

A View from Nearby

Les Back

The Annual Gold Lecture Thursday 20th October, 2016.

First, thanks to Gabriel Dattatreyan for his kind words of introduction and also for the Department of Anthropology for bestowing this underserved honour on me. Over the past few weeks, it has felt a bit like cramming for an exam preparing for tonight. You see, I am not a proper anthropologist. I have never taught anthropology or worked in a department of anthropology, except as a seminar teacher. I have hardly ever published articles in anthropological journals either. It is true I studied here at Goldsmiths for joint honours a degree in social anthropology/ geography (the 'other department' was closed not long after) and I am the proud recipient of the very first PhD in social anthropology ever to be awarded at Goldsmiths.

Like my friends Gareth Stanton and Parminder Bhachu, I am member of anthropology's 'lost generation.' We are people trained as social anthropologists but never worked within the discipline in Britain. So, it's a bit cheeky of me to have the temerity to stand here before you tonight – an audience comprised many of my teachers and gurus and new students - and speak on the topic anthropology's value and values. So, with a bit of trepidation, that is precisely what I plan to do in this auspicious year celebrating thirty years of anthropology at Goldsmiths.

Why is anthropology valuable in today's world? Claude Lévi-Strauss captured his own answer to this question in his third volume of *Structural Anthropology* entitled *The View from Afar*.¹ The value of anthropology is to undermine the parochialism of Western thinking and to emphasise the cultural diversity to be found within the hinterlands of the human condition. The task of ethnography – derived from the greek *ethnos* meaning 'race, folk, people, nation' and *grapho* 'I write' - was to document and compare the portraits of these different human cultures and cosmologies. However, as Lévi-Strauss noted, an ambiguity remained at the heart of this version of anthropology's vocation between a desire to record the variety of

¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The View from Afar*, London: Penguin Books, 1985.

humankind and the sense that there are also shared resemblances and structures.

I want use Lévi-Strauss's reflection as a starting point for re-thinking the value of anthropology in our time. Rather than searching for far off differences to compare I want to argue that anthropology - as the art of listening, learning and telling and showing - is well placed to make sense of the ways in which cultures combine, move and are situated in particular contexts while remaining linked across place and time. The nearby always contains the view from afar but not in quite the same way that Lévi-Strauss meant it.

My happy hunch is that anthropology is having something of a renaissance. Eleven undergraduate programmes here a Goldsmiths, seven MAs and two PhD programmes. Extraordinary. The resurgent interest in the discipline has caused consternation as well as excitement. Tim Ingold has pointed out that references to ethnography seem to crop up everywhere. Here 'ethnographic' has become an imprecise prefix for almost anything... ethnographic encounter, ethnographic fieldwork, ethnographic method, ethnographic film, ethnographic theory and autoethnography etc... He complains this has become a 'modish substitute for the qualitative.'² He argues too ethnography is simplified, reduced to a positivistic tool to ascertain and claim to know the contours and discrete shapes of human culture. Sloppy usage betrays shoddy practice. This is not what Ingold calls 'proper rigorous anthropological inquiry.'

I will return to Tim Ingold later but I think he sounds an important cautionary note in calling for more precision in our language and purpose. His emphasis on anthropology as a mode of learning not confined to what we do in 'the field' is relevant to the argument I want to make tonight. Perhaps he's right that ethnography – as *writing about people* or what I want to call *writing with people* or maybe just people writing – needs to be shaped to a more appropriate size.

