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We We We All The Way Home: The "We" Affect in Transitional Spaces

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The majority of ethnographic studies for businesses have focused on places: home, work, "third places," and even "non-places". Daily life, however, is composed of transitional moments – matter of "in-betweeness." Transitional spaces and movements have increasingly been sites for "filling the gap" informational and "cocooning" products. We explored the in-between transitional moments on buses and commuter boats in Salvador, Bahia. We contend that the experience in this time-space creates a "we-tween" or just a "we-we," which engages the people and the environment in a moment of group solidarity and interactivity. We contrast this study of in-between to those we conducted in "Western" countries. The "we" affect suggests that corporate efforts in design and development have been disproportionally focused on Euro-North American values, which has direct implications for corporate innovation. We highlight the value of a multi-voiced approach in the collaboration between our US research lab and our product lab in Brazil, as one kind of solution to the problems of appropriate innovation.

Transitional Experience

Transitional spaces are traditionally taken as "non-places" or momentary space-time between activities – those that are deemed "meaningful" – but a careful observation shows that they are in fact important elements of daily life that tie these activities together. One the one hand, daily life activities increasingly revolve around them – setting the rhythms of our daily life. In large urban areas, for example, we, more and more, organize our work and activities around commuting time, rush hours, bus schedules, and the like. On the other hand, they serve as "buffers" (or ritual spaces) to help us "transit" from one activity to the next – a space-time in which people, for example, put themselves together for a job interview, deal with their anxiety before a doctor's appointment, reflect upon the decisions and commitments just made in a business lunch, ponder on the conversation with one's manager, and more. Because our concern with making these and other in-between moments more productive – an intrinsic European and North-American value – we have overemphasized the former (i.e., the increasing negative impact of transitional spaces on our personal time).

EPIC 2006, pp. 60-75, ISBN 1-931303-30-4.

However, this came at the cost of overlooking a myriad of distinct cultural practices taken place around these moments. For the most part, while we recognized the situated nature of these practices, observing the social, cultural, economic, and technological differences across different social groups, cultures, geographies, and others, we have fundamentally classed them as the same phenomenon – a momentary interruption in the flow of our individual everyday activities. As such, one key cultural value calls the attention: individual accomplishment. We focus on the individual, despite the collective experience that unfolds in transitional spaces – underscoring the actions, experiences, and needs of the individual. We thus assume and construct a "social network" of egos ("I's") connected by personal interests, intensions, and the like through distinct communication and coordination actions. As result, of course, we attempt to resolve this "on-the-go" productivity issue, by filling these "empty" moments and spaces with communication, coordination, productivity, and even entertainment technologies – informational and "cocooning" products – for the individuals.

In our observations in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil, we encountered different cultural manifestations in and through which "I's" – or individual subjects – get merged and a new form of collective subjectivity emerges involved everyone around. Our experiences riding buses and even boats in Salvador, made us take transitional spaces (1) as a matter of "in-betweeness" – buffers between distinct activities – and (2) as fundamentally collective experiences – momentary space-time that creates "we-tween" or "we-we" experience, which engages the people and the environment in a moment of group solidarity and interactivity. In this paper, we thus contrast this study of "in-betweeness" in Salvador to those we conducted in "Western" countries. The "we" affect suggests that corporate efforts in design and development have been disproportionally focused on Euro-North American values, which has direct implications for corporate innovation.

This paper is a dialogue between the two authors' perspectives on their personal and joint experiences riding on public transportations in Salvador as transitional spaces. We start describing two of these moments on buses and commuter boats. We contend that the experience in this space-time creates a "we-tween" or just a "we-we," which engages the people and the environment in a moment of group solidarity and interactivity. We contrast then this study of in-between to those we conducted in "Western" countries. Finally, we discuss the implication to corporate innovation, not as much as a series of design ideas, but instead as the approach for the collaboration between our US research lab and our product lab in Brazil, as one kind of solution to the problems of appropriate innovation.

It Was a Hot, Steamy, Crowded Bus Ride

Salvador da Bahia is larger than it looks on a map. It was the end of summer in Bahia. We were in there to study maids and other lower income working women. We had been out to a "suburban" area of Salvador to talk to some maids. It had been about a 45 minute cab ride in the morning but now we were headed back to our hotel in the city center.

