Ethnographer Diasporas and Emergent Communities of Practice: The Place for a 21st Century Ethics in Business Ethnography Today

INGA TREITLER
Anthropology Imagination

FRANK ROMAGOSA
RAPP

> Do no harm; communicate and collaborate; keep learning, keep teaching; instigate meaningful change; make theory action.
> Designers Accord code of conduct (designersaccord.org)

> Every profession bears the responsibility to understand the circumstance which enables its existence.
> Robert Gutman[1]

> For an exile, habits of life, expression or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally. There is a unique pleasure in this sort of apprehension.
> Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile* (1984)

INTRODUCTION

What kind of times are these we live and work in? Last October, many of us left the EPIC2008 meetings with a drive to apply "sustainability" thinking to our research and design. It is no coincidence that those meetings were hosted in Copenhagen, a city in a region where design is an unabashed element of all public decision making and environmental management. Here sustainability and fairness have long been key criteria of success in design. But a number of those who had planned to attend were in the end unable to, as employers faced budget crises of all sorts given a few years' worth of unsustainable, indeed unethical financial and real estate sector decision making. The gruesome detail of what happened during that financial meltdown is all too familiar but the "sustainability" concept seems to be one of the rising themes emerging in response to survival of the times, with design and ethnography somehow joined to create a mandate for a more culturally

---

[1] Robert Gutman is often referred to as a sociologist among architects. This quote is cited often by those concerned with social organization, with innovation, and with design in architecture. We include it here because in its simplicity it speaks to the essence of what we have captured in this paper about our ethical obligations in an emergent discipline. We do not know its original source.

Reflecting Our Roles, Skills, and Ethics

relevant and personal sense of ethics that might allow us to return to the very roots of our disciplinary training.

Many of us engaged in research and design have felt a recurrent dilemma. The impulse that drives us to work is the desire to do good; to leave the earth better than we found it; to listen to, channel and respond to consumers and the public whose ideas we are "under contract" to represent. And yet we engage as we go in a kind of "innovation-addiction" that too often yields a proliferation difficult to manage for a healthy society and earth. As historian Daniel Boorstin noted thirty years ago "nothing can be uninvented" (1987:311). And Edwin Land, creator of the Polaroid commented a few years later that "It's not that we need new ideas, but we need to stop having old ideas." How often does our livelihood rest on understanding the miseries of others without necessarily remedying them? As we face up to the "unarticulated needs" of the public, we bear a certain responsibility to address that "need" in ways that sustain both ecosystems and economic systems, and that understand the conditions that sustain our very practice. In this paper we explore how practitioners go about living up to that responsibility in various work places. Our thesis is that the premise of that work owes a debt to the knowledge building that has occurred among our peers and beyond the walls of our organizations—knowledge born of diaspora.

To understand ourselves better as design researchers in industry, we recently launched a series of conversations with practitioners in our field, and saw that there is something about the *way* we have practiced since the decade's collapse that positions us well to respond to the times' growing demand to transform how business is done. We turn our attention to describing those *work ways* and how today's ethical demands cause us to revisit our origins as we build a future that is already here.

DIASPORA CHARACTERISTICS AND THEIR VALUE

Diaspora is from the Greek διασπορά – "a scattering or sowing of seeds." The imagery is poetic, pointing us to organic processes of growth, and the spread of culture brought on through history and commerce. The phrase also connotes exile, resettlement, expulsion, slavery, racism, war, and the numerous other hardships that plague a previously geographically secure people. Exile is a complex and evolving identity, a perpetual longing to return, the desire to recreate community away from home, perpetual self-policing to ensure authenticity, and the right to claim membership in a group. As a manifestation of these processes in the life of EPIC, previous lectures, workshops, artifacts and hallway conversations explored and challenged the "right to belong," common kinship, a shared ancestry, and cannons of ethics. It should come as no surprise that just as for diasporas in general, intellectual and professional communities like those of us gathered here today come under intense self-scrutiny.

DIASPORAS IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

The movement of people and ideas through diasporas is a function of our times—peculiar to a millennial turn compounded by the disorientation and effects of globalization. Boundaries are redefined, "belonging" means differently. Popular culture shows us that Diaspora is a fruitful metaphor for capturing that modern striving. A quick Wikepedia review locates four occurrences under the name *"diaspora:"* a science fiction novel, a Star Trek inspired massively multiplayer online role-playing game, two rock songs and the explosion in recent intellectual history of a slew of journals dedicated to diaspora studies .

