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The Transformation of Ethnography: From Malinowki’s Tent to the Practice of Collaborative/Activist Anthropology

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One hundred years ago, in 1917-1918, Bronislaw Malinowski was immersed in his second expedition to the Trobriand Islands. The onset of World War I prevented Malinowski from returning to Britain since he was a Pole, a citizen of Australia, and thus technically one of the enemy. He was required by the Australian government to report his movements, but Australian anthropologists agreed to financially support his research and offered him a place to write during the fifteen months between his two field trips. His research primarily focused on the island of Kiriwina and on the village of Omarakana but with side trips to other islands in order to follow the exchanges that were part of the Kula. In June 1918, he again pitched his tent in the village of Omarakana, where he had deep connections to the chief and members of his sub-clan. As a lone ethnographer in the Trobriands, Malinowski became a model for anthropological research even into the late 20th century. Anthropologists occupied a sort of “savage slot” within the academy (Trouillot 2003). They often studied places like Papua New Guinea and focused on a circumscribed tribal group, whose members, as Deborah Gewertz and Fred Errington (2016:348) suggest, “engaged in the likes of regional exchange systems involving competitive reciprocity, warfare including headhunting (if not cannibalism), male secret societies with complex initiations and masked figures, and, with European contact, cargo cults.” They conclude, “The goal of this research was often comparative so as to document the range of human variability, especially ‘them’ in contrast to ‘us.’” (Gewertz and Errington 2016:348).

Today, ethnography looks quite different. With a focus on globalization, health crises, human rights, poverty, and social discrimination, we have gone from Malinowski’s tent to the local community, the clinic, the work place, the street demonstration, and the halls of government. Furthermore, we have moved from considering those we study as “subjects” (or even “informants”) to partners and collaborators. We are more interested not just in applying our knowledge to solve problems but in using advocacy, intervention, and activism in the pursuit of social justice.

In this article, I critically examine the central pillar of much of applied anthropology’s research: ethnography’s transformation over the past one hundred years. I view ethnography both as fieldwork practice involving the
anthropologist and a community, population, or group of subjects and as a mode of writing where we communicate our experiences, findings, and analysis to our students, academics, and the broader public. I will start with our two great patriarchs: Malinowski, who taught anthropology in England at the London School of Economics, and Boas, who founded the anthropology department at Columbia University in the United States. Taking a feminist perspective, I emphasize the role that women anthropologists and feminists have played in this transition. Without obscuring the role that men have played, I want to ask, “What can we learn about ethnographic practice and writing from these two patriarchs, their women students, and contemporary women anthropologists?”

I build my analysis of the first eight decades of the transformation of ethnography (1917-1997) around the following four advances:

1. Acknowledging the historical, political, and economic context in which our subjects and their communities are living;
2. Finding social diversity in the field, particularly in the role of women, bringing forward their voices (as well as those of men) through our fieldwork methods and our writing;
3. Using a “dialogical” approach to writing ethnography; and finally,
4. Emphasizing reflexivity and the researcher’s position in the field.

All of these advances were important in transforming ethnography, in some cases, beginning in the 1930s but intensifying in the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s. These initial changes set the stage for an even broader set of transformations in the last twenty years as the various forms of applied, public, and engaged anthropology became more widespread. I am interested in two forms of engaged anthropology. First, I will explore the growing use of participatory action research (PAR) primarily pioneered by applied anthropologists and community-based participatory research (CBPR) started by public health researchers. The second is the trend towards activism and advocacy. Here, I will look at anthropological efforts to shape specific policies in order to bring about a more just and equal society. I conclude by summarizing the challenges we face in continuing to promote collaborative/activist ethnography and in making it a more permanent part of training our students.

Let me begin with Malinowski in his tent on the Trobriand Island. From October 1917 to October 1918, one hundred years ago, Malinowski spent his final year on the Island of Kiriwina in the village of Omarakana. In writing up his research in his famous book on the Kula, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Malinowski invites us (the readers) to join him in experiencing life in Kiriwina with that oft-quoted sentence, “Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a village while the launch or dinghy which has brought you here sails away out of sight” (Malinowski 1961:4). He wishes to get “in real touch with the native and learn the secret of effective fieldwork,” or the “ethnographer’s magic,” by which he will able to evoke “the true picture of tribal life” (Malinowski 1961:6). Malinowski (1961) tells us that effective fieldwork involves three steps: (1) creating synoptic charts and tables outlining the framework of the native culture, (2) collecting the imponderabilia of actual life, and (3) writing down “characteristic narratives, typical utterances…and magical formulae,” all documents of the native mentality (Malinowski 1961:22-24). The goal here is “to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, and to realize his vision of his world” (Malinowski 1961:25). This is the recipe for participant observation: a methodology that is the core of the cultural anthropology that most of us practice today.

Boas, our other patriarch, conducted research with the Kwakiutl (now the Kwakwaka’wakw) in British Columbia a generation before Malinowski. He took a different approach, one less based in participant observation and more geared towards the collection of texts and collaboration with a Native ethnographer. Boas’s aim was not just to focus on Kwakwaka’wakw “customs and beliefs” but to understand the “mental life” or “the culture as it appears to the Indian himself” (Berman 1996:218-219).

Boas forged a crucial collaborative relationship with George Hunt, the son of a Scots-Irish trader and a Tlingit mother. Although he learned the Kwak’wala language as a child, Hunt was not really a Kwakwaka’wakw; although, his marriage to a high-ranking local woman allowed him to participate in potlatches, the winter ceremonials, and even train as a shaman (Berman 1996).

