ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE UNIVERSITY:Interview with professor Gina Louise Hunter.

By Daniela Alves de Alves (UFV)

PRESENTATION

Gina Louise Hunter an Associate Professor of Anthropology at Illinois State University in Normal, IL. Gina earned her PhD in Anthropology from the University of Illinois in 2001. Her doctoral research was based on ethnographic fieldwork with women in a low-income neighborhood on the outskirts of Belo Horizonte. This earlier work focused on reproductive politics and ethno-physiology; and the cultural construction of motherhood and gender relations. Currently Gina's scholarly interests lie in anthropology of food and anthropology of education, especially higher education. She has long been affiliated with the Ethnography of the University Initiative (EUI, eui.illinois.edu) at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. EUI fosters student ethnographic research on their own universities, and helps faculty from various disciplines incorporate student ethnographic work into their courses. Gina has written a number of articles about this approach to teaching ethnographic methods and examining the university. [857]

In the second semester of 2015, Gina taught a course on the ethnographic method, at Universidade Federal de Viçosa. The interview by anthropologist Gina Louise Hunter discusses the challenges and contributions of the ethnography of familiar spaces. In that sense, it helps us think about the everyday setting of university institutions as a culturally rich place and increasingly diverse and plural.

Educação em Perspectiva (EP): *What are the challenges of conducting ethnography on one's own workplace, in this case, the university?*

Gina Louise Hunter (GH): There are several aspects to this question: political, personal, and methodological ones. Traditionally, ethnographers

are conceptualized as outsiders to the research context. Anthropologist Bronsilaw Malinowski was the first to codify ethnography as a method. With his work on the Trobriand Islands (1922), Malinowski created a method and a genre of ethnographic writing that features the researchers' preliminary excursions into a relatively unknown field, his process of discovery and enculturation, and his eventual analysis that made strange beliefs and behaviours seem familiar and reasonable. But as anthropologists began work "at home" (see review by Peirano, 1998), debates emerged about the relative virtues of being an insider vs. an outsider to the research scene. Some see that having a level of unfamiliarity with the group or locale under investigation is a key tool for cultural awareness. There is an expression that "it is hard to teach fish about water," meaning that it can be hard to see and to question the cultural operations at work in our own lives. For this reason, Spradley and McCurdy (1972), for instance, advocate having students conduct ethnographies of relatively unfamiliar "microcultures" that are within easy access of their everyday lives. To me, however, the important point is that an ethnographer always stands in *some* position vis-à-vis her subjects. One is never truly an insider or outsider: it depends on what variables one chooses to consider. So, the positionality of the researcher is always an important methodological, ethical, and political consideration.

However, to answer your question more specifically, our universities are large and complex institutions; so studying one's own institution does not necessarily mean studying one's own social group. When my students *do* study their own social groups they are often engaged in a process of "de-familiarization," of questioning their own taken-for-granted understanding. Many anthropologists have adopted the Romantic era expression "making the strange familiar and the familiar strange" as a key goal of anthropological work. Studying your own workplace or social group is frequently an exercise in making the familiar strange.

In more political terms, taking the university as an ethnographic object can be an exercise in studying "up" a powerful, bureaucratic institution, as Laura Nader (1972) called on anthropologists to do decades ago. She argued anthropologists must study the powerful, rather than the relatively powerless. She argued that

investigating bureaucratic institutions is key to educating citizens to effectively intervene and exercise their rights within these institutions. She advocated an ethnography that moves "up,""down," and "sideways," that is, investigating ethnographically the impact of powerful elites and institutions on the everyday lives of others (Nader, 1999).

Through my work with the Ethnography of the University, I see students' research on our own universities as an opportunity for critical inquiry into an institution that is very powerful in their lives and with which students can engage and reform.

EP: *You are a faculty member affiliated with the EUI (ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE UNIVERSITY INITIATIVE), based in the University of Illinois, which is described as a repository for students' projects about their universities and at the same time a research tool for future generations of students. How do you evaluate the gains that the EUI has been providing to university anthropology students?*

GH: When anthropologists Nancy Abelmann and William Kelleher co-founded EUI, part of their impetus was the idea that student research and writing would be better if it built on previous student research. They imagined that student researchers would see themselves as contributing to a research community and not just writing a paper for the teacher. In our courses, we have found this to be true.

