

## EDITORIAL COMMENTARY

Understanding the emergence of American anthropology as an academic discipline requires that it be approached simultaneously in terms of debate over substantive data and theory, institutional patterns and alternatives, the careers of individuals, and the interaction of these factors.

(Curtis M. Hinsley, Jr., 1976)

This Commentary (nor, indeed, the selection of essays comprising this issue of *JASHM*), cannot fulfill the conditions stated in the Hinsley epigraph. The issue is simply meant to draw readers' attention to some of the conditions in which American professional anthropology emerged. We hope that readers will examine the excellent book (Spencer 1976) out of which Hinsley's quotation and two other essays are taken. They are 1. Regna Darnell's 'Daniel Brinton and the Professionalization of American Anthropology' and 2. Margot Liberty's 'Native American "Informants": The Contribution of Francis La Flesche'. For those wishing to go further, we also recommend Darnell's more recent contributions (1998, 1999) in addition to the excellent works by George Stocking (1968, 1974).

Like its companion, which celebrates some of the 'founding fathers' of British social anthropology (*JASHM*, Vol. 10, No. 4), this issue has more modest goals: to provide current students of the anthropology of human movement with some idea of how American cultural anthropology began as an academic discipline and what makes it different from the British approach.

There is some risk that the growing habit of university [administrators] to group us with the social sciences will tend to influence students to believe that anthropology is intrinsically a social science and has always been such, plus only certain odd sidelines and specialties of its own. It therefore seems important for everyone concerned with anthropology to recognize that its specific social science aspect is historically recent -- scarcely a generation old. . . . And so far as it has a social science ingredient, it prevalently treats the data of this historically, which the core social sciences do to only a minor degree. . . . [Kroeber 1954: 767, 764]. It also seems unlikely that the social science ingredient will absorb or displace the older natural science and humanistic components.

If at times some of you, like myself, feel somewhat ill at ease in the house of social science, do not wonder; we are changelings therein, our true paternity lies elsewhere. (Kroeber 1959: 404).

John Cole cites Dell Hymes (1972) -- with whose "reinvention" of anthropology he disagreed, -- observing that

American anthropology differs from European most strikingly in its holistic "four-field" approach. The most severe revisionist critics of our discipline have periodically concentrated their attacks on this concept, maintaining that the four fields are really unrelated, unmanageable, or at least outmoded (Cole 1974: 112).

Cole was against adding "new specialties such as ethnohistory, kinesics or human ecology" suggesting that anthropology

has been a more fertile discipline in America than in Europe, and this is due largely to the association (occasionally forced!) of linguists, ethnographers, archaeologists and

physical anthropologists. Obviously this conclusion is debatable, but however one evaluates the present state of anthropology, a look at our discipline's origins is instructive. Criticisms that the four-field approach is not "self-evident" or "natural" miss the mark because they attack a straw man issue. God did not ordain a mystical four-in-one concept of anthropology, revealed to Americans but not to Europeans. *But it is an important theoretical statement* (Coles 1976: 113 - italics added).

And there were other questions. For example, Hinsley remarks: "This vision of a two-tiered scientific establishment is essential to understanding the early history of the Bureau [of Ethnology] and of anthropology in Washington [DC] generally, because it determined the structure and mode of operations of Powell's organizations. A product of the peculiar needs and exigencies of mid-nineteenth century scientific explorations of the American continent, this view of distinct functions was both democratic in inviting wide participation, and elitist in reserving certain functions to a few individuals" (Hinsley 1976: 41).

In 1882 Otis Mason -- a self-trained anthropologist himself -- delivered a public lecture at the Smithsonian that was intended to "bring about a better understanding between scientific specialists and intelligent thinkers." "Who may be an anthropologist?" Mason asked rhetorically, and then answered: "Every man, woman, and child that has sense and patience to observe, and that can honestly record the thing observed." Anthropology, he stressed, was "A science in which there is no priesthood and no laity, no sacred language; but one in which you are all both the investigator and the investigated" (Mason, cited in Hinsley 1976: 41).

Perhaps members of the 'New York anthropology' group (see Lesser 1976), 'Philadelphia anthropology', or others who identified themselves by various locations, would have had different ideas emanating from the many perspectives on a discipline that represented several areas of the United States: New England, the east coast (including "government science" in Washington (D. C.)), the midwest, southwest and California. In this issue of *JASHM*, after Darnell's and Liberty's essays, we focus on three significant individuals: Franz Boas, Alfred Kroeber and Robert Lowie, in a commentary, written especially for *JASHM*, by Alan R. Beals (Emeritus Professor, University of California, Riverside), who knew all three men.

