

Anthropology Book Forum

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Anthropology's many pasts: frustrations, engagements, and commitments

Review by Nicholas Barron

REGNA DARNELL and FREDERIC W. GLEACH, eds. 2017. *Historicizing Theories, Identities, and Nations*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 300 pgs., ISBN: 978-1-4962-0268-0

Historicizing Theories, Identities, and Nations marks the 11th volume in the Histories of Anthropology Annual series. Once again, editors Regna Darnell and Frederick W. Gleach have curated a stimulating array of essays that enrich scholarly inquiries into the discipline's many pasts. Synthesizing subjects that have appeared in previous iterations of the series, the 11th volume brings together 13 chapters under the banner of theories, identities, and nations and the scholarly understanding of these subjects' respective histories. In addition to these guiding terms, multiple robust and overlapping themes can be traced throughout the volume including anthropology's underappreciated interactions with other disciplines and the formulation, circulation, and modification of anthropological ideas and debates in relation to the varied geopolitical developments of the 20th century.

The bulk of the volume's chapters sit within a subset of the history of anthropology that one might call "Boas studies." While the parameters are by no means without variation, works that fall within the bounds of this cottage industry have several generic features. The historical actors centered within these works are often Euro-American scholars with allegiance to "the father of cultural anthropology," Franz Boas. Relatedly, one finds close analytical attention to the

development of pluralistic conceptions of culture, cultural relativism, and the critique of biological conceptions of race. Though this might seem rather restrictive, the authors of these chapters find new and productive angles on the paradoxically maligned and exalted Boasian paradigm and its founding figures. The volume begins with Darnell's own chapter, which provides a close re-reading and comparison of the 1911 and 1938 editions of Boas's *Mind of Primitive Man*. While the chapter emphasizes continuity in Boas's thinking as well as his commitment to scientific empiricism, Darnell's treatment of the sections of the book dealing with race illustrate how Boas sharpened his position on race overtime and in relation to seismic shifts in national and international politics. As the target of his intellectual and political venom shifted from the American eugenics' movement of the 1910s to the Nazism of the 1930s, Boas expanded his critique of race beyond American society to include his European homeland.

Through an exploration of Boas's correspondence with the noted pragmatist John Dewey, Michael Harkin underscores a palpable, though not entirely harmonious, relationship between the two thinkers. Drawn together by common progressive and reformist impulses, Boas and Dewey ultimately parted ways when it came to the United States' entry into World War I, a development that Boas opposed and Dewey supported. Working in a similar time frame, David Dinwoodie turns to an even more under-investigated dimension of Boas's intellectual associations—a newer generation of irreverent, cosmopolitan, social commentators, namely Randolph Bourne. Dinwoodie argues that Bourne's transnationalism and critique of traditional intellectuals and experts came to influence the more pointed political commentaries found in Boas's *Anthropology and Modern Life*.

Additional twists on the Boas studies tradition can be found in chapters dealing with Boas's students as well as his student's students. Frank Salamone offers an analysis of Ruth Benedict's conception of social synergy and its relation to Abraham Maslow's famous hierarchy of needs. Meanwhile, James Nyce and Evelyn Bowers explore A. Irving Hallowell's evolutionary theory in relation to his friendship with the philosopher Grace A. de Laguna. In a more speculative vein, Harkin's second contribution to the volume poses the question: what would Boas have thought of 9/11? Working against the reductive characterization of Boas as an abject relativist, Harkin suggests that Boas's commitment to liberal cosmopolitanism would have placed him at odds with

“religious fundamentalism of any stripe” (41, 52). Chapters from Robert Ulin and Andrew P. Lyons help move the volume beyond the Boasian purview while still underscoring the discipline’s complex relationship with other theoretical developments of the first half of the 20th century. Ulin considers the impact of the linguistic turn on anthropology by focusing on the equation of communicative practice with agency, and Lyons traces Edward Westermarck’s influence on Bronislaw Malinowski through a discussion of the many variants in relativist thinking.

The volume’s remaining passages take readers to less trodden territory where the history of anthropology stretches beyond Boas, the United States, and Western Europe. It is in these chapters that the discipline’s complex relationship with the shifting geopolitical dynamics of the 20th century become most evident. Particularly, notable is a series of illuminating chapters from Nguyen Phuong Ngoc, Nguyen Van Huy, and Bradley Camp Davis dealing with anthropology’s underexplored history in Vietnam during the latter half of the 20th century. Olga Glinski’s treatment of pre-WWI ethnographic inquiries in Eastern Europe critically catalogues and contextualizes the work of scholars who became caught up in populist movements that saw in the peasantry the grist of novel national identities. Read alongside Lyon’s contribution, this chapter also helps recontextualize Malinowski whose contributions are typically viewed through the British functionalist tradition with little reference to the political and intellectual debates that permeated the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Thomas McIlwraith’s eulogy for Arthur Nole, a Tahltan elder and ethnographic interlocutor, brings the volume to a close. Despite being tonally different from the rest of the volume, McIlwraith’s chapter is perhaps the clearest treatment of the overlapping themes of theory, identity, and nation as readers learn how Nole’s perspectives on Tahltan culture, history, and resource development and management formed in relation to private property regimes in Canada.

For practicing anthropologists who follow the history of the discipline closely, the book is certainly a relevant read. However, this volume and its Boasian passages have a particular resonance in the wake of recent discussions about the current state of the discipline and its ability to persist in the face of a slew of existential threats including anthropogenic climate disaster, authoritarianism, structural racism, and neoliberalism just to name a few (e.g., Clarke et al.,

2020). As such conversations tend to entail historical reflection, these recent conversations mark the latest episode in the discipline's longstanding reflective gaze. While reflexivity can and has led to principled, empirical inquiries into anthropology's past, it can also lead to the perpetual re-centering of the same small cohort of disciplinary ancestors. Moreover, within such recursive storytelling, there is the potential for intellectual forebearers to be reduced to caricatures in parables of liberal perfectibility. In such instances, Boas, for example, is presented as an unwavering devotee to cultural relativism, promoter of anthropology as the science of humanity par excellence, and single-minded critic of biological racism. Though not inaccurate, this depiction ignores Boas's own frustrations with the limits of the relativist critique, his engagements with non-anthropological thinkers, and his commitment to the shifting politics of his own present—commitments which certainly included, but were by no means confined to, upending scientific racism. Though delineated in a minor key, these frustrations, engagements, and commitments echo throughout *Historicizing Theories, Identities, and Nations*. Thus, while this volume most certainly takes us back to Boas, it does so, I believe, in a critical and productive manner that enhances anthropology's enduring inclination to interrogate its own past—not to bask in self-congratulation, but to better conceptualize the problems of the present.

Works Cited

Clarke, Kamari, Deborah Thomas, Lucia Cantero, Ryan Jobson, Chris Loperena, Jonathan Rosa, Savannah Shange, and Zoe Todd. 2020. "[The Case for Letting Anthropology Burn? Race, Racism and Its Reckoning in American Anthropology.](#)" Webinar, Wenner-Gren Foundation, September 23.

Nicholas Barron received his PhD in anthropology from the University of New Mexico. Focusing on North America, his research explores the intersecting histories of applied anthropology and Indigenous politics. His writings have appeared in *History and Anthropology*, *Histories of Anthropology Annual*, and *History of Human Sciences*. Currently, he teaches anthropology at Mission College while also serving as a Managing Editor for the *History of Anthropology Review* and the Book Review Editor for *Anthropology and Humanism*.



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