Students conduct their research knowing that they have the opportunity to add a bit of knowledge to an existing body of work. Students write for their colleagues and for future students. The EUI repository housed at the University of Illinois (https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/handle/2142/755) has over 1200 student projects; and I have started an additional repository for my students at Illinois State University. Some of the archived projects are final semester papers or reports, but the archive also includes processual documents such as field notes, interview transcripts, and images.

Students take the EUI archive very seriously. They know that their work will be made public so they are more invested in it; they know that they must carefully observe our protocols for human subjects research, which must be approved by our Institutional Review Board (research ethics committee). They take their peers research seriously and cite it in

their own work. In this way, each new student project is contributing to a larger scholarly conversation—even if their projects are very brief, partial, and short-lived, as is often the case. These are often students' very first incursions into ethnography and primary research.

I think that EUI's student research model has tremendous benefits for students. By the way, EUI is a multidisciplinary endeavor, and there are EUI-affiliated courses in diverse fields throughout the university. Also, the EUI archive is publically accessible, so these benefits are not limited to anthropology students.

EP: *In your opinion, based on your experience with the ethnography of universities, what are the specificities of this organization compared to other organizations?*

GH: Illinois State University is a large, public university that enrolls approximately 20,000 students, primarily at the undergraduate level. So, that's already a distinct kind of organization within the arena of American higher education.

One aspect I find interesting is that the university's primary population, the students, don't necessarily see themselves as part of the academic organization per se. Our students, and perhaps American students in general, understand their college experience primarily in terms of their own individual goals. They see the university as a means to their personal and career aspirations. Part of what I do in my ethnography courses is to get students to think more about the ways in which their experiences and subjectivities are shaped by university interests and structures.

Likewise, faculty often see themselves primarily in terms of their disciplinary identities (as, say, a chemist or a historian) and not as workers in an organization. As academics, we also tend to understand that the university is a privileged space that stands somewhat outside the market. In his research on the university, Wesley Shumar (1997) noted that faculty's failure to identify as *workers* has often made it difficult for them to recognize and respond effectively to changes in the university. More specifically, he writes that non-tenure-track (NTT) faculty (the part-time instructors that universities increasingly rely on) are to academia what temporary workers are to many other industries, but scholars (and faculty) often fail to analyze NTT faculty within the same explanatory frameworks they use to understand similar transformations in

other contexts (such as industry). So, from this perspective, it is helpful to think about the ways universities are *like* other organizations, or, at least the ways that they must respond to the same social, economic, and political forces.

Shumar and others show that public higher education in the U.S. and elsewhere has been increasingly "privatized" and "marketized" over the past several decades (see, for example, Teixeira and Dill, 2011). There are many Americans who see little value in publically funded higher education. The current state administrations of Wisconsin, Illinois, and other U.S. states show this trend clearly. I must note here that "public" universities in the U.S. are publically subsidized but not tuition-free as they are in Brazil. (At Illinois State, only about 18 percent of the budget is covered by state appropriations). Overall, in recent decades, the cost of public higher education has shifted from states to students and their families. A report (SHEEO, 2014) by the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association calls this trend the "new normal" in state funding for public higher education. They summarize this challenging situation as follows:

> In the new normal, retirement and health care costs simultaneously drive up the cost of higher education and compete with education for limited public resources. The new normal no longer expects to see a recovery of state support for higher education such as occurred repeatedly in the last half of the 20th century. The new normal expects students and their families to continue to make increasingly greater financial sacrifices in order to complete a postsecondary education. The new normal expects schools and colleges to find ways of increasing productivity and to absorb reductions in state support while increasing degree production without compromising quality. At the same time, more and more states are adopting daring completion and attainment goals which will only be achievable by better serving those students who have typically been underserved—first generation, low-income, and minority students. [2014:48]

The marketization of higher education is not just about who pays for college; it is also evident in administrative practices of assessment and productivity reporting. Faculty are increasingly seen as "service providers" and students as "customers." We

must seriously ask how this impacts teaching, learning, democracy, and our capacity to create a more equal society. These processes can be studied from many angles. Shumar and Mir (2011) review some of the anthropological approaches to the study of higher education. Ethnographic studies can show how students, faculty, and others understand and negotiate these transformations in education.