Boas published an enormous corpus of Kwakuitl texts. The *Ethnology of the Kwakuitl* (Boas 1921) contains 1,481 pages of hunting, fishing, and foraging texts (fishing perch, digging lupine roots, or picking elderberries), followed by
dozens of recipes for food (cold roasted salmon, baked clover roots, elderberry cakes) and a section called industries, which describes making the tools for gathering and fishing, including cedar bark strips used in baskets, woven mats, and sails for small boats. These seemingly “transparent” texts were actually a product of a very complex set of relationships between Hunt and his interlocutors, between Hunt and Boas, and between the texts Boas received from Hunt and what was published.

On the one hand, Boas instructed Hunt to produce texts in Kwak’ala with English interlinear translations “in answer to my requests and specific questions” (Briggs and Bauman 1999:490; see also Berman 1996). Boas sent Hunt published texts that shaped Hunt’s decisions on how to “put my letters to gather” (Briggs and Bauman 1999:490). Boas also edited the texts and framed them with prefaces and chapter headings (Briggs and Bauman 1999). He often instructed Hunt to work harder and reminded him that “the continuance of your work for the Museum depends entirely on your success” (a veiled threat to cut off Hunt’s funding) (Briggs and Bauman 1999:487). On the other hand, Hunt exercised a good deal of independence and creativity. He did not take down stories by dictation (as Boas did) but listened to a story, went home, and wrote down a text. He wrote in the archaic style of myth recitations, in order “to show you the oldest way of speaking” (Briggs and Bauman 1999:491). Jean Cannizo emphasized George Hunt’s creativity. She concluded, “George Hunt is one of the most important originators of our current view of ‘traditional’ Kwakuitl society; he is a primary contributor to the invention of the Kwakiutl as an ethnographic entity” (Cannizo 1983:45). Nevertheless, it is important to remember that the Boas-Hunt relationship was a hierarchical one, and Boas had the ultimate say in creating a seamless account of Kwakuitl traditions.

By the early 1920s, anthropologists had two very different approaches to ethnography. In one, Malinowski emphasized participant observation and collecting the imponderabilia of daily life, and in the second, Boas utilized collaboration with a Native fieldworker with whom he co-constructed texts that preserved the details of native beliefs and traditions. Both were interested in mental life, “the native point of view,” or capturing “the culture as it appears to the Indian himself.” There was a clear message in both these approaches that came to shape modern ethnographic authority (the ability of the fieldworker to convey the truth of the lives of Others). We can see it echoed in Malinowski’s call for us to imagine being in a Trobriand village or watching a kula exchange or in George Hunt’s careful descriptions of Kwakwaka’wakw methods for cooking salmon, “You are there…because I was there” (Clifford 1988:22).

Women Students

One of the things that both patriarchs had in common was a relatively large number of women who earned their Ph.D.s at the London School of Economics (LSE) and Columbia in the 1920s and 1930s. Table 1 includes the names and graduation dates of most but not all of Boas’s and Malinowski’s female doctoral students. They are listed roughly in the order of their prominence in academic anthropology.

The connections that Malinowski forged with his students are described by Hortense Powdermaker. “It was my impression that his relationships with women were easier than those with men. With women, he was a continental gentleman, somewhat in the manner of the well-known gallant and flirtatious tradition which, however, did not prevent him from being completely serious when it came to discussing their work” (Powdermaker 1966:35). Powdermaker particularly stressed the formation of a cohort of graduate students, many of whom became leaders in British anthropology (Raymond Firth, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Audrey Richards, Edith Clarke, Camilla Wedgewood, Gordon and Elizabeth Brown). During her first two years at LSE, “strong personal bonds developed between us and Malinowski; it was a sort of family with the usual ambivalences. The atmosphere was in the European tradition: a Master and his students, some in accord, others in opposition” (Powdermaker 1966:36). Malinowski’s daughter, Helena, elaborated, “Bronio’s women students had great affection for him not just because he was attractive as a man, as his detractors have said, but because, in England at least, women were not really accepted in academic life; it was still cranky to go to university, and the middle-class woman was expected to be cultured but not really efficient at anything. As Audrey [Richards] put it, there was a horror of the clever woman, but Bronio didn’t have it at all, and women blossomed in this atmosphere of being taken completely seriously” (Wayne 2000:48). He even visited Audrey Richards among the Bemba in 1934 (Gladstone 1986).
Boas was equally appreciative of his women students. Many referred to him as “Papa” Franz and also saw themselves as part of a family. As Boas wrote in 1920, “I have had a curious experience…during these last few years. All my best students are women” (Babcock and Parezo 1988:88). Between 1920 and 1940, twenty women earned their Ph.D.s at Columbia. Boas was particularly adept at helping his male students obtain positions of importance in anthropology, for example, Kroeber’s position at the University of California Berkeley, which became one of the premier graduate programs in the United States. Boas also tried to obtain academic positions for at least two of his women students, albeit with a paternalistic attitude. He obtained a lectureship for Reichard at Barnard College, since she, unlike Benedict, had no husband to support her. She became a full professor, but since she taught in a woman’s college with no graduate students, her role in the discipline was limited. After Benedict’s divorce, Boas tried to find a position for her on the Columbia faculty but was blocked by the Dean. Once the Dean was replaced, Boas secured an assistant professorship for Benedict in the Department of Anthropology (Caffrey 1989).

