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Engaging with the Expansive and Eclectic Work and Legacy of Franz Boas

Review by Joseph Weiss

The Franz Boas Papers, Volume 1: Franz Boas as Public Intellectual—Theory, Ethnography, Activism

by Regna Darnell, Joshua Smith, Michelle Hamilton, and Robert L. A. Hancock (eds)

University of Nebraska Press, 2015

Early in her preface to this first volume of the Franz Boas Papers, Regna Darnell suggests that Franz Boas is an “elephant in the middle of the room” for contemporary anthropology, in relation to which “all practicing anthropologists have struggled to position themselves.” “Indisputably the founder and dominant figure,” Darnell writes, in the emergence of anthropology as a “professionalized academic discipline in North America,” Boas has been “eulogized and reviled, claimed as an ancestor and repudiated as having led anthropology astray” (Darnell: xi). *Franz Boas as Public Intellectual – Theory, Ethnography, Activism* is intended in one sense as response in and of itself to this ambivalent and conflicted legacy. At the same time, it inaugurates a broader reassessment of Boas’ corpus as the introductory volume of the *Franz Boas Papers Documentary Edition*, “an ambitious project to digitize and critically edit the Franz Boas papers” housed at the American Philosophical Society (Hamilton: 345). It is in this introductory spirit that we can perhaps best understand Darnell’s repeated emphasis on Boas’ defiance of “simple definition” and the ways in which the volume as whole repeatedly emphasizes the diversity of his own engagements within the academy, with the First Nations and Native American communities in which he conducted the vast majority of his most well-known research, and with publics in the United States, Canada, and Germany. Boas as a scholar, as a fieldworker, as an activist and as a public intellectual cannot be encompassed within any “single perspective,” and *Franz Boas as Public Intellectual* seems meant both to demonstrate the wide variety of ways in which Boas’ legacy can be approached and to act as an invitation for a broadly diverse set of engagements with the Boas papers as they continue to be published (Darnell: xi-xii).

Considered in this light, the volume is a tremendous success, bringing together the contributions of anthropologists, historians, journalists, museum specialists, literary theorists, and linguists, among others, and focusing on a myriad of different dimensions of Boas' career and ongoing impact within the academy and outside of it. Though so integral to the mission statement of the larger *Boas Papers* project, the very diverse character of this volume also makes it a challenging text to engage with on its own terms. The text deliberately resists presenting any single, unifying position on Boas or offering general overviews of his career or basic theoretical positions outside of the specific foci of individual chapters. This volume, in other words, is not for the uninitiated, and those without some familiarity with Boas' major writings or the substantive details of his ethnographic work in Canada may find themselves unable to gain purchase on the often highly compelling interventions made within the book's individual chapters. Though an introduction to the *Boas Papers* project, it is clearly not meant as a broader introduction to Boas' scholarship, and potential readers who are not already well-versed in "Boasiana" will benefit from consulting Boas' own *Race, Language and Culture* (Boas 1982a), the *Franz Boas Reader* edited by the late George Stocking (Boas 1982b), and perhaps some of Darnell or Stocking's own writings about Boas (e.g. Darnell 1998; Stocking 1996) before engaging with the present volume.

Though it risks a certain measure of inaccessibility, the eclectic and non-didactic approach that this volume takes enables its authors to explore a number of different areas of Boas' scholarship and scholarly legacy that merit contemporary reassessment. The volume is organized into four parts, the first three of which target separate (if interrelated) dimensions of the Boasian project. The first part, "Theory and Interdisciplinary Scope," is the most conceptually coherent section of the volume, with its chapters all conforming to two broad objectives: first, to rehabilitate Boas' reputation as a theorist *contra* the charge that his work was merely descriptive or atheoretical (e.g. Darnell: xvii, 3); and second, to demonstrate that Boas was a "master bricoleur," drawing on whatever scientific and analytical tools he had "at hand" in order to advance his own intellectual and political pursuits (Darnell: xviii). Most of the section's chapters pursue this second objective, exploring Boas' intersections with evolutionary science and American pragmatism (Lewis), literary theory (Bracken, Chamberlin), linguistics and philology (Silverstein), and ethnomusicology (O'Neill). The first objective is left mostly in the hands of Lewis and, especially, Darnell, whose chapter advances a critical reassessment of Boas' manifesto *The Mind of Primitive Man* (Boas 1911). The fact, in particular, that "relational or abstract thought as a universal human capacity has come to be recognized as common sense in public as well as

anthropological discourses” has made it far too easy to ignore or dismiss that this was ever a “theoretical position in need of articulation and defense” (Darnell: 3). Darnell’s chapter aims to reassess this position, demonstrating that Boas’ “cultural relativism,” as it is commonly glossed, was a well-elaborated theoretical position that wove together Boas’ ethnographic, linguistic, archaeological and biological research in order to articulate a “robust stand-point based epistemology that underwrote later culture and personality, ethnoscience, social interactionist, and interpretivist approaches constructed on Boasian foundations” (Darnell: 5). This epistemology cannot be disentangled from Boas’ sustained critiques of scientific racism and unilineal evolution. Rather, Darnell repeatedly reminds us that Boas viewed culture and biology as co-constituted, and that he positioned anatomical study alongside the study of language and material and immaterial cultural elements as equally necessary in understanding human diversity (pp. 6-7).

