

The Politics of Visibility: When Intel hired Levi-Strauss, Or So They Thought

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This paper examines the politics of visibility – the ways in which the work of ethnographers is positioned inside and outside organizations not only as means of unpacking the “real-world” but often as means to create business and marketing differentiation. We contend that the institutional embeddedness of ethnographic practices shapes “the where,” “the who,” “the what,” “the how,” and “the when” of doing ethnography. Thus, the choice of sites, who and what researchers choose to make ‘visible,’ the narratives about the field, and how and when they tell them are not without political and business weights. To examine visibility as this political question, we shifted our gaze from ethnography as a methodology and practice to ethnography as a part of a broader business and marketing discourse and strategy. Specifically, we explore a few particular encounters with the field and the organization that took place in course of two studies conducted in Brazil.

“While their functions and sources of authority as experts are quite different from journalists, anthropologists often function nowadays like the best and deepest journalists—certainly their experiences of other places, of sites of research and reporting, are similar today.” George Marcus (2008)

INTRODUCTION

When asked whether the contemporary world with its oft-televised “clashes of cultures” needs more anthropologists, George Marcus (2008) responded positively. He nonetheless added that we do not necessarily need those “à la Malinowski or Boas” (or Lévi-Strauss, for that matter), for they most likely would not be prepared (epistemologically and methodologically) to adequately study and have significant insights about today’s world complexities. He goes on asserting that such a mode of ethnographic knowing and doing – journalistic of sorts (see above quote) – sets ethnographers to deliver their intimate views of the field, but not necessarily in a critical manner which questions and unearths the entanglements of doing ethnographic fieldwork. It has been over two decades since Clifford and Marcus’ *Writing Culture* (1986) and Marcus and Fischer’s *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (1986) marked a turn toward a broader awareness of the representation problem, anthropologist’s authority, and fieldwork politics. However, we – the imagined ‘we’ of social scientists, designers, and related professionals doing ethnographic work in the industry that Nafus and Anderson trenchantly unsettled in their 2006 EPIC paper – still find ourselves presented with a predicament: while the (market and business) possibilities that ethnography can bring to bear to business still dazzle us, the full extent of ethnography’s entanglements has not been fully realized, let alone appreciated.

This idea challenges us to question that maybe our emblematic, unproblematic epistemic (and methodological) commitments of detangling, unpacking, unveiling “real people’s real needs and wants” – making the strange become familiar – are a myopic take on the role and value of ethnography. As Nafus and Anderson (2006) put it, such a discursive marker, which “we ourselves have created to persuade others to grant us positions that historically have seemed implausible” (p.244), has taken us thus far to a place where ethnography has been embraced and become a legitimate, common practice as well as part of a firm’s marketing repertoire of caring about and understanding “our clients.” At the same time, the reification of such a reductionist notion of ethnographic knowing and doing – “butterfly collecting” – risks limiting (and even hampering), on the one hand, the ways in which we can contribute to product development, marketing and business strategy, and on the other hand the kinds of ‘research’ work we are asked to perform and how.

However, we do not wish here to rehash this discussion vis-à-vis the meanings of ethnography in the industry, the ways in which ethnography has been constituted internally through discourses of “real people, real needs. The entanglements of ethnography knowing and doing have been discussed extensively elsewhere [e.g., in the context of research consultants and clients (Sunderland and Denny, 2007) and ethnographers in the organization (Nafus and Anderson, 2006, Baba 2005)]. Instead, we shift our attention to the ways in which the industry constructs notions of ethnography as a means to unveil new market opportunities and as part of its broader business and marketing discourses and strategies. In other words, as ethnography practices become part and parcel of current business “grand narratives” of understanding and addressing customers’ needs; they are in turn shaped by corporate practices, values, and discourses – they become institutionalized. This institutional embeddedness of ethnographic practices in turn shapes “the where,” “the who,” “the what,” “the how,” and “the when” of doing ethnography. The choice of sites, who and what researchers choose to make ‘visible,’ the narratives about the field, and how and when they are told are not without political and business weights. In other words, the choices of visibility become political and economic questions.