On the whole, however, women in both the United States and England were marginalized compared to the males in their cohort. Only Ruth Benedict became a full professor in a major Department of Anthropology (Columbia University), but even she met with professional roadblocks. When Boas retired in 1936, Benedict declined to sit passively on the sidelines “because I am disqualified as a woman” (Caffrey 1989:276). She continued to be an active candidate but was passed over when the Dean, who was her major supporter, died. Ironically, she was given the role of acting head during the two years that Ralph Linton was being selected as Boas’s replacement. Finally, she was promoted to full professor but only two months before her death in September 1948. Margaret Mead never had a permanent position at Columbia, finally becoming a full Curator at the American Museum of Natural History only in 1964 when she was sixty-three years old. Boas’s two minority students, Zora Neale Hurston and Ella Deloria, did not even obtain Ph.D.s. After studying with Boas, conducting research in Florida, Jamaica, and Haiti, and completing two books, Zora Neale Hurston received a one-year Rosenwald Fellowship to complete her Ph.D. at Columbia, but the director of the foundation rejected her proposed plan of study and shortened her fellowship to one semester. With no means of support, Hurston left graduate school but continued to write, eventually winning acclaim as a novelist and ethnographer (Boyd 2014).

After taking courses from Boas and translating a collection of Lakota stories, Ella Deloria earned a Bachelor of Science degree from Columbia Teacher’s College in 1915 and then returned to South Dakota to take care of family members. Boas reconnected with her in 1927 and brought her to New York where she published a book of Dakota stories that she had collected on several different reservations (Deloria 1935). In the next fourteen years, she lived in South Dakota and made trips to New York whenever Boas could pay her. She published a Dakota grammar with Boas (Deloria and Boas 1941) but was never able to obtain an advanced degree or hold a permanent position.

Malinowski’s female students were equally marginalized. British academic departments were like a pyramid: they had only one professor at the head of a department with a few anthropologists holding the positions of reader while most were lecturers. Thus, there was little room at the top, especially for women. In addition, British women often felt that they had to choose between either marriage or a career because it was not possible to have both. Of Malinowski’s female students, only Lucy Mair became a professor in Britain. Monica Wilson returned to South Africa to teach, and Hilda Kuper became a full professor at the University of California Los Angeles. Hortense Powdermaker, an American, founded the Department of Anthropology at Queens College and worked her way up to professor. Audrey Richards, one of the most respected women in British Anthropology, eventually returned to Newnham, a women’s college at Cambridge University where she had been an undergraduate. Phyllis Kaberry, very late in life, became a reader at University College, London.

![Table 1. Women Ph.D. Students of Boas and Malinowski (Listed in Order of Prominence in Academic Anthropology along with Date of Ph.D.)](image-url)
In contrast, several of Malinowski’s male students (E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Meyer Fortes, Raymond Firth) became professors in the major Departments of Anthropology in Britain. Despite the marginalization of both British and American women, they nevertheless were important innovators in each of the four phases of the transformation of ethnography as I will emphasize.

Acknowledging the Historical, Political, and Economic Context in which Our Subjects and Their Communities Live

The first step in transforming ethnography was to understand the economic and political context of the “primitive cultures” anthropologists studied. For Malinowski, this was colonialism and for Boas what we now call settler colonialism. Malinowski basically erased colonial influence from his ethnography. We know from his diary that he spent a great deal of time with his friend Billy Hancock, a pearl trader, who took posed pictures of Malinowski. Malinowski also abducted Ogisa, a Dobuan, to be his manservant when he passed through Dobu on the way to Kiriwina (Malinowski 1967). He preferred to take pictures of Trobrianders not wearing Western clothing. Michael Young (2007) published a photo of a kula gathering on the beach, probably taken when the Dobuan fleet arrived in April 1918. In it, we can see a man on a log dressed in a t-shirt and other male figures on the beach wearing shorts and shirts. The man on the log does not appear in the version of this photo published in Argonauts (Malinowski 1961). It is also harder to see the clothes worn by the men standing at the left side of this photo.

More important, Malinowski ignored the vast system of indentured labor through which young men were recruited to work on plantations. In British Papua New Guinea between 1890 and 1914, 80,000 men were employed in this system (Graves 1983). These laborers were paid at the end of their contract, and with this money, they bought Western items called “Truck” to fill their trade boxes. This trade box system transformed the material base of village life over several decades. Stone and wooden tools were replaced with metal ones. Bark cloth was replaced with cotton cloth, as missionaries compelled their converts to wear Western clothing (Graves 1983).

The Kwakuitl were also embedded in a colonial economy, in this case with a large White settler population that began with the establishment of Victoria and Vancouver in the 1830s. Boas began his research in 1886; by that time, the Kwakwaka’wakw population had shrunk from an estimated pre-colonial population of 19,000 to a little less than 7,650 (in 1862), mostly because of epidemics of small pox, measles, and tuberculosis (Wolf 1999). Population decline meant that many ritual positions were unfilled, and the cash economy allowed new contenders to compete with the traditional chiefs for prestige (Wolf 1999). Thus, during the late 19th century, potlatches and feasts became more elaborate, and larger quantities of goods were distributed. Missionaries found the winter ceremonies “barbaric” and “overwhelmingly shocking to behold” (Wolf 1999:76), and the Canadian Government declared potlatching “foolish, wasteful, and demoralizing” (Wolf 1999:111), forbidding these feasts in 1888.