We would not deny that we tried to catch a cab back to the heart of the city after an exhausting day of interviews and going through daily life routines with the women but unsurprisingly there were no cabs to be found in the poorer suburbs. We caught a bus. Buses are, of course, one of the primary ways these working women travel to and from work, often taking an hour to two hours per side of the commute. The sun was beginning to set as we climbed aboard. It was crowded – as one usually finds in large cities in South-America.

There were four of us traveling: the two authors and our local guide Antonio and his girlfriend, but only Adriana and Antonio managed to find a seat. As very common in Brazil, Adriana promptly took our backpacks and held them throughout the ride – if you find a seat you are supposed to somehow help those standing – "less fortunate." It was immediately apparent this was neither like the early morning buses nor like trips we had taken on the Tube or buses in London, the BART in San Francisco, the trains in Tokyo or buses and the Metro in Moscow. The bus was not quiet. There were conversations happening everywhere on the bus, from front to back. As people boarded, like ourselves, they were drawn into already happening "conversations".

Figure 1: Bus ride

Conversation is rather a weak word really, for there is shouting, laughing, giggling and arguing happening on the bus. People move from standing to sitting positions and

sitting to standing position. There are no introductions, no real pleasantries or greetings, no sense that you are an individual anymore – once on board, you are a part of the bus. Indeed, it is bus as super organism, to reappropriate an old Durkheimian concept (Durkheim 2001). Once we passed through the doors we had become part of the "we-we." A 30-something woman asks of Ken "So do you think that was right of my boyfriend? Do you?" He responds with a puzzled look, taking too long to process the sentence in Portuguese, much less respond. She turns and continues the question to the woman next to him. Who more or less agrees and the first woman continues with her story talking to Ken and the other woman, as well as, two other standing passengers at this point.

Milgram (1977) has talked about familiar strangers; people independently travel through the same part of the city – perhaps seeing each other over and over again at the commuter train station, and perhaps eventually tilting your head for a "hi" or perhaps not. The people are familiar to one, like the landscape on one's commute but never become friends. This is not the bus ride. There is nothing "familiar" about most of the people to the other passengers. They do not know them, or recognize them, or care about their biographies, necessarily. They are, for the most part, strangers. Strangers, however, does not necessarily mean distancing. Indeed, these are more like fellow travelers, who, thrown together, take life for a ride. Nor is the atmosphere one of a club opening in LA: no one exchanges cards, gives biographies, works the room/bus for social contacts, in short there is not the utilitarian value of "networking," as Putnam (1995) describes the work of oraganizations like Elks clubs. Nor is it networking, the verb, that is often associated with "social software" like LinkedIn, which are designed to make contacts for work that payoff. No numbers, names or business cards are exchanged. No requests for follow up contact are given. It is not about socio-economic status exchange – the first 30 minute conversation between American businessmen on an airplane. There is no obvious "instrumentality" or "productivity" involved in bus ride. The closest analogy we have found is like walking into a party but with no corner to hide in.

It is a strange kind of conversation whose intension is for the most part to keep everyone connected to each other – it is the "bate-papo" (shooting the breeze) that permeates the environment: small-talks about light politics and life, gossips with sexual suggestions, word games, and of course complaints about everything. Starting and maintaining these "bate-papos" are the "natural" thing to do – creating and maintaining the bonds that turn the experience into an enjoyable one. Clearly, one should not forget the loud music in the background – if not from vehicle's stereo, or from a passenger's own hi-fi – helping consolidate the atmosphere.

In this environment, one cannot just "stand" in this crowd. Nor can one just sit and stare out the window, which Antonio tries to do. A woman in the seat next to him asks the man in front of them whether he would give her an ice-cream he is carrying in his cooler – he is a street vendor, who probably spent the day selling ice-cream on the beach. They start negotiating whether he should give it for free or not and that conversation, as by "magic," turns into one about religious values – apparently the man was evangelical, and, of

course, we were in Bahia, where one breathes religion everywhere, everyday. Soon they, together with a woman standing, who has just joined the conversations, are engaging Antonio. He looks out more. They talk more to him. Despite repeated attempts at resistance, soon he is pulled into the bus.

