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Abstract

In this essay, we engage current discussions about refunctioning ethnography along lines that are meant to reimagine larger trajectories of ethnographic theory and practice. While these discussions are complicated and involved, much attention has been focused on refunctioning the mythological residue of Malinowskian modes of fieldwork from which springs trends for apprenticing graduate students to do and write up fieldwork. What has received less attention in these discussions are two other related tendencies on which we focus here: the first concerns connecting current leanings toward collaborative ethnographic activism, in particular, with those contemporary performances of ethnography that surface from Boasian-situated histories; the second concerns connecting these contemporary performances as they articulate in practice, with not only graduate, doctoral-level training in ethnography but also emerging impulses for teaching and learning ethnography at all levels, including undergraduate instruction.

Keywords

research imaginaries, refunctioned ethnography, ethnographic pedagogies, collaborative research and action

The question of what we might have ethnography do has always in one form or another shaped ethnographic theory and practice.¹ In its classic era, modern ethnography emerged as an instrument, a method for apprehending and elaborating the mysteries of “culture,” whatever or wherever it may be. The same could be said for the “new ethnography” or ethno-methodologies of the 1950s and 1960s and even the symbolic and interpretive anthropologies of the 1960s and 1970s. Feminist, postmodern, and critical approaches to ethnography, moving in and around the vein of the 1980s critique, changed this, of course. As ethnography gained traction as a dialogic and experimental undertaking, it was opened up to much greater potential for dialogue, collaboration, and engagement; for many, it also opened up greater possibilities for linking ethnographic theory and practice in much more proactive and immediate ways (see, for example, Lassiter, 2005a; Marcus, 1999; Tedlock, 2005).

As is well known, the last several decades of the 20th century witnessed an explosion of ethnographic experiments along these lines (Marcus & Fischer, 1999). But as ethnography now emerges from this apparent interlude, and as ethnographers now reflect on where ethnography has come since the 1980s critique (either decrying the period’s excesses or chastising it for not going far enough), many scholars (several at the center of the 1980s critique) suggest that ethnography has again reached a state of suspension and awaits systemic reimagination and refunctioning within the field (see, for example, Faubion & Marcus, 2009; Rabinow & Marcus, 2008; Westbrook, 2008). George Marcus (2005a),

for example, suggests that although inclinations toward intersubjectivity, collaboration, and activism are now mainstream in ethnographic practice, many ethnographers “have failed yet to articulate for themselves (and others) a revision of their historic research program to accommodate the rather dramatic *de facto* changes in their practice of basic fieldwork and ethnography that have occurred since the 1980s” (p. 677).

Although many have persuasively challenged the assumptions behind calls for rearticulating ethnography along these lines—as they relate, for example, to pronouncements for a more public anthropology (see, for example, Field & Fox, 2007)—we believe that one of the central issues driving much of this recent discussion deserves serious attention: the teaching and learning of ethnography (i.e., its pedagogy) and its relationship to redirecting larger trajectories of ethnographic theory and practice. Although this discussion is complicated and involved (on which we briefly touch below), it primarily centers on refunctioning the mythological residue of still-dominant Malinowskian modes of fieldwork from which spring trends for apprenticing doctoral-level graduate students to do and write up fieldwork. This, of course, has profound

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implications for theorizing and putting into motion what larger fields of inquiry will have ethnography do today and in the future (see, for example, Holmes & Marcus, 2005, 2008). What has received less attention in these discussions, however, are two other related tendencies on which we will focus in this essay: the first concerns connecting current leanings toward collaborative ethnographic activism, in particular, with those contemporary performances of ethnography that surface from Boasian-situated histories; the second concerns extending these contemporary performances as they articulate in practice beyond doctoral-level training in ethnography and into emerging impulses for teaching and learning ethnography at all levels, including undergraduate instruction.

With these tendencies in mind, the question of what we will have ethnography do seems a particularly relevant question today, one that resonates with ethnographers across many different fields, where a range of scholars and practitioners are also grappling with the problem from a number of different perspectives (see, for example, Adler & Adler, 2008). For us, it is also a deeply personal question, one to which we have turned often since the time we ourselves were both graduate students (in anthropology and folklore, respectively) coming of age in the wake of the 1980s critique. At that time, these developments, coupled with those in feminist and critical theory, seemed to only amplify our conviction that ethnography could and should be—to invoke Dell Hymes (1969)—“critical, political, [and] personal.” As such, these developments focused considerably our interests in bringing issues of equity to bear on our ethnography, to move it beyond dialogic approaches to representation (a key concern for ethnography during and since the 1980s) and to push it in the direction of a more explicit collaborative ethnography (see Lassiter, 2005a, 2005b), one that engages us—both we ethnographers and the people with whom we work—in cooperative approaches to research that imagine and push toward, in deliberate and explicit ways, coinscription, corepresentation, and, in turn, collaborative actions: all connected as a continuum, or constellation, of praxis.

