Responses to ideological and financial attacks on higher education have been widespread. Students, faculty, and staff have mobilized around the world, not simply to reverse cuts in funding but to rethink along new lines the means and ends of education. For the past half-century, higher education held a privileged place in a larger social compact that promised upward mobility through expanded access to professional credentials. Foreclosing this portal has stood as a cancellation of the future as it was once understood by much of the working and middle class. The message to those who are not already the beneficiaries of increasingly stratified vectors of opportunity is that there is no place for them in the enchanted land once reachable by vessels propelled by winds known as equality and progress.

In distinction to this narrowing optic, the demonstrations and mobilizations responding to recent attacks seek to stir up their own storms of protest. They chart their own course for what the future might be. Due in large part to the expansion of higher education over the past half-century, the university, once the preserve of specialized knowledge that does no more than be for itself, has become a site where activists of various stripes pose the question of what and who education is for. These critical interrogations reflect not simply on the aims of higher education, but on its means as well. They reassemble shards of ruptured disciplinary authority, protocols of expertise that have gone out of service, methods and forms taken up with new feelings, tone, and consequences. The resulting mobilizations share with cultural studies the goal of expanding the techniques, objects, and aims of what is worth knowing. They realign the affinities and affiliations by which critical engagement moves in the world.

It is in this spirit that we share in this research thread some exemplary work by an interdisciplinarily and geographically-dispersed collective that sought a concrete response to the baleful changes visited upon their campus and its social surroundings. Appropriating the genre of the campus map, graduate students at Queen Mary University London and University of North Carolina Chapel Hill have produced a countermap of the university. Elegant in design, yet multi-purposed, their mapping of alternative uses and critiques takes the form of a poster-sized doubled sided print which locates the university within its larger societal force field (the map's front side), and stages an arena for playing that field by means of a board game (which appears on the reverse side). In sharp contrast to the political geography of curricula intended to assimilate students to an already settled matter and progress-toward-a-degree, an unproblematic temporal beat measured by accumulated credit-hours, the critical cartographical work of this collective reallocates the energies of their seminars and research to produce alternate forms of knowledge and means for its legitimation.

At once serious and playful, the work of this counter-mapping opens a range of political and pedagogical timbres through which the apparent fixity of the present is rendered fungible and the tone of response multiple. A variety of futures and possible courses of action can be imagined and explored in the present, both inside and outside of the classroom. At once strategic and tactical, practical and conceptual, focused and elastic, the composite map and game provide a political technology by which the boundaries that define the present limits of the possible might be redrawn. Both the artifact and the interview below invite response across a wide array of media, including related contributions to this thread of Lateral. As co-editors of the thread, we hope that you will join this conversation and mobilization. Please do contact us with your commentaries and interventions. Our hope is that this example can be set in relation to others that are being devised in the midst of this vital contestation.

Bruce Burgett, University of Washington Bothell
Randy Martin, New York University
Interview with the Queen Mary Countermapping Collective
Manuela Zechner - Tim Stallmann - Maria Catalina Bejarano Soto - Liz Mason-Deese
Rakhee Kewada - Bue Rüchner Hansen - Mara Ferreri - Camille Barbagallo

What was the process you undertook to create the map?

For some of us the process started with a reflection on the question of ‘what is the university?’ during a PhD seminar. Taking this question and thinking through the materiality of how we inhabit the university, we found ourselves in our first years of yet another degree in yet another institution, tired of what the neo-liberal university makes us be and do and urgently desiring a collective place and practice within it. We dodged PhD writing and seminar coursework by proposing a collective process of making a countermap. From the outset we hoped that the process would allow us to engage with the university in a more collective, inspiring and transformative way.

For others of us the process started through an encounter with the practice of countermapping and the Counter Cartographies Collective (3C’s); an encounter that resonated with us affectively and intellectually, seeming to point to a potential modality of engaging with the university.

Once we had set up the parameters and secured funding for a collaborative process between our group at Queen Mary and the 3Cs, we began to undertake extensive preparation. This involved two months of gathering data, reflecting and discussing: between ourselves, with staff and students from Queen Mary, through the medium of a questionnaire, statistics and our experiences. Out of this grew an extensive archive, out of which we began to develop the map and a collective working space.

May 2010 saw us move this preparation into the second phase, beginning the map design and inviting other people to participate in making and producing it, via an open call for collaborators and participants. We spent intensive weeks working together in London, setting up our headquarters in the business school where many of us were based, and organised three open events in order to engage different groups of people.

We began with a reflection on the imaginaries of the university, followed by a collective drift around Queen Mary Mile End campus. Second, we held a workshop on how to make a counter-map using open source software. Finally, we held a discussion with different collectives and people in and around the university about how counter-mapping can be of use to education movements and groups, as a research method as well as organizing tool.

