately the issue is resolved in just a few moments after the security guards make a couple of calls to someone inside the Palais. I never find out why my pass was not ready or how the matter is fixed but that matters little: I am let in.

I thank the guards warmly for going out of their way to accommodate my participation, and - feeling a bit like an academic Cinderella - make my way to the inner yard. I cannot help but feel that there is something magical in the building in front of me: whereas all the other gorgeous houses on its either side contain just 'normal' activities, this is the place where 'the international' meets. I pause at this thought for a moment, only to be jerked back into reality by the sound of rushed footsteps as people making up 'the international' pass me by from all sides. I glance quickly at their wardrobe, hoping that I fit in: I have swapped my unfortunately characteristic writing sweats for a classic tailored jacket, smart pants and heels, but I still fear that the academic within may be peeking out. Cinderella all right - even if I would not necessarily call my fieldwork 'studying up', it certainly does include dressing up. I finally reach the front door, make my way up the short staircase and find myself in the impressive front lobby where I am greeted by the equally striking view of the Lac Léman. In just a few moments yet another session of the UN Human Rights Committee would be opened. I hang my coat in the wardrobe next to the Session venue and cannot help but think: I have arrived.



Discovering 'the Iceberg'



These fieldnotes embody some of my first experiences of doing fieldwork at the UN Human Rights Committee as I prepare to set out for yet another fieldwork period in October. During the past year I have attended the 107th and 108th Session of the Committee held respectively in March and July of 2013, and in the following weeks I will complement these experiences by following the Committee's 109th Session. In the previous sessions I have conducted participant-observation in all the events that were open to the public at the Palais Wilson, headquarters of the UN Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. I have complemented this ethnographic material with interviews with members of the Human Rights Committee, NGO representatives and the UN secretariat, as well as discussions with representatives of the UN Congress services, press secretaries and interpreters. I have also followed (or more specifically, attempted to follow) NGO delegates and state delegates around the Palais and Geneva as they participate in the proceedings, and spent any moments spared from these diverse experiences by hanging out in the cafeteria of the Palais in order to observe the unfolding of the sociality accompanying the Committee's session.

Importantly - whether at lunch time at the cafeteria or breaks in between sessions - I have been able to contextualize my general presence of monitoring the Session by associating myself with the group to which I bear the closest external similarity (with a bit of a stretch of the imagination), thus gaining also a useful social identity from a well-embedded category for the Committee's operations. With this I refer to the category of 'the intern'; the steady stream of young scholars (usually phd students) who act as the private assistants of treaty body members, and who are through these experiences being socialized into the UN bureaucracy.



My fieldwork is part of a project that has in some ways been already ongoing for quite a while - I first began studying the compilation of state reports submitted to UN human rights treaty bodies at the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Autumn 2009 (Halme-Tuomisaari and Huotari 2012; Halme-Tuomisaari 2012) - in other ways is just starting as, ignoring a few short prior visits, these sessions have formed my first substantial fieldwork period at the UN. Yet, the operations of treaty bodies are in different ways highly familiar to me from my decade-long query into the contemporary 'human rights phenomenon', which would have hardly been possible without due recognition of the role the UN as an integral part of the entire phenomenon's unfolding (Halme-Tuomisaari 2010).



With this background in mind these fieldnotes embody a set of collisions - minor ones - where my 'old' data, or knowledge, meets 'the new'. Many of my experiences have become moments where my fieldwork experiences have instructed me to reconsider issues that I earlier held as true, or whose existence I was entirely unaware of. Jointly these moments have led me to conceptualize the public sessions of such expert bodies as the UN Human Rights Committee as forming impressive *icebergs* the full shape and volume of which remain largely hidden from most of existing scholarly accounts on treaty bodies.