Many others have worked in similar veins over the past several decades (see, for example, Hale, 2008). Our key purpose for this essay, however, centers on how those of us working within these collaborative ethnographic frameworks might more systemically theorize our pedagogies along these same lines and then move toward designing and developing our research practice with our students accordingly. Following George Marcus’s notion of “research imaginary” (see Marcus, 1998), we propose a reimagining of ethnographic pedagogies within what we call a “Boasian imaginary,” which we believe informs much current collaborative ethnographic work (although it may not always be readily apparent [see Darnell, 2001]) and one that may also have great promise for refunctioning collaborative ethnography, in particular, in the present. We begin by briefly touching on current, and what are quickly

becoming well-known, discussions that call for refunctioning Malinowskian-styled research imaginaries in graduate pedagogy; suggest an alternative Boasian imaginary that seems more in line with an ethnography repurposed and reanimated for collaborative, activist partnerships and projects at all levels; and conclude with some thoughts about why refunctioned collaborative ethnographic pedagogies should matter within larger changes currently under way in ethnographic theory and practice.

Imagining Malinowski and Refunctioned Ethnography

Books, manuals, and guides on doing and writing ethnography—not to mention websites, blogs, listservs, and other electronic media—are now ubiquitous; neither faculty nor students need look very far to find prescriptions, approaches, and models for carrying out ethnographic projects. Courses in ethnography are more commonly taught today than they were in the past, and students of ethnography at all levels in fields like anthropology, folklore, communication studies, and education have access to the methods of and approaches to ethnography unlike ever before.

Although it is generally accepted that ethnography encompasses a wide variety of topics and issues which can range from the study of science and technology to underground economies, a powerful set of assumptions about how ethnography is enacted and inscribed continues to have enormous influence on how it is constructed and practiced in the present, especially concerning how it is passed from one generation of ethnographers to the next (Holmes & Marcus, 2005, 2008). In many ethnographic pedagogies (particularly in but not limited to anthropology), ethnography that is done abroad or under difficult circumstances is still considered (though rarely openly articulated as such these days) to be more “serious,” “real,” or “authentic.” As a student moves “up the chain” from undergraduate to master’s-level and then to doctoral-level work, and as she moves from presumably “less serious” to “more serious” ethnographic work, she often shifts from, as an undergraduate or master’s-level student, an instrumental approach to learning ethnography (i.e., taking one or more classes in ethnographic methods and perhaps using a variety of available ethnographic manuals) to, as a doctoral student, a mentor-apprenticeship approach to learning ethnography (i.e., one often accompanied by relatively few advanced course offerings in ethnographic methods, if they are offered at all). As the student moves from introductory to mid-level to more advanced training, time and space for doing ethnography also widens: as an undergraduate or master’s-level student, ethnography is frequently deployed locally, conducted for short periods, often a semester or sometimes over the course of an academic year; as a doctoral-level student, ethnography is frequently deployed abroad, conducted for longer periods, often a year or more (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997).

The set of assumptions behind what constitutes “serious ethnography” ultimately stems from an equally powerful set of ideas and concepts behind how ethnography is imagined, a kind of “research imaginary” that, borrowing from Marcus (1998, pp. 6, 10), summons “provocations,” “presuppositions,” and “sensibilities” that frame actual ethnographic approaches and strategies and are perhaps most powerfully experienced at the nexus of teaching and learning ethnography. Key to this research imaginary, as Douglas Holmes and George Marcus (2005, 2008) note, is an enduring image of “being in the field,” one that follows if not completely in style, then in the spirit of Bronislaw Malinowski who, regularly introduced as the “father of ethnography” in many an introductory ethnography course, set forth a systematic method for doing ethnographic fieldwork in his *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922). Malinowski’s experience and subsequent method, of course, forcefully shaped the modern development of ethnography in anthropology and closely related fields. In an oft-quoted passage, Malinowski (1922) wrote,

Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight. Since you take up your abode in the compound of some neighboring white man, trader or missionary, you have nothing to do, but to start at once on your ethnographic work. Imagine further that you are a beginner, without previous experience, with nothing to guide you and no one to help you. For the white man is temporarily absent, or else unable or unwilling to waste any of his time on you. This exactly describes my first initiation into field work on the south coast of New Guinea. (p. 4)

To be sure, a great deal has changed in ethnographic fieldwork since Malinowski penned these lines. Few now conduct fieldwork in ways that Malinowski once did; even fewer contemporary ethnographers would directly identify with Malinowski’s fieldwork experience—especially because the conditions of fieldwork have changed so dramatically since his time. Yet the mythological image of Malinowski “alone on a tropical beach close to a native village” continues to have considerable bearing on ethnography’s underlying mythology. This “research imaginary” (in the more literal sense) is bound up in an enduring fieldwork tradition that branches out from this original image of fieldwork in its most “serious,” “real,” and “authentic” form (Holmes & Marcus, 2005, 2008; Marcus, 2002; see also Gupta & Ferguson, 1997).

This “Malinowskian imaginary,” if you will, is most easily apprehended where it unfolds in often very predictable ways: in the staging of student fieldwork, particularly in how advanced, doctoral-level graduate students are trained as, in Holmes and Marcus’s terms, “initiates” (Holmes & Marcus,

2005). As apprentice ethnographers, in addition to the actual training in methods they may (or may not) receive, initiates are also soaked in and absorb a set of images, stories, and scenarios “from the field” imparted by classic texts like Malinowski’s and those that followed in its wake. Importantly, they also steep in the images, stories, and scenarios of their mentors who have their own immersion stories, replete with their own particular challenges of doing “real” and “serious” fieldwork. Their heads full of these fieldwork images, stories, and scenarios, initiates (almost always) then venture off alone to do their fieldwork. In keeping with this imaginary, their fieldwork experiences will be more “authentic” if they take place in faraway and exotic places, where, in addition to the alienating differences of language and culture, they must also cope with foreign ways of sleeping, eating, shitting, et cetera. These experiences will eventually form the core of their own immersion stories, reinforcing the tropes of emotional isolation and physical hardship at the core of traditional masculinist, testosterone-injected, Malinowskian-styled fieldwork research imaginaries.