Boas’ dual emphasis on the physical and the epistemological had profound consequences on his fieldwork practices, which form the broad topic of Part 2, “Ethnography.” Unlike the six chapters of Part 1, Part 2 contains only two chapters, focusing respectively on Boas’ relationships with his long-term Tlingit-Kwakwāk ’wakw collaborator and “informant” George Hunt (Wilner) and Nlaka’pamux ethnographer James Tait (Laforet). Wilner’s chapter contains the most direct engagement with Boas’ own fieldwork practices, drawing on Boas and Hunt’s correspondences to trace how Boas and Hunt’s Kwakwāk ’wakw ethnographies were shaped and the conditions under which they were produced. The Boas that emerges in this account is complex, at once a staunch ally of Hunt and his defender against Canadian attempts to prosecute Hunt for violating the ban on “Indian dancing and potlatching” and a self-serving scholar with a ravenous appetite for indigenous artifacts and physical remains who repeatedly pushed Hunt to violate his own community’s protocols to acquire new material (Wilner:169-172). Wilner also highlights the extent to which Boas’ Kwakwāk ’wakw research and writing was co-authored with Hunt, a fact which Boas sometimes did and sometimes did not acknowledge. In this sense Wilner’s chapter alongside Laforet’s exploration of Boas and Tait demonstrates the fallacy of the “lone ethnographer” even at American Anthropology’s professional genesis. Ethnographic work is and always has been co-authored, the product of multiple voices and multiple standpoints, and this section of the volume demonstrates that Boas was well aware of this fact and made some effort, at least, to acknowledge it even as he also took advantage of his collaborators.

Part 2 is disappointing in its brevity, however. Dedicating only two chapters to something as significant as “ethnography” for Boas and the Boasian legacy in Canada – particularly absent any writing focused

on his earlier work on Baffin Island – feels partial. This may in part be an organizational issue. Given the diversity of contributors to the collection and the complex political and colonial histories of the northwest coast, it may be that relatively few contributors were positioned to discuss Boas' fieldwork beyond his relationships with two admittedly central interlocutors. But the section and the volume as a whole would be considerably strengthened by more chapters and more approaches to something as vastly significant as "fieldwork" for Boas and his descendants. It seems somewhat odd in this regard that Bracken's deconstructive analysis of Boas' early fieldwork in Alert Bay is found in Part 1 of the volume when its concerns seem just as much ethnographic as theoretical. This said, the relative paucity of material in Part 2 is at least somewhat addressed in Part 3, "Activism," which begins with two chapters that directly address the significance of Boas' ethnography in historical and contemporary Aboriginal legal and political struggles on the northwest coast (Dinwoodie; Hancock).

The chapters that follow range more widely over Boas' various engagements with U.S. Indian policy (Smith), Germany during the rise of Nazism (Langenkämper), and the United States during the world wars (Liss). While these chapters lack Part 1's organizing focus, they effectively demonstrate the significance of consistent public engagement for Boas, offering ample evidence of his efforts to speak to a non-academic public and to directly intervene in American and German policy in ways that resonated with his scientific concerns and convictions. It is this section that works most directly to demonstrate that Boas was a "public intellectual." Boas clearly understood his work – and the work of anthropology more generally – as being of central significance to the general public, correcting prejudices about racial inferiority and evolutionary perspectives of culture. And he positioned himself as an expert able to advise on these issues at the highest political level, writing letters to multiple American presidents and an open letter to Reichs President von Hindenburg decrying the suppression "in the most brutal fashion" of "free expression of opinion" and "even the most modest opposition, i.e. half the population" in Germany in the early 1930s (Boas, quoted in Langenkämper:283).

The fourth and final section of this volume, "Part 4: The Archival Project," is something of a post-script to the direct engagements with Boas that make up the first three Parts of the volume. Instead, the two chapters of Part 4 outline the archival project represented by *The Franz Boas Papers Documentary Edition*, detailing the acquisition of the American Philosophical Society's Boas collection and the conditions under which the volume to come are being produced. Particularly significant, given the volume's own earlier engagements with the extractive dimensions of Boas' own ethnographic practices, is the fact that the Boas papers are being digitized in consultation with an "Indigenous Advisory

Council” who have the final veto as to “which documents are presented and who has access to them” The recognition that “Boas’s fieldwork, like that of many other anthropologists in the past, included matters now considered culturally sensitive, under Indigenous intellectual property copyright, and potentially inappropriate to share with non-Native communities or among different groups of a Native community” is vital for archives that contain material collected (and appropriated) from indigenous communities, and the collaborative nature of the *Boas Papers* project appears laudable in its attempts to avoid reiterating colonial forms of epistemological and representational violence (Hamilton:356).

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Joseph Weiss recently received his PhD in Anthropology from the University of Chicago. His research focuses broadly on indigenous political possibility in the context of settler colonialism. His dissertation explored how the residents of a Haida First Nations community on Canada’s northwest coast challenge

colonial control over time through imagining and attempting to construct social and political futures for themselves and their settler neighbours. Current projects include an ethnohistorical study of the relationships between the Haida community and military personnel and an ongoing examination of the ways in which natural history museums represent indigenous peoples.



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