

In the Winter Semester of 2019, I was presented with the wonderful opportunity to participate in the Direct Exchange and spend one semester at Cornell University in the United States. As an anthropologist completing an MA in North American Studies at the Freie University, it was imperative for my research that I spent some time embedded and directly engaged with the culture under study. As a self-funded student from a working class background, such a trip would not have been possible without the generous support of the Direct Exchange and DAAD, and for that I am incredibly grateful.

My semester in Ithaca presented an eye-opening experience of the world of North American Academia, and how different it is to study in an educational environment run with a business model. On the one hand, the sheer number of resources available to students was incredible. There were a vast number of beautifully designed libraries, specialising in a wide range of disciplines - from the incredibly informative Africana Library; the gorgeously ornate AD White reading room that attracts many tourists; the newly built and highly chic Fine Arts library, to the Karl Kroch Rare Manuscripts Division - an underground treasure trove containing the largest collection of medieval manuscripts on Witchcraft and the Inquisition in all of North America. Alongside the vast number of physical books, the University is subscribed to pretty much every online journal one could hope for, as well as a member of an Inter-library lending programme, so you have access to all study materials you could hope and desire.

The professors, as well as administrative staff, are exceptionally helpful and supportive, and it seems the majority of graduate students develop close personal relationships with their Advisors, through colloquiums and other departmental meetings and activities. What's more, the campus is also frequently visited by a wide range of inspiring guest speakers and visiting scholars. During my semester, I had the pleasure of attending talks from renowned Anthropologist Anna Tsing, investigative journalist Jeremy Scahill, and the one and only Spike Lee. I personally found the stipend for graduate students very generous, and for once in my life, I was able to comfortably feed myself and focus upon my studies, which was a really tremendous experience.

On the other hand, the business model seeps into the educational realm, and I often found the classroom environment to be too competitive: dominated by self-serving individualism and goals of personal success, rather than fostering a collective space of learning and development. Participating in the 'Teaching Anthropology' course granted me a valuable insight of what goes on behind-the-scenes of the classroom, as well as some useful pedagogical skills.

The Cornell campus is located in Ithaca, four hours north of New York City, and is a truly breathtaking site to behold. A picturesque bundle of bell towers and gothic buildings, the campus sits atop of a hill, overlooking the lively town of Ithaca, surrounded by two gorges with cascading waterfalls on either side. The view is, as they say 'gorgeous', until one notices the large nets that are attached to all bridges on campus. Cornell has a high suicide rate, partly caused by the long, dark winters, and the incredible pressure placed upon students in an Ivy League College.

Of course, the University does what it can to support student's mental health: Cornell Health has over 35+ therapists and counsellors available, and one cannot visit the doctor about something as banal as an ingrown toenail without having to first complete a mental health survey. The main organisation that deals directly with student's issues is EARS, a student-led support system of volunteer counsellors, who hold anonymous drop-in sessions for those facing a crisis. During my time at Cornell, I participated in their ten week training programme and learnt some valuable life skills.

Notable Cornell Alumni include Toni Morrison, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Bill Nye and Anthony Fauci. However, the discovery of another heralded Cornell Alumnus, John Olin, who's name stands above the main campus library, revealed an unsettling campus history that forced me to question the supposed progressive values of the university. Therefore, I decided to follow the path of another notable and respected Alum, Kurt Vonnegut, who consciously turned his back upon academia in order to focus on writing fiction.

My time in the States was a wonderful opportunity, which provided many fruitful avenues to explore for my own research, as well as long lasting friendships and a greater understanding of the workings of American Academia. Like with all life experiences, there were both positives and negatives, but nonetheless, it was a life changing and valuable experience, and for that, I am incredibly grateful to have participated in the Direct Exchange.