EP: *Is it possible that some of these investigations may conflict with the interests of the University Administration? How does the Anthropology of Universities deal with the dimension of power?*

GH: Yes, there can be a conflict of interests. I doubt that any organization's administration really enjoys uninvited scrutiny. However, this does not mean that such research should not happen.

A few semesters ago, my students and I conducted a semester-long inquiry into international students' experiences on our campus (Hunter *et al,* 2013). Although we found that overall Illinois State does a very good job at welcoming international students, not everything in our presentation was complimentary. We made criticisms. We presented the results at a university-wide symposium and I know that not all administrators were happy to hear our findings. But, our presentation generated great discussion that day and the university has worked to improve many of the practices we faulted. I should note that the biggest barrier we identified to creating a welcoming international environment on campus resides with American *students*. Students' own highly scheduled, technology-mediated lives and lack of knowledge about the world beyond U.S. borders was the main obstacle to international friendships. This issue goes far beyond the specifics of our campus or administration.

Regarding my student projects generally, I have found that sometimes the university and students' interests coincide but often, of course, they do not. What is most common, however, is that students find that they disagree with the administration on strategies used for achieving a shared goal.

For instance, one student, Kristen Holm (2008), conducted research on a campus Christian organization. She found that both students and the university administration want students to gain a sense of belonging on campus. Where some students and the administration diverge are

on the best strategies for cultivating belonging. The Dean of Students Office promoted student involvement in Greek organizations (sororities and fraternities) but does not, for obvious reasons, promote student participation in religious organizations. On our campus however, Christian organizations are quite popular. Kristen argued that the University might do well to consider what makes those organizations especially attractive to students and successful (in the case of the organization she investigated).

Another little project that comes to mind was about campus safety. Both students and administration want a safe campus. One of my students (Leannais, 2008) became curious about campus safety intercoms (a fixed telephone tower with a blue light). She decided to stories about safety and danger on campus and, specifically, student perspectives on the "blue lights," as the phones are known. She asked, "Why do we have these blue lights? [Do] they make people feel safer or more cautious? How did their use come about?" She found that students joke that the intercoms are useless and campus police would release data to her about whether the intercoms were ever actually used (which led her to believe that they are not). Nevertheless, all parties agreed that it was a good that the university has them! She thus realized that the intercoms serve as *symbols of security* rather than actually useful apparatuses. The student concluded that the university's installation of these intercoms was principally about creating the appearance of safety mostly for an off-campus audience (parents and potential students) rather than addressing a true safety need.

We all know that administration and students can find themselves of opposite sides of an issue. But, I think that wise administrators are likely to listen very carefully to what student researchers have to say. We must remember too that neither students nor administration (nor faculty) are monolithic groups. There are usually many interests at play in any issue. When my students research controversial campus topics, I often advise them to interview relevant university staff and administrators, who thus become important research participants. Good ethnography usually takes into account multiple perspectives, interests, and discourses and explains where differing views come from.

Furthermore, at EUI, we ask

students to make recommendations to the University based on their research. In this way, students have to think concretely about how to improve the university.

EP: *In a recent conference at Universidade Federal de Viçosa (UFV/BR), you stated that the concept of "pedaço" developed by the Brazilian Anthropologist José Guilherme Cantor Magnani is very useful to a sociocultural anthropology of universities. How do you make use of that concept? How can it help in understanding the spacial dynamics of other urban institutions?*

GH: In his article, "De Perto e de Dentro, notas para uma etnografia urbana" (2002) Magnani examines ways of understanding cities and urban life. He notes that there are many conceptualizations of urbanization and cities, such as Saskia Sassen's idea of the "global city" (1991), that produce views that are "from outside and far away." He wanted to juxtapose those interpretations with a view of the city produced ethnographically, "from up close and inside" and in particular, with a view that accounts for social actors' own creative social arrangements and trajectories. In his research on leisure spaces with urban residents he elaborated on the native category of "pedaço," (basically, "neighborhood"). He writes that the term designates an intermediary space between that dichotomy Roberto DaMatta identified as the private sphere (the home) and the public sphere (the street). He says that *pedaço* is an important space of sociability that is broader than familial ties but closer, more meaningful, and more stable than those formal and individualist relations of citizenry in the public sphere (2002: 116).

