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Excerpts: A look inside

Cultures@SiliconValley

J. A. English-Lueck

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Rarely asked and often assumed,
this book addresses the question,

"What is the difference that culture makes?"

Silicon Valley, the paramount producer of the information revolution, has become the icon for a lifestyle saturated with digital devices. Most books on the region focus on Silicon Valley's entrepreneurial reputation, but this book is the result of an anthropological expedition into the everyday lives of people living in, and connected to Silicon Valley. These people use technology to create cultural realities and transform their cultural identities into tools. A specialized high-tech economy has drawn people to the region, and created an unparalleled concentration of "techies." Technology permeates everyday life and the very metaphors of community. The economy has also drawn people from all over the world, creating a complex cultural mix, ranging from Cambodian culinary entrepreneurs to Midwestern process engineers. The region is not only a bellwether of technological research and production, but a laboratory for the creation of a complex society. Within schools, workplaces and homes identities emerge, engage, erode, transform and are recreated to coalesce into a larger community of communities. The two strands of technological saturation and identity complexity intertwine to produce many different choices. These choices play out in how technology is used, work is done, community is made and family is lived. People juggle these choices, often informed by the same pragmatic instrumental reasoning that characterizes high-tech workplaces. The 21st century lifestyle of Silicon Valley—saturated by information technologies, struggling to manifest civic life from deeply diverse identity communities—illustrates the social and cultural dilemmas of the near future.

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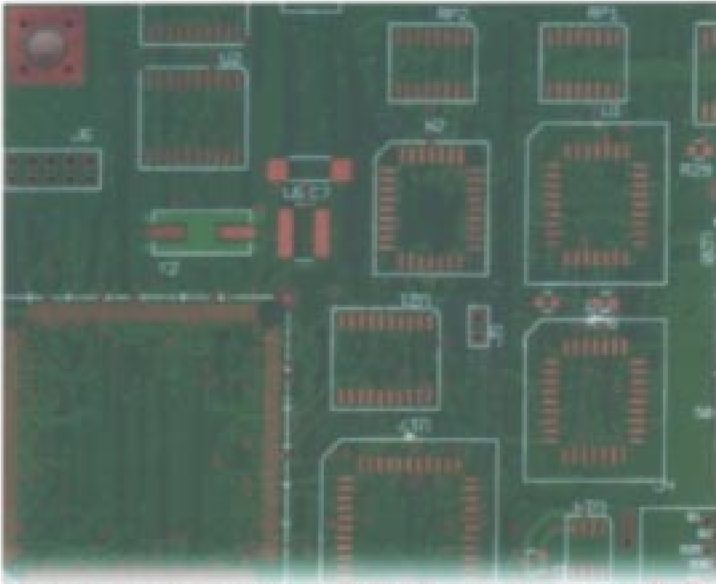

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Prologue

The Morning Report

Asok is a software engineer in one of the showcase companies in Silicon Valley, a gleaming edifice of glass and tile. He and his wife were born in India. Like many in his network of friends, he went to Stanford University to pursue a graduate degree and found work in a large company. He stayed in that company for three years, coding, learning American ways, and discovering that political hierarchies in American workplaces are very different from those he had known in India. Eager and enthusiastic, he put his heart and soul into his first project. His teammates were like family. They worked long hours together, eighty to a hundred hours per week in the crunch times. They went to Burgess Park for picnics, and loaned each other money. It was a heady experience. Suddenly, the product on which his project was based was canceled. His group was broken up and his teammates were distributed among a number of other projects. It was a character-building experience and Asok struggled with his grief.

His next project was less glamorous, and ultimately less satisfying: writing code for an upgrade to a widely available graphics program. Meanwhile, he married, bought a condo, and kept up his ties with classmates from India and Stanford, and with his old project team. Almost as in an apprenticeship, he stayed with the company until he had "upgraded his skill set." Then, leaping into the furnace, he joined an old classmate in a start-up. They were determined to make it but found it difficult to develop their many ideas into a product a client would be willing to buy. After two years of not quite making it to the Initial Public Offering stage that would make them wealthy, Asok began to rethink whether he should continue to work more than a hundred hours a week at a failing enterprise. He then heard about another position, via a buddy from his old institute in Haryana, India, who also worked in Silicon Valley. He took the job, and found both the work and the organization congenial and challenging. At the moment, his situation is relatively stable, but he

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knows that at any time a management decision in the now vast organization could jeopardize his status. Oh well, there are many more jobs out there.