The dot.com era nurtured a "fertile verge" that brought together social sciences, engineering and design professions. Conjured up were ways to "meet human need" by connecting an idea to a person. In the drama, IPOs filled these emerging worlds with cash. That period of rapid communications and technological change served as a catalyst both in the creation of diasporas as personnel turnover in response to shifting demands and experimentation in industry, and in the perpetually cycling return "home" as people worked for one company after another, sometimes as a manager, sometimes as a consultant, sometimes as staff, and sometimes as company principal.

Whatever position we held in these diasporic processes, we were involved in exploring dimensions of human behavior, trying to think about futures and about new values, always thinking about behavior that didn't yet exist. As we invented new realms of research and of design, the ethics of the two naturally conflicted. Observers were intended to be unobtrusive and non-interventionist,[2]] while designers were creating things that met as yet undisclosed needs. *Increasingly*, our participants turned the gaze on us.

WHAT IS ETHICS? IS IT A "FEELING"? IS IT A CANON?

The historic conditions leading to our present era in which ethnography permeates the corporate world are common knowledge by now. We talked with ethnographers, designers, and planners about how through passion and serendipity they wound up where they are today. What we wanted to learn from them was not so much what their training was, because it was clear early on that few of us in fact arrived at our jobs as a simple corollary of training. Instead we wanted to learn how people found their way, what they carried with them as they moved from one post to another; and what place a notion of ethical practice held for them along that road.

First and foremost we found people wanting to make a difference. That was stated in a variety of ways, but usually with the apology that it was naïve, trite, or even a bit

---

[2] An image headlined an article that appeared in *Business Week* in June, 2008, addressing the rise of ethnography as an emerging core competency in business today (Nussbaum 2008). Ethnography peers into peoples' everyday lives, at times to respond to immediate needs, other times to uncover possibilities for altogether new futures. The appearance of this kind of reporting in an essential and well-known business magazine signals the on-going rise of design anthropology in business today.

Reflecting Our Roles, Skills, and Ethics

Pollyannaish. We found people wanting to be based in community not building a life around a job. We found people compelled into workplaces by the ethical stance of the corporation and its promise to do good. We found that they had tumbled serendipitously into a group of likeminded people and turned it into work. We found that they wanted to balance out life and work, finding synergy between the ethics and values in the two. And most concretely we heard they wanted to let consumers be **heard** by corporations. **In short, they want to do good**. Today, when the dominant theme in the corporate world is its bankruptcy these impulses are being revisited.

For some, the route from a background in *some kind* of social science to the creative world is about stories and their travels. We spoke with someone who, with early anthropological training in an elite Russian university traveled thousands of miles like a latter-day Boas to pursue a second advanced degree in California. If for this person an early and ongoing passion for the life and times of ethnic images has led to a career in the branding world, it has also secured a commitment to forestall how anthropology itself as a practice is hijacked in business today. "Europeans," he told us, "dress up as 'Indians," play 'Indians' and over time go so far as to adopt this lifestyle". This mimicry is dissonant – he believes the same is happening to anthropology today, people 'playing' at anthropology. Indeed with the rise in attention of corporate America to the value of the consumer in speaking to the needs of design, ethnography becomes a commodity sold to clients.

We spoke with another colleague who came to this profession with an underlying passion for the visual (she had studied film) but told us this passion was brought to the fore *after* school when she "landed" (she told us) in a place where the challenge was to put visual thinking to everyday, collaborative, and tangible use. Whether this right place / right time was happenstance or ran deeper, for our colleague this was on-going formation, her workspace's exposed brick walls and its practice a metaphor for her profession's ongoing travels. And hers!

For many of the design ethnographers we spoke with, process over end-product was the fundamental value and ethic. The reasoning is that whereas a monetized product is the necessary outcome, building futures of value requires a commitment to a generative and collaborative process. It is that identification to such a process that has been an innovation in the practice for our interlocutors: ideas are not owned but shared; knowledge is not the property of an individual but "moved forward with other people." To build futures requires more than one hand. We learned in our conversations that a client being touched by watching an ethnographer work constitutes a success, one that is measured by the questions that client asks. In that space lies the opportunity for introducing novel notions; raising suggestions about the impact of a product on the consumer and the consuming community, the reach and communication through packaging and brand, and even the placement of a product in the market.