People continue to get on and off the bus during the ride. Getting off is the only way to be alone, to be an individual person again. Getting on, pulls you into the interaction, the dynamic, the superorganism of the "we-we-we" all the way home.

Whatever Floats Your Boat

The bus alone would not have been exactly compelling evidence to bring back to Intel to argue for an adjustment to our thinking, however, we saw evidence of similar phenomenon throughout Salvador. Another time, we were coming back from a day-long site-visit and interviews in one of the bay islands – Ilha da Maré – whose only access was by boat. Ilha da Maré was one of the first islands being colonized by the Portuguese in the region, who, after arriving there by chance on a hazy day, built a church and established a small settlement. For many years, the Portuguese exploited African slaves in sugar cane crops, who eventually became the dwellers in the small fisherman village on the other side of the island we visited that day. Nowadays, it is getting increasingly harder to live out of fishing, so more and more locals are turning to tourism – namely, opening bars on the beach – or finding jobs in Salvador to make their living.

Our experience riding a boat in fact started earlier on that day, when we took a boat to get to Ilha da Maré. No boat captain wanted to take us to the small village on the other side of the island because it would mean a 30 minute longer trip – they usually take people to the tourist area to which the great majority gets off. Antonio then started articulating with other local people who also wanted to go the village, and formed a small coalition large enough to convince one of the boat captains to take us on the longer ride. After about half-hour of discussion, they finally agreed to take us. At that point, we had already met most of the people who live in the village, and even met a young woman who had recently moved to Salvador in order to finish high school – apparently an unusual decision for people from that particular village – and who took the time to be our local "tour" guide. For the locals, there was nothing unusual about this spontaneous collectivism (or collective actions) that help them cope with everyday struggles, say, to get boat captains to agree to take them to the village so as to avoid a hour long walk through the island, and more importantly making the experience more enjoyable (or, we may say, less painful).

It was a typical summer day in Bahia – hot, hot, hot, and sunny. After visiting the village, carrying out the interviews, and walking for about one hour through Ilha da Maré, we stopped by one of the local beach bars for some cold water and very cold beer while we waited to the next boat back to the continent – it could not be differently, we have to admit. A loud music coming from one of the boats announced that it was ready to departure. We forgot to mention but the island has no pier – to get on or out, people have to get their

pants wet, no matter if you are an old lady carrying her groceries, a young guy carrying his new TV set, a toddle with her parents, or an American anthropologist.

We had nevertheless to let this boat go and waited for the next one – apparently the music was too good as it got overfull (as long as there are people willing to take it, they will bring in). The second boat pulled in a couple of minutes later – a smaller wood boat but playing equally loud music. We decided to take our chances and get on this time. We sat at the roof on the outer bench facing people on the inner bench – the boat had basically four bench rows, where the inner benches were placed back to back facing the outer benches. As we should have anticipated, this boat also left the island overfull. No one was wearing life-vest or bothered looking for one, which was seen more as an annoyance than anything – people wanted to enjoy the ride after all, not be "bothered" by (or reminded of) the potential danger of that 30 minute trip. At least, on the roof top, we did not feel too claustrophobic and the music did not seem so loud.

Figure 2: Meanwhile Ken has a nice chat with one of the locals

Initially, people sat with their parties but as soon as the boat left the island, people started moving about. Kids went to the back to play, girls grouped together with some young guys also on the back and started talking, laughing, discussing, and the like. One young man, who apparently got on the boat to be with his fellow friends, jumped on the water and swam back to the beach, soon the boat started getting in rougher waters – to enjoy the company no matter how brief this might be. On the roof top, adults also had fun –

some pulled out some beer cans from the coolers, some started singing and trying some samba steps in the limited space they had, while some stood up to appreciate the ride. Suddenly there were no longer parties, but one. Everyone was supposed to participate; in fact everyone was drawn into this single collectivism – regardless of your socio-economic status, skin color, religious background, or native language. It is not the case that class and color differences cease from existing, as Freeman pointed out in his studies of class relations in public spaces of Rio de Janeiro (Freeman 2002), but that people, regardless of the background, are drawn into participating.