To contextualize my fieldnotes a few cursory notes on the role and functioning of UN human rights treaty bodies is helpful. In the absence of an international human rights tribunal operating for example under the auspices of the UN, the nine treaty bodies that exist on the basis of treaty provisions are the highest international monitoring and implementing bodies for human rights covenants. Although treaty bodies are commonly called as being 'court-like', in their operations they are far more flexible than courts; also both the legal status of the bodies themselves as well as the documents that they process and produce is ambiguous under international law.[\[1\]](#)

In concrete treaty bodies are committees formed of 15-25 individuals who are



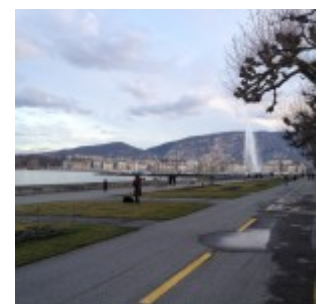
nationals of states, which are parties to the treaties in question. Although treaty bodies faced previously frequent charges of being ‘politicised’ and including as their members senior government officials lacking substantive human rights expertise who instead represented the interests of their governments, today members are increasingly individuals seen as human rights experts. By their professional status they are commonly academics usually from within the different branches of the law, or acting judges. The Human Rights Committee monitoring compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) is one of the oldest of the treaty bodies, and it is widely regarded as the most authoritative or important of them; this view is commonly also forwarded by the Committee’s members. Certainly the profile of the Committee’s members holds a high emphasis of legal background as illustrated by the fact that of the Committee’s current members only one has a background in a field other than international or domestic law. The relationship of treaty bodies and law, including the attempts to ‘legalize’ their work, forms an ongoing source of fascination for my research, and it is one of the issues that I continue to observe and elaborate as my venture unfolds.

The main form of operations for treaty bodies is formed by the ‘reporting cycles’ in which treaty bodies receive and process the state reports composed by states and submitted by the intervals stipulated by the treaties, usually once in approximately five years. The culmination of these cycles is the already mentioned ‘constructive dialogue’ between state representatives and treaty body members which takes place at the UN either in New York and increasingly in Geneva which is also the headquarters of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. In reality intervals between reports vary as both state parties and treaty bodies assisted by the Secretariat of the UN Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights face severe delays and backlogs. This situation forms a key reasons for the ongoing pressures to reorganize and ‘streamline’ the operations of treaty bodies; a process for which numerous proposals are circulating at present as they have continued to circulate during the entire existence of the treaty body system.



In addition to state reports, treaty bodies receive and process individual petitions where so provided by the relevant treaty, as well as additional ‘shadow’ reports compiled and submitted by NGOs to complement the reports of state parties. I have in another context discussed the importance of these reports by pointing out how they reflect the growing global importance of implicit knowledge held by human rights experts, which through different bureaucratic practices at the UN, among others, contributes to the erosion of the institute of the state, and generates new political subjectivities. I have further argued that although the intensified centrality of NGOs is commonly viewed as being positive, it also undermines public political processes by replacing them with a private realm of interest struggles governed by activist strategies and expert knowledge (Halme-Tuomisaari 2013). In my fieldnotes I continue discussing the role of NGOs with the aim of offering further theoretizations on how their role in treaty body proceedings impacts their role in international law and international collaboration more generally.

In my previous fieldwork periods I have structured my observations around five themes, most of which remain largely untheorized and have at the present moment as their primary aim to offer a sense of ‘time’, ‘place’ and ‘people’ around the Committee’s proceedings. In the following weeks I attempt to continue exploring these themes and also accompany them with more theoretical reflections where possible. The first theme I have tentatively titled “From “Real Reality” to ‘UN reality’”, and through this title I attempt to offer a general description of the sessions of the Human Rights Committee as well as to describe how they might appear to ‘the newcomer’. I also discuss the relationship that treaty body sessions hold to the surrounding ‘real’ world, as opposed to being seen as forming an ‘insider’s club’.[\[3\]](#)





With the second theme I will attempt to address the relationship of the Human Rights Committee to the other UN human rights monitoring mechanisms by focusing in specific on whether and how the Universal Period Review (UPR) process, the recently established monitoring mechanism by the Human Rights Council, is discussed by the Human Rights Committee. My preliminary observations suggest that inter-links are surprisingly scarce, and in the instances that I have encounter so far I interpret their tenor to speak in particular of attempts to defend the legitimate and authoritative position of treaty bodies which are currently under great pressures for reformation. I will continue with this theme in my forthcoming observations, and consider what kind of further avenues that this material opens up for considering the UN human rights monitoring framework as a whole, and the role of treaty bodies in general and the Human Rights Committee in specific as a part of this framework.