This paper thus examines the politics of visibility – the ways in which the work of ethnographers is positioned inside and outside organizations not only as means of unpacking the “real-world,” but as means to create business and marketing differentiation. In particular, we explore the specific dynamics between research, field and organization using two specific examples from our own research during two separate studies conducted in Brazil. These examples underscore the dual nature of visibility – the visibility of ethnographers themselves and the visibility of their work, inside and outside the corporation – as well as the choice of which things to make visible. To analyze these situations, we utilize feminist notions of field positionality and reflexivity. We contend that the visibility of ethnographers is no longer just a matter of how they position themselves relative to the field, people, and local cultural practices and values, but how ethnographers are positioned (and their identity rendered) in the field as a result of complex interactions among business goals, people’s intents, and their research aims. In other words, in the field, ethnographers not only work for the company

Insight On-Site

and do research, but they are subjectified by it (in Foucault's language) where their visibility or invisibility reflects the images with which people and the business endow them.

ETHNOGRAPHIC (BUSINESS) ENCOUNTERS

Central to the discussion of visibility is the positionality of ethnographers in doing fieldwork and analyzing their field experiences. In contrast to the classic 'outsider' framework, where an ethnographer is positioned in respect to and opposition to the 'other' (the insider), increasingly a more fluid notion of positionality is undertaken. As a 'positioned subject' (Hastrup, 1992), the ethnographer's identity (and consequently his/her practices) is constituted and shaped through encounters with the business and the field that take place before, during, and after the fieldwork. For better or worse, the creation of this ethnographic brand by the industry (Nafus and Anderson, 2006) has in part rested on the auspice of "real people's real problems" – a manifest marker of a firm's interests in understanding their customers. This perspective positions us, ethnographers, as "the link" between the business and the outside reality, and consequently shapes the business expectations concerning what ethnographic research is all about as well as the types of deliverables and influences we are supposed to offer. On the other hand, our positionality in the field is shaped by the ways in which we perform and display our research and work relations, and in turn the perception of who we are (or what we represent) shapes how people (or subjects, or users) engage with us.

From the choices of sites, participants, and questions to the actual conducting of the ethnographic work, fieldwork is not without the influence of an economy of power relations¹. Sunderland and Denny (2007) discuss the politics of segmentation when selecting 'authentic' subjects and researchers. They described the trajectory through which subjects and fieldwork were shaped by preconceived notions of race and ethnicity (in terms of skin color, native language, authentic culinary, (low) income group, and other categories.) and authentic interactions (e.g., research conducted by researchers of the same 'racial group' as those researched). In doing research in the industry, particularly at a global scale, sites as well as 'users' are subject to business 'interests' and perceptions, which shape as well as limit the range and types of ethnographic possibilities. Geographies are contingent on and defined by business interests (i.e., possibilities of revenue growth) and categories (i.e., market segmentations), as the 'classic' division of the world market into the 'US' and the "rest of the world" categories (Nafus and Anderson, 2006).

In the politics of visibility, the strange and unique to be revealed is no longer 'the local' alone, but ethnographers themselves. They become the subject of and subject to inspection by their "local subjects" as well as marketing strategists. This by and large shifts researchers' positionality in the field. In addition, our multi-sited ethnographic efforts do not simply follow the 'issue,' by means of a thread of established logical associations among sites, as

¹ Borrowing this notion from Foucault's work, namely, the ways in which research participants and researchers as well are made subjects

defined by Marcus (1995) – as though research choices were devoid of power relations – but often follow the ‘business.’ In all these respects, the choices of what, who, and when to make visible (or invisible for that matter) is as much a research concern as an economic and political one.

