

**Deep Diversity and Global Flows: Silicon Valley and the Asian Pacific  
Region**

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Abstract: Migration to high-technology work and the creation of technopoles in East Asia itself creates a dynamic global flow between the Californian region of Silicon Valley and particular sites in East Asia, providing an illustration for the process of deep diversity. The concept of deep diversity, first posed by philosopher Charles Taylor and reified by anthropologist Clifford Geertz, problematizes ethnic identity categories. As categories multiply and become dense within a particular region, maintaining discrete identities becomes more difficult. Aspects of particular heritage identities are exaggerated, minimized, co-opted and contested. Identity management in the Silicon Valley region highlights the onset of deep diversity, as it appears on an identity landscape already rich from historical waves of immigration. Under conditions of deep diversity, deep toleration--cultural relativism for the masses--can emerge as a strategy for social interaction. Deep diversity holds some implications for theorizing future transnational interaction and ethnogenesis, the creation of new cultural schema.

Anthropologists began by studying cultures that were disappearing. Then they studied cultures that were laboratories for various social scientific questions. Now they have an opportunity to study cultures that no one has ever seen before, cultures that are shaping the future. (Margaret Mead in Peck 1981)

Charles Taylor, the renowned Canadian political philosopher, has labored to conceptualize global differences, as experienced within a multicultural state polity so that some sort of stability can be achieved. He calls this condition deep diversity. Two facets distinguish deep diversity from its normative and somewhat shallow form. First, deep diversity is complex, existing in shifting global urban landscapes that embrace dozens, if not hundreds, of interacting identities based on ancestry and affiliation. Second, this form of diversity recognizes that the practices of diversity are not superficial, but reflect deeply held beliefs about relationships, family, power and governmentality. Deep diversity at its core posits that complex differences exist, whole structures of meaning may separate people, and that people must actively engage in creating new commons for the basis of community. Some of that negotiation requires the creation of new identity categories.

It is particularly instructive to look at Silicon Valley youth growing to consciousness under the conditions of deep diversity, who are redefining their sense of self-meaning, beyond the categories into which they have been placed. They are not part of the airplane-flying cosmopolitan transnational elite, but they are daily exposed to multiple ways of being human (see Louie 2000). As anthropologists have long known, it is difficult to accept received categories of ethnicity while viewing the processes of ethnic

identity as "negotiable" (Stern 2005). Although still shaped by class, caste and clique, teenagers in Silicon Valley are creating a distinctive set of values.

I first met David Le in the San Francisco International Airport, where he was waiting to go on a home stay in Japan over spring break with selected members of his high school Japanese class; both fellow travelers and hosts become his close friends. David is fifteen, ethnic Chinese Vietnamese, and attends Eastside Valley High School. He is the center of one of networks my colleagues and I studied to understand the global reach of youth networks.<sup>1</sup> His life revolves around multiple domains, practices and narratives. David loves gaming, computers, planes and ROTC, a naval officer training group at his high school. He is part of a larger military community that has its own distinct identity. The students meet veterans and connect to existing military communities. ROTC students and advisors alike use "family" as a metaphor to describe their relationship. Victor, one of David's ROTC family, is a sixteen year-old Latino ROTC and gaming enthusiast. Victor considers David to be a friend who can be trusted, the necessary tender maintaining reciprocal relationships. Victor and David play computer games, and organize a group of young men to go play paintball. Much of what they do together, in gaming or planning their lives, is "strategizing," a skill Victor believes essential.

Although David's parents are important to him, he could not tell me what they did for a living. His father works for his uncle, "in computers." His mother's work was described to us by the housemate, Ren, who was once her co-worker in a medical device company. Xiao Ren is in his mid-twenties and attends a community college in order to finish the last classes of his four-year degree. He had nearly finished a degree in the

People's Republic of China when he came to the United States. When not with his co-workers, he spends time in online games and chat rooms, largely, but not exclusively, "Asian." His presence in the household is part of a larger strategy used by the family to both get income to pay for the exorbitant cost of Bay Area housing, but also bring in Vietnamese and Chinese speaking students to act as informal tutors for David and "his bratty little sister." Between seven and ten people can be living in the house at any one time, including relatives that move in and out of the house. The house is divided into sections for the main family and their boarders. David's computer has a CD burner and broadband access, so that family and housemates traffic through his room.