It is not widely known that Franz Boas, the 'founding father' of American cultural anthropology, was an early proponent of the study of dance and body movement as culture. The subject weaves through several lifelong themes in his work, such as the study of expressive and aesthetic forms of culture and the relationship of race and culture to behavior. In *Primitive Art* (1927), for example, Boas articulated a theory of dance as emotional and symbolic expression as part of his theory of rhythm in art and culture. Ruby (1980) suggests that Boas was trying to overcome the prejudice of some scholars that dance and the arts of body movement were not a fit subject for scientific investigation since they were so "emotional" in content. It was also a reaction against the economic determinism arguments of Bucher and others. Although Boas certainly saw dance as an emotional and aesthetic outlet for the dancer, his interest was not in the individual as much as the social -- of the dance as an expression of culture. For Boas, body movement of any kind was a means of signifying one's cultural identity, and, as such, should be amenable to ethnographic description and analysis (Ruby 1980).

As early as 1888, in the first volume of the *Journal of American Folklore*, Boas published "On Certain Songs and Dances of the Kwakiutl of British Columbia" and his interest in Kwakiutl dances continued throughout his life. In his last paper, published posthumously, Boas explained why it was so important to the understanding of that particular culture.

It will be seen from the foregoing that song and dance accompany all the events of Kwakiutl life, and that they are an essential part in the culture of the people. Song and dance are inseparable here. Although there are expert performers, everyone is obligated to take part in the singing and dancing, so that the separation between performer and audience that we find in our modern society does not occur in more primitive societies such as that represented by the Kwakiutl Indians (Boas 1944:10).

Boas was also a researcher who never tired of trying new methods and techniques. Ruby notes that in 1930, when Boas was 70 years old, he returned to the site of his earlier studies among the Kwakiutl with a motion picture camera and wax cylinder sound recording machine. His goal was to create footage of dances, games and methods of manufacturing, as well as record songs and music. Boas was thus "one of the first anthropologists, and perhaps the first social scientist anywhere, to use the motion picture camera to generate data in natural settings (as opposed to a laboratory) in order to study gesture, motor habits, and dance as manifestations of culture" (Ruby 1980:1).

Boas asked his daughter Franziska to study the Kwakiutl dance footage and she did so, supplementing her observations with material from her father's earlier work (Boas 1897). Part of this material was published as a discussion following the article by Franz Boas in the volume edited by Franziska entitled, *The Function of Dance in Human Society* (Boas 1944). The films and her manuscript were subsequently deposited at the University of Washington.<sup>1</sup>

Historical evidence suggests that Boas was interested in using the films and sound recordings for a study of rhythm but he could find no suitable method of analysis. Three letters written in the field to Ruth Benedict are particularly revealing of Boas's interests and insights. On November 9, 1930 he wrote, "The question of song and dance rhythm was not complicated. The feet and the hands move with the time-beating; but time-beating and singing are a tough problem." On November 13, 1930, "Julia [his field assistant] danced last night with the crowd and has her first formal dancing lesson tonight. . . the dance problem is difficult. I hope that the films will give us adequate material for making a real study." And finally, on November 24, 1930, "I already have a good deal of materials for this style-motor question." On the same day, Boas wrote to his son, Ernst, "Julia is learning the dance, but I believe it is too difficult to learn

---

<sup>1</sup> Ruby tells us that in 1961 the film footage, drawings, and manuscript were given to the Burke Museum of the University of Washington by Franziska Boas. Bill Holm of the Burke Museum edited the footage into a two part film (Part I deals with Games and Technology and Part II with Dances and Ceremonies). He also annotated the footage with appropriate citations from Boas's publications and attempted to locate the Kwakiutl in the film to ask them to describe what was depicted. The films, together with Holm's notes, are available from the University of Washington Press.

quickly. At any rate, *through the criticism she receives I learn what it is all about.*" (Rohner 1969:293-4 cited in Ruby 1980, italics supplied).

Clearly, Boas understood two criteria that we take for granted today as necessary to the practice of good field research. First, that learning the body language from local skilled practitioners is essential. Second, that critical remarks from such practitioners provide important means for understanding such things as local concepts of the body, space and time, as well as criteria for adequate performance.

Since Boas had gathered written descriptive data on Kwakiutl dance since 1888, it is interesting to ask why he thought the new, filmed data could provide him with "adequate material for making a real study." Ruby notes that Franziska Boas provides us with a tantalizing possibility. In a personal communication to Ruby, she suggested that Boas made the filmed data because he had heard of Laban's work and "wanted to know whether Laban Notation was being expanded for wider use than just for [Western theatrical] dance, but I did not know enough about it to make use of it myself. His pattern was to investigate any new channels that might be fruitful. He very probably would have used Laban Notation had he lived later into the 1940's."