On the other hand, when conducting fieldwork we often encounter situations in which our presence and interaction with informants impacted and was impacted by local power relations. These types of concerns are related to power differences between researchers and researched, thoroughly discussed by feminists and post-structural researchers in terms of reflexivity and positionality (England 1994; Wolf 1997; Crag 2005). The importance of reflexivity is not just that it contextualizes and deepens interpretations for exploring the politics of knowledge production and the social processes that knowledge produces, but that it also assists in questioning how things are conducted. In particular, reflexivity suggests that researchers diligently and systematically reveal their methods, encounters, and themselves as instrument of data generation and analysis. In addition, researchers must also reflect on the ways in which their choices (of data selection/representation, medium of communication, issue/subject visibility, for example) impact how their research audiences construct the meanings of the work (and draw conclusions thereof) and how those researched are in turn affected (or may be affected) by it [Sunderland and Denny (2007) discuss reflexivity based on Ruby’s work (2000)].

Reflexivity suggests a critical analysis of the ways in which different identities are endowed to researchers during fieldwork as well as the political and power natures of researcher’s relationships with their informants and those researched [Landes (1994) and Goldstein (2003) for rich accounts of the complex nature of such relationships]. Elsewhere, Empinotti (2007) discusses how the use of multi-sited ethnography allowed her to work with different informants and to meet many research subjects, and consequently created the opportunity to observe how these interactions influenced data collection. In order to understand the processes of differentiation between researcher and researched, Empinotti discussed positionality in three circumstances: how she, as a researcher, became part of the social structures of power present in the sites where she conducted her fieldwork; how the interviewees’ expectations toward the impact of her work in their lives influenced their answers; and how the recognition of commonalities between herself (as a Brazilian woman) and the researched influenced their answers. In a somewhat similar fashion, Halstead (2001) describes the fluidity of her positionality (and her ‘self’) in the field as dynamically and contingently constructed and negotiated by those researched according to their own interests. Both studies significantly demonstrated how being an ethnographic subject (i.e., the focus of outside interests – “why would someone care about us?”) was appropriated by those researched (and informants for that matter) as a manifest means to perform and confer status and power, locally.

People are not ‘blind’ to who we are as researchers (and industry representatives), what we do (or should do from their perspective), and how it impacts (or should impact) their lives. In fact, informants actively manage and negotiate our work in the field, for instance,

Insight On-Site

they organize the research settings (select subjects or sites) according to their perception of the impact of the research on, say, their power relations (or status) with the local community in question, or on the community in general. After the third site visit, working with the same informant as part of an ongoing research project in Salvador, Brazil, de Paula's informant told him that one of the reasons he chose to bring the research team to that particularly poor community was in the hope that by doing so 'the outside world' would become aware of this community's everyday reality and "do something about it." He was rather surprised when the mother of those interviewed, who at that time was living in a "palafita" (a slum shack hanging over the water), blatantly told de Paula that he should only return after he had something to give them (she was categorical on saying something to "give" as opposed to "offering"). By making his choices public, this informant in fact greatly influenced the interpretation of the research and analyses.

Recruiting can also be subject to political choices, both at organization and local arenas. The economics of the market segment determines which groups will be counted as research subjects. That is to say, the ways in which organizations class people according to business interests, strategies, and technologies, socio-demographic and market indicators, and broader socio-economic discourses influence what and who to be rendered visible or invisible. For instance, almost half of the world's population turned visible to businesses as their category shifted from 'the poor' to consumers. As a result, new business strategies and new technologies were devised to address the new market opportunities, which in turn demanded more research to understand this newly 'emerging' category. On the other hand, the local choices of participants are also subject to local politics – power hierarchies and strategies. Time and again the difficulties in reaching participants beyond key stakeholders have to do with local power strategies, for instance, stakeholders wielding power by controlling the access to as well as selecting participants (Empinotti, 2007).

In deconstructing ethnographic encounters – prior, during, and after fieldwork – we do not attempt here to make any assertion of the validity of ethnographic work, nor of the merits of academic ethnographic work over those in the industry. Instead, we are interested in reflecting upon and investigating the entanglements of ethnographic doings and knowing (see Sunderland and Denny, 2007) for a reflexive and honest discussion of common realities and dilemmas of fieldwork. In what follows, we will narrate and discuss two particular experiences of researchers being made subjects – "positioned subjects" – in the field. In one study, we explore the ways in which the company's PR created a "media hit" by exposing to the press de Paula's ethnographic work of during "Campus Party" – a week-long event where "geeks" of all sorts camp, network, blog, crack codes, share war-stories, and the like. The ethnographic work was taken and dealt with as a business differentiation that spurred media attention, and curiosity of sorts, and create "free PR." In the other study, we explore Empinotti's positionality as a result of people's attitudes and expectations toward the organization for which she was working as a consultant. Particularly, we were struck by the ways in which the ethnographic work was rendered visible or invisible as ethnographers positioned themselves either as a company's representative or as a researcher. In the end, the

work was deemed interesting to the extent that it represented a possibility of business relationships.