Anthropology's renaissance I think is also linked to something else. I sense a yearning on the part of students to think on a worldly scale. To find ways to make sense of the complexities that are unfolding in

² Tim Ingold, 'That's enough about ethnography!' HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory, 2014, 4(1): 383–395. p. 384

front of them but also within their lives. Also, I think the turn to anthropology is part of a widespread frustration with the confinements of a narrow-minded political culture, that is, as Zygmunt Bauman comments, populated by strongmen and women like Donald Trump to Marine La Pen whose answer to a world of divided connectedness is to build walls and retreat behind them.³ There is something else too that is alienating in the unabashed parochialism in the post-Brexit interregnum. Commentators like Melanie Phillips applaud the return to 'parish-scale thinking' and Therea May cheerfully invites us to join her in the enclosure of a serpia tinted Little Englandism. The push back against all this swells the ranks of anthropology undergraduate programmes and the energy of young minds that are drawn to what Paul Gilroy calls a planetary, or moving, off-shore humanistic curiosity.⁴ That's my hunch.

I want to try and make my argument for anthropology's value tonight in two distinct ways. Firstly, I want to reflect on the principles embodied in the craft - sometimes mysteriously - of Goldsmiths anthropologists, many of whom are sitting here in this grand room tonight. Don't worry it's going to only going to be 'part truths' as James Clifford would say. Secondly, I want to illustrate my argument with a new experiment in sociable 'people writing' being completed with my friend and colleague Shamsar Sinha for a new book that we are trying to finish called *Migrant City*. So, I want to try and bridge anthropology's past in the spirit of tonight's 30th anniversary celebrations and also talk about the opportunities afforded to us now to do people writing differently.

Room 274, September 1981.

In his history of British anthropology Adam Spencer comments that 1981 was the 'gloomiest year of [Margret] Thatcher's rule for the social sciences.' It was the year of the New Cross Fire when thirteen young black people died in a house fire just a street away from the college. That summer had seen youthful uprisings in all of Britain's major cities. The Special's *Ghost Town* topped the charts and captured prophetically the feeling of the time. I met my first

³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Strangers at the Door*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016, p. 47.

⁴ Paul Gilroy, "Where every breeze speaks of courage and liberty': Offshore Humanism and Marine Xenology, or, Racism and the Problem of Critique at Sea Level', *Antipode*, 2018, 50(1): 3-22.

anthropologist on a wet autumn afternoon late September, 1981.

A deceptively diminutive-looking woman, with a long shock of red hair walked into Room 274, in what is now called the Richard Hoggart Building. She spoke in American accent and was there to explain the content of her course - AN101 in Social Anthropology - on offer to the room of bewildered young geographers myself amongst them. A Physical Geography lecturer, looking like an accountant in suite and tie, said: 'I'd just like to now introduce Dr Nici Nelson who is going to talk to you about your option choices'. Nici came to the front of the class, and, in an almost actorly voice, said: 'If rocks and strata make your heart beat faster then anthropology is not for you!' My friend Sim Colton and I looked at each other, thinking the exact same thought and raised our hands in unison: 'where do we sign up?' That was the turning point on the road leading here. I need to thank you for that Nici, first and foremost and many other lessons. I transferred after my first year to the joint honors degree programme.

At that point the department didn't exist, at least officially. Brian Morris had been first employed as a part-time lecturer while still a graduate student in 1973-74. One of Brian's fingers is bent at a right angle. He got it caught in a machine Black Country factory and used the money from the industrial injury pay out - a princely sum of £120 - to fund his first trip to Africa.

Almost immediately Brian became known as a brilliant teacher with an infectious enthusiasm for learning. It was recognized by Professor Jean La Fontaine who supported the local cause of the discipline at Goldsmiths. Pat Caplan had joined in 1977/78 and together with Brian they set up a Unit of Anthropology in 1978/79 within the Psychology Department. They were teaching around 150 students: yes, that is right a staff student ration of 75 to 1. Studying anthropology at Goldsmiths was a serious business but it could also be riotous fun. The department would have annual residential weekends held in rural Wrotham, East Sussex.

Listen to this description of the proceeding from the Department Occasional Newsletter, Number 3. Summer, 1984. 'Saturday afternoon was taken up by a walk - some of us made it to local Iron Age (?) burial chamber, returning in time for tea and a talk by Winston James of the Caribbean Studies Centre on Rastafarianism.