Priyesh and his wife, Sima, old friends of Asok's, are having breakfast. Sima tells Priyesh that her relatives are asking if they will go back to India soon. They shake their heads, wondering why they would want to go back. She says, "I do not miss India . . . anything Indian I want I have it right here—grocery stores, temples, cultural programs, Hindu magazines. There are three movie theaters in the Bay Area showing Hindi movies seven days a week. I only miss my family." Priyesh reflects that here in Silicon Valley he can have all the good parts of India—the people and culture—without having to put up with a decaying bureaucracy and failing infrastructure. They argue gently about whether they really live in an Indian world. She points out that while many of their friends are Indian, including a recently immigrated cousin, Priyesh still has to work with many non-Indians.

Sima adds that she has to interact with very different cultures in their son's preschool—where they celebrate Chinese New Year and Cinco de Mayo. She pauses and then notes that it isn't really too different from interacting with all the different religions and cultures back in India. Priyesh scoffs at the whole problem. All these cultural differences don't matter to him. When he is at work, it is the technology that matters. Whether you are Irish, Chinese, or from New York just isn't important. Well, maybe a bit. The Irish speak better English and he can understand them more easily. What he really doesn't understand are the locally born folks who act as if Silicon Valley was their own invention. Maybe in the beginning this was true, but now it just isn't so simple. Sima responds enthusiastically, noting, "All the different engineers from different countries . . . that is why the brain power is there. If it was just Indians I don't think it would have happened. If it was just Taiwanese, just Chinese, it would not have happened. It's all the different ethnic groups that come together. All these engineers come from different countries and that's why it's making Silicon Valley successful today!"

Priyesh goes back into his home office. He makes a practice of telecommuting every day from about six to nine o'clock in the morning, to avoid the worst freeway traffic. His computer at home is nearly an exact duplicate of his computer at work. The computer is his, but the company provides the infrastructure that allows him to connect to the network. He

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can, at the very least, spend those hours reviewing his e-mail. He gets from fifty to one hundred e-mails each day. Many are work-related, but others connect him to mailing lists of people who are interested in technology stock investment, or people who like to play Indian music or tennis. They will send each other quick messages to set up meeting times or to announce the arrival of a particular artist. He also stays in touch with his family in India with e-mail, since that is the most convenient way to communicate across time zones. In addition to communication, Priyesh uses the morning "chunk" to get the information he needs in order to "set up" his software tests remotely. The network allows him to "work" in the computer laboratory from the convenience of his home or cubicle. When he is in his cubicle, he does use his phone from time to time to talk to his wife, but within his company, life is lived on the computer.

Across the street from the home where Priyesh telecommutes from, Heidi, one of those "locally born people," begins her day. She is almost twenty and Silicon Valley is her heritage. Her father has worked for a large technical company for most of her conscious life. She loves God and photography, and works with her friends on a magazine covering alternative music and extreme sports. It is a great job for her while she is a student at De Anza Community College. She learned her sophisticated computer skills at her father's knee. She watched him work his network, a broad spectrum of friends, to find whatever bit of technical information he needed. In addition to producing the graphics for the magazine, she markets it, never really needing to go beyond her network of church and family friends, school mates, fellow musicians and kin. She doesn't think there is anything revolutionary about Silicon Valley. Naturally, she will use technical skills to develop her own business. If this gig doesn't work, something else will come up. It always does. She wishes it were cheaper to live here—she would like to have her own apartment—but that is just impossible. But living with her parents is okay. Dad gave her his old computer when he upgraded and when she needs more RAM, he lets her use his new one. She stretches and goes out to get her morning paper, the *San Jose Mercury News*, from the lawn.

Norman, working on his car, waves to Heidi. He is a purchaser and planner for a major company, and lives at home with his parents. His car is his pride and joy, the ultimate object of his salary and his stock options. It is in mint condition and "fully loaded." It has an expensive stereo—complete with cassette, CD and DVD players. The latter device is in-

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stalled in the dashboard, fully retractable when not in use. When it slides out he can and does watch movies while he's driving. He also has a play station hooked up to the DVD player so he can play games. In the center console Norman keeps some cigarettes, some CDs, a bit of candy and some cologne. In the door tray he has a remote for his DVD and stereo players and a cell phone. In spite of San Jose's low crime rate, he has a spray can of Mace as well. He enjoys using the TV to entertain his friends, or to amuse himself while he commutes. He recognizes that it is a bit addicting, though. He told Heidi that he once took his friend to the mall to buy something, but rather than accompanying him inside, Norman stayed in his car and played games on his play station. Yet he considers himself a bit old-fashioned. He doesn't use a PalmPilot, but instead writes actual notes with pen and paper to keep himself organized throughout his day.