ETHNOGRAPHIC WORK “IN THE SPOTLIGHT”

In early 2007, I (Rogério) received a call from Intel’s local marketing team asking whether I would be interested in “conducting some ethnographic work” at the Campus Party. At first, I found it totally “unacceptable” as a legitimate research endeavor in that clearly the local team had no interest in attaining any deeper understanding of that event, its user population, and their practices. Also, there was not a clear and direct research or business implication for my group. However, in a rather peculiarly anthropological way, this request seemed attractive. A month later, after many emails back and forth discussing the “strategy” of the research work, scheduling media interviews during the event, as well as rehearsing the “message,” I packed up for a week of “fieldwork.”

Of course, the event offered a unique opportunity to observe, interact with, and understand a (hard)core PC user group, but more interesting were the encounters (or lack of) of the various ‘tribes’ participating in the event – gamers, modders (computer chassis personalizers), bloggers, open source community members (or ‘open source advocates’), and the like. What was particularly puzzling and unique was that although these people represented the most active members of online communities, they were still willing to pack their computers (not notebooks, but their actual desktops including CRT monitors) and sleeping bags in their backpacks, travel from different parts of the country (as well as from other countries in Latin America), and spend a week camping together. This in fact became the standard answer for why Intel had sent an ethnographer to study the event. The press, however, was more interested in the fact that some companies were using the event for recruiting programmers, bloggers, and other professionals. As they reported, people in the event for the most part were interested in knowing others like them, whereas companies were more interested in these people as professionals.

In this game of interests—researchers interested in people, people interested in other people (or job opportunities, for that matter), reporters interested in companies, and companies interested in professionals (as well as reports – do you mean ‘reporters’ or ‘reports?’)—identities were being constructed through people’s encounters (ethnographic, business, and casual interactions for example) while at the same time people continued to perform their own identities as gamers, modders, bloggers and open-source people. Identity negotiations were clearly the case here. For instance, at times I performed my ethnographic work – taking notes and pictures of observations and conversations. At one time, though, I was explicitly asked to ‘perform’ ethnographic work as part of a TV news report. In doing so, different identities got conflated in the same performative action, namely, I was at once publicly performing a stereotypical notion of ethnographic work (the reporter asked, “please go ahead, do your job as you normally do it, watching people, and please pretend we are not here;” and I cracked a smile) while simultaneously being an Intel representative – talking to

Insight On-Site

the reporter as an Intel trained spokesperson. Different interests were at play—the firm’s interest in getting media coverage (a quantifiable ROI – in fact, my work was recognized for its primetime coverage), the reporter’s interest in finding a unique, interesting story while covering the event, and my somewhat peculiar interest in letting the ‘show’ run, stepping out and analyzing the whole situation.



FIGURE 1: Ethnography as performed in front of the cameras and a local journalist interviews Rogério (Intel’s ethnographer)

The interaction between the ethnographer and the journalist becomes problematic when the ‘field’ is a site of business and marketing negotiations and enactments. As Marcus states, in the opening quotation, ethnographers function (and often are taken as) “the best and deepest journalists,” particularly when we think of the ways in which their work

(epistemologically and methodologically speaking) is taken as a matter of collecting real data from real people – a positivist instance of doing qualitative research in an objective distance. But, this is what people expect nowadays of the ethnographic work as ethnography becomes a ‘brand.’ As such, this is how the work (and its outcomes) is actualized and takes shape in people’s imaginaries, inside and outside the organizations.