The party that evening must have been a success since it was still going on at 7am the next morning, and its undoubted highlight was the magical transformation by Max (using Ghanian spells) of Brian's gender fortunately (or otherwise) this was not permanent.' The thing that was shocking by in Brian's transformation was not the vivid pale blues eyeshadow - that I actually this suited him - or the sparkly shirt or the second-hand shiffon top - no the thing that was queer before queer theory was the shaving of Brian's signature beard. A naked cheeked Morris! That was truly transgressive. I hope after tonight there will be a student groundswell to re-instate the residential weekends - I can definitely see Mark Johnson as a future candidate for such serious play.

Brian and Pat were joined by Olivia Harris in 1979/80 who had read Classics as an undergraduate at St Anne's College, Oxford. I want to dedicate these reflections tonight to Olivia's memory, who was stolen away from us at the young at the age 60 in 2009 by cancer. She had been trained at the LSE and supervised by Marxist anthropologist Maurice Bloch. Although a free intellectual spirit, Olivia linked us into the centers of the discipline in the UK. As Jonathan Spencer points out between 1970—1994 50% of all anthropology PhDs came from the 'big three' departments: Oxford, Cambridge & The London School of Economics.⁵ In 1986/87 I remember Olivia gave the prestigious Malinowski lecture at the LSE. Like her colleagues, who I'll come to in a minute, she was a brilliantly oddity.

Olivia could play the violin and she liked folk dancing. I remember when I was a graduate student she employed me and a friend of mine to do some furniture removals for her. We arrived at her home in north London to do the task at hand but hadn't bargained for an off-campus tutorial. In the midst of lifting a particularly awkward sideboard, I made some callow remark about Levi Straussian anthropology being exoticising. Olivia balked and challenged me... 'I've always admired his ambition for comparison have you read *Trisite Tropicque?*' 'No' I replied. She gave me a curious and mildly disapproving look 'well you should, Levi Strauss is a great writer. You should know what you are criticizing.'

⁵ Jonathan Spencer, 'British Social Anthropology: A Retrospective', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 2000, 29: 1-24.

When Olivia was excited by something her voice would pique and switch to a higher frequency. She sounded younger somehow in the midst of an anthropological debate. Olivia was the embodiment of the words of ancient poet Aeschylus, who wrote: 'to learn is to be young however old.' In this environment there was an enthusiasm for learning, a lack of social distance, care as well as excited curiosity. Looking back these were the kind of values that seemed to me to be alive in the craft of anthropology as practiced in SE14.

I hadn't realized until recently that Steve Nugent joined the Department the same year that I started studying anthropology. He was as a replacement lecturer for Pat, who was away doing fieldwork. That's the other thing about anthropologists they always seemed to be going away somewhere... whether it Lesutho by Barcelona. Steve was something altogether different. He seemed more aloof and immune to sentimentality of any stripe. A kind of punk anthropologist without the style accessories, although I used to enjoy listening to him performing in the bands he played guitar in.

Steve knew about what was going on in the wider world of radical letters. You couldn't always find the books he talked about in his lecturers in the library... you had to seek them out and needed to 'do the work'. I don't think Steve cared much for our earnestness – he probably still doesn't – but he was intellectually generous. 'You might like this,' he'd say recommending Ned Polsky like one of last year's hit records. I remember Steve loaning copies of his own books and in particular Erving Goffman's *Presentations of Self in Everyday life*, which sowed a lasting interest in an attentiveness to the *endotic*, as opposed to exotic, aspects of life.