In the middle of the ride, Rogerio was entertained taking some pictures of the crowd on the back of the boat, when Ken was caught in a "conversation" with a local man. It is hard to pin down exactly what the conversation was about, given that the man was speaking in Portuguese and slightly drunk, and Ken was slowly trying to catch up with him. But, a meaningful interaction was created and Ken was able to participate in this "conversation." To exchange content was not necessarily the goal of the interaction – the point was to engage in some sort of interaction that would bond all together – and no one was expected to be left aside.

We again want to emphasize the collective nature of this experience in Salvador. In this case, it would seem that the whole is more than the sum of the parts. Thinking of collective experience in terms of a multiplicity of individuals fails to see the forest for the trees. Indeed, we want move some corporate attention to understanding the "forests", the collectives around the world. Rather than the constant focus on the individual, we want, instead, to be able to talk about collective experience; intersubjectively negotiated, individually incorporated, only more or less shared, and yet a common lens through which we make sense of everyday experience.

Tubing Alone

The contrast to a ride on the Salvadorian bus or the boat with one on bus route 73 (Jungnickle 2006) London or to the Tube is striking. The Tube, though equally as crowded during the same time of day, is full of people staring: up at advertisements, down at shoes, off into space while listening to music. Marc Auge (2002) talks about this kind of experience as "collectivity without festival and solitude without isolation" (pg 7). Auge describes the experience as one where people acknowledge the presences of others, then avoid them to show they are not a threat. They express an air of civil inattention.

Being alone-together has been a repeated "finding' in much of our work – people attempting to move comfortably through space without having to engage in the social environment. There are predominately two ways we've seen this happen. One has been commonly referred to as "cocooning" or a "nurtrant" technology or creating a "bubble." Five years ago, we saw this with the Sony Walkman, now the Apple iPod. Michael Bull wrote about the Walkman:

> *Personal-stereo use enables users to cope with, or deal with, stressful emotional situations through use in situations when they would otherwise feel vulnerable, alone, or when they would otherwise be forced to think about unwanted things due to lack of distraction* [2000:49]

He goes on to claim "personal stereos are a tool enabling the individual to maneuver through urban spaces without coming directly in contact with other people" (2000:103) Of course the books and magazines play a similar role. The other form of avoiding the present of in-between has been when people are absorbed in life elsewhere, ala their mobile phones. Gergen (2000:227) has called this "absent presence" that he describes as when "one is physically present but is absorbed by a technologically mediated world of elsewhere." Ito (2005) have demonstrated how teen girls in Tokyo use mobile phones to be with their friends across town, while being in their bedrooms or being with their boyfriend, while riding on a train in another part of Tokyo. The vast majority of the technological products developed in the last decade have focused on either isolation or escapism for the individual in these public spaces.

Figure 3: Sony presenting people as an annoyance and enabling isolation and escape. Newark airport billboard, April 2006.

Although it is true we move individually, collectively we produce flows of people, capital, and activities that serve to structure and organize our daily life experiences. Collectively, we create successful products. As we further explore cultures beyond our own and how they deal with these transitional spaces, we may learn new ways to create needs (Baudrillard 1983) and new products.

"I Need One"

The products that we have suggested from our previous research have continued the trends of social isolation, escapism and a focus on "me." It is fairly clear that other companies as well are pursing these same directions. The Salvadorian transitional experiences have called these individual and isolating directions into question, at least as the only way to develop products and services for transitional moments and movements between places. It opens up possibilities for further inquiry into products or services that temporally spontaneous engage and connect a person in a collective in transition to the environment and others around them. The idea of the collective has been little explored. We, in industry, can talk of WOM (word of mouth) or "social software" but still resist taking the collective seriously. In the end, we share the delusion that we sell individual products to individual people.

As we attempt to develop products and services for transitional spaces, it becomes important to view this mobility as a collective rather than an individual phenomenon. We are concerned not so much with how specific people move from A to B, but rather with collective phenomena in two senses. The first is how repeated patterns of movement create larger cultural structures, and the second is how those structures then serve to make sense of particular mobilities. This is very much a relational view of mobility. When an individual undertakes a bus ride, the journey makes sense not purely in terms of an individual experience or in terms of the historical pattern of previous journeys, but in the relationship between the two.