The images, stories, and scenarios that student ethnographers absorb as initiates and later craft from their own fieldwork experiences, of course, are at their heart permeated through and through with “difference,” the staple of ethnography; ethnographic tellings add depth, authenticity, and authority to the elaboration of that difference (compare Gupta & Ferguson, 1997)—if not in what are now more reflexive, poetically astute, and more “authority-conscious” “dialogically attuned” ethnographic texts (a la, for example, Clifford & Marcus, 1986), then in the ethnographic stories relayed to colleagues and (eventually to one’s own) students during the course of training. From this initial fieldwork experience initiates develop—and importantly, are encouraged to experiment with—images, stories, and scenarios from their own fieldwork experiences which they then add to the canon (which exists inside and outside of ethnographic texts themselves) and thus enlarge and thicken the broader research imaginary from which all ethnographers draw, in turn, to imagine how we will do ethnography and what we will do with it (Holmes & Marcus, 2005, 2008).

As these ways of imagining ethnography get firmly established within the larger “provocations,” “presuppositions,” and “sensibilities” (Marcus, 1998) that surround ethnographic training, initiates take them in through this host of compelling “stories and tales” shaped by powerful “images and scenarios” that reach outward, via the rite of passage of fieldwork, through Malinowski and his mythic descendants and into the hearts and minds of newly minted professionals, who, after all, must yield to the expectations of building and sustaining ethnographic knowledge and thus their careers. (In this scenario, there is little question about what we will have ethnography do.)

Nothing is inherently wrong with all of this—all fields of inquiry contain enduring foundational assumptions,

mythologies, and research imaginaries—except when it hinders imagining and doing different kinds of ethnography in the present. Douglas Holmes and George Marcus (2005, 2008) argue that it does and that the reproduction of conventional “images and scenarios” of fieldwork are more and more at direct odds with the actual, contemporary conditions of “the field” in which ethnographers work today: especially—and this is the point—when it concerns training new ethnographers who are faced with a field progressively more dissimilar from their predecessors. “The field” as we know it—and ethnography for that matter—has changed faster than its pedagogies.

There’s no mistaking that ethnographic theory and practice has changed markedly as the conditions of “the field” have expanded into multisited domains with wide-ranging purposes and goals (e.g., dialogue, reflexivity, cultural critique, public scholarship, activism)—especially since the 1980s critique. But perhaps more than anything else, the nature and role of *collaboration* in that fieldwork—even since the 1980s critique—seems to have changed even more (see Marcus, 2002, 2005a, 2005b). Of course, doing and writing ethnography has always depended in large measure on collaboration, though ethnographic “collaboration” has functioned in different ways through time (see Lassiter, 2005b). Unlike the past, however, contemporary ethnographers now work within ever-more explicit, dynamic, and expanding flows of complex collaborations that implicate a wide range of sites, organizations, and constituents unlike ever before. We defer here, in particular, to George Marcus who has made these observations in more than a few recent essays (see, for example, Marcus, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009), in which he points out that the conditions and expectations for collaboration now inform the “fieldwork encounter” more pervasively than ever before, from “working with subjects of various situations in mutually interested concerns and projects” to broader interdisciplinary collaborations “promoted by globalizing sovereignties” in which collaboration is an “organizing endeavor at all levels and in all places” (Marcus, 2008, p. 7). Marcus (2008) further observes that

[T]here are pressures on fieldwork, coming from multiple directions today, to define itself in terms of the modality of collaboration. Anthropologists confront the “other” (now “counterpart”) in the expectation of collaboration, and in their appeal for funds, etc., in their relation to dominating and patron institutions, they should represent themselves as collaborators or themselves organized in collaborations. This is all very different from the way in which collaboration has been embedded, neglected, and redeemed in the traditional practice of ethnography. Collaboration instead is a key trope for condensing a whole complex of new challenges. (pp. 7-8)

Among these new challenges, suggests Marcus (2007), is charting a different kind of collaborative ethnography from that which emerged in the wake of the 1980s critique: that is, in which ethnographers seek to reflexively offset colonial modes of research by engaging research participants as dialogic partners in projects (still) largely initiated by the researcher. Streams of contemporary fieldwork collaboration now propel ethnographers into multiple sites of complicity, that is, “where everyone, directly or indirectly, is implicated in and constituted by complex technical systems of knowledge, power, health, politics, media, economy, and the like” (Marcus, 2007, p. 8). Which means, of course, that ethnographers are not the only ones asking ethnographic questions, or even doing ethnography; ethnographers no longer enter into projects with clearly defined “subjects” or “informants” but with “epistemic partners” who may very well be addressing similar ethnographic questions in their own (albeit differently deployed) “paraethnographic” projects. In this kind of collaborative ethnography, the questions, products, and functions of ethnography are multidirectional (initiated by all parties, not just the researcher[s]), connecting a wide range of multisited “collaborative imaginaries” for what we (i.e., ethnographers and our epistemic partners) might have ethnography do in the present, that is, as “collaborative resources for common objects and questions” (Marcus, 2007, p. 9).