Last but not least is Victoria Goddard, now Professor Victoria Goddard, who I think was still a graduate student in 1982, when she taught a course that I think was called AN205 *Politics, Economic and Social Change*. She introduced us the ideas Immanuel Wallerstein and the world system – long before globalisation became vogueish – but also we learned about anti-colonial theorists and black liberationists. Victoria is from Argentina. At the time we were living through the Falklands War and Margaret Thatcher's authoritarian form of populism. There were a number of students at Goldsmiths on military scholarships. On the day in 1982 when HMS Sheffield was sunk by an Argentinian Exocet missile there was a fist fight between

a soldier students and those of us who were against the war in the student common room. Alive inside and outside of Victoria's seminars was the necessity of historical understanding and the mutual implication of politics and economics in the working of a social system that operated on a planetary scale.

My intention here is more than ritual praise song to the anthropological elders. From these half dozen portraits of motley brilliance – later to be joined others of the similar cast of mind like Jean Besson, Sophie Day and I would include all of today's faculty too - can be extracted some of the tacit values of the anthropologist's craft. As students we didn't learn them as straightforwardly as we might have. Adam Kuper commented that this tacit knowledge was learned with a 'minimum of direct instruction' leaving students to 'pick up a great deal on one's own'.⁶ I remember Brian addressing a seminar for postgraduates. He brought in one of his Malawi fieldnote books. He stood in front of us in his inimitable style held up the notebook to show us its pages. They were almost completely blank! Almost nothing. There was a date here and there, occasionally a scribbled drawing but the pages were largely empty. 'What kind of sorcery is this?' How does he get from this to his brilliant essays collected in *Wildlife and Landscapes in Malawi*.⁷ It was like a disappearing trick in reverse.

Fortunately, alongside Brian's alluring but allusive magic was my supervisor, Pat Caplan. The value she embodied was the importance of discipline, critical purpose, fastidiousness and rigour. I learned so much from Pat but I know the stories I use to illustrate these lessons are cringing for her to hear. So, I'll spare you this time, Pat. I think it mattered that from its inception Goldsmiths anthropologists were inspiring mavericks, comprised of more women than men, from a complex range of class backgrounds, half of whom were not born in the UK and where feminism, anti-imperialism and outward looking cultural critique were at the heart of their work as teachers and writers. Of course, there were problems and struggles too. I am thinking of reckoning with the dazzling shadow of whiteness and

⁶ Adam Kuper, 'Post-modernism, Cambridge and the Great Kalahari Debate,' *Social Anthropology*, 1992. 1(1A):57-71 p. 60

⁷ Brian Morris, *Wildlife and Landscapes in Malawi: Selected Essays on Natural History*, Trafford Publishing, 2009.

ethnocentrism, the struggle to bring anthropology home and face its implication in the colonial and postcolonial encounters nearby.

Let me summarise, the values they embodied, which I think have been reproduced over time, can be described as enthusiasm for learning, a lack of social distance, care as well as excited curiosity, an attentiveness to the world and the dilemmas lived out within it - from beer brewers in Mathare Valley to what's happening in local Betting Shop in Lewisham. A kind of inductive approach to 'problem solving' rooted in the paradoxes and traps determined by the organisation of social life within which the people we listen to are obliged to live. I think also they taught the importance of learning from failures: how can one learn anything if you don't try and fail and paraphrasing Beckett fail better next time. Part of the gift of fieldwork is to make what Harvey Molotch calls 'going out' compulsory.⁸ To encounter people in the routine circumstances of unfolding life. As Clifford Geertz once put it the value in being made to feel a fool.⁹ It is also to examine what has been learned in a Socratic sense. In away an anthropologist has to live her life twice over at the very least - once in real time and then again in the process of recording what has happened. Then often returning again and again in reflection, trying to figure things out and weigh up the balance of things. It's a matter of confronting the world in its ordinary circumstances of life, which may or may not correspond, to the things we have read about it in the library. An openness too to other disciplines and other crafts of telling and showing society including music, film and photography. Within all of this though was an insistent on the importance of rigour, of doing the work of careful critique as well as checking the details. Remember, Olivia's mild reprimand offered over her sideboard?