At the same time, the Kwakwaka’wakw became enmeshed in a cash economy, especially after work became available for men, women, and children in the growing number of salmon canneries and for men on commercial fishing boats. Boas was quite aware of the canneries; he vividly described how salmon were canned in a letter to his children in 1900. In this industrialized process, Chinese and Indian men cut the fish while women put the fish in cans prior to weighing, boiling, and sealing (Rohner 1969). George Hunt worked in Mr. Spencer’s cannery during the summer months and in a letter to Boas in July 1899 described the difficulties of working during the day and then in the evenings trying to write down Kwak’wala speeches and songs from the winter ceremonials that Boas observed in 1894 (Cannizo 1983). The next summer during the height of the salmon season, Boas kept pressing Spencer to let Hunt out of work so Boas could revise Kwak’wala texts with him. However, he was not able to get Hunt’s time until August and then only intermittently until the daily salmon catch diminished. Economic issues were key. As Boas admitted, “While the fishing season is on, the people make a lot of money, but the season only lasts for six weeks” (Rohner 1969:253). These economic and population transformations, however, were not even hinted at in the material Boas and Hunt published.

Anthropologists in both Britain and the United States began to study the impact of colonialism under the broad concepts of “culture change” and “acculturation.” During the 1930s, the Rockefeller Foundation funded fellowships for Malinowski’s students for research in “applied anthropology.” Malinowski’s last manuscript, The Dynamics of Culture Change, borrows heavily from the work in Africa of his women students. In fact, Phyllis Kaberry edited and published the unfinished manuscript after Malinowski’s death (Malinowski and Kaberry 1945).

Lucy Mair’s Native Policies in Africa (1936) provided a trenchant overview of governmental structures, ideology, and policies implemented by the British, the French, and others, outlining the positive and negative consequences for African labor, land tenure, and social cohesion. Monica Wilson’s book on the Pondo, Reaction to Conquest (1936), provided case material that documented how in some places the native system of land tenure was allowed to survive, while in many others, an arbitrary European system was imposed. Likewise, Audrey Richard’s (1936) analysis of the Bemba Chiefship under Indirect Rule laid bare how the Chief’s responsibilities had multiplied, but the decline in traditional tribute, the loss of labor from young men who were migrating, and the low level of financial support from the colonial administration had undercut the functioning of the modified
Within United States anthropology, there was more direct collaboration between anthropologists and the government in administering Native American affairs. With the advent of the New Deal in 1933, John Collier was appointed Commissioner of Indian Affairs and advocated for the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) that, among other things, called for the formation of tribal governments with written constitutions. To aid in devising tribal constitutions and securing additional tribal lands, Collier created an advisory board of senior anthropologists and spoke to a meeting of the American Anthropological Association (Kelly 1980). In 1935, he also signed papers creating a relationship with the Office of Indian Affairs (OIA), and Julian Steward became the liaison. Steward began looking for anthropologists who could examine contemporary Indian communities and conduct acculturation studies (Morgan 2017).

Early in 1936, a young anthropologist, Scudder McKeel, who had written an acculturation study of the Sioux, was appointed head of a new Applied Anthropology Unit (AAU) (Kelly 1980). McKeel assembled a group of five other men who conducted nine studies of contemporary tribal societies with the goal of making policy recommendations about bringing tribal councils and constitutions to interested Indian Tribes. This led to recommendations to go slowly in pushing new forms of government on badly factionalized tribes.

Soon after the AAU was constituted, friction emerged between McKeel and OIA bureaucrats over how its work would be supervised, how much freedom the unit would have, and from where funding for the studies would come. Findings were often ignored or were rejected when they conflicted with previously determined policies (Kelly 1980). OIA officials were deeply suspicious about whether anthropological knowledge would be helpful. The unit was disbanded at the end of 1937 when McKeel took a position as director of the Laboratory of Anthropology in Santa Fe and when other Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) officials objected to hiring another “anthropological administrator” (Kelly 1980). Anthropologists continued to work in several other agencies (the Soil Conservation Service and the Education Division of the OIA, renamed the BIA). Anthropologists contributed to the study of land use patterns, the human dependency surveys, and five monographs on Indian Education and personality development (Kelly 1980).

Neither the British nor the American approaches, with their emphasis on culture change and acculturation, directly examined colonial power and the impact of a cash economy, nor did they result in any policy changes. For the most part, none of the OIA/BIA projects, as Lawrence Kelly (1980:22) concludes, “provided administrators with the kind of information that they wanted when they wanted it.” Audrey Richards felt colonial administrators had little interest in taking the advice of anthropologists. “It looks as though the anthropologist has been advertising his goods, often rather clamorously, in a market in which there was little demand for them (Kuper 2014:7). The main impact in the United States was that the projects within the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Soil Conservation Service, and the Education Division of the BIA were important in supporting applied anthropology. Consequently, the growing number of those interested in solving contemporary problems founded the Society for Applied Anthropology (SfAA) and this journal in 1941.

**Finding Social Diversity in the Field: Seeking Women’s Experiences and Bringing Forward Their Voices**

The second important step in transforming ethnography involved understanding the diversity within indigenous cultures. More attention was given to the views of commoners (rather than only elites), children became a group to study, and variant roles (such as shamans, religious practitioners) began to attract attention. But, most important, women anthropologists, partly because they had access, began to examine the lives of women. Women students of Malinowksi and Boas again were in the lead beginning in the 1920s and 1930s.

Phyllis Kaberry devoted her entire career to the study of women. Her book *Aboriginal Women: Sacred and Profane* (Kaberry 1939) demonstrates that Aboriginal women were not subordinated drudges but provided more than half the food, organized women-centered birth and puberty rites, and held secret, women-only coraborees, or dances that contributed to the ritual life of the Kimberley region tribes. Audrey Richards authored *Chisungu* (1956), a careful and ethnographically rich account of the Bemba twenty-four-day puberty ceremony for two young women. Richards documented the ritual and provided a careful analysis of its purposes, values, and effects.