David's aunts and uncles on both sides of his family live in clusters in lower-income Eastside neighborhoods of Santa Clara County. Another set of family members lives in Vietnam, and plans to move to Silicon Valley. They play a more distant role in his day to day life, although he has visited them in Vietnam several times. David believes he has a strong family, and indeed much of his life revolves around his family, but he still sees his own ethnic Chinese Vietnamese family as less "strong" than other diasporic Chinese families. David sees himself as part of a larger Asian America. This identification is evident not only in his relationships, but in his articulation of online identities. The prefix AZN is incorporated into his various online appellations to read "Asian"; David is [AZN]Asian Star Pimp, Asian Pimp Fighter, and Asian Pimp Daddy (Gorbis 2001:119). David exists within a complex ecosystem of identities.

Deep diversity, first posed by philosopher Charles Taylor and reified by anthropologist Clifford Geertz, problematizes ethnic identity categories. However, his idea of deep diversity is heuristic, it can be taken farther than he has himself taken it.

Taylor argues that there are different levels of political engagement in a multicultural context. Simply identifying differences in culture and outlook, but assuming that all are ultimately under a single undifferentiated national umbrella is "first level diversity." Diversity in this mode is a shallow concept, referring to the maintenance of memory and tradition at the local level, but relative homogeneity within the nation-state. In this model, moral panic is engendered as people worry about "losing" their distinctive identities, becoming a "disappearing culture." Accepting that people as distinct as Quebecois or Dene might view even belonging itself "in a very different way" points to deep diversity (Redhead 2002; Taylor 1993). Deep diversity philosophically underpins the anthropologist's conception of global connection that is "a sense of connectedness, a connectedness that is neither comprehensive or uniform, primal nor changeless, but nevertheless real." It provides for reworking and multiplying connections, even intensifying them (Geertz 2000: 224, 247).

In an attempt to theorize the cultural convolutions of Silicon Valley, deep diversity, as Geertz reframed it, led me to an even more defined interpretation of the concept. Deep diversity refers not only to the plurality of meaning schemas each "culture" uses to formulate its political identity, but also to the proliferation of criteria that can be used to define culture. Using diversity as a concept metaphor forces us to examine our assumptions about the unconscious criteria that are used, the stability of the categories, and the possibility of ethnogenesis, the creation of new categories. Commonly, and in accordance with the hegemonic use of "immigration" as a driver of diversity, ancestral identity, primarily from the nation state, has been the default criteria. David is clearly Vietnamese, or is that Chinese? Similarly, it is assumed, including by David's parents,

that exposure to people that share his identity will intensify his identification with them. However, instead, David is conscious of the multiplication of Davids. One David "maturely" tries to embody "Asian" self-restraint while interacting with his grandparents, another "is goofy" with age-mates from ROTC. He engages in habitus code-switching (see Bourdieu 1998). Taylor, who views cultural knowledge as fundamentally embodied, would appreciate David's dilemma (Abby 2004:3). His exposure to supposedly similar people differentiates him, and his life with "others" gives him new platforms for identity.

Moreover, diversity means one thing when power (be it class or rank) is attached to a few well-described categories and another in a global urban environment. Not to understate the existing complexity, the area north of Flagstaff Arizona has Hopi and Navajo, defined by the State and by well-worn, if often challenged, linguistic and familial criteria. *Bahana*, or if speaking Dine, *bilagaana* European descendents comprise the "other." With three categories, seven overall interactions are possible (each can interact within the category, between any two categories and between all three). My reading of Taylor led me to think that qualitatively, the greater the complexity, the deeper the deep diversity. Calculating the complexity of cultural interactions in the Silicon Valley region, using a conservative minimum of fifty linguistic/ethnic categories, 1.125 quadrillion interactions were possible! Given that fifty was a number derived from gross linguistic and nationally based ancestral categories, adding other criteria for cultural identity, such as region, religion, passionate dedication to Steve Job's Apple vision, drives the complexity of the diversity very deep indeed (English-Lueck 2002:117, 137). Transnational interaction and communication change the ethnic experience. The very complexity of diversity in a global city makes it much less predictable and more

ambiguous. Alternate forms of identity, not based on heritage, interact with traditional categories of ethnicity as emerging identities compete or are coupled with those ancestrally-based statuses.

