

READERS' CORNER:

Reflections on Jen Sandler and Renita Thedvall (eds.). 2017. *Meeting Ethnography: Meetings as Key Technologies of Contemporary Governance, Development, and Resistance*. New York: Routledge.

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In this edited volume, Jen Sandler and Renita Thedvall have collected a set of papers foregrounding the ethnography of meetings across numerous types of organizations. They introduce the collection by offering a general critique of ethnographers who they argue have, by and large, failed to adequately theorize meetings, coining the term “meeting ethnography” to refer to the “[exploration of] meetings as both ethnographic objects in themselves and as sites of ethnographic inquiry of diverse issues and practices” (1). In this sense, their critique echoes Hull (2012), who implored ethnographers to “read with” rather than “read through” documents, showing how they are not only reflective of bureaucracy and bureaucratization, but also generative of it.

Sandler and Thedvall trace the genealogy of meeting ethnography from Goffman’s work on social gatherings through Fred Myers’ work on aboriginal meetings to Helen Schwartzman’s (1989) seminal study of meetings, which criticized the “taken-for-grantedness” of meetings and

Page 1 of 4

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encouraged anthropologists to take meetings seriously. Drawing heavily on Schwarzman's work in their own chapters, both Sandler and Thedvall demonstrate the (infra)structuring power of meetings in distinct but complementary contexts.

Nancy Kendall and Rachel Silver's chapter makes the important observation that "partner meetings" can be a key site for collecting data about organizations like NGOs and other development agencies, even if the specific organization being studied is only one of many participants in the meeting. This is especially salient in light of Sandler and Thedvall's discussion in the introduction of the (often immense) difficulty of *access* in the context of meeting ethnography, a challenge that is especially pronounced in ethnographies of banks, multi-national corporations, and other private institutions.

Simone Abram contends that the proliferation of meetings in the context of local governments has contributed to the standardization of a particular type of bureaucratic subjectivity, forcing politicians and their constituents alike to behave in a certain way. As multinational corporations take on increasingly prominent roles in the maintenance and provision of what were previously understood as "public" services, understanding how meetings contribute to the regimentation of individual and collective orientations both within and without the corporate sphere is exceedingly important.

In their chapter on *asamblea* meetings in rural Argentina, Baez Ullberg and Skill theorize meetings as "assemblage[s] constituted by heterogenous elements like people, ideas, landscapes, knowledge, material and technologies" (71), emphasizing the social labor that pieces it all together. Their observations highlight the importance in a business context of the setting and materials (that is, the actual materiality of the spaces and places in which meetings are—and aren't—convened), in addition to the participants and the topics they discuss.

Of particular interest to business anthropologists will be Garsten and Sörbom's chapter on the World Economic Forum's annual Davos meeting. What appears at first to be an ethnography of the meeting itself evolves into a thoughtful meditation on the methods and methodologies of anthropology at the intersection of high finance, multi-national corporations and transnational elites.

In a volume written and curated with the explicit aim of promoting meeting ethnography, the inclusion of an essay somewhat critical of meeting ethnography is appreciated, not least because it demonstrates a considerable degree of self-awareness. While Brown-Saracino and Sitman "firmly believe in the value of meeting ethnography," they implore researchers to avoid using meetings "as a crutch or stand in for the myriad other scenes one must observe" (103). They note that in the context of community organizing, very few local residents participate

in community meetings, concluding that while meetings can provide a useful starting point for “community studies” and “neighborhood ethnographies,” scholars must be aware of the limits of meeting ethnography as a tool for understanding broader social processes. Their emphasis on the multiplicity of meetings, especially informal or unplanned meetings, is equally relevant to business anthropology, where chance encounters and chats around the proverbial water cooler can be just as important as staff meetings and board meetings, and certainly more pervasive and inclusive.

The book ends with an essay by Helen Schwartzman, an anthropologist whose 1989 book *The Meeting* is considered by the editors (and indeed most of the authors whose work appears in this volume) as the foundational text of what has coalesced over the last few years as a distinct focus on “meeting ethnography.”

A few moments in the book struck me as slightly hostile. Schwartzman, for example, somewhat casually dismisses Garsten and Sörbom’s observation that the “smoke and mirrors” of Davos disguise the socio-political realities of the meetings, arguing instead that “smoke and mirrors are...*all* that is happening” (173, emphasis added). I also found myself wondering why there was not a more serious focus on meetings in corporations and banks. Anette Nyqvist’s (2017, 2015) recent work, for example, draws on ethnographic research at board meetings, industry conferences and trade fairs—meetings which are eminently important in the production of corporate and financial professionals—and her work touches on many of the same themes discussed in this book, and a growing number of ethnographers have studied (or are studying) organizations like investment banks, consulting firms, multinational corporations, lobbying groups, think tanks, etc.

Apart from these minor points, *Meeting Ethnography* is a welcome addition to the literature on the anthropology of organizations and contains important theoretical and methodological insights for ethnographers who find themselves observing or participating in a meeting—so basically everyone, but especially business anthropologists.

References

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