Among Boas’s students, Elsie Clews Parsons wrote ten articles between 1915 and 1924 in the *American Anthropologist, Man*, and other professional journals about Pueblo mothers and children (Babcock 1991). Taken together, they outline pregnancy beliefs, rituals performed after a child’s birth, the events of a typical girl’s childhood, and marriage practices. Gladys Reichard conducted fieldwork among Navajo families in the 1930s, writing *Spider Woman: A Story of Navajo Weavers and Chanters* (1934) about women’s activities, including weaving, which Reichard herself mastered. Her novel *Desba: Woman of the Desert* (Reichard 1939) utilizes true incidents from her research and depicts the life of Desba, a strong mother in a matrilocally extended family.
Ella Deloria’s novel *Waterlily* (1988), based on stories from elderly Dakota women, portrayed camp life in the late 19th century. Bea Medicine (1988:49) viewed Waterlily as part of Deloria’s larger body of work that “remains among the fullest accounts of the Dakota culture in the native language. It is unique as a woman’s perspective, which has been lacking in the writings on the Lakota/Dakota/Nakota peoples and as an interpretation of the Dakota reality to other peoples.” Finally, Ruth Landes, a student of both Boas and Benedict, wrote *The Ojibwa Woman* (1938), part ethnographic description and part narratives collected from Maggie Wilson and written down by her daughter in the 1930s, making it a three-way collaboration (Cole 2003). This collaboration had some of the characteristics of the Boas-Hunt relationship since Ruth authored the book and integrated Maggie’s stories into the topic of each chapter (e.g., on marriage or occupations). But the stories were left intact, giving a sense of the varied lives of Ojibwa women and the ever-present cultural and spiritual beliefs through which events were experienced and orally transmitted.

**Bringing Forward Women’s Voices**

Most of us in my generation of anthropologists who were trained in the 1960s and 1970s were unaware of these pioneering examples. Instead, we were heavily influenced by the social movements we were part of: for example, the anti-war movement, the Civil Rights movement, the Chicano Movement, and the Women’s movement (Lamphere 2016). These movements, and the influence of Marxist theory, led us to emphasize the economic and historical contexts of relations of power and resistance. For feminist anthropologists, this meant examining women’s subordination or autonomy and issues of work, family, motherhood, health, and sexuality. Our ethnographic methods, including case studies, interviews, and life histories, meant that women’s voices were part and parcel of the monographs feminists wrote in the 1980s and early 1990s.

One cluster of studies in the 1980s focused on women’s industrial and service work both in the United States and abroad. For example, my research with Patricia Zavella, Felipe Gonzales, and Peter Evans was one of several studies of industrial work in the United States; it focuses both on women’s strategies in the workplace and the impact of their employment on the gender division of labor and child care at home (Lamphere et al. 1993). Lynn Bolles’s research in the 1970s and early 1980s, published in *Sister Jamaica* (1996), covered similar ground. She examined the work and family lives of factory workers in Kingston in the context of international capitalism and the destabilization of the Jamaican economy under the Manley government. Similarly, Aihwa Ong studied the electronics industry in Malaysia. As manufacturing jobs moved out of the United States, young, single women were recruited as workers in developing countries like Malaysia. Ong emphasizes women’s forms of resistance (including spirit possession) as a way of coping with the stressful conditions and long hours experienced in electronics plants (Ong 1987). Finally, Karen Brodkin Sacks (1993) describes Black women health care workers and their strike against the Duke Hospital in Durham, North Carolina. The emphasis in all of these studies is on women as actors, whether in terms of shop floor resistance, union organizing, or strategies for finding child care and pushing men to do more housework.

Other research analyzed women in the Global South, examining women’s roles and power in post-colonial and development contexts in a wide variety of societies. For example, in one of the first monographs of this type, Susan Bourque and Kay Warren (1981) focused on the changing roles of women in highly patriarchal villages in Peru. Also written about Peru, Florence Babb’s book *Between Field and Cooking Pot* (1998) was one of several studies that examined urban market women in differing economic and social contexts. Mary Moran (1990) explored the contrast between traditional market women in Southeast Liberia who are still part of the dual-sex system that gives women’s societies considerable autonomy and power and “civilized women,” who although educated with higher status, have more circumscribed lives, even as they forge economic strategies to provide for their families. In contrast to these clearly patriarchal cases, in her study of a Minangkabau village in Sumatra where the matrilineal kinship system gives women structural power, Evelyn Blackwood (2000) explores the complexities of women’s exercise of power in a broad number of contexts.

Also in these decades, lesbian feminists explored sexual identity, new family patterns, and gay communities. In her book, *Lesbian Mothers*, based on research from the 1970s, Ellen Lewin (1993) compared the lives of lesbian mothers with those of single heterosexual ones. Kath Weston’s book, *Families We Choose* (1991), became a classic, showing how gays and lesbians (sometimes ostracized by their own kin) created partnerships and friend networks that constituted a new family life. Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis documented the lives of butch-fem lesbians in the working-class bar culture that thrived beginning in the 1950s in Buffalo, New York. Their rich life histories not only chronicled the discrimination lesbians faced but the texture and quality of relationships with lovers and other women in this community (Kennedy and Davis 1993).

These books included case studies and life histories of individual women and extensive quotes from interviews. Women’s voices were an important part of these and other feminist ethnographies of the 1980s and 1990s and distinguish them from the ethnographies of the Malinowski era.