Changing the emphasis from normative categories to potential interactions serves several purposes. This more descriptive version of deep diversity captures the flexibility of the postmodern version of globalization, while tracking the scope of interactions allows us to scale the unit of analysis more precisely. Are we talking about the global connections that reside in a household or network? Are the connections from the Silicon Valley region to the Asian Pacific nodes of Vietnam, Taiwan and the People's Republic of China? What exactly is flowing in the global flows and how is it being fused with other elements to create a commons? Whose commons is it and at what scale of resolution? Viewed through the lens of deep diversity, David's life takes a different focus. His family and network reside within structured flows, shaped by immigration policies, and the regional economy. Larger scale educational interactions (international exchange, the reach of the American military) shape other aspects of his experience of deep diversity. Ren's and David mediated communication through online gaming and chats once again broaden the scale. Deep diversity simultaneously captures wide reach and narrow channels as large scale interactions, are defined along particular parameters (Starcraft, naval aviation, ethnic Chinese Vietnamese chain migration) (Gorbis 2001:36).

### **Silicon Valley, nexus of a global network**

Silicon Valley is an elastic and imaginary designation, with boundaries that expand and contract with the global high-technology economy. Situated in northern



California, at the southern end of the San Francisco Bay Area, it can be seen as a physical space with a focused economic niche, a short-hand for regional marketing to attract businesses, or a postmodern imagined state of mind that embraces technology and entrepreneurial risk. It is not a governmental entity, and the region overlaps loosely with Santa Clara, San Mateo and parts of Santa Cruz and Alameda counties, hence data about it will shift depending on the unit of accounting.

In the aftermath of the 1965 Hart-Celler Act, immigration increased from Asia, from 4% in 1901-1920 to 39% during the period from 1980-1993. The 1990 amendment of existing immigration law expanded the use of H1-B to recruit skilled workers, particularly from India and greater China. The region is now a minority majority space (see Banerjee 2006; Center for Immigration Studies 1995).

Using census categories, which anthropologists have long recognized as representative of the problematic "first level" diversity approach, the region has 2.49 million people, 41% of whom are "white, non-Hispanic," 28% are Asian, 25% Hispanic, 3% Black and less than one per cent are Native American, in spite of the fact that the Bay Area is home to one of the largest populations of urban Indians (Henton 2008:2). Forty-five thousand people in the San Jose- Sunnyvale-Santa Clara cities identify as belonging to two or more "races" (Census Bureau 2006). In the 2000 census, 60% of California's mixed race births occurred in Santa Clara county, the primary administrative unit in Silicon Valley (Stern 2005:5). While 12% of the nation is foreign born, 35% of the legal immigrants and sojourners to Silicon Valley were born outside the United States (Henton 2008:10; Hirschman 2005:598). Linguistically, nearly half, 48%, speak a language other

than English at home, and nearly half of those, 49% speak an Asian or Pacific Islander language (Census Bureau 2005; Henton 2008:10).

Numerical data for a particular group are not as revealing as the particular circumstances of daily life in a given niche. Large groups, such as the Chinese, have so much critical mass that they can afford to differentiate themselves—Chinese from Taiwanese from Tainan (in the South) distinguish themselves from those from Taipei (in the north), Chinese from Shanghai differentiate themselves from Beijing émigrés (see Wong 2006:190). Even within this relatively narrow channel, the complexity of interactions and global reach is apparent. The history of Chinese immigration to the San Francisco Bay Area runs deep. The diversity of diasporic experiences is fundamental to the differentiation of Chinese in this region. From the Gold Rush era, through the building of the railroad, "Sino-California" is build into the fabric of the State (Starr 2005:119). Nineteenth century ethnic migratory labor in agriculture and commerce established a Cantonese Chinese presence in the Bay Area, made painful by intense racism. The great grandchildren of those early immigrants intermarried with other ethnic groups, and became increasingly less distinctively Chinese and more Asian Californian. San Francisco State University was the site of the first ethnic studies program promoting an Asian American consciousness (Teraguchi 2004).