Marcus (2007) admits that this kind of multisited collaborative ethnography—that is, where “ethnography . . . becomes multi-sited not by following known processes, but by moving within the imaginaries of its found collaborations” (Marcus, 2007, p. 9)—is still emergent and not fully realized in academic ethnography but that it may find further articulation in newly emergent ethnographic pedagogies (see also Marcus, 2009). Indeed, if ethnographers are, by the very conditions of their work, being pulled into more streams of complex and interacting interlocutors and relationships than ever before, where the ethnographer is but one of many different “navigators of the contemporary” (Westbrook, 2008), and thus working within a plethora of research and other agendas, then repurposing the training of initiates along these lines seems a much more appropriate way to prepare future ethnographers who are now charged with making sense of the contemporary world through collaborative modes of ethnography. This being the case, we might very well imagine, as Holmes and Marcus suggest, that ethnographic pedagogies could be “refunctioned” accordingly, where framing an ethnography “that is theoretical, empirical, ethical, political, and existential in its scope and purview can be built into the constitution of the ethnographic relationship” (Holmes & Marcus, 2005, p. 1110) as we theorize, practice, and, especially, teach it.

Paul Rabinow and George Marcus elaborate these and other ideas in a recent book, *Designs for an Anthropology of the Contemporary* (Rabinow & Marcus, 2008), in which they argue in effect—albeit from different vantage points—for

graduate training that is repurposed and refunctioned along these lines. In general, they encourage collaboratively designed graduate work—especially between and among initiates, their mentors, and ideally with their epistemic partners—that is meant to shift the focus away from research in which the lone student ethnographer decides on a project and then sets off for the field, to research in which initiates are pushed to collectively imagine and then design ethnography as a collaborative partnership much like a contemporary “design studio.” In this ethnographic pedagogy, groups of faculty, students, and their “counterpart others” work together as epistemic partners in larger research collaboratives to chart collective lines of “ethnographic inquiry” as well as what those lines of inquiry might produce (ethnographic texts, for example). The effect, one might envision, is that initiates learn to imagine and carry out ethnography as a collective project from its inception: figuratively in terms of the lines of inquiry engendered and literally in terms of the potentials for the kinds of collaborative ethnography that might be produced, whether that is with each other or with their epistemic partners or both.

Rabinow describes his Anthropology of the Contemporary Research Collaborative at UC-Berkeley and Marcus his Center for Ethnography at UC-Irvine (see esp. Rabinow & Marcus, 2008, pp. 115-121): both are meant to refigure the conventional and still predictable “go-out-and-do-fieldwork-see-you-next-year” Malinowskian research imaginary and instead foster and amplify student training in the vein of “collaborative imaginaries.” Marcus, for example, writes that UC-Irvine’s Center for Ethnography “offers the opportunity (to students as well as professors) to organize workshops that bring together anthropologists and counterpart others in order to reflect explicitly on collaborations, on shared imaginaries, on difference, and to make these reflections part of the research design” (Rabinow & Marcus, 2008, p. 118). It appears that Marcus and his students are doing a seemingly simple yet provocative thing: pulling the processes of the contemporary field, saturated as it is with modes of collaboration, more firmly into the process of graduate training itself; that is, backing up that process one step earlier, where initiates and their research collaborators are dealing with and navigating collaboration up front, instead of after the fact.

In some ways, these pedagogical experiments are not unlike ethnographic field schools (see, for example, Iris, 2004), many of which have long sought out the same kinds of changes in ethnographic pedagogy for which Rabinow and Marcus (2008) seem to hope. But this most recent vision for refunctioning ethnography seems different in the explicit and conscious ways it, first, directly destabilizes the deployment of a Malinowskian imaginary in the training of so-called initiates and, second, directly reimagines as well as restages the contemporary challenges of fieldwork within alternative, multidirectional, multisited collaborative imaginaries. These

two points are especially interesting for us because we have also worked to imagine and design more collaboratively focused ethnographic pedagogies where students, faculty, and research collaborators together imagine and then initiate similar multidimensional collaborative ethnographic projects (see, for example, Lassiter et al., 2004), as have a good many others (see, for example, Hyatt, 2001; Lamphere, 2004; Wali, 2006). Although many of these ethnographic projects arguably work within the same kinds of collaborative imaginaries that inform Rabinow and Marcus’s collectives (i.e., those that generate “collaborative resources for common objects and questions” [Marcus, 2007, p. 9]), they also proceed from and are implemented within collaborative imaginaries that generate broad-based civic engagements and activism as well.