Norman and Heidi hold different values, but they are friends. Norman is Chinese—a fact Heidi hardly thinks about. His father is from Taiwan. Norman's "auntie" Lily, a friend of his parents', drives by. Lily is an interior designer. She considers herself an amateur ethnographer, as she studies her clients and gets to know their passions. Do they love the American Southwest? Have they traveled to India? Do they love to ski? She helps them decorate their homes with the appropriate "artifacts." She understands that objects can transport her clients to their "dream space" where they can relax, heal and be whole. Her clients, often overstressed managers, need to have an environment that can bring a bit of serenity into their lives on demand. Lately, being Chinese has actually added to her skill set, since feng shui is all the rage. Her network of fellow designers often discuss their problems. They must transform industrial park offices and suburban homes, however sterile and uninspiring on the outside, by providing interiors that have "a Silicon Valley look." The image is ultramodern with bold colors and chrome, softened by artifacts drawn from global traditions and tailored to the expectations and experiences of each client.

The Silicon Valley aesthetic is like a photo mosaic, a composite image consisting of many tiny photographs—such as a portrait of Abraham Lincoln made from hundreds of tiny Civil War photographs. While the broad outline conveys an impression of high technology and California living, the details of life reflect snapshots of people who come from everywhere, from Bangalore to Berkeley.

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CHAPTER I

Culture Version 1.x

A Technological Community

Why It Matters

When California's Santa Clara County was labeled "Silicon Valley" in the 1970s the region was transformed in the public imagination. But much of the mythic characterization of the region as a brave new world is hyperbole. Although the Valley is home and showcase for the latest in high-technology innovation, its denizens do not live lives radically different from those of their urban American counterparts. There are distinct social and economic classes. The institutions of the community—schools, hospitals, mayoral offices—are not so different from those in Sacramento, or San Diego. People eat, sleep, work, and play in patterns familiar to many Americans.

Yet the region experiences forces that will significantly shape the future elsewhere in America, and the world. Technological devices from e-mail servers to telephones make it possible—even easy—for people to form dense interconnections in local networks, as well as in wider global affiliations. Technology suffuses daily life, the economy, and even the very language of Silicon Valley. Like the belled sheep at the fore of the flock, Silicon Valley is a bellwether beast, pursuing the newest technologies on the drawing board and in the hand. Its specialized economic history, once based on fruit agriculture and now built around high-technology production, has drawn people from around the world. The community's cultural complexity makes it an illustration of postmodern life. The heterogeneity of classes, ethnicities, national cultures, self-identified subcultures, and organizational cultures makes it difficult to assign individuals to any particular category or to assume that anyone shares your cultural premises. Artifacts and behaviors may derive from Midwestern homeliness, California counterculture, or from any number of sources from around the Pacific Rim and beyond. Europeans find the Valley European, while South Asians have reproduced bits of Indian life. Mid-

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western Americans find it both familiar and alien. Cultural interactions are inherently ambiguous; certainty in the cultural identification of oneself or others is illusory.

The things that make Silicon Valley distinctive—its technological saturation and complex range of identities—are not merely interesting cultural artifacts in themselves. They are significant because both the pervasiveness of technology and identity diversity are coming to define the emerging global culture. By studying the nature of the bellwether sheep, we may understand the consequences of technological saturation and cultural complexity for the rest of the flock. With this in mind, I have deliberately identified Silicon Valley as a natural experimental laboratory.

Silicon Valley is not the only place where either technological saturation or cultural complexity are dominant factors in defining culture. Indeed, if it were the unique repository of those features, it would be irrelevant to our understanding of any other culture. But "silicon places," whose economies are increasingly dominated by high-technology industries, are replicating around the globe, from Austin to Bangalore, while Manhattan, Chicago, and London are home to wide-ranging cultural diversity. Beyond these dramatic examples, even smaller communities feel the exponential growth of consumer technologies and the increasing opportunity to encounter people different from themselves. These people are also subject to the forces that so obviously shape culture in Silicon Valley. Silicon Valley has enthusiastically embraced technology and cultural complexity, making it a prime location for the anthropological study of what happens in any technologically saturated community. We can learn from its experiences.