The virulent racism that created the Chinese Exclusion Acts of 1882, 1892 and 1902 was modified by a century of co-existence, but influenced intercultural interaction more subtly. In the Bay Area, the era of "coolies" was gone, but the advent of "high-tech or techno-coolies" had begun. Immigration to the Silicon Valley region, from 1985-2000 was dominated by Chinese; 37% of immigrants were from China, 13% from Taiwan, and

3% from Vietnam, including many ethnic Chinese (Saxenian 2006:53). After 2000, Indians dominated the H1-B visa holders for skilled workers. In the 1980s the new diasporic Chinese were placed in technical positions. There was some pay disparity, although that disparity eroded over the next decade (Saxenian 2006:55; Wong 2006:36). However, access to management and entrepreneurial opportunities were more critical than the monetary glass ceiling. Assumed language barriers, embodied restraint and repression of competitive lust were seen as barriers to effective management by non-Asian co-workers. In short, the subtler stereotypes of habitus kept the new Chinese from developing the reputations needed to excel in the business side of high-technology; they were kept behind cubicle walls. The biases are less overt, but nonetheless formed a statistically significant barrier (Shih 2006; Varma 2002:337).

When Ari, an engineering manager from Israel, wanted to institute a process of testing that gave feedback early in the process of product development, Chen, an engineer from Taiwan, defended his group. Chen worried that early feedback would cause him, and his group, to suffer a loss of face (*mianzi*), and he consistently avoided participating in testing until his product was nearly developed. While this may have been the reason for Chen's actions, it is instructive to examine Ari's reasoning. In Ari's opinion Chen's conservatism undermined the purpose of testing and indicated that Chen didn't see the larger management issues. Ari's attribution of cultural causes for Chen's resistance is an example of how nuanced barriers are erected in co-worker evaluations.

Chinese immigrants responded with a variety of strategies to circumvent these barriers by creating professional organizations, using transnational personal networks to get a technical edge, and mentoring incoming immigrants (Varma 2002:356). The

diasporic Chinese community built active networks to rival the non-Asian "old boys" who had dominated companies and laboratories. As they form ethnically-based or transnational entrepreneurial companies, they job-hop to maximize individual success (Shih 2006:188).

### **Coming of age in Silicon Valley**

While ethnic high-technology immigration, employment and networking is significant, for the purposes of understanding deep diversity we should look beyond this frame of reference. First, remember that deep diversity posits that surface ancestral culture, that census differences are not the only ones that matter. The increased density of differences, and the ecology of the distribution of those differences, mean that some identities are intensified and narrowed, while others become more diffuse. Second, cultural differences are more than having a different language or set of festivals, being deeply diverse provides alternative structures of meaning. In one set of circumstances, a narrow definition matters, such as being a Microsoft certified software engineer from Shanghai. Under other conditions, that same person may be drawn into identification with Silicon Valley, as his son comes home to describe the joys of being gaining rank on World of Warcraft. People do what appear to be the same things for quite different reasons. Sometimes this leads to the familiar world of attributive stereotyping, "he's Chinese so he must be worried about face." At other times, new frameworks of meaning are created, as Taiwanese engineers reinvent themselves as Silicon Valley-style entrepreneurs. The complexity of difference, given the dynamics of the global urban landscape, can both foment fusion and sharpen demarcations. The resulting ethnogenesis,

the creation of new culture, effects changes in individuals, communities and transnational policies.

Cindy Chen lives in deep diversity. She is sixteen, born in Texas, although her mother and sister are from Taiwan. After moving to Silicon Valley, her father died, leaving Mrs. Chen a widow supporting two young women by doing accounting work at a fiber optic firm. She spoke Japanese as a child and is thrilled that her daughter is studying Japanese. She is even more thrilled that in spite of spurning Chinese Saturday school, Cindy still can speak Mandarin to friends and relatives from Taiwan. To Mrs. Chen, Cindy is a good girl, studious, focused on getting into a good university and law program. Cindy's Asianness only partly stems from her language competency. Being on the nearly all-Asian school badminton team, as are the other Eastside teams, is as much a part of her cultural practice as keeping her linguistic skills intact. Her best friends are Vietnamese, also in badminton and also studying Japanese.