Many have linked these public, applied, and activist tendencies to developments in ethnographic theory and practice that surfaced in the wake of the 1980s critique which, for many, helped to infuse “circumstantial activism” into their ethnographic praxis (see, for example, the essays in Marcus, 1999). But these developments also stem from an even larger set of field approaches, enactments, and imaginaries (in terms concerning both how ethnography is constituted through time as well as how individual persons engage ethnography within and across space), ways of thinking about and doing ethnography that stem from traditions of collaborative modes of research and action that pull ethnography and civic engagement into the same stream. What we have in mind here comes from the Americanist school of anthropology, or more precisely, the Boasians, what we’ll refer to below as a “Boasian imaginary” (Campbell, 2010), one that stems, as Matti Bunzl (2004) has noted, “from a mode of knowledge production that represents a genuine alternative to what has come to be seen as Malinowski’s entrenched design of fieldwork” (p. 435). Refunctioning this Boasian imaginary, we suggest, may open up even more possibilities for imagining what we might have ethnography do, especially for (but not limited to) ethnographic pedagogies that reach, in the present, for collaborations that are implicated in civic engagements and activism.

Imagining a Boasian Imaginary

It is now well-known that Franz Boas and his students both theorized and practiced ethnography in ways quite dissimilar from what would eventually become (or construed as such) the dominant Malinowskian fieldwork tradition (see, for example, Stocking, 1968, 1974, 1992). While the Boasians may have come to share many of the same aspirations for ethnography—scientific, descriptive, and ultimately, comparative—the Boasians began with a very different set of assumptions when it came to fieldwork, especially in the earliest years of the Boasian school. Matti Bunzl (2004), for example, notes that the Self/Other distinction was never as

central to Boasian-styled fieldwork as it was in (or came to be assumed for) the Malinowskian tradition of participant observation: because Franz Boas and his students were originally concerned with elaborating the histories of undocumented peoples, the task of fieldwork did not so much concern elaborating the “strangeness” of so-called primitives as it did documenting their rightful place in a larger, collective human story. Instead of accentuating difference, Boas’s ethnography stressed the correspondence with and similarity of indigenous texts to other, already collected, nonindigenous texts (e.g., European) of human history. Thus, unlike Malinowskian-styled fieldwork where, observes Bunzl (2004, p. 438), the “production of anthropological knowledge was a function of mere observation, as long as it occurred across—and thereby, reproduced—a cultural chasm between ethnographic Self and native Other,” in Boas’s approach to fieldwork,

a constitutive epistemological separation between ethnographer and native was absent. To be sure, Boas exerted various forms of power over his informants. But this power was never figured in terms of epistemological privilege. From Boas’s perspective, neither anthropologist nor informant had immediate access to the history he hoped to reconstruct. In this situation, anthropologist and informant were united in a common epistemic position vis-à-vis the real Other of Boasian anthropology. That Other, ultimately, was the history that had generated the present condition, a history that eluded immediate description due to the absence of written records. (p. 438)

As the objective/subjective distance between ethnographer and so-called native had less meaning in this Boasian approach to fieldwork, “natives” could be mobilized to collect their own histories—which is exactly what happened, such as in ethnographic partnerships like that between Franz Boas and George Hunt, who worked together from the late 1880s to 1933 to compile Kwakiutl Indian texts (see, for example, Berman, 1996).

The historical emphasis of the early Boasian school—and the collaboratively oriented approach to collection that it engendered—grew, in part, out of the 19th-century ethnography of the Bureau of American Ethnology, where a variety of ethnographers, including American Indians such as James R. Murie, Francis La Flesche, and John N. B. Hewitt, collected one of the largest and most diverse indigenous histories ever compiled (Darnell, 1998). Although this approach to fieldwork and ethnography in the United States moved away from these early emphases and toward those more comparative and presumably more “scientific” during and after the world wars—a development vehemently criticized by Boas’s student Paul Radin in his *Method and Theory of Ethnology* (1933)—an

underlying impulse for reciprocity and collaboration stayed with Americanist ethnography (albeit to varying degrees) throughout the 20th century and remains in the present (see Lassiter, 2005a, pp. 26-75). The possibilities for such ethnographic cooperation—from documenting native languages to narrating life histories—were bolstered by the Boasians’ tireless stance toward cultural relativism and, in turn, the integrity of the point of view or “standpoint” of native interlocutors, the latter of which was, notes Regna Darnell (2001), “used in a way congruent with present-day feminist standpoint epistemology” (p. 111).

Although ethnographic description would no doubt have a broad range of functions for Boas and his students, these earliest developments in the Boasian fieldwork tradition paralleled—and in some ways set the stage for—the migration of anthropological praxis into wider spheres of political engagement, most prominent among these the critique of social evolutionism, and of race. From this position, historical or cultural description was not only serviceable to the story of humankind but also immediately applicable to a wider sphere of human issues and concerns. Anthropology, wrote Boas (1940),

is often held to be a subject that may satisfy our curiosity regarding the early history of mankind, but of no immediate bearing upon problems that confront us. This view has always seemed to me erroneous. Growing up in our own civilization we know little how we ourselves are conditioned by it, how our bodies, our language, our modes of thinking and acting are determined by limits imposed upon us by our environment. Knowledge of the life processes and behavior of man under conditions of life fundamentally different from our own can help us to obtain a freer view of our lives and of our life problems. (p. v)

