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On Concept Work

2012-09-25 05:00:33

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The most recent edition of [Cultural Anthropology](#) is dedicated to *Writing Culture* as an episode in the history of anthropological thought. George Marcus ([2012](#)) provides one of two vistas of the relation of *Writing Culture* to experiments and experiences in anthropology today.

He writes in his [abstract](#), “Fieldwork today requires a kind of collaborative concept work that stimulates studios, archiving, para-sites, which in turn constitute the most innovative expressions of ethnography, difficult to capture in the traditional genre.” Whilst one may disagree that ethnography is the only object and form for anthropological inquiry, the claim that fieldwork requires “a kind of” collaborative concept work is well-taken. What “kind” then?

For the last six years a collaborative group centered at Berkeley [Anthropological Research on the Contemporary](#) (ARC; anthropos-lab.net), has been engaged in just such experiments in collaborative concept work, to assist in the orientation and practice of fieldwork as well as the labor of giving form to the products of fieldwork within a collaborative setting (Rabinow, 2003 & 2011; Rabinow and Stavrianakis, *forthcoming*). As participants in this ongoing experiment, we think that there is something missing in Marcus’ brief synopsis that is worth drawing out.

Giving an account of the collaborative work at ARC, Marcus writes: “It [ARC] has evolved a distinctive sense of how collective labwork should develop alongside ongoing ethnographic research projects [sic] (the function of “concept work” that it defines for itself), and there are some interesting debates early in its history, and archived on its website, about alternative ways a lab or studio initiative might relate to existing ways of thinking about the conduct of fieldwork” (Marcus, 2012; 439). In view of Marcus’ suggestion that the “concept work” at ARC has been taken up for idiosyncratic reasons, it seems worth offering a word about the shared problem to which the creation of ARC was one response. ARC took form out of a dissatisfaction with the reigning “individual project” model in anthropology, and the modes of subjectivation that it presumes and produces (Collier, Lakoff and Rabinow, 2006). There was a felt need for an organized space in which two things would be facilitated which are often disfavored by the university department in its current state: a

collective work on concept formation for use in orienting common work; and the formation of shared standards and modes of judgment.

In this sense, concept work is not an end in itself. It is always connected to the problems one wishes to think through, as well as the question of how one could make a judgment about the problems one is engaging. Thinking about the (collaborative) mode in which one makes judgments is necessary if one thinks that ethnography, understood as the description of how a group does something, is only one part of anthropology. Rather, concept work forms one part of a broader experiment in attempting to change both how anthropology can be practiced and the purpose for which it is practiced. Marcus writes that he is in favor of “mutual concept work ... on which the collaborative experiments with form that I am evoking depend.” (Marcus, 2012, 435). The question is: what does such mutuality consist in and what does it cost? In his recent book, *The Accompaniment*, Paul Rabinow argues that work on shared concepts requires attention to the disposition of those engaged in the practice as well as power relations (Rabinow, 2011; 127-132). To this end, through ARC and also through his experiments in graduate pedagogy (*ibid*), Rabinow has attempted to work against modes of subjectivation dominated solely by contemporary regimes of credit and career rewards.

When practiced as inquiry, anthropology produces knowledge of the world, and, occasionally in very skilled practitioners, it makes something visible that was not visible before. Insofar as this is a practice of form giving, this making-visible can be thought of as a judgment of sorts. To put it in terms taken from Dewey’s pragmatic philosophy: “The meanings which are suggested as possible solutions of a problem, which are then used to direct further operations of experimental observation, form the predicational content of judgments.” (Dewey, 1938, 131). The fact that problems, observations and judgments are context dependent, situated and existential shows the deep resonance between Dewey’s pragmatism and anthropological modes of inquiry. Dewey is not an answer, but is a resource for anthropology (Rabinow, 2003, 17.)

Concept formation and work on shared standards of judgment were responses to the broad question of how knowledge is produced in the human sciences and the purposes for which it is produced. More specifically, the question was what kind of anthropological knowledge should be produced today and how?

The “how” includes the question of whether it is possible to subject anthropological claims about the world to tests of significance. This has taken place in ARC through work on the relation of problems and concepts. For example, with respect to the anthropological problem of the practice of collaboration between human and biosciences, on the ethical

ramifications of work in the sciences today, concepts were needed, such as the conceptual distinction between “collaboration” and “cooperation” (Rabinow and Bennett, 2012). The shared concept work, as well as diagnostic work took place over many years and much of it is online and available for use (anthropos-lab.net, see especially, [Bios Technika](#) and the [Diagnostic of Equipmental Platforms](#)). The shared work of thinking through relevant concepts, and the question of which problems to engage in together, is part of asking how anthropological work can have significance beyond the egoism of an author’s relation to their monograph, or journal article. If this is not taken into account, we think the worth of problem-oriented collaboration and the concept work necessary to it will be missed.

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AMA citation

Stavrianakis A, Bennett G. On Concept Work. *Somatosphere*. 2012. Available at: <http://somatosphere.net/2012/09/on-concept-work.html>.

Accessed April 4, 2013.

APA citation

Stavrianakis, Anthony & Bennett, Gaymon. (2012). *On Concept Work*. Retrieved April 4, 2013, from Somatosphere Web site: <http://somatosphere.net/2012/09/on-concept-work.html>

Chicago citation

Stavrianakis, Anthony and Gaymon Bennett. 2012. *On Concept Work*. Somatosphere. <http://somatosphere.net/2012/09/on-concept-work.html> (accessed April 4, 2013).

Harvard citation

Stavrianakis, A & Bennett, G 2012, *On Concept Work*, Somatosphere. Retrieved April 4, 2013, from <<http://somatosphere.net/2012/09/on-concept-work.html>>

MLA citation

Stavrianakis, Anthony and Gaymon Bennett. "On Concept Work." 25 Sep. 2012. Somatosphere. Accessed 4 Apr. 2013.<<http://somatosphere.net/2012/09/on-concept-work.html>>