Cindy's friend, Tran, is also an advanced student of Japanese and involved in the same Advanced Placement courses. Tran just began her first job at Great America doing karaoke style recording for tourists (an amusement park in Santa Clara). Cindy enjoys her mall strolls with these young women, although consumption is less the point than visiting all their friends who work in stores there. They are her intimate friends with whom she shares thoughts and dreams and are people to "smile with." Two of her friends of friends are people she uses instant messaging applications to connect to chatting about alternative rock/pop music. One of those is Julio. Julio is Cindy's online buddy, a friend from Algebra 2. For a time he pursued her as a possible girl friend, and still thinks her "cool." He is eighteen and planning to go to a culinary academy. He is estranged from his mother

and considers the African-American-Filipino family of his ex-girlfriend his second family. His father and grandfather have moved back to Mexico. Julio spends five hours a day on instant messaging, finding it a more real and intimate form of communication than telephone or face to face. One of his best friends is Matt, part of the e-circle and network Julio calls his "Mexican buddies," or the group he calls, "yomutta." Of course, Matt's "not actually, but might as well be Mexican." Matt talks the talk, eats the food and lives his life as if he were Latino. In Matt's, Julio's and Cindy's world, actually having the ancestry is one of the criteria, but not even a necessary one, of formulating an identity. After all, there are enough to go around. Silicon Valley teens are experimenting on themselves; mixing ethnic and other identities to develop relationships across groups (see Shankar 2003:130). Not all teens actually bear this out in daily behavior, but they articulate "mixing" groups, "not limiting" oneself to one set of practices, is "cool."

### **Beyond the ancestors**

When framing the identities of Cindy and her friends, notice the significant "pre-theoretical commitment" that biases scholars of diversity. It is assumed a priori that actual ancestry really necessary for identity. Under the conditions of deep diversity, must this be the case? While our gaze has been drawn to the immigrants, a fundamental question is less frequently asked, what is the impact of such dense demographic complexity on the rest of the community? Asianness, even Chineseness, is not exclusively enacted by people whose ancestors, however distant, came from China. Of course, orientalism, selective colonial and post-colonial cultural borrowing, is a well established phenomenon.

However, since it living in deep diversity makes traditional cultural guideposts more ambiguous as reshuffling and reinvention are facilitated.

Deep toleration, the act of living comfortably in deep diversity, poses challenges for anthropologists, as well as the communities we study. Power is still a real part of the negotiation for the commons, it would be naive to think otherwise. Silicon Valley cities Cupertino, and Palo Alto established elementary school level Chinese immersion programs because of the economic power of Mandarin speakers, and the power of the local Chinese community, made that option viable, if contested (see English-Lueck 2003). However, when fourteen year-old Kim says she likes Chinese music because her family watches Chinese music dubbed in Vietnamese, or Japanese music from anime, she is revealing differences in cultural authority. China and Japan have massive media infrastructures with tremendous global reach; Vietnam does not. Nonetheless, the acknowledgment of that power differential should not diminish Kim's right to negotiate something new, a sense of self situated in Asian California, which defines her search for a new commons.

One way to look at diversity is to gaze at the past, framing identities around national ancestral categories, mourning the loss of tradition amidst globalization. In this framework, each generation beyond the actual act of immigration is homogenized into an amorphous whole. This melting pot metaphor is rife with a priori assumptions about the dynamism, or lack thereof, of local cultures. Silicon Valley, because of the historic circumstances of agrarian and high-technology global demographic flows, is an experimental site for deep diversity. It is within this framework of deep diversity, and the deep toleration that accompanies it, that new culture is created, experienced locally along

narrow channels, but drawing on the widest global palette. Jenet, a seventeen year-old self-professed Japanese anime addict, a "blend of American and Chinese" culture, passionately decries "checking race/ethnicity is like, garbage ... I just keep going as I am now, just keep growing and learning and meeting people, experiencing new things and just kind of developing, thinking, beliefs. Growing emotionally and mentally. I guess as long as I keep growing and not just stay stagnant, stay put, stuck ...flattened under a piece of paper like a flower forever, then I think I'd be okay. Cause everybody really needs to change and grow."

## Notes

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1. Data used in this article are from ethnographic projects housed under the umbrella of the Silicon Valley Cultures Project during the 1998-2008 period. The first is the Work, Identity and Community project, partially funded by the National Science (see English-Lueck 2002). In this project 175 workers were given multiple in-situ interviews in their homes and work spaces. The second is a collaborative project done with the Institute for



the Future to understand the global reach of youth in Silicon Valley, London, Tokyo, Stockholm and Helsinki. In Silicon Valley seven networks of teens, including a hub and between two and seven nodes, were shadowed and interviewed (Gorbis 2001). The third is a collaborative project with the Santa Clara County Office of Education's Center for Educational Planning on informal learning networks. Once again, four separate networks drawn from public, private and alternative high schools were interviewed and observed in everyday life (English-Lueck et al. 2003).

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