This book is an anthropological foray into an emerging global landscape. The production of technology dominates the region and is attracting people from around the world, reshaping cultural identities. Silicon Valley has been studied by economists, urban planners, sociologists, business theorists, and historians. They examine their own particular slice of social reality, be it the structure of networked global business practices or the struggle of the underclass in the showcase region of late capitalism. Journalists capture the story of the day, often highlighting the rich, the famous, and the exotica of Silicon Valley.[1]

[1]Annalee Saxenian, an urban planner, examines the region for its connections to organizations, particularly as it compares to Boston's Route 128 and the role of Indian and

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Anthropology is concerned with mundanity—the details of daily life, and what the small actions and interactions teach us about the human condition. The sites for that exploration and the tools for uncovering behavior differ widely. In the United States, anthropologists have been trained in a particularly broad disciplinary worldview, adding insights from biological anthropology and archaeology to direct observations of cultural life. This provides an interesting lens through which any time or place can be viewed. In addition to classical ethnographic inquiry—that is, observing and listening to living people in their own environments—we have additional conceptual tools. From biological anthropologists we learn to think about the processes leading to human variation and evolution that can be broadly defined as "change through time." We are, in the end, animals—but animals who manipulate our own environments and organize ourselves to adapt to the world around us using the ideas and artifacts shaped by our cultures. Archaeologists have taught us that sweeping cultural changes show a pattern when viewed over time, and that the tiniest objects we use reveal much about our behavior. Our words and actions tell stories, but so do our artifacts. A fragment of porcelain fired in Asia can tell a tale of international migration and trade, and illuminate the daily routine of a person who might have lived and died in obscurity, under the historical radar screen that tends to register only the prominent. These perspectives force cultural anthropologists to ask questions about the smallest details of daily life and then link them to ever changing larger forces. Hence, this anthropological consideration of Silicon Valley focuses on ordinary people, living lives filled with the minutia of daily activity, surrounded by material objects and cultural ideas. Evidenced in those small objects and behavioral impulses are larger evolutionary forces, vast historic changes that drive us to re-create our cultures, often without even knowing it.

Social anthropology, a once-British tradition now practiced around

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Chinese entrepreneurs in the region (1985, 1994, 1999). Sociologist and urban planner Manuel Castells examines Silicon Valley as a global technopole, a twenty-first-century industrial complex (1996, 2000; Castells and Hall 1994). These works focus on the roll of the entrepreneur. In contrast, sociologists Dennis Hayes (1989) and Karen Hossfeld (1988) examine life among the less privileged workers in Silicon Valley. Jean Deitz Sexton's *Silicon Valley Inventing the Future*, Po Bronson's *Nudist on the Late Shift* (1999), and Paulina Barsook's critical political commentary *Cyberselfish* (2000) are distinct examples of more journalistic examinations of life in the Valley.

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the English-speaking world, teaches us that how we organize ourselves into groups, and how we support those organizational forms with beliefs, is a vital clue in unraveling human behavior. Silicon Valley people organize their lives around networks, family, and work organizations. These organizing principles are part of the distinctive culture that defines the region. As an anthropologist, I must explore those aspects of social life.

I am primarily a cultural anthropologist, and so I focus my attention on the role of culture as I find it in its natural setting, in the "field" (Lindholm 2001: 12). The idea of culture is one of anthropology's greatest gifts to social philosophy. It refers to "everything that human beings have created and transmitted socially across time and space" (van der Elst and Bohannan 1999: 32). Anthropologists are used to employing the term "culture" in its broadest sense, as in: "Human beings adapt to their environment using culture." In the past, the term also referred to the social entities that were presumed to share the same "creations" and "socially transmitted" ideas. We continue to refer, rather imprecisely, to the "Navajo culture," or the "American culture," a practice that tends to make us ignore the important contextual differences between Navajos in Window Rock and Navajos in Los Angeles.