My third area of focus has been on NGOs, particularly the techniques through which NGOs make their claims both visible and audible in treaty body proceedings; an element that I am planning to elaborate later with a discussion on the notions of 'temporality' around treaty bodies. The fourth area of focus has been on NGOs, yet this time by focusing on the people for whom NGO work forms both a profession and a passion. The last theme I have explored relates to the notion of time - the concrete moments of beginning and ending of the Committee's sessions by fleshing out the various thoughts that the beginning and ending of the Session awakened in me as moments with which 'the international' first comes into being, and at the end vanishes. By emphasizing these sentiments I want to continue with my experiments, undertaken also by the preceding glimpses offered this paper, to find ways of bringing 'the people' into the equation.

Here I wish to draw attention to the various depictions of UN operations - with the official press releases offering merely one exemplary genre - which are usually characterized by a highly de-personalized tenor devoid of names, personalities, senses of humor or strong emotions. Yet, I argue that all of these elements are cardinal for understanding both the operations of this global



organization as a whole *and* the continued impact that the organization has the capacity to induce on a global level; given that it remains difficult to measure or somehow objectively show what the UN actually achieves in the world, I find its continued global relevance to emanate increasingly from the diverse *feelings* that people invest in the organization (see Navaro-Yashin 2013).

Emphasizing emotions is also relevant for how I treat the material I have acquired through interviews: as important as I see interview material being in offering ‘real information’, to me it is at minimum as important, if not more, in offering me insight into the common conceptions, illusions, fantasies and myths invested in UN human rights operations by the various engaged actors’: for example, is the UN seen “an embodiment of efforts to change the world”, as one young intern phrased the matter, or a “dysfunctional organisation that cares little for its employees”, as a seasoned member of the UN secretariat phrased the issue? These themes form a vastly under-explored area of UN operations, yet they are crucially important in ‘making the organisation real’ by the actors who participate in its work both in Geneva, and around the world.

The 109th Session of the UN Human Rights Committee takes place between October 14 and November 1, 2013, at the Palais Wilson, in Geneva.

[1] Recent years have seen the appearance of a great number of contributions discussing UN human rights treaty bodies and the future of the UN human rights regulatory framework more generally; see (Rodley 2003; Keller and Ulfstein 2012; Comstock 2009; Megret 2012; Egan 2011; Tyagi 2011; Freedman 2013; Odello and Seatzu 2012; Vandenhole 2004; Clark 2011; Young 2002; Joseph, Schultz, and Castan 2005; Kamminga and Scheinin 2009; Bassiouni and Schabas 2011; Cole 2012; O’Flaherty and Ulrich 2010; Bayefsky 2000)