**Using a “Dialogical” Approach to Writing Ethnography**

Highlighting women’s voices in ethnographies indicated that feminists were moving away from an objectivist/distanced stance in their writing. One of the catalysts for rethinking ethnographic writing was *Writing Culture*, edited
by James Clifford and George Marcus (1986). Their critique of objectivist writing noted that the ethnographer was always present in the field but “disappeared” from the written text. As Clifford says, “Ethnographic writing enacts a specific strategy of authority. This strategy has classically involved an unquestioned claim to appear as the purveyor of truth in the texts. A complex cultural experience is enacted by an individual” as Malinowski did in *Argonauts*. Writing from an omniscient point of view and asserting “ethnographic authority” gives the reader the impression of “being there” and knowing the truth about another, distant, and unfamiliar people. The ethnography implies, as I earlier quoted Clifford (1988:22), “You are there... because I was there.” Contributors to the volume argued for ethnography that was more “dialogical” (from the word dialogue): that is, a text focused on interactions and conversations that were the stuff of field research. Such open-ended writing foregrounds the words of subjects.

Unrecognized by the contributors to *Writing Culture*, several of Boas’s women students provided early examples of just such dialogical writing in the 1920s and 1930s. In both *Pueblo Mothers and Children* (Babcock 1991) and *Spider Woman* (Reichard 1934), Parsons and Reichard included the ethnographer in the text, captured interactions and conversations, and quoted women directly rather than describing what they said. The most creative in this regard was Zora Neale Hurston. Her first ethnography, *Of Mules and Men* (Hurston 1990a), recounts her two trips to Eatonville, Florida, where she was raised. Written in dialect, Hurston’s book is a tale framing other tales. Her entrance into Eatonville is full of dialogue, as she tries to position herself as Zora returned home: just Lucy Hurston’s daughter instead of some rich Northerner with a Chevrolet. The stories are not set apart as some dry-as-dust texts but are fully integrated into the situations in which people recount them. Her vivid descriptions of the dances she attended and conversations recounted in dialect just as they were spoken capture the texture of everyday life in ways no other ethnography had to date. The same dialogical approach is found in her second monograph, *Tell My Horse* (Hurston 1990b), and her memoir, *Dust Tracks on the Road* (Hurston 1995).

During the 1980s and early 1990s, my generation of feminist anthropologists also produced innovative dialogical ethnographies. I will mention three of the most creative examples: Marjorie Shostak’s *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* (1981), Ruth Behar’s *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza’s Story* (1993), and Lila Abu-Lughod’s *Writing Women’s Worlds: Bedouin Stories* (1992b); *Nisa* and *Translated Woman* are biographies, while *Writing Women’s Worlds* contains the narratives of a large patrilineal extended family. All three authors weave together narratives about their own relationship with their subjects, with lengthy first-person stories from their subjects and third-person observer accounts. But each author does this differently. Shostak begins each chapter with lengthy ethnographic analysis, Behar with a “fieldnote” about the day the narratives were collected, and Abu-Lughod with a personal story from her fieldwork observations about the chapter topic. Each of these authors uses a different mix of authoritative description, conversation, and personal narrative to craft these dialogical, fluid ethnographies. However, the authors still controlled the narrative, translated the stories into English, and wrote the books.

**Emphasizing Reflexivity and the Researcher’s Position in the Field**

These three ethnographies also reflect how feminist anthropologists were rethinking their relationship with those they study. All three authors grappled with the power relationship between themselves and their subjects and how to deal with their own positionalities. As part of this trend, Lila Abu-Lughod (1992a), Kirin Narayan (1993), and Patricia Zavella (1993) wrote thoughtful essays about reflexivity and positionality, what Zavella calls social location (based on class, race, and gender). Their approaches do not assume “sisterhood,” but focus on difference. Patricia Zavella (1993) suggests we need to negotiate these dilemmas of difference, carefully outlining our own social location as well as the social locations of our subjects. This recognition is a crucial step in moving from the hierarchical collaboration embodied in the Boas/Hunt relationship to equal partnerships with our subjects. These four advances taken together meant that by the end of the 1990s, our ethnographic subjects had become active, speaking people in varying social locations with socially determined challenges and strategies. However, as I have demonstrated, Malinowski’s and Boas’s own women students played an important role in these transformations as early as the 1920s and 1930s.

In the past ten years, the term “engaged” anthropology (Low and Merry 2010) has become widely used for the activities that anthropologists participate in outside the academic world of conferences, journal articles, and books. This includes the long legacy of applied anthropology projects (Lamphere 2004). In the next two segments, I go beyond the usual forms of engagement, such as writing op-ed pieces and participating in public forums, and instead focus on two forms of engagement that I feel are the most forward looking, consequential, and challenging: collaboration and activism, especially activism that attempts to change public policy.

**Critical Engagement 1: Collaboration: From Research “Subjects” to Equal Partners**

There are two models for transforming our research subjects into collaborators or equal partners in research. They have different roots. One model that has been widely used in applied anthropology is PAR. Based on the work of Kurt Lewin in the 1940s, early advocates of this Northern tradition used the methods of science to solve practical problems through planning, action, and evaluation, for
example, in work places and schools. Sol Tax (1958) democratized this model through his work on the Fox Project. He saw “action anthropology” as based on self-determination for local communities (in this case a Native American population) and “providing alternatives” so that communities could choose their own future path (Tax 1958). This opened the door to community involvement and a more participatory approach.