It is unfortunate that this concept was first conceptualized as *kultur*, a noun, rather than a verb, as that is misleading.[2] Culture is the operating system that shapes our cognitive and behavioral processes, the "'conceptual structures' that create the central reality of a people" (D'Andrade 1984: 115). However, defining the scope of the "people" that create culture is problematic, since culture acts at many levels of social organization. "Creations" and "social transmissions" take place within the family, the network, the community, the region, and the nation. Culture "happens" across national boundaries at a global level in McDonald's restaurants, airports, and cubicles around the world. Yet all the people in a single family, or a single nation, share behaviors only in the most gen-

[2]Arjun Appadurai makes a similar argument when he suggests that culture is best used is an adjective, "cultural," in describing other aspects of life. He suggests that the "idea of culture as difference" best defines the use of the concept. Hence cultural differences can be detected ethnographically, even when cultures may be complex and fragmented (1996: 12-14). However, he restricts his definition of culture to only those aspects of social life linked to identity, a definition that excludes the material realm—"administrative arrangements, economic pressures, biological constraints, and so forth"—in explaining human behavior (Kuper 1999: 246).

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eral way—demonstrating patterns, but not absolute uniformity. In studying culture it is important to look for the patterns—the footprints of commonality—while also documenting the variation within the patterns. Silicon Valley does not "have" a single uniform culture—although patterns do emerge—but it contains practices from many cultural variants in endless combinations, creating something altogether singular. This book lays out some of the cultural patterns that have been teased out of peoples' words, artifacts, actions, and interactions.

By looking at cultural processes at the community level, this study joins the many case studies of complex communities, from Hong Kong (Evans and Tam 1997) to Pittsfield, Massachusetts (Nash 1989). Specifically, I use Silicon Valley as a case study to reveal the experiences and consequences of technological saturation. This information has a special relevance to people who are connected with such "silicon" communities, both ordinary citizens and policy makers. Silicon Valley is also a natural laboratory for cultural complexity, containing a diverse array of interacting identities. Thus, while this study focuses specifically on Silicon Valley, it has wider implications for understanding the more general processes of living with digital technology and intense cultural diversity.

Silicon Valley also provides us with a mirror in which we can look at ourselves and examine our own choices. Some communities actively seek to duplicate Silicon Valley's apparent success, or at least those features that they believe will lead to prosperity, making political decisions that encourage industry, create private-public partnerships, and aggressively promote technical and infrastructural "progress." Corporate and public organizations enact policies less visible than acts of Congress, but perhaps not less profound in their effect. Individuals also embrace technologies for many purposes and results, reinforcing existing values and shaping new ones. Understanding the social life of Silicon Valley people allows all of us to reflect on the choices we make—both inside and outside Silicon Valley.

Digging Up Stories

This book is based on material from the Silicon Valley Cultures Project, a fifteen-year exploration of work, family, technology, and identity that began in 1991, conducted by Charles Darrah, James M. Freeman, and myself (English-Lueck et al. 2000). Because the project has extended over a substantial amount of time, it has described life in Silicon Valley

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terviews. The composite characters are created to enliven widely observed actions and to create fictional integrity in the scenarios. The detailed vignettes are themselves fictional composites. The words and deeds in them were said and done, but by a number of different people.

Conceptually, two ideas dominate this book—technological saturation and identity diversity. Silicon Valley showcases changes in daily life that come directly as a result of the pervasive use of technology. The region also embodies changes in demography, and highlights the complex cultural interactions that accompany participation in a global high-tech economy. Hence the book is divided into two parts.

The remainder of this book explores the intertwining strands of Silicon Valley, as the prototype of a community that is suffused both with many technologies and many identities. The economic specialization of the region has drawn people with great technological expertise to the community in unparalleled density. Technology permeates everyday life and provides the metaphors of community identity. The magnet of high-tech work has created a new population influx. Historically steeped in agrarian-based ethnic diversity, Silicon Valley has drawn different populations from within and beyond the United States into its high-technology economic engine. The array of cultures in the region fueling the workforce ranges from Cambodian culinary entrepreneurs to Midwestern process engineers. International ties emerge not only from immigrants and economic sojourners but also from the social bonds that are made and repeatedly reinforced through emerging electronic technologies. The region is not only a bellwether of technological research and production but also a laboratory for the creation of a complex society that contains diverse identities. Individual identities emerge, engage, erode, and are re-created to produce a larger community of communities in which people interact in schools, workplaces, and homes.

The two strands of technological saturation and identity diversity intertwine to produce many different choices in uses of technology, work practices, community connections, and family relationships. One dominant pattern emerges from these choices—instrumentality. Instrumental reasoning—the kind of reasoning that calculates the relationship of means to ends—is integral to producing and using technology. Life is managed. How does that reasoning affect the way in which we live as social and cultural beings? What happens when people make cultural identity itself into a tool, an instrument that is a means to an end? How do we

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manage identity complexity in an increasingly global culture? Once anthropologists traveled to distant islands in the South Pacific to test the validity of established gender roles or socialization patterns. Today we recognize that life in Silicon Valley is a laboratory for the integration of consumer technology and transnational migration, reflecting larger American, and even transnational, cultural trends.