I didn't realize it but by 1988, the moment when I joined the ranks of the lost generation, I was beginning - however opaquely - to have a feel for all these things. Unemployable in anthropology I got jobs elsewhere as a researcher. I remember being introduced at the Thomas Coram Research by Psychologist Ann Phoenix, the niece of local community activists Sybille Phoenix, as an 'urban ethnographer'. I can almost see Tim Ingold rolling his eyes but at the time I thought - 'that'll do.' I was struck by how easy it was to bring

⁸ Harvey Molotch, 'Going Out', *Sociological Forum*, 1994, 9(2): 221-239.

⁹ Clifford Geertz, *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*, Princeton, N.J : Princeton University Press, 2000. p. 30.

these craft skills into the conversation with psychologists who wanted to understand the paradoxical combination racism and multiculturalism in London's cultural life. I want to shift now to our present circumstances, Lévi-Strauss and what else I mean by the view from nearby.

Anthropology's Blues

Following Olivia's direction I read Levi Strauss's extraordinary farewell to fieldwork, *Triste Tropicque*. It's one of my favourite books. She was right, he is a great writer. He famously begins with the caustic line: 'I hate travelling and exploring.'¹⁰ It is a book of many surprises like the fact that his first teaching job in Brazil was actually in sociology.

Triste Tropicque is full of contemplations on time, epistemology and tragedy. He writes: 'So I am caught within a circle that has no escape: the less human societies were able to communicate with each other and therefore corrupt each other through contact, the less their respective emissaries were able to perceive the wealth and significance of their diversity.' Levi Strauss also points to the limits within this preoccupation with the view from afar and documenting 'vanish realities'. He continues: 'I may be insensitive to reality as it is talking shape at this very moment, since I have not reached the stage of development at which I would be capable of perceiving it. A few hundred years hence, in this same place, another traveller, as despairing as myself, will mourn the disappearance of what I may have seen, but failed to see. I am subject to a double infirmity: all that I perceive offends me, and I constantly reproach myself for not seeing as much as I should'.¹¹

What we imagine we are looking can be a blinding filter. Such preoccupations make us unable to admit what is before us often right under our noses or for that matter, just across the street. I am mindful of another Goldsmiths Anthropology graduate Dr Lez Henry and a passage from his brilliant study of soundsystem culture in Lewisham *What the DJ Said*.¹² At the beginning of the book he points out that one of the biggest local sound system sessions took place at

¹⁰ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Triste Tropiques*, Atheneum: New York, 1974.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 43.

¹² William (Lez) Henry, *What the DJ Said: A Critique from the Street!*, Nu-Beyond: London, 2006.

51 Lewisham just across the street from the Goldsmiths anthropology department and next door to the Sociology Department. For all our aspirations for inclusive education, Lez pointed out: 'I seriously doubt that the staff and students at Goldsmiths were aware of what transpired on Saturday night in this alternative public arena, where the seminary was more organic in its orientation to a collective process. Learning that was based on countering much that was taught in formal institutions like Goldsmiths College...'.¹³ Part of the struggle and the value and the challenge of doing anthropology today is to develop a widened capability to perceive and a capacity to see and hear more.

The lone adventurer/ interpreter disliked so much by Levi Strauss inhibits us from expanding our sense of what people writing can be and who can be involved in it. My thesis mentioned earlier was published as a book called *New Ethnicities and Urban Culture* twenty years ago. It contains nods to feminist, postmodern and postcolonial critiques of ethnography it was written within a standard mode of anthropological realism. The lone ethnographic participant and documenting what was seen and heard. I felt a deep tension between being part of those social worlds, while the act of writing about them set me apart at the same time. Somehow, the fact that everything was so nearby exacerbated those tensions.

