

# “We didn’t cross the border, the border crossed us”

## Nicholas De Genova discusses our bordered identity

Citizen Artist News: Nicholas, you are host to a very stimulating research workshop at Goldsmiths College called ‘Migrant Struggles, Practices of Citizenship, and Techniques of Bordering’. In many of the sessions, guest speakers have opened up a range of themes and issues such as securitisation; mapping how the growth in the business of border management and control is in part due to the involvement of the social sciences and all that this entails. The concept of the ‘Border as Method’ has been discussed. The observation here being that borders are becoming ‘deterritorialised’ as Sandro Mezzadra would say, ‘without ceasing to invest particular places’. Mezzadra, as I understand him, sees this as a consequence of a State’s commitment to servicing global capital flows. Discussions have also involved analysing political subjectivity, of which your own articles on the ‘incurability’ of migrants in the USA has opened up other ways of thinking about the notion of political subjectivity and ‘belonging’. And finally, the notion of the ‘Autonomy of Migration’ has been raised: a concept used to better understand how migrants constitute political change.

Given this rich discourse, I am curious to know your thoughts on how one might understand the University as a border regime. First, I am sure you will agree that there is something paradoxical, if not amusing, in a research group gathering to discuss bor-

ders, migration and citizenship inside an institution that itself is a border regime. But more importantly, what are your thoughts on the changes to the University brought about by the directives of the UKBA for the management of ‘international’ students? That is, what do you make of the janus-faced character of the institution as, on the one hand, presenting itself as a space of equality, mobility and cosmopolitan membership and on the other hand, the conversion of its managerial systems to police ‘immigrants’ on behalf of the State? How might we understand this complex mix through the lens of your own research and/or the discussions had in the research workshop?

Nicholas De Genova: It is a perennial fantasy and illusion of academia that the university ought to be ‘a space of equality, mobility and cosmopolitan membership.’ Of course, upon closer inspection, it becomes readily apparent that ‘the’ university is really a system of hierarchically stratified educational institutions, utterly necessary for the reproduction of various distinctions, ranks and credentials to certify and qualify various types of skilled or professional labour for capital, and thus deeply embedded in the wider reproduction of social inequalities. Cambridge and London Metropolitan are obviously very different kinds of academic institutions. The ideologies of equality, cosmopolitanism, opportunity and (upward)

mobility are therefore always haunted by the evidence of their service to the educational validation and fixing in place of rigid separations and hierarchies of status and prestige, which are likewise directly or indirectly implicated in the monetarisation of ‘achievement’ in terms of salaries, benefits, and conditions of work. Capitalism requires more or less unrelenting innovation and thus is continuously de-composing and re-composing labour, including labour of the most highly ‘skilled’ of prized sort. So, once we begin to think about it, there’s not really any paradox. If academia is ensnared in the reproduction of the larger capitalist system, we should expect that it would similarly be implicated in the reproduction of the regime of citizenship and immigration of the capitalist state.

But this is where things get interesting, because if we contemplate the border regime in which those of us employed or studying in higher education take part, we can begin to appreciate better what the work of borders is in our contemporary socio-political moment and our present historical conjuncture.

It is of course pernicious that ‘foreign’ students are subjected to extraordinary surveillance under the securitarian conditions of our ‘anti-terrorist’ present. The operationalising of a very diffuse and pervasive suspicion against all non-citizens, regardless of immigration status, coupled with the invidious racialised distinctions that sort and rank

different kinds of ‘foreigners’, are blatantly manifested in the universities, and we have to recognise in this process a re-disciplining of our academic institutional lives. In these flagrantly offensive practices, however, what we ought to always bear in mind is that part of the source of irritation and indignation is the increasingly indiscriminate ‘contamination’ of the formerly more ‘protected’, relatively privileged, comparatively elite segments of the larger spectrum of non-citizens. In other words, intrusive surveillance and the apparatus of institutionalised suspicion which we have been seeing with greater frequency and intensity in the universities have long been commonplace among the ‘lower’ ranks of migrants, the ‘illegal’ or ‘irregular’ migrants above all. The regime of immigration has always been fundamentally about policing a thoroughly hierarchical series of categorical differences.

The politics of immigration and borders are unsettling and troubling, likewise, because these blunt inequalities expose the exclusionary parameters of citizenship itself, which is conventionally understood in modern (liberal) political conditions to be about equality for all before The Law. In the universities, the raw inequalities between citizens and the various categories of non-citizens confront people who otherwise perceive one another as peers or colleagues -- in short, as equals -- with the cold hard facts. When it comes to immigration and

borders, The Law is all about inequality -- indeed, radical and often irreversible inequality.

