THE COMING OF AGE OF HYBRIDS: NOTES ON ETHNOGRAPHIC PRAXIS

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It has been nearly 15 years since Donna Haraway wrote in Simians, Cyborgs and Women that, "In so far as we know ourselves in both formal discourse and in daily practice we find ourselves to be cyborgs, hybrids, mosaics, chimeras." While Haraway's referent was not the community of practitioners, scholars and change agents assembled for the EPIC conference, her attention to the particular arrangements of material goods, human labor and social relations in processes and histories that have consequences for people's lives resonates with the themes addressed in the workshops and with concerns that bring many of us to this conference. In this talk I will explore how ethnographic praxis is constituted in and through our focus on the here and now of everyday practice by which logical divisions and dualism such as material – social, virtual – real, local –global, spiritual – secular are unmasked. Recognizing both our hybrid subjects and our hybrid identities, I will suggest we turn the analytic lens on ourselves and acknowledge and celebrate our pragmatism, our lives on the margins, and our commitment to the ephemeral, situated orderliness of everyday practice.

INTRODUCTION

The EPIC Workshop track was designed to allow conference participants the opportunity to discuss topics of interest in a small group context. The conference organizers thought it would be useful to create a forum where people from throughout the EPIC community (e.g. workplace studies, technology design, marketing, business) could share their experiences and perspectives, and begin to map out the scope and depth of our intellectual heritage. Judging from the comments after the workshops, these objectives were accomplished. It might not be too much of a stretch to suggest that the future of our EPIC community rests on our ability to talk across our differences and create frameworks where our diversity is also our strength. The EPIC workshops were a step in this direction.

My comments here are intended to provide one view onto the workshop topics, highlighting the *relational* questions addressed by many of the workshops. That is, relations between the *social* and *material*, between *online* and *offline* interactions, between *global* agendas and *local* problems, and between our *spiritual* selves and our *secular* workplaces. It seems that the notion of hybrids, both as a way to

conceptualize the *subjects* of our research and as a way to describe our design, research, applied, academic, corporate, citizen *identities* might be a good way to organize my remarks.

HYBRIDS

The notion of hybrids is offered as an alternative formulation to the dualisms that permeate much of our discourse and to the misplaced concreteness that attends to naturalized categories like real and virtual, local and global, material and social. Donna Haraway (1991:177) writing in Cyborgs, Simians and Women offered, "In so far as we know ourselves in both formal discourse and in daily practice we find ourselves to be cyborgs, hybrids, mosaics, chimeras." What I want to note in this quote is the reference to the knowing that comes from an examination of *daily practice*. In my view dualisms, pure categories lose their explanatory power when examined in relation to the complexity and particularity of everyday practice.

The inadequacy of these dualisms to account for everyday practice was made vividly clear to me in a study I embarked upon soon after I arrived at Xerox PARC over 20 years ago (Blomberg 1987, 1988). My project then was to understand how a new computer-mediated design tool, Trillium, would change the working practices of the interface designers at Xerox (hopefully for the better). In addition, my study would help the developers of Trillium iterate on the design, making Trillium better suited to the practices of the designers. In those days, as is the case today, the taken for granted categories of technical and social permeated the discourse. The formulation that most expected from my study was that the introduction of Trillium would result in or cause the designers to work in a particular new way. Although time does not allow me to go into detail on this study, what I found instead was that Trillium was taken up in very different ways by two different groups of designers. For one group it was used mainly to represent the visual elements of the interface and some of the interface behavior. For another group the underlying Trillium code was translated into the computer code that ran on the target machine. In other words, the interface designers were writing machine executable code, not just using Trillium to design the user interface. What I concluded back then was that Trillium could not be defined or known in isolation from the practices of the designers who used it. The tool acquired its very materiality in and through its use. The social and the technical were inextricable linked. While I didn't have the language of hybrids at the time, our understanding of Trillium arose out of the particular arrangements of material goods, human labor and social relations and these were not fixed.

HYBRID SUBJECTS

The focus of our ethnographic inquiries and our interventionist agendas require that we view our subjects as collections and arrangements of people, things and relationships. Out subjects are never unitary, but are situated in networks of relations whose significance and orderliness can be understood through an examination of everyday practice. The notion of hybrid subjects points to this characteristic of our ethnographic project.