I tried to stay in contact with many of the people but by the same token I lost connection with so many. I showed some of the people what I was writing but not others. That unevenness is still haunting because of the imbalances of power, control and ultimately reward within the process of writing. Susan MacDougall acknowledges when she writes it is a mistake to think that a special sort of humanity can be claimed by anthropologists. She observes perceptively that our commitment to careful dialogue is both 'sincere and instrumental.'¹⁴ As Eudora Welty put it we are always listening for a story.

¹³ Ibid. p. 12-13.

¹⁴ Susan MacDougall, 'Ethnography: Deviation,' Correspondences, *Cultural Anthropology* website, May 19, 2016. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/877-ethnography-deviation>

Sociable People Writing

I think one of the things I try to do differently now is to develop a deeper sense of on-going dialogue, a more sociable form of research. Not just 'being there' but returning or the value of 'staying there', checking in and going back. The work being done by Cathrine Degnen and Katharine Tyler is a sign that the terms and quality of anthropology's sibling relationship to sociology is being re-evaluated.¹⁵ Pat Caplan's brilliant book *African Voices, African Lives* is a model in many ways of what I have been aiming for.¹⁶ This connects too with one of Tim Ingold's recent quarrel with the overuse of the 'ethnographic prefix'. Rather, than reducing human cultures to what Raymond Williams called 'fixed forms' (the way the Nuer think about their cattle ... or Working-class extended family structure is), Ingold emphasises anthropological learning as an unfolding and repeated process between the participants. 'That is to say, they are corresponding – as letter writers do...' This is not a about fixed findings but a 'scribing [of] thoughts and feelings and waiting for answers – living lives that weave around one another along ever-extending ways.'¹⁷ This approach to people writing would allow and facilitate a greater openness of representational space where the voices and understandings of participants can appear alongside the anthropologist's interpretations.

This kind of sociable inquiry is what Shamser Sinha and I have tried to develop in our study of the experience of young adult migrants in London. For almost ten years we have been working with the thirty participants in the study who whose lives are linked across the globe. We have given keynote lectures with participants like Charlynnne Bryan at SOAS and wrote article *with* her and not about her. The SOAS lecture is the only time I have experience spontaneous applause in the middle of a keynote. What we did was re-enact the forms of correspondence we had in front of the people assembled. We have fought with journals to let participants be credited as

¹⁵ Catheren Degnen & Katharine Tyler, eds, *Reconfiguring the Anthropology of Britain: Ethnographic, Theoretical and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, The Sociological Review Monograph 65/1, Sage Publications: London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, 2017.

¹⁶ Pat Caplan, *African Voices, African Lives: Personal Narratives from a Swahili Village*, Abingdon, Oxford: Routledge, 1997.

¹⁷ Ingold, p. 389 -390.

authors in their own names rather than imposing anonymity as an unthinking ethical reflex.

Sociable research of this kind is an opportunity for some but also a risk for others. Participants, whose immigration status is more precarious often wanted to be heard but invisible and unnamed and protected by the cloak anonymity. It's been a fascinating experiment in knowing differently and doing research in the spirit of correspondence or repeated cycles of communication, reflection and writing.

One of the downsides of this is that it has been very difficult to finish the book. In fact, the book seems to constantly be unwriting itself – like a computer virus that automatically deletes exiting words or demands that they be updated like a new version of a software application. I could say many things about how this has made me think about the value of anthropological craft but I want to end with just one illustration that brings me back to the theme of this evenings talk.

Ali's journey to London took two years arriving in 2006. He had built a boat by hand to crossed from Greece to Italy. The crossing took four hours, I am not going to show you any pictures of boats by the way. Ali was born in Quetta in North Western Pakistan. He defines himself proudly as a member of the Hazara 'descendents of Genghis Khan'. Persian-speaking people they are they are Shiite Muslims in an overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim context. In Afghanistan and North Western Pakistan, Hazara's are a racialised group physically set apart from the ethnic Pashtuns. They have been the objects repeated violent attack and repression.