DIASPORAS AND TRAVELING CULTURES

All of the people with whom we spoke are travelers, not merely because they exhaust passports, nor even because they (might) have a shared repertoire of knowledge, but because they keep common stock in a certain disposition or way of being in the world, where process and narrative and A to Z and everything in between *does* matter. The folks we spoke with all have been parts of companies that have been new companies or the seeds of new companies. Many of the strategy and design firms they represent served as incubators for a common culture, ones that at times "seeded" new companies. In fact no fewer than five companies have been founded from E-Lab (later Sapient) and Doblin. Though not modeling their expansion on the diaspora model we've been using, Sapient used a business strategy that resonated. After buying E-Lab in the late 1999, offices were expanded through what Sapient called "seeding." Practitioners moved from one office to another carrying experience at the level of the ethic and culture of the Chicago office to the London office introducing a common practice of client management, outreach, and project design, as well as research methods, internal communications, and solutions. Similar dynamics took place in founding new companies by former E-Lab or Sapient staff.

No matter what the success of these *business* projects, there is a certain diasporic memory that remembers the kernel to imagine a future—memory here living and ongoing, a practice that sustains. And, unsurprisingly, a very basic guiding principle has been a commitment to an ethical practice, something we heard repeatedly from our interlocutors.

ETHICS

Our discussion has made evident that the challenge of ethical practice constitutes the fiber of our practice. The roots of ethical work in anthropology can be traced back to its origins. Franz Boas, American anthropology's father figure, was a political and intellectual reformer. His ethical stance against the misuse of anthropological research in the name of espionage was legendary, a position for which he was sanctioned by the discipline. His sanction was only recently lifted but continues to fall under discussion to this day in the halls of anthropology and the discussions of Ethics Committees. At the beginning of American anthropological time, we all remember that Papa Franz left an imperial and anti-Semitic Prussia, geology degree in tow, to explore how Eskimo see color differently. For this, Boas offered us not the racialized explanation then current but instead culture as explanation. Eskimo, he taught us as he founded a discipline, see and know color as different categories. Developing culture as explanation was sociologically innovative and the basis of ethical practice. (These findings had a long career, forming part of the litigant brief in Brown v. Board of Education, some fifty years later.)

Claude Lévi-Strauss**,** who for his part has framed the thinking of many generations of social scientists who followed him, bore a continual concern for the human condition as noted through his contributions to UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) (Lévi-Strauss 1952)

Reflecting Our Roles, Skills, and Ethics

> The true contribution of a culture consists, not in the list of inventions
> which it has personally produced, but in its difference from others. The
> sense of gratitude and respect which each single member of a given
> culture can and should feel towards all others can only be based on the
> conviction that other cultures differ from his own in countless ways.

Lévi-Strauss's thoughts are perhaps different to our present notion of applied, but certainly his was an ethically essential applied anthropology.

If the first half of anthropology's past century was about understanding how humans inhabit the world, its close filiations with design should be apparent. A half-century after Lévi-Strauss' UNESCO ethics position on race, the publication of a Designer's Accord in 2007 was inspired by a burgeoning ethics of sustainability. The accord comes with a simple code of conduct to be adopted (though not enforced) by practitioners in their client engagements (designersaccord.org)]. (For the language of the code, please refer to the first epigraph above.)

What's at stake in observational research is the practice itself. Merging these multiple frames of ethics is what has advanced the possibilities to introduce and influence new ways of doing business in this chaotic time of upheaval. The emphasis here is in fact a return to roots.

In conversations with our colleagues, the following ethics goals emerged:

1. **Be responsible to the client and to the participant**. Letting the participant be heard is as much part of the contract as the $150 incentive.

2. **Reconcile diverse interests**. For example, what happens when a new IT desk is staffed with fewer people?

3. **Share findings**. Bear the full expression of the participant to the client and to colleagues.

4. **Leave conditions better.** Take what you have (a corporation that must sell products in order to survive) but and follow through to positive advantage.

5. **Respond to requests for proposal (RFPs) with a moral compass.**

6. **Impact others who are touched by the project**. Evaluate success by the way others ask questions.

7. **Influence the process as much as the solution**. Ethics is a practice of doing.

8. **Discover ethics from people**. Discovery can reveal the ethical compass of our interlocutors and research participants?.

ETHICS IN A TIME OF ACCELERATION

If anthropology and ethnography have long been concerned with a changing world as the basis of its ethical practice, they also have long taken a keen interest in *observing* and *documenting* that changing world. Before Levi-Strauss took an adamant interest in writing about what he called "culture in entropy," Radcliffe-Brown noted from a plane over Eastern Africa what he called "teeming" masses of people in motion. Almost a century later, we note how money travels and at times even teems. This is a world still betwixt and between, when the great bank holding company Goldman Sachs—founded in the Lower East Village in New York City in 1869—predicts that by 2025 the gross domestic product of the 4 BRIC countries[3] could be half of what the G6 produces. By 2040, it will have surpassed it.