We have attempted to disentangle the individual experience from the collective. The individual approach focuses on the actions and experiences of the individual. It assumes a solitary actor who is independent decision makers. In the transitional experience of the bus, we've seen how this has not been the case. There is another thread beyond the collection of "I's" to be discussed that follows a pattern of "on-the-go" productivity in terms of communication and coordination of people. Recent attempts at social software or office applications point to this notion of the multiple "I's" or individuals attempting to coordinate purposeful action. The ethnomethodological literature that Randall (2005) described provides a door into this way of seeing. A characteristic of this line of research is the purposefulness of the individuals acting together to get something done. There is a long tradition of this work yielding results that eventually become products or services. We hope these continue, however, wanted to point out that we are trying to open a new line of inquiry for research and product development along the lines of an emergent collective. We have presented examples of where the whole is more than the sum of the parts; it is characterized by local participant created content, emergent structure, and loosely and ephemerally connected social groupings as the basis of the interactions.

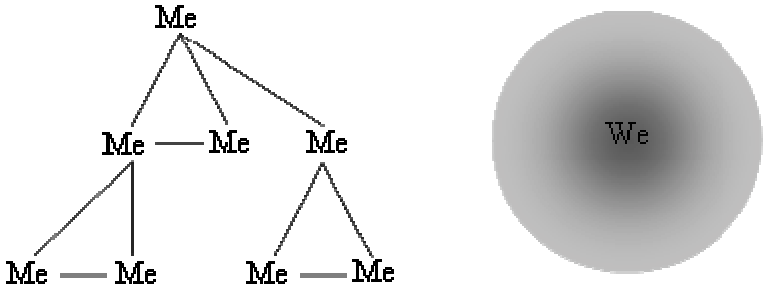

Figure 4: "Me-Me" and "We-We" structures – These two diagrams depicts the different ways in which we can understand the social interactions that take place in transitive spaces. On the one hand, the "Me-Me" structure emphasizes the connectivity between individuals – often represented by an "ego-centric" social network. On the other hand, the "We-We" structure emphasizes the emergent connectedness of collective interactions – in which the individual "Me" blends into the collective "We."

Far Apart Together

In doing ethnographic praxes in emerging markets, we set out to investigate and unravel the nuances of people's daily lives. As the first British explorers of the 18th Century (Pratt, 1999), we are the eyes and ears of "the Empire", reporting back the "exotic" experiences, people, and practices so as to help create new understandings, new markets, new "needs" and new opportunities. To this end, we create not only the images of the far-distant lands – narratives and discourses about different lands that populate the imaginaries of the industry. Thus, aligned with economic goals of multinational corporations, we increasingly construct the "realities" of the other worlds and, by problematizing their realities, we come to create customers' needs leading to market and product opportunities. Many critical and contemporary writers have written about this as new forms of colonization in a post-colonial era. But, this brings to the fore the question of how can we avoid this colonial eye on the lives of these people and rather promote a form of ethnographic praxis that supports the creation of innovations that are not just appropriate for the market, but ethically appropriate for everyone.

We thus problematize the translation of our findings into "implications for design." "Naturally," a meaningful and expected closure for this particular genre – writing ethnographic praxis in and for the industry – is to offer readers and ultimately business decision-makers an "insightful" discussion on the "implications for design" (see Dourish, 2005 for an interesting discussion about this topic) or products, or processes, and the like. We take issue with this as the valuable part of the emerging genre of ethnographic praxis for this community. Ethnographic findings should stand as an integral part of what the community is about – the doing of ethnography and learning from it. What we learn is not necessarily what is immediately valued by the corporation, but should be what is of value to

learn about human behavior. What we learn may also depend on who "we" are. What is of value to one corporation may not be to another. How the business makes use of findings, should vary from business to business – a real value for us as a community would be continue also with the tradition of learning about human behavior. The learnings can they be incorporated, or not, as other ethnographers decide on the value and applicability for their corporate context.

After only one year of a conference, the pressure of the emerging genre already is upon us – what is the relevance to me as a corporate worker. Tell me what this means to me! There is precious little room to have a finding about human behavior and allow ethnographers to use their analytic power to try to understand what that might mean for them in their context of business. So we will comply with the "applied" lesson. Rather than focus on how "we-we" is being used within innovation, we will look at process. We underscore the collaboration between our US research lab and our product lab in Brazil, as one kind of solution to the problems of appropriate innovations – whatever kind innovation they might be. This collaboration avoided assuming symmetric or purely overlapping roles (or some kind of hidden, asymmetric, neo-colonial relationship) in the field; instead, it rested on the distinct, but complementing, backgrounds and experiences of each researcher. Our collaboration thus engendered a multi-voiced dialogue between an American anthropologist based in the US, visiting a "foreigner" site, a local Brazilian ethnographer, who lived in the US for over 8 years, and a local Salvador couple, one of whom was a photographer and the other worked in an NGO.