It is through connecting physical traits with the Hazara people that they are targeted. *The Pakistan Tribune* reported a bus shooting on the outskirts of Quetta in October 2014. Nine people were killed on their way to buy vegetables. Members of the Hazara had lived in Pakistan since 1880s and long before partition. Almost all migrated due to the history of persecution from Emir Abdul Rahman Khan to ethnic cleansing perpetrated by the Afghan Taliban.

Shamser and Ali had been friends since he arrived they had met at a community support centre. Ali agreed to be part of our project and in July 2010 Shamser visited him in his East London flat. Shamser tells a great fieldwork fable about how unnerving it was to visit him. It

was during the World Cup there were flags of St George in the windows of most of the houses. When he approached Ali's address Shamser heard the ferocious bark of a dog. He thought to myself 'what kind of place is this?' Ali opened the door and to Shamser's surprise both the flag of St George in the window and the barking dog turned out to be his.

Ali loves animals and particularly dogs. In Afghanistan he once kept over twenty dogs. He customised a cave in the mountains making it into enormous kennel. The Staffordshire Bull Terrier was actually given to him in London by one of his neighbours. As we settled to talk, Ali said: 'No one knows about history, you know that - in this country.' He was drawn to London was because of it long connection to his place of birth.

Here is another native son of Quetta. Sir Ian Jacob born in Quetta in 1899. His father was Field Marshal Sir Claud Jacob. He followed his father into the army and Jacob trained as an officer at the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich. Just nearby. He later served as the Military Assistant Secretary to Winston Churchill's war cabinet and was later a distinguished broadcasting executive, serving as the Director-General of the BBC from 1952 to 1959. An interesting fact about him is that he refused to submit to the political pressure to suppress the BBC's reporting of the 1956 Suez Crisis and the British bombardment of Egypt.

My purpose here though is to show the mutual implication of these lives. Quetta was incorporated into British controlled territories of India in 1876 because of its strategic location on the Bolan Pass. Ali Great Great Grandfather served in the 106th Hazara Pioneers a colonial battalion formed in 1904 whose permanent peace station was in Quetta. By the 1930s Quetta had developed into a bustling city with a number of multistory buildings. Many of these building were destroyed in an earthquake in 1935 but the imprint of this past is still there. Ali told us Quetta is referred to locally as 'Little London'.

Anthropological attentiveness can make us think different about the historical traces carried in places and lives. The nearby is linked to what is afar. The forces that made Ali's life there unliveable are a complex combination of the geopolitical history of Afghanistan, patterns of community formation and also the patterns of ethnic/religious violence. But to put it crudely, Ali is here because Sir Ian was there. Part of what we have been trying to do is trace those

correspondences as a way of breaching the walled in logic of the so-called 'migrant crisis'.

Ali told Shamser 'I am a handyman.' During the long periods of waiting for his asylum claim to be processed he has filled his time often working as a neighbourhood bricoleur. His depiction of the east London street where he live is not one of a world falling apart riven with Brexit resentments. Rather, in the midst of racism's ruins he offers a portrait of living convivial street. Ali begins an inventory of this world, starting with John:

'So he got me a dog. He said 'take this dog, take care of him, he is yours'. That why he is my friend. Another guy, he's living down the stairs, Tony. He's my friend. In front of me, John is living there. He's working in Job Centre. He's a good guy. My next door neighbour, Joan. She's a good lady, she was in army. She is 86 years old. Sometimes I am going to see her, helping her with the cleaning. Clean her garden.'

'So, another, another, Harb is living there - an Indian guy. There is a taximan in front of me, Jewish. I got no problem with them, they all love me. They know I am a hard worker. Another girl Joyce living with her boyfriend - Ben. They know me. Paul is living there, I know Paul. I know loads of people, you know, in this road. They all know me I know them, we got a good relationship.'

What countries they come from?