If her conjecture is accurate, Boas was not only among the earliest researchers to use a camera with a view to the detailed analysis of dances, dancing, and 'motor habits', he also recognized the analytic possibilities that a transcription system like Labanotation offered to the anthropological study of body movement. Since Laban's first published work appeared in 1926 after many years of development, this is entirely possible. There is no evidence to suggest that Boas knew Laban or discussed these ideas with him or any of his students. We do know that Laban conceived of a movement writing system capable of recording all forms of body movement and not just Western theatrical dance forms, but most of these ideas were not published until after Boas's death.

As Beals points out in his essay, Boas also fought against the popular misuse of race as an explanatory device for human social differences. He was a fervent opponent of racial explanations and he sought to establish the primacy of culture over race as a means of understanding social behavior. This interest took on a particular urgency in the 1930s when racism in America and Nazism in Europe were powerful forces. When Nazi social scientists began to publish their "scientific" explanations for the racial inferiority of non-Aryans, Boas had an additional reason for advocating the primacy of culture for understanding human differences. Boas combined his need to dispute the racists with his interest in gesture and motor habits in the work he directed by one of his last students, David Efron (1941). In the introduction to the published version of Efron's dissertation, Boas makes clear his interests:

The present publication deals with the problem of gesture habits from the point of view of their cultural or biological conditioning. The trend of this investigation as well as that of the other subjects investigated indicate that, as far as physiological and psychological functioning of the body is concerned, the environment has such fundamental influence that in larger groups, particularly in sub-divisions of the White race, the genetic element may be ruled out entirely or almost entirely as a determining

factor...The behavior of the individual depends upon his own anatomical and physiological make-up, over which is superimposed the important influence of social and geographic environment in which he lives (Boas in Efron 1941:ix-x).

Efron's research on race and gesture was a study of traditional and assimilated Jews and Italians in New York City, and he employed a number of innovative methods at the time. They included the direct observation of gestural behavior in natural situations; sketches drawn from life by a painter, and motion pictures that were analyzed using graphs and charts based on measurements and tabulations, as well as the observations and judgments of naive observers (Efron 1941:41).

Boas had also encouraged earlier students to pay attention to body movement. While in the field, Margaret Mead wrote to Boas on March 29, 1938 saying, "When I said I was going to Bali, you said: 'If I were going to Bali I would study gesture'" (Mead 1977:212 cited in Ruby 1980). However, by the time Mead and Bateson returned from the field Boas was too frail to see or discuss their work with them. Whether Boas, Mead and Efron, ever spent time discussing their mutual interests is unknown, but clearly Columbia University was a place where ideas about how to study body movement were circulating in the 1930's.

Following Beals's essay in this issue of JASHM is a second reprinting of A. Irving Hallowell's 'Cultural Factors in Spatial Orientation'.<sup>2</sup> Hallowell's work on spatial orientation is included, not because he was instrumental in professionalizing American cultural anthropology, but because it may be true that he has more to say to contemporary students of the anthropology of human movement than any American anthropologist up to the end of the 1970s. We can only agree with the editors of *Symbolic Anthropology* when they remark,

Whatever the natural aspects of space, it is, like every other part of nature, given meaningful configuration in the culture of any people, and different peoples construct space differently, to a greater or lesser degree. Hallowell describes vividly and clearly the way in which the *Saulteaux*, a North American Indian tribe, conceive of space, the way in which they order it, and the way in which that ordering in turn becomes part of their experience of it. Descriptions of such subtlety and sensitivity as Hallowell's are less common than one might like, and so this paper becomes all the more valuable for the very clear and precise way in which he is able to translate the *Saulteaux* conceptions into terms, we, with entirely different notions of space, can easily comprehend (Dolgin, Kemnitzer and Schneider 1977: 131).

Inevitably perhaps, there will be critics who will say that our choice of representative 'ancestral figures' is misguided -- that we leave out important people. Some will no doubt criticize Volume 10, No. 4 for the same reason: it lacks an essay about E. E. Evans-Pritchard, for example, who may have had more to do with shaping social anthropology today than did Radcliffe-Brown or Malinowski. If so, they forget the main audience for whom these issues of

---

<sup>2</sup> This essay was originally published in 1955 in *Culture and Experience*. It was reprinted in Dolgin et al. 1977.

*JASHM* are prepared: contemporary students of an emerging subfield of sociocultural anthropology<sup>3</sup>: the anthropology of human movement.