In contrast, CBPR was founded on the notion of participation and grew out of Paulo Freire’s approach as outlined in Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970). Freire adopted the goals of critical consciousness, emancipation, and social justice in his work with those living in Brazilian favelas and other poor communities. He argued that communities have their own sources of knowledge and practice. They are not “objects of study” but subjects of their own experience who participate in social and educational inquiry. In Freire’s view, self-conscious people will progressively transform their environment through their own praxis. Intellectuals are to be catalysts and support, but not manage, social transformation. Thus, participation, knowledge sharing, and attention to power are key issues in pursuing this model (Wallerstein et al. 2017).

PAR and CBPR have now converged, and both provide similar models for community participation. The major tenant is that community members are equal partners in all phases of the research, from problem definition to data collection, interpretation, and dissemination. Knowledge is not owned by the researchers but shared and retained by the community. The research process should empower community members through capacity building and power sharing in terms of both decision making and knowledge production.

The pages of Practicing Anthropology and Human Organization are filled with more examples of how PAR is being used. In some cases, community participation comes in the middle of the research process. In Holly Mathews’s article on a breast cancer awareness program in North Carolina, African-American community activists were trained to conduct interviews but not included in the planning phases. However, because of their interviewing experience, some women decided to meet together and share their own personal experience with breast examinations. They then decided to plan and conduct a new project, thus entering into a more equal partnership with Mathews (2014) and other researchers. Other projects are more incorporative at the beginning. For example, a study of violence and sex workers in Southern Africa involved local sex worker groups in the topic and design of the project and in carrying out the research. Interview training and participation by sex workers in both phases was probably crucial in obtaining almost 2,000 participants. The interviewers felt empowered and were able to give their interviewees information about support services and encourage them to join the sex worker support groups. This extended the project beyond research and into intervention (Hendriks et al. 2016).

Good collaborative work takes long-term commitment as was true for both of these projects reported in Practicing Anthropology. Lynn Stephen’s We Are the Face of Oaxaca: Testimony and Social Movements (2013) is probably the best example of collaborative research with members of a social movement. From beginning to end, this long-term project on the 2006 teachers’ strike and its aftermath was created through a mutual process of consultation and planning. Stephen used personal networks established through twenty-three years of research to document the participants’ own stories of the strike, the effort to take power from the state, and the massive repression that followed. Stephen, her colleagues, and students began documenting events and videotaping testimonies during the summer of 2006 as events unfolded. She returned in the summer of 2007 and discussed with teachers and activists what questions a website containing the data the team had collected might answer.

In the fall of 2007, close friends of Stephen and their children fled Oaxaca and came to Oregon to settle. Stephen was able to use their testimonies to bolster their case for asylum. The couple, colleagues, and students at the University of Oregon then collaborated with Stephen on how to build a website. Through continuous collaboration with those in Oaxaca, summer fieldwork, and the assembling of a website team in Oregon, testimonials were added, subtitled, transcribed, and fully approved by those who gave them. Stephen’s book, We Are the Face of Oaxaca (2013), focuses on the role of testimonies in the movement and in the pursuit of human rights and justice. It features extensive quotes from the videos and links to the book’s own website where readers can view and listen to the participants’ words. In doing this, she turned her collaborators into authors of their own stories, making the book, in reality, a multi-authored set of documents.

**Critical Engagement 2: The Role of Activism, Advocacy, and Policy**

Over the last decade, with increased interest in issues that impact local populations and the growth of various forms of engagement, the importance of activism has become more legitimate within the academy. I will follow Ida Susser (2011) in defining activist research as involving interventions that forward social justice for an impacted population or community. Although activism and advocacy have taken many different forms, there are few examples where anthropologists have used their research to change public policy at local, state, and national levels. This is perhaps the most difficult and challenging task of activist anthropology but one I think we should undertake, especially at this time. Let me give you two model examples.

The first example is how Sandi Morgen worked with Joan Acker and Jill Weigt on the impact of Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF), the new welfare program that was initiated in 1996 (Morgen, Acker, and Weigt 2010). They interviewed women who had entered the labor force and no
longer received monthly TANF payments, although they
did receive some subsidies for childcare, transportation, and
housing. These women still struggled to make ends meet, and
many lost jobs due to transportation difficulties or childcare
responsibilities (Morgen, Acker, and Weigt 2010). After
giving their report to the state agency that funded them, the team
wrote brief “cameo” reports on issues for legislators, widely
publicized their results in the local press, and testified at legis-
slative hearings. They collaborated with friendly legislators
and community groups to attempt to change Oregon state
policy—a slow process. For example, in 2004, they worked
to alter Oregon regulations so that some TANF recipients
could count postsecondary education as part of their work
requirements, thus allowing women to get the training that
would help them obtain higher-paying jobs and perhaps leave
poverty behind.

A second example is Sarah Horton’s book They Leave
their Kidneys in the Fields (2016). It is based on research with
farm workers in Mendota, California. These men and women
harvested melon and corn and weeded cotton and tomatoes.
Her intensive interviews, case studies, and observations in
the agricultural fields helped Horton to assess the long-term
impact of work conditions on workers’ health, especially heat
deaths and kidney failure. In addition, she showed that state
and federal laws that should improve working conditions and
protect workers’ health are often not enforced.