Recognition of the power of the "Bottom of the Pyramid"—those 4 billion people who earn less that $2 a day—began 75 years ago, in the dark days leading to the world's last great depression. Franklin Delano Roosevelt tells us in a 1932 radio address called *The Forgotten Man* that "these unhappy times call for the building of plans that rest upon the forgotten, the unorganized but the indispensable units of economic power ... that build from the bottom up and not from the top down, that put their faith once more in the forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid."

What has changed? Technology, to be sure, joins us ever more closely, as FDR's Forgotten Man is increasingly a productive and possibly self-sustaining person, via such new technologies of economy like micro-credit, or "e-Choupals," electronic village squares in India that make agriculture much more responsive to market conditions. Not to sound too much a just-so platitude, anthropology in business today needs to observe not merely the wonder of a changing world, but the kinds of moral value propositions that this changing world is so quickly taking up. A new moral compass for our new times.

CONCLUSION: A NEW POINT OF VIEW

Early anthropology, like early design, was trying to change the whole world, its moral compass indeed that expansive. The world has sped up since then, but we can go back to beginnings that go either unspoken or unknown, that *we are for a return to first principles*, to

---

[3] BRIC refers to the fast growing economies of Brazil, India, Russia and China, which represents 40% of the world's population. The original source is Wilson and Purushothaman 2003. The first summit of these nations ended June 16, 2009 with "a declaration calling for a 'multipolar world order', diplomatic code for a rejection of America's position as the sole global superpower" (Halperin 2009).

Reflecting Our Roles, Skills, and Ethics

create a world and to understand a world more than ever requires a unified practice in how we seek to change it.

Our world today is racing at such a clip that the news—what is new—is measured more effectively by the *speed* of change rather than change itself. (Acceleration more than velocity) If a half-century ago Lévi-Strauss observed with awe that cultures create stability via structures that combat entropy, his worry was change. And so it was for design, which gave us cybernetics, Eames chairs, the Danish Modern, and the skin and bones architecture of Mies van der Rohe. So too was less more in Elementary Structures of Kinship!

But that paradigm of knowledge and action has given way to a new epoch, where as the world transforms in ever quickening speeds our prototypical designs are less a chair than a genome, less a modern office's filing cabinets than cloud computing, and indeed, less a stable system for reckoning family than a technological shift in how we create communities, not as far as the bird flies but as quickly as our Facebook book of friends can be updated, from structures to networks.

And yet, we can find in that old manual of ethics, *Tristes Tropiques,* a renewed charge to redouble an ethics for our practice. For no matter how much the engines of our knowledge quicken our pace, shorten our breath and narrow our vision, we can fashion across these two bookends a bridge to reanimate our humanity, the core ethical practice. Lévi-Strauss begins what is a travel book by telling us how much he hates "traveling and explorers." After many passages of travel and of discovery, he concludes with a marvelous phrase, a storied exchange, about **seeing** the world to grasp it: "the brief glance, heavy with patience, serenity and mutual forgiveness, that, through some involuntary understanding, one can sometimes exchange with a cat" (1955/1973:544). Let's remember that Lévi-Strauss was in exile from France, but also from modernity's filth. Already careening from the even-then quickening pace of life—we can read *Tristes Tropiques* as a paean for vanishing worlds, and can take from it a renewed charge to listen past the demands of speed and acceleration to our common humanity—this is an ethics for today more than ever, to listen with patience and serenity no matter how brief the glance.

NOTES

REFERENCES

Boorstin, Daniel
1987   Hidden History: Exploring our Secret Past. NY: Vintage Books.

Halperin, Tony
2009   Brazil, Russia, India and China form bloc to challenge US dominance. Times
               online.
               http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/us_and_americas/article6514
               737.ece, accessed July 19, 2009.

Levi Strauss, Claude
1952   Race and History, first published in The Race Question in Modern Science,
               Paris: UNESCO.

1955/1973   Tristes Tropiques. NY: Penguin Classics.

Nussbaum, Bruce
2008   Ethnography is the New Core Competence. Business Week, June 19.

Said, Edward W.
1984   *Reflections on Exile*, Granta, vol. 13: 159-172.

Wilson, Dominic and Roopa Purushothaman
2003   Dreaming With BRICs: The Path to 2050. Global Economics Paper No: 99.
               Goldman Sachs. http://www2.goldmansachs.com/ideas/brics/book/99-
               dreaming.pdf, accessed July 19, 2009.