SOCIAL – MATERIAL

Two of the EPIC workshops have taken up the question of the relation between the social and material (technical) from two different perspectives. The workshop *Defining the Impact of Physical Spaces on Social Interactions* asks how the physical environments in which live shape the possibilities for social interaction. Although not specifically called out in the workshop description, it seems that the flip side of this question, namely how our social interactions define the physical spaces we move through, is

also at play. In this regard I am reminded of one of my first experiences working at Sapient, a business and technology consulting company, in early 2000. As the nominal head of Sapient's San Francisco Experience Modeling group, I was in the position of having to argue for the value of Project Rooms as an essential tool of our practice. Project Rooms were physical spaces where our research teams collaborated in the collection and analysis of the materials from our ethnographic studies. I ran into a lot of resistance from people who didn't understand why Project Rooms were required for our work. I had become convinced in my brief time with the Experience Modeling group that these spaces were critical to our work. But it wasn't the rooms or the physical spaces themselves that were so powerful, it was the practices that had emerged at E-Lab and later adopted by the Experience Modeling group that defined these spaces. The value of project rooms was in the way they were used, in the particular arrangements of material goods, human labor and social relations, and these were not fixed.

Exploring the question of the relation between the social and material from a somewhat different perspective the workshop, *Object Sociality: Researching Living Things* examines the place of things in everyday practice. Material objects are conceptualized as full fledged actors in webs of relations that constitute our practices. This is topic that has occupied the thinking of one of my close collaborators of many years, Lucy Suchman. As Suchman (2004) writes, "Given an ontology of separate things that need to be joined together [the material – social dualism], machines must in some sense be granted agency in order to be reunited with us. …. But what if our ontology comprises configurations of always already inter-related, re-iterated sociomaterial practices?" In considering the relation between people and things, Suchman is pointing to the difficulty of conceptualizing one without reference to the other – their inextricable links.

An example that articulates the inseparability of material objects from how we see and know as social actors is a study by Chuck Goodwin (1994). Goodwin's study of the professional practices of archaeologists carefully details how archaeologists are able to recognize meaningful differences in samples of dirt excavated from archaeological sites with the aid of the Munsell color chart of universal color categories. This chart along with bureaucratic coding forms provides archaeologists with the professional vision to see samples of dirt as evidence of particular kinds of past human activity. As Goodwin (1994: 609) writes, "Of all the possible ways that the earth could be looked at, the perceptual work of students using this form is focused on determining the exact color of a minute sample of dirt. They engage in active cognitive work, but the parameters of that work have been established by the system that is organizing their perception." The system referenced is the particular arrangements of material goods, human labor and social relations which in this case have evolved over years through the practices of archaeologists. It is through these arrangements that archaeological knowledge is constituted in everyday practice.

VIRTUAL – REAL

The workshop, *Studying Distributed Sociality – Online and/or Offline?,* directly addresses the relation between the virtual and the real, the online and the offline. While the workshop's specific topic focuses on designing ethnographic research that can move between real, offline physical spaces and virtual, online spaces, the prior question – how to conceptualize differences between real and virtual spaces remains. The places where we live and act are not easily differentiated as either virtual or real, online or offline. These places are always, already constituted at the intersections, connections and relations between and among the multiple ways we are situated. It is relatively easy to find somewhat dramatic examples where place is defined at the intersection of the virtual and the real, in other words, hybrid places. For example, many of us have seen the image of the digital receptionist greeting her guests in a

hotel lobby. The receptionist could be anywhere connected through a video link with access to the guest register and other relevant databases. Or there is the example from medicine of a remote, digitally connected pediatrician treating her patient with assistance from a combination of human and technical assistants at the patient's side. In these examples the boundary between the real and the virtual is blurred and the place of interaction must be located in the practices of guests, receptionists, patients and doctors.

A more mundane example of this blurring of the real and virtual is the ubiquitous corporate conference call. My colleague, Melissa Cefkin and I have been involved in a study of globally distributed sales teams where meetings are one of the key organizing devices for the work of the sellers. Meetings bring together various configurations of the selling team to discuss opportunities, coordinate activities, and respond to the bureaucratic demands of the corporation. Let me describe one such meeting. Gathered in a conference room at the company's Manhattan office building are four US based members of the sales team. Among those assembled in the conference room is a team member from Germany who happens to be visiting on that day. There are two other team members who are physically located in the Manhattan office building, but have chosen to stay at their desks in the temporary workspaces they have claimed for the day. They will be dialing in to the conference call from there. Then there is another contingent of three team members assembled in a conference room in the company's Frankfurt, Germany office building. A handful of team members are dialing in from various individual locations, one from a train while commuting into Manhattan, one from a home office, another from a client site. Supporting this interaction is a computer screen sharing tool, although not everyone has logged onto this meeting tool. Some folks are following the discussion using documents circulated in advance of the meeting via email for those unable to log onto to the intranet, including the person on the train. It's hard to maintain the purity of categories like real and virtual, online and offline when confronted with the mundane, everydayness of this situation. The space of interaction is defined through the particular arrangements of material goods, human labor and social relations which cannot be defined as either online or offline.