In my course on the ethnography of the university, we used Magnani's work to think through spaces at the university. There are many faraway and outside discourses on universities, too, for example, on the role of the university in national development and fostering social inclusion. But how do students live in, through, and around the university? What are students varied trajectories through the university? What are the social spaces of the university? There are diverse social groups on campus, such as those defined by students' major course of study (e.g. human sciences or agronomy) and they often occupy different spaces and engage in different social practices. So we asked, what are the different "pedaços" at UFV? How is sociability structured in

different social spaces in and around campus? It probably comes as no surprise that students had much to say on this topic. There are diverse social groups who use distinct spaces at UFV. I had students map their own trajectories and map out social groups and spaces on campus.

Pedaço is just one term among several that Magnani used to map social uses and spaces of the city. Others include *mancha, trajeto, pórtico, circuito*--- all of these designating distinct urban territories, moral spaces, regular users, and activities. We found applying these terms to the university to be a useful device for thinking about the university in a new ways.

EP: *In your research outside the USA, is it possible to establish a comparative analysis? What resemblances are recurring in those institutions?*

GH: I haven't conducted research on or in universities outside of the U.S. but, as you mentioned, I was at the UFV to teach a short course on the ethnography of the university for social science students. From that experience, I can make a few comparisons between UFV and my home institution. I'll mention two.

First, both universities are dealing with issues of diversity in the student body. The student populations of our universities is changing but the forces at work are different. Affirmative action policies have been a generator of change at UFV. At Illinois State, the further decline in state funding for higher education and smaller pool of college age students nationwide are trends that influence our student body. We have more transfer students (students who complete their first two years of higher education in more affordable, local community colleges). Regardless of how these "new" populations of students enter college, faculty encounter students with different skill sets and diverse interests. These students challenge our teaching methods and the content of our disciplines. How to best serve these diverse students has become a topic of discussion among faculty in both places.

As a second issue, both institutions have "internationalization" as part of their strategic goals. At both institutions (and many others) it seems that student mobility and English language classes and services are the central features of what internationalization means. It is worth asking for whom such strategies are

most important. There are in fact many reasons to "internationalize" and many ways to do it. If we want to promote peace, international collaboration, greater cross-cultural understanding, what are the best ways to do this on our campuses? It may not be (only) through English-as-a second language classes.

One of my students looked at the discourse of internationalization among faculty as his semester project (Ingram, 2013). He followed a debate on campus about how to incentivize study abroad and a proposal to count study abroad experiences as part of students' "global studies" requirements (a graduation requirement to take courses with non-Western content that are aimed at developing students' global awareness and citizenship). It became clear throughout this debate that faculty had different ideas about what counts as "global" studies. It also became clear that while almost everyone stated support for study abroad, many faculty criticized the increasing trend toward short-term study abroad programs with "lighter" content that their on-campus equivalents. Ethan concluded that study abroad does not necessarily cultivate a global citizenship perspective. And, in any case, study abroad experiences are out of the reach of the majority of ISU students, who cannot afford study abroad. Given this inequality of access, he questioned whether study abroad ought to be a significant priority of our university.

EP: *How can the ethnography of the different groups that occupy the university contribute to the promotion of tolerance and respect of cultural diversity?*

GH: This is very important. The US experience shows that the existence of a diverse student body does not mean that students meaningfully experience and engage with diversity. Students may create "comfort zones" in which they do not need to address difference. Tolerance and respect for cultural diversity does not just happen; it is not just a product of having diverse students (though we need to have that too). Diversity has to be programmed and has to be a value throughout the institution. It has to play into faculty hiring and employment policies, into the curriculum of all fields, and into the extracurricular activities available to students. The ethnography of the university can reveal the social practices on campus that either reproduce or dismantle discrimination.

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