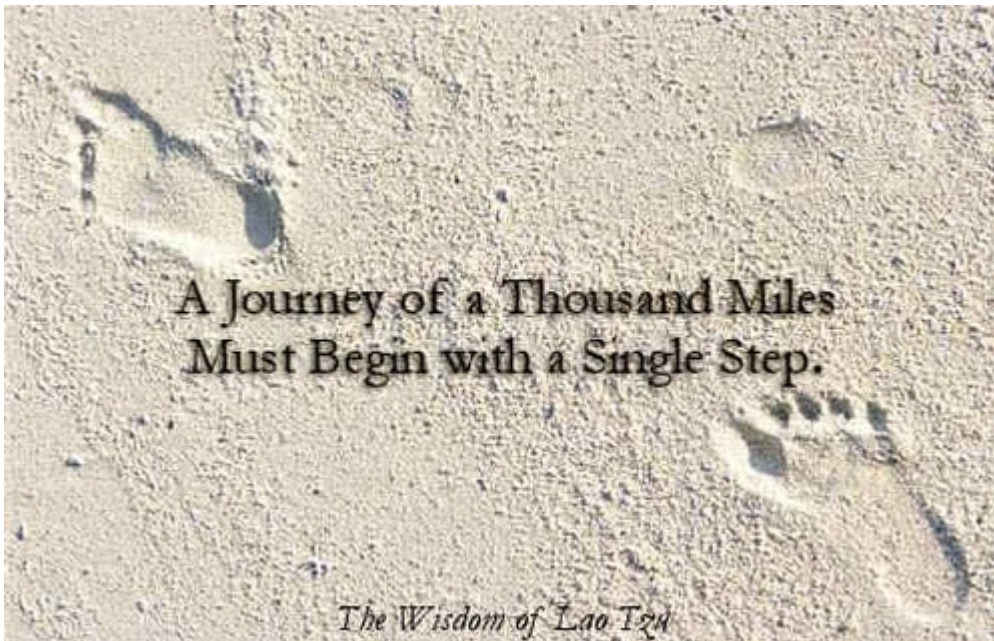
[2] Relevant discussions here include the recent anthropological work on treaty bodies and the international human rights regime, see among others (Merry 2006; Goodale 2012; Dembour 2006; Dembour and Kelly 2007); the ethnography of document; see among others (Riles 2006) and Navaro-Yashin 2013, as well as the anthropology of organizations and bureaucracy; and the study of experts (references to be added)

[3] With the exception of the NGO delegation of Hong Kong I use pseudonyms for all the individuals I refer to; for the present working paper I have chosen simply names from Finnish. I will proceed to discuss this choice as my fieldwork continues.

This glimpse is connected to my ongoing study of the UN Human Rights Committee. The next part of my Fieldnotes of the Committee's 109th session can be read [here](#).

CALLS calls CALLS

Allegra
October, 2013



Just in case there is still anyone out there without funding (a bit of light humour to brighten our dark professional times if you permit), please find below not one, two or even three - but SIX post doc positions. Or to be more specific still, six positions within universities, and then two positions in, well - see for yourselves!

The first two positions are for Princeton, the first for the Fung Global Fellows Program at [Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies](#) (DEADLINE Nov 1), the second for the [LAPA Fellowships](#) at the [Program in Law and Public Affairs](#) (DEADLINE Nov 4). Both positions are for the academic year 2014-2015. The following positions - four in total - are for three-year Postdoctoral Prize Research Fellows at [Nuffield College, Oxford](#). Two of the positions are in Politics, and two in Sociology, but both calls are broadly enough defined to encourage anthropologists to apply (DEADLINE for both Nov 4).

The last [two positions](#) are for [Microsoft Research](#) - YES, that's right!

Microsoft says that they offer "a vibrant research environment with with an open publications policy and with close links to top academic institutions around the world", and you know what, we might actually be persuaded to believe them! We'll leave the obvious concerns about business ethics, global capitalism etc



aside, and choose to be bold: why not give it a go! (After all, they explicitly mention that they welcome anthropologists... and this WOULD be a great step toward authoring something quite exciting about the high-tech world). We're not exactly sure for how long the positions are, but their recruiting team will certainly assist (DEADLINE from NOV 1 onwards).

From the Supervised University to the University of Utopia

Julie Billaud
October, 2013



The contemporary transformations of universities with the adoption of profit oriented modes of management and a greater pressure to measure the ‘impact’ of scholarship are worrying. As Leighton [Christiansen explains in a recent article of the Socialist Worker](#): “ Since the 1970s, colleges and universities have become (...) corporatized “knowledge factories,” adopting big-business employment and organization models; shifting funding out of classrooms; and pouring money into administrators’ salaries and corporate profit margins. These practices include eliminating full-time jobs, contracting jobs out to the private sector, cutting benefits-and hiring more part-time instructors. »

The tragic fate of [Margaret Mary Vjotko](#), a 25-year adjunct professor who died destitute at the age of 83, appears to have become the symbol of devastating working conditions for academics in temporary positions. Academics everywhere seem to have become the « new precariat », while managers reap their awards. At



Sussex University, for example, [Vice-Chancellor Michael Farthing is now paid £280,000 \(including pensions contributions\), as compared to £178,000 in 2007](#) (that'll be a 57% increase then). This comes after Farthing made a strategic plan ironically entitled 'Making the future', which led to massive cuts and redundancies. Farthing has effectively disbanded the renowned Linguistics Department, shut down the Center for Community Engagement (which offered short courses for those in employment or unable to attend university) and cut fundings for the others. Farthing's decision to outsource services on campus has provoked [widespread civil disobedience by students](#).