LOCAL – GLOBAL

The global reach of western capitalism and how local, communities might help define change agendas are explored in the workshop on *Business Ethnography for the Bottom of the Pyramid*. Exploiting local knowledge for the benefit of culturally and economically distinct communities not currently served by design agendas delineated in the developed west, points to the interdependencies of global capital, local markets, and particular social configurations. Our ethnographic praxis suggests that a fruitful way to explore these interdependencies is by focusing on the everyday practices occurring in family kitchens, on school playgrounds, in corporate board rooms, on financial trading floors, and at offshore workplaces. In these places the local and the global are in reflexively constituted.

By calling attention the everyday practices of those caught up in these webs of relation – and here I'm referring to the local practices of powerful corporate actors as well as those we often think of as most affected by globalization – we can get insights into how these global networks are constituted. My concern that we pay attention to the everyday practices of our increasingly interconnected economy led me to organize a conference in 2004 at IBM on *Work in the Era of the Global Extensible Enterprise*, where I hoped to call attention to the human labor, the particular social and material relations, so often rendered invisible in the flow diagrams and value exchange calculators that often define this new terrain (http://www.almaden.ibm.com/institute/2004/). Here again the hybrid, at

once both local and global, seems a better analytical construct for characterizing these shifts and (re)arrangements in global markets that we are witnessing.

SPIRITUAL – SECULAR

Another dualism, the division of the secular and the spiritual, is explored in the workshop, *Holy Hanging Out: Exploring Spirituality and Religion in the Corporate Environment.* Here the topic concerns both the way the spiritual shapes how we construct and conduct ourselves in the workplace and the rationale that sustains religion as a taboo topic in corporate research. Those of us trained as anthropologists before the critical, self reflexive 80s were taught that "primitive" societies didn't separate the religious or spiritual aspects of their lives from the domestic or economic. The spiritual could be seen in the practices of the economy and the interactions in the home. While we have since come to question this other dualism, the primitive – modern; in corporate ethnography, the spiritual and religious have rarely figured in our analysis. The utilitarian and instrumental still dominate our conceptual frameworks even as our hybrid subjects connect us with contexts where it is more difficult to maintain the separation of the spiritual and the secular.

However to advocate a hybrid, mixing of the spiritual and secular is not without risks. Management books exist that tout the value of spirituality in guiding corporate decision making. The authors of the book *Church on Sunday, Work on Monday* claim that, "Spirituality – however defined – is now a popular resource for business needs whether for sparking creativity or for being a better person on the job" (Nash and McLennan 2001). And the authors of a recent book, *Capturing the Heart of Leadership Spirituality and Community in the New American Workplace* (Fairhorn 1997), proclaim that their book "…seeks to promote a new spiritual approach to organizational leadership that goes beyond visionary management to a new focus on the spiritual for both leader and led." Living in Silicon Valley I can not help but note that the Dalai Lama is sighted at gatherings of the powerful digerati of the Valley.

The place of religious imagery in corporate settings recently surfaced at a diversity day event at IBM in San Jose. The speakers for the day had been talking about the importance for IBM of valuing diversity for IBM and had pointed to the various IBM clubs that supported diversity (e.g. Hispanic, Native American, Women, Gay Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender, etc.). During the question – answer period, an Asian woman, who prefaced her question by saying she wasn't religious, wondered why she wasn't allowed to send Christmas greetings to her colleagues. Instead she had been instructed to send only Holiday greetings. She wondered what was so different about the Christmas holiday from all those other markers of identity and belonging that were being celebrated that day. The people on the stage were a bit dumb founded and unable to come up with a response. Then someone from human relations department stood up and tried to make the case. She distinguished between markers of identity that had a religious origin and those that did not. Since the Christmas holiday was connected to Christianity it would not be appropriate to send a religious greeting to our workplace colleagues. Later that day, as part of the diversity celebration, we were all treated to a performance of the Chinese dragon dance. Although not explicitly noted, this dance has connections to Chinese belief systems that date back centuries. No absolute distinction can be claimed between the historical, spiritual roots of the dragon dance and the religious connections between Christianity and various Christmas holiday traditions. But we shouldn't be looking for absolutes.

As we argue for hybridity as an analytic construct, we must examine, understand and evaluate the particular histories and arrangements. As Haraway cautions hybridity –in this case the joining, mixing of the spiritual and the secular – offers possible dangers and potential advantages alike.

HYBRID IDENTITIES

The notion of hybridity is also related to our identities as researchers, designers, practitioners, academics, and employees. Simple labels often confuse and obscure the multiplicity of positions and locations to our subjects that many of us occupy.

RESEARCHER – DESIGNER

Two of the EPIC workshops, *Collaborating Across Social, Organizational and Disciplinary Distance* and *The Sociality of Fieldwork*, have taken up the topic of the connections, flows and boundary spanning activities that characterizes our work. We often find ourselves participants in multidisciplinary activities where our contributions must intersect with the work and interests of others. Our research and our locations inside corporate settings make it increasing difficult to maintain single identities. Our collaborators are often extremely diverse and broad, including researchers from other disciplines, developers, consultants, strategists, designers, project managers, customers and a host of others.