In the following excerpt from the transcript of one of the interviews, we can detect two positionalities. On the one hand, the reporter describes the ethnographer as a professional who studies behaviors, trends, and cultures to influence business and product development. Permeated in the language of behaviors and trends is the inherent notion that such study helps to unveil people’s psychological motivations. In fact, as Sunderland and Denny (2007) stated, psychology provides the intellectual “fodder and framework through which consumption is thought to be generated as well as best explained” (p.46). Thus, ethnography is positioned as a market as well as marketing strategy for understanding and best predicting people’s (future) behaviors. On the other hand, I tried to position my work as a matter of understanding the motivations behind people’s practices (and behaviors) and ultimately what and how meanings are endowed to them – why are people doing what they do? What are the explanations behind their various manifest behaviors? What are their logics? As opposed to the notion of culture as particular categories – e.g., gamers, modders, and bloggers – the very notion of culture is in question – how do these practices – gaming, ‘modding,’ blogging – constitute ‘cultures?’ In other words, how are these practices helping define and reify these people’s identities as gamers, modders, bloggers, or what not?

“The taste [as likings] of internet users is of the industry’s interest. Intel sent to the event an ‘ethnographer’ – a professional who researches behaviors, trends, and studies the culture of groups so as to anticipate desires [wants] that can become products. ‘I came here to understand why this group of people is here, why these people who often communicate through the internet feel the need for a personal encounter,’ explains Rogério de Paula, an ethnographer from Intel. ²”

In the end, from the firm’s perspective, the ‘research’ was successful as the press found it “interesting,” generating thereby a handful of “free PR” opportunities. On the other hand, my ethnographic work and analyses generated a number of insights concerning gaming and ‘modding’ practices that could be valuable to the business world. For instance, it was observed that people chose to travel long distances to participate in the forum in order to strengthen their position within their particular communities. Also, the ways in which people ‘performed’ what it meant to be a gamer, a blogger, a modder differed by means of the uniqueness of their PC chasses and the stories around the stickers on their laptops, as well as by different hacking, sharing, and subverting practices. However, such insights were never of

² Translated by the authors: “O gosto dos internautas interessa à indústria. A Intel mandou para o evento um ‘etnógrafo’, um profissional que pesquisa comportamentos, tendências e estuda a cultura de grupos para antecipar desejos que podem virar produtos. “*Eu vim pra cá pra entender porque esse grupo está aqui, porque que essas pessoas que se comunicam hoje pela internet tem a necessidade de se encontrar pessoalmente*”, explica Rogério de Paula, etnógrafo da Intel.”

Insight On-Site

interest to Intel, given that from start the work was never meant to ‘understand’ people and their practices.

“OH, A RESEARCHER < sigh >... NICE TO MEET YOU THEN...”

In this section, I (Vanessa) describe my experience working as a researcher consultant for Intel in a project taking place in Parintins, Amazonas state - Brazil. The goal of this research project was to evaluate the impact of the Wimax technology which allowed three public schools and one health clinic to have access to high speed internet. The Wimax project was part of a larger Intel initiative called World Ahead, which aims to invest more than one billion dollars all over the world in order to improve and increase computer and internet access to communities in developing countries³. In this context, my responsibility was to work with a researcher (Kathy Kitner) from Intel Research, collecting, data, setting up and conducting interviews, as well as translating the information from Portuguese to English.

We spent 10 days in Parintins and during this period we were exposed to different groups which identified us as representatives of a multinational corporation in the position of changing and improving the community’s lives. In the interviewees’ minds, we were there to analyze the situation, listen to the complaints, suggestions and requests, then take this information back to Intel, and consequently solve the community’s problems concerning infrastructure, access, and needs. When I realized that people had such expectations, I tried to explain that we were ‘only’ researchers and that we did not have enough power to change the situation since we were there just to collect data and generate a report about the impact of such a project in Parintins’ context. As such, their disappointment was conspicuous when they found out that we were “just” researchers, those “who come, take our time and we never see them again.” Even so, people took the time to talk to us and to show us around the places where we had planned to go.