'They are all of them born here. Zarina her Mum is from Scotland, her Dad is from Jamaica. Monica is coming from South America, her boyfriend, Ben. Abba is from Ghana, he born here but his background is from Ghana. Jay, her Mum is from Philippines and her Dad is English. I say about Joan already - she is a white Lady. She has been in the army. There is another white lady, she lives with her son and daughter. Manjit, born here, but his Mum and Dad is from India. Different people, different backgrounds, yeah.'

Joan is of special importance. She was in the British Army and their shared connection with military life is something they talk about. I am not suggesting that these military connections make Ali somehow more deserving, rather they are simply juts part of their connection. Ali has also built a seat for those in the building to sit on out of a discarded bed: 'So, I used his bed, I made it a chair, fix it there in the

garden so everyone can go sit down there under the tree, I cut the tree.'

The building of the bench from discarded wood is emblematic of our argument about how convivial life is also made in the migrant city. Ten years ago he built a boat made from wood to cross the Mediterranean and reach the shores of Europe and then in London he builds a bench for his elderly neighbours to sit on and take the weight off their feet. We asked him if he recognised that part of what he is also doing was making a home too? He replied: 'It was for the people to share. Just to enjoy together. Whoever it is. Look my friends, they're coming from everywhere.'

His is a different vision of what can be traced nearby. These are complex worlds and this is not to diminish the divisions and hostility that can also exist within them. The threads of history are deposited here and often unremarked upon. An attentiveness to this is not just an anthropological opportunity but also a political one. To close, I want to try and bring things together and come back to my question of why anthropology matters.

Conclusion:

Harvey Molotch commented that the problem with sociologists is that they like to eat each other! Anthropologists too have an appetite for feasting on each other's weaknesses. An administrator once whispered to me in hushed tones that an 'anthropologist could start a heated and protracted argument in an empty room.' Of course, critique and argument is essential to any project of thinking and learning. This intemperance can sometimes mean we become preoccupied with minor differences and parochial arguments. Meanwhile, as my friend Michael Keith told me recently, the big research money is scooped up by economists, architects and urban designers. They seem to see cities like London as a 'system of systems' and seek to find logarithms to explain the ebb and flow of life. A case needs to be made for why people writing matters. To me this is about the attentiveness to how the structuring of life – from the ill-conceived social policy to the overheating housing market - force people to live with dilemmas not of their own making.

The 30th Anniversary of Goldsmiths Anthropology department seems like a good moment to reflect on what we might share. An attentive craft committed to open and sometimes unsettling dialogue in the world and with people, a form of curiosity that is a compound of

rigour and excitement, where our ego is sublimated in the service of an attentiveness to others because they are always the most important people there. To apprehend the links between what is happening nearby and at a worldly scale. Perhaps, it is also about the value of working with other ways of telling and showing society and Goldsmiths programmes in visual anthropology and filmmaking are a reminder of those opportunities in a digital age.

John L Jackson is right we he argues that we might need to let some versions of ethnography die in order for others to be born. It is not my place to legislate what that may look like but I think that is the opportunity that is before us all. The stakes are high in a climate of anti-intellectualism where 'expertise' is a dirty word and the 'Metropolitan elite' viewed as the architects of national decline. Our students want something better and I think that is the nature of the challenge.

In doing my homework for tonight I arranged a personal tutorial with the current head of the Anthropology Department, our very own Professor Rebecca Cassidy. I asked her if she thought my hunch about a renewed interest in the discipline is right and why doing anthropology is still valuable. 'Mmm...' and then pausing to think she said 'there's something about being in other people's hands, the sense of the unfamiliar in doing fieldwork... it is a process of openness and becoming. There is the possibility of communication, understanding and translation. The practice of anthropology is proof that it is possible... and that encounter with the world is a kind of hopefulness.' As I listened to Rebecca in my mind's eye I felt my hand being raised again. 'I'd like to sign up for a course like that.'

Happy anniversary on this jubilee of anthropology's value and values.