Audit Culture

These examples remind us that the disciplinary techniques of the New Management Culture have effectively entered our universities. With it, a whole range of monitoring tools has been put in place to assess performance, measure impact and audit relevance. Some universities, in [Germany](#), in [France](#) and in [the UK](#) desperately try to resist...But for how long? And why is it that so many of us are so complicit and accept to submit to Research Assessment Exercises and Teaching Quality Audits when these represent our work so poorly? Is it, as [Marylin Strathern](#) suggests, that [the power of transparency](#) is so pervasive that resistance becomes automatically suspicious?

The effects of these disciplinary techniques are multiple : Not only do they shape specific [academic subjectivities](#), forcing academics to present themselves in certain ways, but they also transform the academic environment, encouraging competition instead of collaboration. The liberal obsession with 'impact' oriented/applied research also means that [critical traditions are in grave danger](#). If one cannot deny the need for research to be relevant, impact criteria often rely on quantifiable data instead of qualitative ones. As [Saïd](#) reminds us in his last interview we published recently:



“The canons of understanding, the canons of interpreting apply in all these instances: whether it is politics, or literature or critics: they have to do with memory. They have to do with notions of coexistence. The world is not an exclusive place...and then human agency or will. It’s up to you to try and hold them together. And that’s where effort is for me. I never saw myself as a solver of problems. People sometimes ask me: ‘Give us a programme! Give us a solution!’, but I distrust that.”

Occupy Everywhere

The Occupy movement with its spontaneous lectures delivered by [Slovej Zizek](#), [Judith Butler](#), [Andrew Ross](#), [Joseph Stiglitz](#) and many others in public spaces reminds us of the urgency to collectively reclaim our space: the one of intellectual freedom. A space whose content should not be dictated by benchmarks and indicators, but rather by the imagination that is necessary in order ‘to think our times by thinking against our time’ (as Wendy Brown phrases it). In contrast with the open lectures organised by French intellectuals in La Sorbonne during the May 68 revolt, the open air lectures of the Occupy movement signify that the main space for us to reclaim is a ‘state of mind’ before being a physical space.

The open-air lecture format is also a powerful illustration of the extent to which we have been dispossessed. While our governments have poured public money to save the banks, we have been made homeless and our universities have become virtual, [nomadic](#), [utopian](#).

This fact is perhaps best captured by the [University for Strategic Optimism](#), an initiative launched by students at Goldsmith University (London) as the Occupy movement found a momentum in the British academia. This imaginary university presents itself in the following terms on its [website](#):

« Our basic public services, we are told, are simply too expensive. They must be



thrown under the wheels of the megalithic debt that bears down upon us. They must be privatised, corporatised and commodified (...) The UfSO offers an emphatic No! to this description of our current situation, and sees instead a magnificent opportunity, a multiplication of possibilities, the opening of a space in which we might think about, and bring about, a fairer and and more fulfilling society for all. In short: Many good reasons for strategic optimism! »

The [UfSO inaugural lecture](#) was held by Dr. Etienne Lantier (a pseudonym?) at Lloyds TBS, Borough High Street London on November 24th 2010. Other impromptu lectures were organised in [TESCO supermarkets](#), and [in front of the Ministry of Business and Innovation](#), to alert the public that the University is indeed, for sale...and may well disappear altogether, as the recent [shut down of the University of Athens](#) sadly seems to announce.

The humorous tone of these spontaneous forms of resistance is a proof that neoliberal governance may well try to discipline knowledge factory workers, its spirit is still very much alive.