However, in the case of the local and regional businesses, the reaction was not as friendly. After meeting the city mayor, he invited us to a dance performance that night. Around 11:00 PM he sent his driver to our hotel and we headed to his house. There we met his wife and three other couples. We all headed to the event together where we stayed in an area reserved for ‘authorities’ (a.k.a., VIP). At this place we were addressed by a man who said: “*I was looking forward to meeting you. When are you going to open the access to Wimax technology to the local business? I really need to have access to high speed internet.*” This person was different from the average Parintins citizen. He was fluent in English, and belonged to a Jewish-Franco-Moroccan family that migrated to the region in the 1930s. His family worked on the commercialization of forestry products all over the world, but after the Brazilian legislation

³ World Ahead program is supported by 4 pillars: 1. Accessibility: Providing the foundation for technology usage and ownership, 2. Connectivity: Extending broadband Internet access to developing countries 3. Education: Preparing students for success in the global economy through programs, resources, and technology, and 4. Content: promoting locally relevant content and services that expand opportunities.

became more rigorous in the 1980s and ideas pertaining to the importance of the Amazonia's preservation became part of the ecological discourse of environmental preservation, his family changed their business niche and became the owner of one of the larger slaughterhouses in the region⁴. After he spent some years living in different parts of the world as a Brazilian diplomat, he decided to assume control of his family's business and he was looking for Internet connection so that he could improve his business efficiency. This man represented the elite of Parintins' business sector and he was at that event because the mayor told him that Vanessa and Kathy (to note, from Intel) would be there. In his mind, we represented Intel and were the means by which he would reach Intel and show his interest in Wimax technology.

At that point, I was utterly surprised, for as an academic researcher I had never previously been identified as part of a multinational corporation. As such, my identity was being constructed based on my professional affiliation with a corporation whose goal is to do business, exploring new consumer markets. After listening to what the man had to say, I explained that we were from Intel's research department and were evaluating the impact of Intel's project in Parintins. He was noticeably disappointed. In his mind, researchers have limited influencing power over decision making at the business levels, and thereby were not the best suited to take his business interest to Intel. After this encounter, he politely talked to us for a while, about the region and his experiences in the US, but he did not leave his contact information with us, nor did he ask for ours—a common practice when one meets potential 'business' partners. Sometime later he left the event and waved goodbye from distance. The following day, we realized that he was staying in the same hotel as us. We had the chance to talk more with him, but he kept a distance. Once he realized we did not represent Intel's 'business' sector, we were not worth any attention.

As a researcher and ethnographer associated with Intel, I experienced how such affiliation impacted the ways in which those researched attributed different identities to us. At the first moment, they saw us as representatives of Intel, an American company that locally represents wealth, modernity, technology and the opportunity to access new technologies that would insert the population of Parintins into the globalized world. At the same time, the local people assumed that since we occupied a position of power and privilege, we would be able to help them solve their problems, in this case access to high speed internet. Because we for the most part work for the private sector, as Intel employees or representatives, they assumed that we had power to influence decisions at a company level. But, once we were identified or identified ourselves as mere researchers, they changed how they saw us: from a channel or instrument to help them with their needs, to powerless observers whose work was simply to observe, analyze and report our findings to those who actually make decisions. At this point, as a researcher, I did not represent change and improvement, but rather stagnation and lack of change.

⁴ Nowadays, Parintins' economy is based on cattle production and tourism.



FIGURE 2: (left) and Vanessa (middle) helping give the prizes. Parintins' mayor stands in the back. Both clearly stood out as 'foreigners'

When Intel hired Lévi-Strauss

On June 1st, 2007, *Época* (a popular Brazilian magazine) published an article entitled “Call Lévi-Strauss!”⁵ In this article about the use of ethnography in the industry, the reporter asserted that more and more companies were hiring social scientists to help them create new products, business opportunities, and the like for the emerging market. But, he began by describing the “everyday work” of an ethnographer: namely, visiting native tribes in Tocantins (middle of Brazil), walking in a public market in Mexico City, and asking for the blessings of a “*mãe-de-santo*” (Candomblé priestess) in Salvador. In doing so, the magazine defined the path for ethnographers in Brazil. In this narrative, ethnography interestingly is positioned along the same lines as the work of classic anthropologists, such as Lévi-Strauss. Notably, in the same ways that Margaret Mead brought cultural anthropology to a wider public in the US [as Sunderland and Denny (2007) discuss], Lévi-Strauss became the reference for what it means to conduct ethnography in Brazil. The images of an outsider (white, male researcher) living with the natives, observing their everyday practices, writing down notes, recording interviews, and the like, come back time and again.