These events brought many new discussions, lines of investigation and people to our process, leading to further intensive working periods in May and September. Without being fully aware of it, we were surfing on an early buzz of ‘mapping’ in the city. At the same time, the British Library hosted an exhibition of maps which was very useful to our research and aesthetics, and there seemed to be significant interest in processes of counter-mapping.

Where did the idea come from, what are the politics of mapping you’d like to advance?

To begin with, it’s a countermap, not a traditional map. One side presents the countermap and the other is a ‘game’. The Counter Cartographies Collective’s practice and politics provided a good background and content and together we all brought our various experiences of mapping, making relational tools and organising. The disorientation map they made of the University of North Carolina inspired us to further think about mapping as a research methodology; specifically as a form of understanding complex flows and blockages and as a way of visualising them and politicising them in the process.

It is a countermap not simply because it sits in opposition to existing maps of Queen Mary, the British university system, migratory flows or of fortress Europe, but also because it’s a process of creating counter-knowledges and perspectives. The process of producing the map is itself a reflection on the knowledge produced through mapping, its accessibility and possible uses, as well as on the tools through which these knowledges are produced and disseminated (open source and free data), and the ways it is disseminated (creative commons).

It is also a countermap because of our own position in making it. The game itself is a countermap in the sense that it counters the idea of a map as a bird’s eye view of complex dynamics. The game makes sense only if you play it, and playing it means to virtually partake in the frustrations of the filter mechanisms of universities and the nation state, their arbitrariness (the flip of a coin determines where you move; both money and chance), their fundamental unfairness, but also to look for alternatives, shortcuts, ways out and ways in.

How did the project itself help cohere the collective?

This long and sustained process lasting from February till September, with its different intensities and configurations of research and work, allowed both the project and the collective to grow in a rich and complex way. Having a regular rhythm of meetings and a headquarters space meant that people could fully focus on the project. The everyday experience of sharing food, figuring out working patterns and having much informal socialising time through which the project also came to be
reflected on - collectively dealing with desires, pleasures and limitations - were important for the becoming of the collective. This was particularly important because we were trying to invent a space for research, analysis, politics and collective collaboration that we hoped to be able to carry beyond the project in some way.

The enthusiastic reception the countermap and game received in different universities, groups and networks was very encouraging and happened to feed directly into recent mobilizations around education struggles in the UK. This has made the countermap not just a useful tool for teaching and organising, but one that circulates in a space that has come to be not just that of individual institutions and projects, but also that of a 'movement'.

How does this transform understandings of organizing and interdisciplinarity?

We started with questions, not answers, and we used all tools we had at our disposal, coming from many different disciplines and backgrounds. Interdisciplinarity may not the best concept to describe the process since none of us are actually 'within' a discipline in our own research, nor in our education path. As such, the working process was the coming together of a group of people with different trajectories of inter- and transdisciplinarity. We came together not as a group of people wanting to state something determinate or to prove a certain point. Rather we formed as a group around a set of shared questions and the desire to make a countermap. This has made the process open and practical.

Our research and analysis has not been influenced solely by notions of academic disciplines. We were not trying to fulfill certain expectations and criteria of so-called 'neutrality' and 'objectivity'. Instead, it has been a practical process in which our mode of working has been formed dialogically by the group and the problems at hand, rather than in reference to tradition or authority.

With all our diverging experiences of the university and the different ways in which studying seems to engender discipline and self-discipline, it was clear that the university was not some object outside us which we could study from a neutral perspective. The complexity of our often diverging experiences of the university, and all of us being within, outside and beyond the university at once, is a complexity which cannot be divorced from what the university is as an institution; a site of labour and study, a filter and a border. For us it is a space which is not a coherent neat structure or objective set of relations, but a strategic field, with certain problems and contradictions running through it. With our map and game we tried to make an intervention into this space and to organise around these problems. As a group this really helped us cohere and create our own space. Not organising around some foreign banner such as an academic discipline, or someone else's problems, we were able to find our own legs. There is no doubt this has been a reason why this process has been affectively, intellectually and politically much more satisfying and inspiring than regular group exercises or 'learning experiences'.

How do questions of tone / voice / look / humour / outrage / critique get designed in?

We all started with different understandings and ideas, so the process of visualising and writing was one of collective design involving discussion, debate and continuous feedback. Small working groups fed back to the main group every couple of hours or at the end of the day. Everyone participated in the visual research and design, with all visual and textual material checked, argued about and edited collectively.

