

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

Lili Fabilli and Eric Hoffer Essay Prize 2009-10 Topic: Whose University?

Winners: Bryan K. Jones (staff), Salman Qasim, and Viola Tang

Bryan K. Jones

21 Turkeys

Twenty-one wild turkeys furiously pick and peck in the dense ivy. In the fading evening light they look like giant speckled rocks hovering over the hillside. This natural scene would not seem out of place in some faraway wilderness, but it is out of place in the middle of the University.

It was near Founder's Rock on the northeast side of campus where I saw them. You've seen the old photos of the spot — a lone outcropping of dark stone surrounded by an expanse of land that rolls unobstructed to the bay. The outcropping is still there, only now it is surrounded by a small cluster of trees, a few bushes — and buildings. A forgotten corner of campus. Development has encroached, leaving only a vestige of the original wilderness.

So I was amazed when I saw those wild turkeys there, asserting their ownership of the land, the University. A squatter's rights protest — only scratching and strutting instead of chants and signs. Indeed we mustn't forget that something else was here before us. From the moment the founders of the University stood on that rock and declared, "This is ours," we have believed it is ours, but we forget who it really belongs to, that something else could claim the right of ownership.

Nature is like a sullen, neglected lover — when you think she's gone, she reminds us that she's there. So, amidst the books and backpacks, she may assert herself. It could be as subtle as a fern growing twenty feet up the side of a building in a wet, mossy patch under a rain gutter, or as bold as the sudden appearance of the turkeys. We'd like to think we tamed our surroundings with our paths laid through the wilderness and the University's great halls lined up one after the other, but nature manages to insinuate. For the creeks still flow from the hills on their irregular courses through campus, disrupting the placid symmetry, the bricks and mortar, the refined history. In the constant struggle between man and environment, sometimes nature wins. I saw a turkey again one morning last fall in the middle of campus. It stood motionless among the fading shadows. I was startled by the sight, though students walked past on their way to class,

not giving it a second look. It was real, and it was a ghost of the past, a reminder that the land still belongs to nature.

Salman Qasim

The Hell if I Know

My computer's clock tells me the time is 2:27 a.m.

The date is December 1st, and this essay is due in under fourteen hours –five of which I will spend sleeping, one of which I will spend on the BART to Berkeley, and six of which I will spend in class. If I've done the math correctly, that leaves me with two hours.

But how long do I really need, just to tell you to whom this university belongs? Recent events have made it abundantly clear that U.C. Berkeley does not belong to US. It does not belong to the staff member, who works the low-wage jobs that keep the University afloat, and is thanked for it with even lower-wages, or a "thank you, but go home for ten days". Or better, no wages at all. A pink slip will suffice.

It does not belong to the faculty, who are charged with endowing a love of knowledge in the brightest young minds around– 600 of them at a time (and still some were unable to enroll). They are given wet matches and told to start a fire in the students' hearts and minds.

And it sure as hell does not belong to me, the student. It does not belong to the student who commutes two hours everyday because he can't afford to live on campus, breaking his back for his education as he carries a day's worth of textbooks and a life's worth of ambition. Who is up at 3:12 a.m. writing an essay for a prize he just found out about; just another drop in the very large, loan padded bucket. Whose father lost his job on July 24th, yet can win no changes in his son's financial "aid". The old man will move 8,104 miles away to work a lesser job.

You ask me: "whose university?" I don't know. I just know it isn't mine.

Viola Jing Xu Tang

Whose University?

When UC Berkeley must face a \$150 million deficit, one of the ways to relieve the budget crisis is to increase out-of-state American and International student enrollment. In addition to fees that Californian students pay, each nonresident student pays over \$22,000 in fees every year. None of these fees goes to help nonresident students. One administrator explains that outof-state students "bring in \$60 million in net revenues." Are nonresident students just cash cows? Whose university is UC Berkeley?

Many out-of-state students do not come from high-income families. Xuan Ming collected donations from each member of her village in China to pay for her tuition. Her family is willing to put everything on the line for the opportunity to send their daughter to the best university they could. International students are ineligible for federal aid and have no hope of establishing residency; students like Xuan Ming must be entirely self-funded.

In the nineteenth century, Chinese workers, seeking a better life, came to work for the Central Pacific Railroad. Today, international students come for the opportunity to have a better education. But increasing enrollment in order to increase revenue is not much better than the Central Pacific Railroad employing Chinese workers purely for cheap labor. International students are the new coolies, here to help.

In particular, international student support services and programming are even now, not what they are at other major universities. International student affairs are spread out among 7 different administrative offices. The lack of communication and collaboration between these offices demonstrates a lack of concern for international students. We must navigate confusing campus bureaucracy, on top of the academic, language and cultural challenges that we must overcome. When asked how students can keep administration accountable to the promise the university makes to us, one senior administrator shrugged and responded “I don’t know”.

At the September 24th Walkout, a red sign blared “U C me now. You won’t see me after 32%.” Already, we do not see the Korean student who had no choice but to return home after the severe depreciation of the Won against the dollar. Already, we do not see the Indian student who could not obtain enough financial support to attend Berkeley. Around the Savio steps, we continue to protest: “The cuts will hurt diversity on our campus!” “We are fighting for public education!” But what is diversity? Who is the public? Whose university is UC Berkeley?

We are all the public. This is our university. The University of California is a public institution no matter if I am from Oakland, Miami or Hong Kong, no matter if I am white, black, brown or yellow. It is the fact that we are all here, from different places, backgrounds and experiences, that truly makes Berkeley diverse. We all stand in solidarity. It is time for the administration to reevaluate whose university UC Berkeley is, to again champion diversity and equal opportunity.