For Intel Research, it is a routine course to work with local (non-marketing) researchers, however, working directly as equal partener with someone from the product group who was "in-country" was a new experience. In the past, the Intel Research teams have worked with market researchers and engineers from the product groups, though most often in the USA. These types of partnerships have largely been "safaris" – good for developing "buy-in" from the people who will use the data and providing the experience of "being in the field." There becomes ownership of the results that help to ensure the insights work their way into products. This process is not altogether different in essence from what Mack (Mack 2005) has described. For "close-in" work in a domain known to lead to results, this is fairly effective.

Typically, however, Intel Research's charter is not to work for a product group but to have their own three year research program. The program should provide value to the company but not necessarily any one product group. The Salvadorian research around urban maids was part of such an effort, not product directed. We were exploring the lives of maids in urban areas, as well as, understanding the relationships between maids and "donas de casa" (housewives) following up on earlier work on upper and middle class women in Brazil. Normally, Intel Research would have hired a local cultural expert, someone from familiar with the history, culture and social practices of a place to facilitate research and analysis. We deviated from this by using a local couple who had an understanding of the city and particularly this population in Salvador. The couple, however, did not speak English.

Part of the typical role of our research facilitators was taken on by partnering with the Platform Design Center in Sao Paulo.

The Emerging Market Product Group's Platform Design Center (PDC) in Sao Paulo was created to innovate locally for non-inevitable technologies. One of their key segments is what has been referred to as "the next 10%", that is, those people who cannot afford current computing technologies. They, therefore, had an interest in these lower income women; The intellectual partnership made sense. They are a relatively new group. Their charter is to cover local innovation for all of Latin and/or South America. Clearly, this is a sizable undertaking for a group of less than 10. At the time of the study, there was only one researcher on the staff so partnering with Intel Research for another set of eyes and ears made sense.

There were two key areas where the partnership was extremely effective: (1) in the field and (2) back in the cubes. Beyond the mundane but crucial (occasional) translation into English, Rogerio (PDC) was key in providing instant cultural commentary on on-going street activities, as well as, in (often informal) conversations with participants in our study. Ken (Intel Research) asked questions about the obvious, the taken-for-granted – a strategy was in fact in place where Ken was able to play the role of the traditional "stupid" foreigner, which legitimized him to ask obvious, apparently nil questions.

Further, combined product-research and research endeavors led to some unusual brainstorming each day about new products and directions. The second area had to do with "being back in the cubes" or really about proselytizing the research throughout the company. Having one voice, or even many voices from the same product group, is not as effective as having two completely different groups suggesting the same ideas and directions. In particular, what we have been trying to stress is the collective nature of many activities in non-European/North American societies. As Carlson (1992) pointed out:

> **Successful products are** more than just a bunch of technical solutions. They are also **bundles of *cultural* solutions.** Successful products, unlike inventions, succeed because they understand the values, institutional arrangements, and economic notions of that culture

Working side-by-side, research group + product group, national + other national perspective yielded insight about a bus ride that may be key in opening up whole new sets of locally appropriate innovations: meaningful and legitimate products and services.

Leaving the Bus

This study has underscored the importance of the collaboration between our research lab in the US and a local product lab in Brazil, as one kind of solution to the problem of me-design, namely the interplay between unveiling taken-for-granted practices and uncovering deeper meanings. The collaboration leads to an understanding of a

transitional space that revealed different ways of thinking about transition rather than isolation and exclusion or the alternative of "me-me" collaborative productivity. We've focused on the importance of participant created content, emergent structure, and loosely and ephemerally connected social groupings as the basis for innovation. We've revealed opportunities for the corporate enterprises to explore the "in-betweenness" and transitional spaces, like the ones we Salvador, as well as, to discover new was of thinking about "we" and not just "me."

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