With regard to this aspiring subfield, it is hoped that it will be adopted by American cultural and linguistic anthropology, and British social anthropology, because there is little, if anything, in British or American archaeology and physical anthropology that contributes to current studies of human movement. One exception to this assertion is an outstanding example of archaeological research that has been extremely helpful to movement specialists: it is the result of the work of a southern African social anthropologist-turned-archaeologist, David Lewis-Williams (1989).<sup>4</sup> A second exception is the work of an American Visiting Professor of Classics at the University of Iowa, Lillian B. Lawler (1964a, 1964b).<sup>5</sup>

Whether we consider British social anthropology or American cultural anthropology, there are great stores of accumulated wisdom from which to choose. Our selection of authors in either case is bound to be contested, but we hope to remedy some of the oversights in future by producing other issues of *JASHM* that will point to the lives and times of those on both sides of the Atlantic whose work has been especially relevant to the problems and issues in the anthropology of human movement.

The Editors

#### References Cited:

##### Boas, Franz

- 1897 Social Organization and Secret Societies of the Kwakiutl Indians. Report of the U.S. National Museum for 1895: 311-738.  
1927 [1955] *Primitive Art*. New York: Dover Publications.

##### Boas, Franziska (Ed.)

- 1944 *The Function of Dance in Human Society*. New York: Dance Horizons.

##### Cole, John

- 1976 Nineteenth Century Fieldwork, Archaeology, and Museum Studies: Their Role in the Four-Field Definition of American Anthropology. In Robert F. Spencer (Ed.) *American Anthropology: The Early Years*. St. Paul, MN: West

---

<sup>3</sup> We use the words, 'sociocultural anthropology' as a convenient reference to both social anthropology and cultural anthropology. By doing so, we do not mean to erase important differences between the two approaches, treating them as the same, because they are not, in spite of many instances of cooperation emanating from both sides of the Atlantic and a few existing similarities, including the presence of ethnographies, participant-observation, etc.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis-Williams's work is cited extensively in Williams, Drid (Ed.) 2000. *Anthropology and Human Movement, 2: Searching for Origins*. Lanham, Maryland and London: Scarecrow Press.

<sup>5</sup> See also Rovik 1991: Homage to Lillian B. Lawler With a Select Bibliography of Her Writings. *JASHM* 6(4): 159-168.)

Publishing Company, pp. 111-24. [1974 Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society.]

**Darnell, Regna**

1998 *And Along Came Boas: Continuity and Revolution in Americanist Anthropology*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

**Darnell, Regna and Lisa P. Valentine (Eds.)**

1999 *Theorizing the Americanist Tradition*. Toronto: U of Toronto Press.

**Efron, David**

1941 *Gesture and Environment*. New York: King's Crown Press.

**Hallowell, A. Irving**

1953 *Culture and Experience*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 184-202. Reprinted in *Symbolic Anthropology: A Reader in the Study of Symbols and Meanings*. J. Dolgen, D. Kemnitzer and D. Schneider (Eds.), 1977. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 131-150.

**Hinsley, Curtis M.**

1976 *Amateurs and Professionals in Washington Anthropology, 1879 to 1903*. In *American Anthropology: The Early Years*. Robert F. Spencer (Ed.). St. Paul, MN: West Publishing Company, pp. 36-68.

**Hymes, Dell**

1972 *Reinventing Anthropology*. New York: Pantheon.

**Kroeber, Alfred L.**

1954 *The Place of Anthropology in Universities*. *American Anthropologist* 56(5): 764-767.  
1959 *The History of the Personality of Anthropology*. *American Anthropologist* 61(3): 398-404.

**Laban, Rudolph**

1926 *Choreographie*. Jena: Eugen Diederichs.

**Lawler, Lillian**

1964a *The Dance of the Ancient Greek Theatre*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.  
1964b *The Dance in Ancient Greece*. London: Adam & Charles Black.

**Lewis-Williams, David and Thomas Dowson**

1989 *Images of Power, Understanding Bushman Rock Art*. Cape Town: Southern Book Publishers.

**Lesser, Alexander**

1976 *The American Ethnological Society: The Columbia Phase, 1906-1946*. In *American Anthropology: The Early Years*. Robert F. Spencer (Ed.) St. Paul, MN: West Publishing Company, pp. 126-35.

**Mead, Margaret.**

1977 *Letters From the Field 1925-1975*. New York: Harper and Row.

**Ruby, Jay**

1980 *Franz Boas and Early Camera Study of Behavior*. *Kinesis Reports* 3[1]: 6 -11.

**Rohner, Ronald (Ed.)**

- 1969 *The Ethnography of Franz Boas. Letters and Diaries of Franz Boas Written on the Northwest Coast from 1886 to 1931.* University of Chicago Press.

**Stocking, George**

- 1968 *Race, Culture and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology.* New York: Free Press.
- 1974 *The Shaping of American Anthropology, 1883-1911: A Franz Boas Reader.* New York: Basic Books.