Thus situated, ethnography could be construed as much more than historical, descriptive, or even comparative; it could be connected to wider social imperatives. For Boas and his students, the work of ethnographic description had the capacity to reach outside of the academy, change people’s ideas about themselves and others, and ultimately change our society. The Boasian critique of racism, for example, joined cross-cultural knowledge (engendered by ethnographic description) with a developing understanding of human biology to fashion “a unique position to subordinate race to culture, to assess the relative civilizational capacities of diverse cultures, and to exhort fellow citizens toward the creation of a more tolerant world” (Darnell, 2001, p. 328). But, as is well known, Boas and his students not only used ethnographic description to avow the complexity of culture to shore up their critique of social evolutionism and racism but also actively endeavored to shift public

opinion and policy—albeit often awkwardly and rarely without controversy (Baker, 1998).²

These activist tendencies, and particularly the relationship of those tendencies to theorizing and doing ethnography within collaborative frameworks in the present, most interest us here. More than a few scholars, of course, have long observed that contemporary aspirations for an ethnography more engaged, public, and applied find roots in the Americanist school of anthropology and that, in no small part, we have inherited traditions of engaging with the ethical and political from the anthropology of the Boasians (see, for example, Bunzl, 1962; Sanday & Janowitz, 2004; Stocking, 2001). But what we have in mind here is how these activist and collaborative leanings and tendencies have persisted into the present, if not always in practice, then in various imaginings of what we might have ethnography do. To be sure, assumptions behind fieldwork and ethnography changed a great deal in the United States as ethnographic research became dominated by a Malinowskian-styled fieldwork tradition in the postwar years and, indeed, as this Malinowskian tradition persisted through ethnography's various revolutions and transformations (including the 1980s critique). Yet this Boasian-inspired optimism for ethnography's capacity to change—for the better—our ways of thinking about and understanding each other is still, we believe, very much alive today. This Boasian tradition has infiltrated ethnographic theory and practice on a multiplicity of levels in profound and persistent ways, even if explicitly expressed connections with the Boasians may have been until recently ignored, overlooked, or even invisible (see esp. Darnell, 2001).

These observations should not come as a surprise for anyone familiar with the literature surrounding the history of the Boasian school of anthropology. We only raise them here to suggest that alongside a "Malinowskian imaginary" is another stream of "provocations," "presuppositions," and "sensibilities" (Marcus, 1998) that are very much in play in various forms of the collaborative imaginaries informing contemporary ethnography. In suggesting this, we do not, in any way, ignore the much deeper complexities of Boasian or Americanist histories, or even the much broader range of (often problematic) researches, theories, and practices among the Boasians. What we are reaching for instead is the research imaginary that moved Boasians to action in the past and that moves contemporary ethnographers similarly. In many ways, this "Boasian imaginary" is captured in Mead's oft quoted "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Though overused and clichéd—and perhaps even naïve—the sentiment Mead expresses here is distinctly Americanist and Boasian. In spite of great changes in ethnographic theory and practice over the past many decades, the Boasian research imaginary that this sentiment captures still underlines much of the imagined possibilities for many collaborative and activist researches today.

Although there is nothing quite comparable to the Malinowskian *mise en scène* (Holmes & Marcus, 2005, 2008) in the work of Boas, his students, and allies—no staging of an iconic character in a scenario rich with shared symbols (like a tent pitched on a beach)—we locate a Boasian imaginary in the collaborative, civic, and activist impulse that characterizes so much of their work, in what Sanday and Janowitz (2004) call "the Boasian legacy of civic engagement . . . [in which] knowledge generation and theory development are never far removed from civic engagement and social action" (p. 4). The Boasian imaginary is certainly harder to "see" than the Malinowskian imaginary; it is more a bustling collection of well-peopled projects than a solo performance in a carefully staged scene. The Boasian imaginary does not depend on remoteness or isolation; projects may not only happen in faraway places (as in work, for example, by Margaret Mead) but also happen closer home (as in work, for example, by Zora Neale Hurston). Whatever the Boasians do (and wherever they do it), they draw on and often foreground combinations of ethnographers and epistemic partners. In addition, whatever the projects underway, this aim of advancing equity and social justice through knowledge directs their work (if not explicitly then implicitly); knowledge, in this vision, serves action and, to an extent, activism. In the Malinowskian imaginary, an ethnographer braves and conquers a strange world to build knowledge about humankind; in the Boasian imaginary, ethnographers collaborate to mobilize knowledge that challenges us to build a better world.

Again, we are describing here an *imaginary*, by definition severely limited "provocations," "presuppositions," or "sensibilities" (Marcus, 1998); not, per se, the details of a much, much more complicated story. Certainly, the work of the Boasians and, more generally, the Americanist school reflects many of the extremely problematic positions and practices associated with the modern development of anthropology. Its colonial past, for example, has common characteristics with that associated with the fieldwork of Malinowski and British social anthropology more generally. In this and other ways, the two imaginaries, we suggest, overlap. But they also compete with one another, particularly concerning how they reflect two very different ways of "being" an ethnographer in the present. Both research imaginaries engage much larger social forces of practice in the sense that Bourdieu (1977) elaborates for *habitus*: complex sets of intellectual, social, and cultural practices that exist somewhere between structure and agency and that direct and play out in the bodily practice of ethnographers (i.e., as ways of being) in the present. Although these imaginaries neither stand for actual ethnographic history, experience, or practice nor delineate discrete schools or models of ethnography, they both draw on and engage larger forces of practice. Both are ways—very different ways—of imagining ethnography that inform how we inhabit being ethnographers and how we decide what we will

have ethnography do. The Boasian imaginary, it seems to us, opens up precisely those ethnographic possibilities that compel us toward collaboration in the first place—in and across our researches *and* our pedagogies.