The first part of the book emphasizes the consequences of technological saturation. In "A Technological Place" I have considered the impact of technology on daily and community life in Silicon Valley. In the chapter you are now reading, "Culture Version I.X: A Technological Community," I have introduced the outlines of life in Silicon Valley, both familiar and exotic. In Chapter 2, "Compressing: Using Digital Devices to Shape Space and Time," I look at what it means to be "technologically saturated" in everyday life, and how technology use affects the choices people make and the consequences, often unintended, of those choices. Here I discuss the significance of "work," a commonly used English word, but one that takes on a distinctive metaphorical meaning in Silicon Valley. Chapter 3, "Networking: Building Community in Silicon Valley," discusses the social organization and public life of Silicon Valley. Networks—a form of social organization that is facilitated by technology—dominate how people structure meaningful groups. Technological metaphors influence Valley language and create a distinct public culture. Community is "designed," "invented," "reinvented," and "refreshed." Civic activities include "NetDays," when high-tech volunteers install an infrastructure to bring the internet into public school classrooms, and the development and celebration of the Tech Museum of Innovation. I examine how the identification with technology is used by people within Silicon Valley, and in other technologically saturated regions, to create a "value-added" community.

The second part of the book is centered on the interaction of diverse identities. In "Trafficking in Complexity," I track the global movements of people that have shaped the cultural complexity of the region. In Chapter 4, "Input/Output: Emerging Global Culture," the evolution of Silicon Valley's global dimensions is revealed in detail, highlighting the complex mixture of ancestral, national, and corporate cultures that flow through the Valley. In it, I must unravel the role of culture and the function of identity. The fifth chapter, "Executing: Culture at Work and Home," explores how culture is viewed, identified, and used at work and

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at home. When is one's birth culture invoked? When is it avoided? Especially noteworthy are the strategies used by workers to "manage culture," although management of culture is not confined to the workplace. The limits and creative solutions families make to adapt to different ancestral and corporate cultural expectations reflect another way that culture is used. These choices are expressed in courtship, child-rearing, and interpersonal relationships. In "managing culture" Silicon Valley denizens engage in the ultimate metaphorical act of instrumental reasoning: turning cultural identity and cultural competence themselves into tools. Finally, in the last chapter, "Reformatting: Creating Useful Culture," we consider the coexistence of technological saturation and identity diversity, and the implications of combining these two forces. What are the challenges inherent in living in such a rich technological and cultural ecosystem, with so many choices and possible interactions? What are the tools people are creating to manage this complexity? How does it change how they organize their lives and relationships? How do the symbols, metaphors, and values of a community—so heavily identified by technology—shape civic life? Ultimately, what can we learn from the natural experiment known as Silicon Valley?

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Anthropology/ Business

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After Santa Clara county in California was labeled “Silicon Valley” in the 1970s, it attained a mythical quality in the public imagination. Although much of the myth is surely hyperbole, the region has experienced and continues to experience forces that will shape the future elsewhere in the United States and around the world. The paramount producer of the information revolution, Silicon Valley has become the icon for a lifestyle saturated with digital devices.

Whereas most books on the region focus oil its entrepreneurial reputation, this book is all arithropological expedition into the everyday lives of people living in and connected to Silicon Valley—software engineers around the water cooler, a mothers’ group at lunch, nannies in the park, rush-hour commuters—to get at the emerging texture of life. A specialized high-tech economy has drawn people from many countries, and the things that make Silicon Valley culture distinctive—technological saturation and cultural complexity—also define an emerging global culture, and in that context it operates as a natural experimental laboratory.

Based on ten years of anthropological research, the book is all ethnographic exploration of the Impact of these momentous changes on a single region. Within schools, workplaces. and homes. Identities emerge, erode, transform, and are recreated to coalesce into a larger community of communities, producing many different choices for its inhabitants. These choices determine how technology is used, work is done, and families are made. People juggle these choices, often informed by the same pragmatic, instrumental reasoning that characterizes high-tech workplaces. Saturated by information technology and struggling to manifest civic life from deeply diverse identity communities, the inhabitants of Silicon Valley illustrate in microcosm the social and cultural identities of the future.

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