⁵ Translated by the authors: “Chame o Lévi-Strauss”

However, the ethnographic encounters discussed in this article go beyond a positivist notion of an objective outsider observing the ‘natives,’ understanding their needs, and reporting on these findings. Instead, ethnographers talk about the complex knotted relationships of power, interests, people, and practices that shape who researchers are in the field, what they choose to render visible (or not), and the impact it might have on the organization as well as on people’s lives. As we saw, the (research) work is by and large about having an impact on the business and people’s lives, while managing all the entanglements of doing fieldwork. Even in academic work this is the case. Elsewhere, Empinotti (2007) discusses her positionality relative to one of her interviewees, a small farmer, when he trenchantly asked her to take his interview public after she had assured that all participants’ identities would be kept private: “Oh no! I want everybody to hear what I just said. I want to hear it on the radio and make sure that the state officers hear what we have to say” (p.92). To have an impact should thus be one of the key considerations when we carry out the research we do as ethnographers—to tell stories that reflect a deep sensibility to the various interests that come to play in doing fieldwork in the industry, among them, the politics of visibility.

In the end, does the industry need “Lévi-Strauss” or “Aiwa Ong”? As Genevieve Bell put it (personal communication), Intel ‘needs’ Lévi-Strauss (and in fact thinks it has hired a number of them) as it has difficulties dealing with post-structuralist, feminist researchers. We do not attempt to argue, however, that we, as researchers, should take any particular position (let alone, to adopt a more traditional, positivist position). Rather, we should be flexible (and reflexive) and able to adapt the work to meet the various needs, perspectives, and values – to frame the work in a somewhat post-structuralist, feminist way. In other words, we have to attain a great deal of understanding of the ways that organizations operate so that we are able to create appropriate (cultural) translations of our ethnographic encounters and thereby have an impact at a business level as well as on people’s lives. However, it is required from us to effectively communicate with different businesses across the organizations – where more structured discussions play critical role. We, as researchers, bear the burden of unangling and sorting out the entanglements of fieldwork, turning that visible, while making the translations relevant to both people and businesses. Thus, the industry will continue hiring “Aiwa Ong” as Lévi-Strauss, and we, on the other hand, should be aware that we will be carrying with us to the field not just our “Moleskine®,” digital camera, video recorder, and other equipment, but also our business cards.

FINAL REMARKS

Ethnography is a “messy business,” a perceived ‘messiness’ that in part emerges from the fact that people have no access to and understanding of its implications. However popular it has become in recent years, it continues to be misconstrued by our colleagues outside the few ethnographic research pockets across large organizations, such as Intel. Often taken as exoteric divination of sorts (we have lost track of the number of times we were asked whether we could tell them -colleagues, the press, or whoever –the “new

Insight On-Site

trends”), ethnography still puzzles people as to the kinds of research practices it employs, data it collects, results it offers, and values it brings to an organization.

We are thus invited to consider the ways we, researchers, render our work visible. That is, we must question how our own positionality and rhetoric affect the ways in which people (be they the firm and/or customers we work for, those researched, or the press) understand ethnography, which in turn shape our research practices. For a number of reasons we have been complicit in producing simplistic, stereotypical (à la butterfly collecting) discourses, as Nafus and Anderson (2006) assert: namely, defending the ‘value’ of ethnographic research in unveiling the real problems/needs of real people, identifying trends and observing behaviors. This is not to say or argue that ethnography cannot contribute to such understandings, but that we are against the idea that there is a crystal ball that answers all business questions. Ethnography is not the Holy Grail, but a critical, complex methodology that offers interesting, nuanced, and often inspiring stories about people and their everyday mundane lives – often invisible from office windows.

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