Refunctioing Ethnography With a Boasian Imaginary in Mind

If we are “to accommodate the rather dramatic *de facto* changes in . . . practice of basic fieldwork and ethnography that have occurred since the 1980s” (Marcus, 2005a, p. 677), then, at the most foundational of levels, evoking a Boasian research imaginary more firmly into our consciousness may provide a fertile base from which to design and carry out our collaborative ethnographies and collaborative activisms in the present. Ethnographers who wish to do something more with ethnography may often imagine that they are working alone—historically, theoretically, and actually. But we want to suggest that those of us who reach for contemporary collaborative and activist ethnographies are all working within a loosely framed but shared set of images, stories, and scenarios (and even bodily practices) that pull us and our many collaborative and participatory projects and partnerships into the same stream of possibility from which we can all draw and collectively imagine more for ethnography. Although we may have not been as conscious of our Boasian ways of being as we have of our Malinowskian, those streams have been with us for a very long time. And many—from Boas to Hurston to Mead—have long resisted the status quo of what ethnography was “supposed to be.”

Reimagining or refunctioing ethnography in the present, though, goes beyond just conjuring up different “stories and scenarios” or acknowledging that such participatory work is part of a much larger and time-honored project. In some ways, recognizing a Boasian research imaginary underlines increased recognition of heretofore “invisible genealogies” (Darnell, 2001) that have, however directly or indirectly, provided epistemological and ontological possibilities for doing collaborative and activist researches in the present. In anthropology, for example, we imagine that this imaginary may underscore recent engagements with (and calls for) neo-Boasianism, which provide frameworks

to rethink such things as fieldwork; cultural creativity and difference in the present and in history; interactions between different groups; autoanthropology; the individual and society; and an anthropologically engaged political stance, particularly with regard to issues of race and multicultural equity. (Bashkow et al., 2004, p. 434)

More to the point, however, the Boasian imaginary we invoke here is not meant to suggest a resurrection of the Boasian’s specific methods or aims; we are instead advocating

a broader range of possibilities for how we might imagine, think through, inhabit, and enact ethnography in the present, especially at the nexus of teaching and learning ethnography. In addition, it seems to us that this Boasian research imaginary may be more aligned with the contemporary conditions of the field in which we now all work, a field that is peopled by collaborative modes of being and working. The Boasian imaginary, it seems to us, may also be closely aligned with refunctioing the collaborative ethnographic pedagogies for which many now hope.

Douglas Holmes and George Marcus, for example, write that the refunctioed ethnography they imagine is meant to repurpose and provide “alternative formulation[s]” (Holmes & Marcus, 2005, p. 1099) of fieldwork training that resonate with “the profoundly altered conditions in which relations of fieldwork today must be negotiated and the more dynamic role that a still under-normed collaboration plays in the concepts, analytics, and imaginary of ethnography” (pp. 81-82). They suggest that “key to this refunctioing is drawing on the analytical acumen and existential insights of our subjects to recast the intellectual imperatives of our own methodological practices” (p. 82).

We propose that a “Boasian imaginary”—with its time-honored inclusion of the “analytical acumen and existential insights of our subjects”—has much to add to and augment the alternative formulations of this newly refunctioed ethnography, especially on levels of student training outside that dominated by the Malinowskian-styled mentor-apprentice model that still underlies much doctoral-level graduate training. Indeed, most of the discussion surrounding this most recent reimagination of ethnography has focused on refunctioing advanced graduate level training. Yet these changes in pedagogy have been (and perhaps should be) happening at other levels, too, including undergraduate ethnographic pedagogies—an area of practice that is rarely taken up in current discussions about reimagining and refunctioing ethnography.

When ethnographic pedagogies enter the undergraduate classroom, Malinowskian imaginaries also dominate and are also very much alive and in play in the teaching and learning of ethnography. Here at this level, ethnography is often deployed as a kind of “Malinowski-lite”: frequently initiated as a class project, undergraduate students are by and large charged to select and make connections with a group, venture off and do fieldwork—by themselves, of course—and often off campus—metaphorically in “a far-away place” if not literally—“roughing it,” at least emotionally, via some version of cross-cultural encounter (or better yet, culture shock) at a church, fire house, garage, or with a group of bikers, teachers, police officers, or similar groups.

Carrying out such ethnographic projects provides hands-on experience with doing and crafting ethnography and, as such, can have an enormous effect on undergraduate students.

So we do not want, in any way, to diminish such experience. But what if we imagine that ethnography can do even more? What if we were to imagine ethnography not as a solo student performance of knowledge accumulation but rather as well-peopled ethnographic projects and partnerships that reach for social and political change in the vein of a Boasian imaginary? In addition, what if undergraduate ethnography is not measured against the staging of Malinowskian-styled fieldwork (where undergraduate field encounters are considered less “authentic” in time and space; and thus not “serious” fieldwork) and measured instead against the depth in which ethnography inspires community involvement, cocitizenships, and collaborative modes of local and community-based change (which, from the perspective of the Boasian imaginary, set within the contemporary conditions of the field *is*, or certainly can be, “serious” fieldwork)?