My own views on adopting a hybrid identity have gone through a transition over the years. When I first arrived at Xerox PARC in the early 80s, the anthropologists at PARC resisted requests from our fellow researchers and corporate interlocutors to provide design implications or design guidelines based on our research findings. We withdrew behind a somewhat narrow definition of who we were – anthropologists and ethnographers. Our colleagues marked this separation somewhat affectionately by remarking as we passed them in the halls, "Here come the anthroids." But we soon realized that our research would not have the impact we desired if we didn't engage more directly with others who could help turn our research findings into tangible outcomes, whether technologies, organizational processes, learning interventions, or business strategies. To be successful we had to be willing venture into terrain that was unfamiliar.

In many ways things have changed rather dramatically since my early days at PARC. Now many of us move back and forth between researcher and designer without really noting the shift. And others readily collaborate with designers and developers in research planning, in analyses and opportunity identification. However, these hybrid identities also have provoked controversy and attempts to police the boundaries of our practice. Who can claim to be an ethnographer? Whose design recommendations should be listened to? Some of us worry that our expertise as ethnographers will be undervalued if those with little or no training are allowed to lay claim to ethnography. And others are concerned that their expertise as designers will be undermined if researchers are allowed to drive design agendas. While I understand the impulse to control who can legitimately profess expertise in ethnography or design, I think we will do more to advance our agenda by demonstrating the value of our work and expanding our practice than by policing our borders.

The breakdown in the divide between researcher and designer is related to other projects underway that fundamentally question the value of maintaining strict disciplinary silos in the academy and elsewhere. Our hybrid subjects (e.g. sociotechnical) often require a blurring of academic disciplines and expertise. For example, I've been involved in two initiatives in inter-, multi-, or trans-

disciplinarily. One involves developing a curriculum for the new design school at Stanford, where researchers and practitioners from a number of backgrounds including design, business, social science, engineering and architecture are exploring what it would mean to place design at the center of a new study area (http://www.stanford.edu/group/dschool/big_picture/our_vision.html). In another initiative, I'm witnessing attempts at IBM to "birth" a new hybrid field focused on services that draws on perspectives, theories and methods from computer science, engineering, management, social science, economics, and business (http://www.research.ibm.com/ssme/). Those who are driving this effort are convinced that the traditional academic silos do not allow for the cross fertilization needed to understand the shift to services in the global economy and its implication for business. There seems to be a growing recognition that our hybrid subjects require hybrid identities.

ACADEMIC – APPLIED

The applied – academic distinction in some ways has been the subtext of the EPIC conference. While not named explicitly in the workshop descriptions, many of us feel deeply that our hybrid identities span the academic – applied divide. The division between the applied and academic sciences has been contentious in a number of disciplines for many years, but perhaps no more so than in anthropology (Baba 2005). Our current admonition to recognize the hybrid nature of all research (applied and academic, practical and theoretical) was echoed by one of the key figures in American Anthropology, Bronislaw Malinowski, who wrote, "Unfortunately, there is still a strong but erroneous opinion in some circles that practical anthropology is fundamentally different from theoretical or academic anthropology. The truth is that science begins with application…" (Malinowski, 1961). While our research may be funded by corporations, non profit organizations, or for profit institutes; our research already and always has the potential of contributing to both theory and practice – to ethnographic praxis. Moreover, we will do a great deal to legitimize our practice as corporate ethnographers by contributing to the theoretical and methodological debates current in academic research spheres, whether in anthropology, sociology, critical studies, feminist studies, design theory, HCI or computer science. One of the goals of the EPIC conference is to provide a forum where practicing and academic researchers can advance the field of corporate ethnographic praxis and by so doing clearly and proudly claim our hybrid identity.

Related to the recognition that our research can have multiple outcomes, from contributing to academic debates, to developing new methods, to designing workplace-appropriate technologies, to uncovering new business strategies, is the question of whose interests we serve. The workshop on *Framing Ethnographic Praxis for Innovation,* with its focus change, must necessarily ask, innovation of what, by whom and for whom. Here our sometimes conflicting, interdependent identities as corporate actors and world citizens may collide. These questions are complex and must be answered by each one of us in the particular contexts in which we work. I raise them here to suggest are one lens through which we must consider and define our ethnographic praxis and our relation to it.

CONCLUSION

Ethnographic praxis points us to the power of everyday practice to challenge the assumed concreteness reflected in categories like social – material, real – virtual, local – global, secular – spiritual. We should celebrate a commitment to the ephemeral, situated, orderliness of everyday practice and to our complex, situated identities.

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