In the summer of 2016, Horton studied these same
State and Federal policies in melon picking. This research
is part of her effort to impact state and employer policies.
Based on her interviews and observations, she completed a
report to Cal-OSHA about the problems of rehydration and
access to shade among cantaloupe and watermelon workers.
The report pointed out how food safety rules were used to
prohibit workers from bringing their own water to the fields.
However, the placement of company-provided water and
pressure to produce meant that workers seldom had the time
to rehydrate. Also, some workers did not have access to shade
and often skipped breaks (which companies encourage) since
the rest periods were unpaid. Horton’s report made concrete
recommendations for making company-provided water
more accessible and for providing canopies on trailers and
cycling workers through positions so that they work under
the canopies for a period of each day. Cal-OSHA has been
unresponsive to the report and is apparently considering
distance from water jugs on a case-by-case basis rather than
approaching it as a systematic issue that needs to be altered.
Realizing that change may only come with continued pres-
sure, Horton was instrumental in getting an audit that resulted
in one company being cited for violating the labor code. She
is also working with two NGOs to continue to raise the issue
of accessibility to water with Cal-OSHA and to explore the
possibility of company-provided stainless steel water bottles
with the help of food safety experts who could advocate for
this solution with employers. Making an impact takes flex-
ibility, long-term strategies, and the concerted efforts of an
array of activist organizations.

The Challenges of Collaborative and
Activist Research

I see four challenges to furthering collaborative and
activist research:

(1) The need for increased attention to the issues of bring-
ing research subjects into the planning and design of a
project

Researchers usually do not take the time and effort
needed to bring subjects into projects as equal partners. Most
of us are content to train interviewers or establish an advisory
board of local activists and professionals. But skipping these
initial steps and failing to put in place a mechanism for com-
munity input, leadership, and feedback during the research
leaves the researchers in control and fails to build trust and
empowerment in the study population, a crucial element in
building collaboration.

(2) The importance of developing ways to give collabora-
tors authorship of the documents that bring the results
to broad audiences

Often, writing the ethnography of a project is left to the
academic or applied researchers rather than community col-
laborators. Collaborators who are already professionals (so-
cial workers, teachers, long-time activists) can be more easily
incorporated if their full-time work obligations are taken into
account. NGO staff and activists are often too pressed for
time to write up results, but their input and approval can be
solicited at each stage, and they can be acknowledged as co-
authors. Ordinary interviewees can also participate in public
dissemination and also be authors in their own right, as Lynn
Stephen’s project illustrates. Co-authorship is an important
sign of our commitment.

(3) The need to train graduate students so that they develop
the skills necessary to approach potential research part-
ers, define a problem collaboratively, design research
projects, and provide feedback to collaborators at cru-
cial points in the process of qualitative interviewing or
participant observation

For graduate students, working on a collaborative/activ-
ist project of a senior faculty member is the best way to learn
these skills and perhaps formulate a follow-up dissertation
project with the same community collaborators, as Elise Trott
(2017) at the University of New Mexico has done. She gained
experience conducting fieldwork and building collaborative
research relationships by collaborating with Sylvia Rodriguez
(2006) and Northern New Mexico irrigation organizations. In
order to provide these opportunities for graduate students, tra-
ditional academic departments must hire more faculty who are
engaged in collaborative/activist research and make changes
in Ph.D. programs to encourage students to take this approach.
Finally, collaborative researchers need to build activist strategies to change public policy into their own projects and their research training of students.

Here, the key is to work with local NGOs and community groups who already have a policy agenda and connections to school boards, city councils, state legislators, and program administrators. This can lead to successful policy initiatives as well as multi-year collaborative efforts.

Conclusions

The transformation of ethnography began only ten or fifteen years after Malinowski lived in his tent on the Trobriands. Malinowski’s female students as well as those of Boas helped to pioneer studies of colonialism, ethnographies about women, and dialogical forms of writing. Many of these changes got a further boost and became more widespread through the participation of anthropologists in the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s and the increased inclusion of minority scholars and women into the discipline. The more recent acceptance of collaborative and activist anthropology, not just in applied anthropology programs but throughout a wide range of departments, has further transformed ethnography. But there are still challenges and room for change.

Today, collaborative and activist ethnography is more needed than ever. Many federal policies are being overturned or more damaging ones are being put into place. Thus, it is important for applied anthropologists to continue their research on the critical social issues of our time. While many policy changes will emanate from Washington, DC, there are still important policy decisions that are being made by state legislatures, city councils, and school boards. We can engage with these organizations when they are considering policy changes on issues we know best and where we have conducted ethnographic research. Ethnographic case material and individual stories can make a powerful impact if presented through the voices of community members. Long-term focus on particular policies at local levels in collaboration with communities and organizations will have lasting impacts. This is no longer Malinowski’s ethnography but ethnography that fits the struggles and dilemmas of ordinary people in the 21st century.

Notes

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2Low and Merry (2010) describe six kinds of engagement: (1) sharing and support for our subjects and their communities, (2) teaching and public education, (3) social critique, (4) collaboration, (5) advocacy, and (6) activism.

3Change can, of course, come from a combination of sources. For example, in 2015, California passed Assembly Bill 1513, a law that requires that companies pay workers at the piece-rate during the breaks, thereby removing the incentive for workers to skip breaks. And the citation Horton mentions has brought a larger investigation by the Labor Commission into the same company searching for additional violations. The potential threat of more investigations pushed companies to begin to follow the rules across a wide variety of harvesting situations. Still, continued pressure from advocacy groups may be necessary to assure that these initial events bring about real changes (e.g., workers always taking their breaks and companies always following the rules about hydration and shade).

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Collaborative ethnography—the collaboration of researchers and subjects in the production of ethnographic texts—offers us a powerful way to engage the public with anthropology. As one of many academic/applied approaches, contemporary collaborative ethnography stems from a well-established historical tradition of collaboratively produced texts that are often overlooked. Feminist and postmodernist efforts to recenter ethnography along dialogical lines further contextualize this historically situated collaborative practice. The goals of collaborative ethnography (both historical and contemporaneous) are...