Our different histories and approaches to design, critique and affectivity generated many discussions that allowed us to find ways of building the map and game on multiple layers and registers. The resulting design may be bumpy in some places, but the fact that contrasting aesthetics and approaches are present in it makes it more interesting for us than a smooth one-dimensional design done by one person. Importantly, we wanted the map to speak transversally across a range of levels. We therefore conceived of it as based around a number of key layers: a subjective one, mainly constituted by the narratives and of course drawings; an institutional one, constituted by an anatomy of the campus; a display of flows, actors and institutions also on the level of the city (London); and a layer speaking to global flows, borders and actors. With the knowledge that there are many more that constitute the relations between the university, migration regimes, money flows and policies of austerity, the question was how to make it look readable without resulting in a homogenising, polished, final look. This also speaks to the impossibility of creating a total picture of the complexities of the subject.

We had a lot of discussions about the presentational style and the aesthetics of the map. We wanted it to look both playful and serious. It was soon clear that we wanted to go beyond the machinist look of much 'systemic' countermapping (as in the style of the maps of Bureau d'etudes for instance, which were a key point of reference) and also giving up on the pretence of scientific authority (no pie charts, not too many standardised icons). Instead, we have little brains playing on the idea of 'brain-drain', sea monsters referring to real baroque navigation charts, as well as to the real monsters of bureaucracy and border control. The idea of a Sea of Bureaucracy was intended as both a real lived experience for many (we used the text of an actual form you have to complete) and of course also a humorous nod to some of the affects of migration and administration. It is hoped that the diverse and fluid design illustrates the point that it is a map of movement and conflict rather than of fixed systems, filters-border mechanisms and set borders. We tried to conceptualise this
into the vague idea of 'techno-baroque'. Techno standing in for the technocratic, bureaucratic, pointing to all of the insane digital and bricks 'n' mortar infrastructures of profiling, differential access, containment, information gathering and legal requirements. Baroque as the excessive and exceeding, monstrously deformed, echoing the irrational paranoias about the foreigner and the international student that fortress Europe and fortress UK have built and continue to build. In this way, the aesthetic is designed to mock the techno-baroque nature of the current power dispositifs, and to convey the idea that systems of security and control produce their own monsters, imaginary as well as real.

We also tried to situate our systematic critique in some of the subjective positions that run through and are produced by the institutions, flows and apparatuses we mapped. We mapped the salaries, communications and thoughts of staff in the Mary section of the map, and we presented a few speech bubbles with the testimony of various people passing through border agencies. Their presence in the map situates the information and data about VFS Global (the private agency managing Visa application procedures for over 46 countries worldwide, making good business with this) and the UK government.

How might we think about the map as a cultural-political artifact? What kinds of materiality and social practice might it engender? What strategies of dissemination/distribution does it lend itself to (and what avenues was it possible to pursue)?

We all shared a sensitivity to the material aspect of a map as a political tool of communication and organisation, drawing from the experience of the 3C's but also from other experiences in the group with political documents and actions. The idea of a map was from the very beginning born out of a reflection on the limitations of other forms of academic research and dissemination and also on the simplistic and traditionalist approaches of most mainstream activist material on the issues surrounding the -then burgeoning- mobilisations around cuts to funding of higher education in the UK. We wanted to make something people would want to put up on their walls, something that was beautiful and not patronising, something that could travel by itself.

The free distribution and possible uses of the map were built into the design of the whole project. This started with the open public events we co-ordinated in May and continuing throughout all the forms of dissemination and distribution – presentation, game playing – we have done since the countercamp was printed. Thanks to the format we have been able to give it away at meetings, conferences and to organise game playing sessions on our campus and elsewhere. We have also been able to use it as teaching material in different departments, in our own and in other universities, as well as using it to discuss the context of alternative educational spaces such as free schools, and to leave in friendly self-organised spaces and radical infoshops and activist spaces.

What has been the reception to this project, as best you can tell. Have there been unexpected or unintended responses? Has it inspired kindred projects/mobilizations?

The reception has been good, and quite diverse. Some people like the map, some the game, and people stress different aspects of both. In general people really appreciate the fact that it looks very different from most activist and political material. A staff member at Queen Mary in the International Student Admissions Office asked for copies to help her explain to her British colleagues the issues faced by many international students. A presentation to a group of professors highlighted how little our own lecturers knew about the difficulties faced by their own international students.

The game has worked very well as a tool that forces people to discuss their own and others’ experiences of education and border crossings. We specifically designed it as a relational device to get the players to share their experiences and frustrations, and to imagine alternatives. The colourfulness and playfulness of the map has brightened up many a grey bureaucratic political meeting, and inspired others to invent similar tools of mapping, acting and organising in relation to other institutions. We’ve had requests for people to use our InDesign files for making their own maps (the 'code' of the map is open and free), and given workshops to other groups making their own maps of the university.