With these questions foregrounded, several projects involving faculty, undergraduate researchers, and local communities come into view, projects such as a series of oral history and ethnographic projects at Radford University carried out by faculty, undergraduate researchers and local residents in southern Appalachia (see, for example, La Lone, 1997; La Lone et al., 2003a, 2003b), projects that also helped to generate local discussions about, and plans for, heritage preservation and education (see, for example, La Lone, 2003); a community-university newspaper project at Temple University titled “The Death and Rebirth of North Central Philadelphia,” a series of stories, commentaries, and other features generated by ethnographic research that included undergraduates enrolled in a research methods course (see Hyatt, 2004), research that helped to augment planning efforts for community development (see Peebles, 2004; cf. Hyatt, 2010); or an ethnography researched and written by a group of Ball State University undergraduate students in collaboration with African Americans living on the “other side” of Muncie, Indiana, the site of the famous Middletown studies (see Lassiter et al., 2004), a project that inspired a wide range of local activisms, including those connecting students to community-wide efforts to address issues of racial discrimination and equity (see Lassiter, 2008, p. 77). (The latter of these is our own.) One could very well cite any number of similar projects and partnerships. The point is not to set these projects out as new or unusual; rather, the point is that such partnerships and projects, though heretofore often neither visible nor terribly valued (indeed, like the research imaginary from which it arguably springs) against the backdrop of a dominant Malinowskian research imaginary and its refunctioning, may have greater relevance when understood as part of a larger project to refunction a Boasian imaginary in and for the present: that is, to open up ethnographic pedagogies at all levels that are at once collaborative, public, and engaged. Even as a Malinowskian research imaginary reaches to come in line with the contemporary force of collaboration that now

saturates the field as we know it today; the Boasian is already very much in line with these current developments. In addition, perhaps most significantly, if refunctioning dominant Malinowskian modes of fieldwork is, in the end, about engendering better, more collaboratively attuned, more nuanced ethnographies (and who could be against that?), refunctioning Boasian modes of fieldwork in the present is ultimately about generating better, more collaboratively attuned, more nuanced, and, ideally, more effective activisms—and not just for professional practitioners but for our students as well.

Doing ethnography in the present, then, would seem to require more than just the restaging of ethnographic training among doctoral-level students. It calls for the extension of contemporary collaborative imaginaries into wider arrays of needs and purposes at all levels. We make this assertion not only because we think that undergraduate pedagogies, for example, shouldn’t be “left out”; but also because as widening streams of collaboration have engulfed ethnography in the field, they have also caught up the entire academy in those streams, not just in the specialized work of a relatively small group of doctoral students. In addition, as sites of collaboration are expanding across the communities in which we work and into the academy, the possibilities for ethnography as more than an instrumental component of undergraduate or graduate-level training—that is, an ethnography with collaborative, democratic, civic, and perhaps even activist, goals—are also expanding.³

Reinhabiting and reanimating ethnography through a Boasian research imaginary should ultimately encourage those of us now reaching for collaborative ethnographies and activisms to, once and for all, embrace our craft as more than a method or mode of research—however that research is represented, constructed, or refunctioned. If contemporary Malinowskian-styled research imaginaries have settled into a kind of suspension, we see no such stagnation in the ethnography that taps the Boasian research imaginary and refunctions it for both graduate and undergraduate pedagogies. That research imaginary cultivates—and has always cultivated—ways of being that continually percolate out of and inspire collaboration, agency, and action. That way of being opens up new possibilities for imagining what we might have ethnography do and subsequently commits us to ethnographic pedagogies that necessarily engage both faculty and students (as well as the people with whom we work) in civic engagements and activisms.

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1. This article was originally prepared for and presented to the Rackham Graduate School's Ethnography as Activism Workgroup at the University of Michigan, an interdisciplinary collaboration of students and faculty exploring the growing possibilities for linking ethnographic researches and activism in the present. Sections of the article were developed further by Lassiter at the 2009 Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, in a paper titled "Re-Imagining Collaborative Activisms" and by Campbell at the 2010 Annual Conference on College Composition and Communication's Qualitative Research Network in a paper titled "Imagining Ethnography."
2. This and that which follows relies heavily on Campbell's dissertation research, in which she argues in a much lengthier and more developed discussion for the unveiling of Boasian imaginaries within the context of currently unfolding ethnographic composition pedagogies (see Campbell, 2010).
3. That expansion, of course, includes linking ethnographic researches and activism across a broad range of fields, not just in anthropology (from which we draw much of the preceding discussion). Though they also draw from anthropological histories and sources, interests in the unfolding potentials of ethnographic pedagogies (particularly for undergraduates) seem at this point more developed in fields such as English composition, folklore, and oral history than they are in anthropology (see Campbell, 2010). As we originally wrote this article with just such an interdisciplinary audience in mind (see Note 1) and as we sought to reach those scholars and practitioners more interested in the exploration of "methodological issues raised by qualitative research rather than the content or results of the research," we decided to submit this article to *Qualitative Inquiry* for review (the first and only journal to which we sent the article) rather than a more conventional anthropology journal (a question raised by reviewers of an earlier version of this essay).

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