While capitalism must be understood to fundamentally operate on a global scale, the entire planet is criss-crossed with ever more securitised (and often militarised) borders. This is a very important example of how capitalism systematically generates a separation between what is called the ‘economic’ and the ‘political’. State power particularises the ‘political’ in various territorially-defined spaces and jurisdictions, corresponding to the tenuous and historically specific and contingent tempos of struggle that have been more or less fixed in place, fetishised, and institutionalised variously in different places. So, while capitalist industries or employers may desire and even actively recruit migrant labour, border regimes ensure the subordination of that labour according to various formulae and recipes through which to differentially incorporate individual ‘foreigners’ within the immigration and citizenship regime of one state or another. This is a process that Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson have called ‘differential inclusion’, and which I, emphasising the active illegalisation of undocumented or ‘irregular’ migrant labour in particular, have similarly called ‘inclusion through exclusion’.

I myself make no pretense of being an ‘expert’ on British immigration law or policy, and as you

know, the UK Border Agency itself has been very recently dissolved, so I cannot comment very directly or specifically on the precise practices of the border regime here in the UK, which in any case are in flux, even as I respond to this question. What we can say with assurance, nonetheless, is that the extension of border policing and immigration monitoring into a diverse spectrum of ostensibly non-governmental settings -- increasingly carried out by non-state functionaries employed to conduct the routine bureaucratic operations of various sorts of institutions -- signals that The Border is no longer exclusively located at the territorial borders of the state (the geographical perimeters), nor even at the countless checkpoints in airports and other ‘ports of entry’ where large block lettering trumpets to the masses of bedraggled travelers their presence at the ‘UK Border’. No. The Border is increasingly everywhere, and may be activated in a proliferating cascade of seemingly mundane circumstances.

This helps us to understand that we all have what I have taken to calling bordered identities -- citizens, tourists, travelers, migrants, and refugees alike. As the Chicano (Mexican American) liberation struggles in the United States have long proclaimed: We didn’t cross the border; the border crossed us.

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# Future city: what do security barriers and guards imply?

“One of the readings of [the Central St. Martins College of Art and Design, Kings Cross] building is to see it as a future city. To see it as the way cities may be constructed to encourage creative thinking and experimental making.” Jeremy Till, Head of Central St Martins.

To imagine an art college as a ‘future city’ is an exciting proposition. From Augustine’s City of God to Corbusier’s Radiant City the idea persists, expectant with new possibilities for living, working and interacting. As its etymology in ‘polis’ – the Greek word for ‘city’ – would suggest, such utopian imaginings are fundamentally of a political character. David Harvey writes, “the question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from the question of what kind of people we want to be, what kind of social relations we seek, what relations to nature we cherish, what style of life we desire, what aesthetic values we hold.” It is unsurprising that the Head of CSM, himself an architect, should latch on to CSM’s new home, the magnificent Granary building, strikingly restored as a so-called ‘creative warehouse’. This constantly photographed, prize-winning space is one of the primary promotion tools for ‘brand CSM’ in the globally competitive Art & Design education market. The vision presented in the college’s promotional video is one where the designation of distinct spaces in the building – workshops, project spaces, the canteen, and so on – enables corresponding forms of creative activity: ‘production’, ‘exchange’, ‘reflection’, ‘discourse’ and ‘display’. Seductive as this rationally functioning creative factory might appear in some respects, there is an unsettling sense from the video that creative activ-

ity and human interaction in the college can, and should, be predetermined and engineered through forms of spatial control. Furthermore, there is a danger that a focus on the building rather than the more messy prospect of the myriad people and activities occurring within it, causes a fetishistic inversion: instead of merely housing the staff and students who in fact constitute the art college, the building becomes the art college and those who work and study there are simply passing through, like objects on a conveyor belt who enter into its efficient system of flows before, eventually, exiting out the other side.

In fact, as anyone who works or studies at CSM can attest, the experience of the building is far from the slick image of smooth flows and seamless transitions between areas of activity presented in the video although, the reasons for this might have a lot to do with the desire to institute just such a vision. What sort of future city do the security barriers and guards imply? A gated community perhaps, keeping the barbarians at bay; or else a business district where private corporations or retailers can keep electronic tabs on their staff and customers through their entry/exit systems? Gaining entry without your card is a struggle, the system’s refusal overriding human confirmation of a student’s status. Even with a card I have had my ID double-checked ‘for my own safety’. A dystopian police state then? (This is no joke now that non-EU students have been instructed to present themselves weekly to the student office to prove they are ‘genuine’).

Last year’s degree show was reminiscent of a large gig or music festival as far as the enforcement of seemingly arbitrary rules went as to where people could and couldn’t

go, how they could get there, if they were allowed to bring a drink, etc. A weird feeling of being under occupation on your own territory. Systems of control are also witnessed in the way the ID card enables or disables access to rooms or areas such as workshops through electronically locked doors. Another cause of much frustration amongst students are the regulations about what is and isn’t allowed. For example, students are not allowed to paint on the ply studio walls (in an art college!). I heard from a student who was sent the bill for a replacement 4’x8’ sheet of ply after she painted a white square on the wall to project her film for the degree show. Someone has determined that the ‘ply aesthetic’ overrides all other concerns, and deviation shall be punished. A city at the mercy of a dictatorial interior designer?

What gets shown where is also carefully monitored and controlled. Areas must be booked-ahead. Spontaneous activities in ‘the Street’ – the main central space designated for ‘display’ – will be pounced on and stopped by security guards if they haven’t received permission or are not occurring in the correct ‘zones’. Something as innocuous as hanging drawings on the outside-facing walls of the studios, for example, can summon forth bureaucratic arbiters citing fire regulations. An over-cautious and conservative city then, where prohibition soon becomes internalized as a reluctance to step outside of familiar parameters?

Whilst none of these things will prevent all the incredible thoughts, experiments and experiences that issue forth from student energies, they are an impediment to those energies, a discouragement. What is more they promote a culture of passivity which can only be detri-

mental to the future of CSM, and its reputation. The overriding sense of control that permeates the building is not conducive to creative production, interaction and thinking, but is instead felt as alienating – a suppression of critical autonomy and a limit to creative possibilities. And amidst the many blockages constructed to control what does and doesn’t happen, the flows which are engineered to occur, such as ‘hot-desking’ and bookable spaces, are exactly the things which further disempower by taking any sense of territorial ownership from users of the college. A sense of a place which is yours, and which you can’t, at a second’s notice, be displaced from (due, for example, to an erroneous double-booking!)

The question we should ask then, if we stick with the metaphor, is: who owns the city? This is interesting in terms of CSM as it turns out, because the college forms the first stage of a huge Kings Cross development project which will include office buildings, apartment blocks, shops and restaurants. The investors are Argent property developers, London & Continental Railways, and DHL. Although there is no time to go into it here, a familiar story is the way the ‘cultural capital’ – in the estate agent jargon, ‘vibrancy’ or ‘creative buzz’ – of an art museum or, in this case, art college, adds value to an area seeking capital investment from companies, residents and speculators. Related to this is the whole subject of cultural institutions’ role in ‘gentrification’ of an area at a period of intensive social cleansing through measures such as the ‘bedroom tax’, benefit caps, and the recent 80% market rent rule for social landlords. (Areas of Kings Cross and Euston still have large working class popula-

tions living in housing association and council flats – perhaps not for much longer!).

The first thing that confronts you when you enter the Granary building is not in fact the manned security gates, these are some distance away, beyond a large area of the main space, but a sublimely glowing, interactive Perspex model of the Kings Cross development; the future city! We are not in the college at all, but a public access Kings Cross Visitor Centre. If we step outside of the building we are in what appears to be a well maintained public square, incorporating an impressive illuminated fountain system, which leads further down the newly laid pedestrian street towards the station. A small plaque just beyond the square reveals the reality that this is in fact a ‘private estate’ – another of those city developments that appears to be public, but which is owned and run by private investors who have been sold the land from the local authority (in this case Camden Council). This would account both for the security guards in their fluorescent jackets and red hats, who keep the area anaesthetically spotless, and for the yellow public safety signs that pop up everywhere at the first sign of ice or snow.

What these new privately owned ‘malls without walls’ have in common, according to Anna Minton, is an “emphasis on security and safety ... [A]s malls, multiplexes, campuses, shopping centres and the business districts spread, the growth of private security is a given.” Could this be a clue to what is going on at CSM? Is the ‘future city’ envisaged by the new building a homogeneous, sterile, securitized, risk-averse, paranoid model manifested in private estate management? (It is true the build-

ing, and in particular ‘the street’, is sometimes compared to a shopping mall). The exact ownership arrangements regarding the Granary and its immediate vicinity are hazy, at least to me at this time. But at the very least this seems an important element in any consideration of what sort of ‘future city’ CSM should or could be.

To return finally to David Harvey’s question as to what kind of city we want, I would suggest the following for a start:

1. We want a city which is owned collectively by its inhabitants, where its citizens feel at home, and not at the mercy of unknown, outside powers, and where they don’t exist for the benefit of private interests.
2. We want a democratic city, where decisions are taken at all levels, where proposals can be considered, and where consultation is the norm.
3. We want an open city, not a police state. Trust not suspicion.
4. We want a diverse city, with a good social mix of people, including those born and living in the local area, and no enforcement of discriminatory government agendas against those from overseas.
5. We want a political city, where contesting and critical voices can be heard (as someone proud to work at CSM amongst brilliant staff and students, this is my contribution!)
6. We want an avant-garde city! Where non-conformity, the production of difference, and the flowerings of the disruptive imagination can be a part of everyday life.

We know that the blueprints for utopia are liable to turn into the worst dystopias. But that shouldn’t stop us dreaming.

Luther Blissett, Fine Art Tutor, CSM