

Introduction

Boasian Aesthetics: American Poetry, Visual Culture, and Cultural Anthropology

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The early twentieth century saw various conceptual crossovers and collaborations between U.S. cultural anthropologists and avant-garde artists.¹ Boasian anthropology was entangled with a remarkably wide network that included modernist poetry, countercultural movements such as the Harlem Renaissance, avant-garde film-making, Bauhaus design, and collaborations with the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Most forcefully from the 1920s to the 1940s, the work and public persona of Franz Boas, the German-American anthropologist who founded U.S. cultural anthropology, appealed to a bohemian and politically active circle of scholars, artists, and writers in New York that included Ruth Fulton Benedict, Edward Sapir, Margaret Mead, Elsie Clews Parson, Zora Neale Hurston, Gregory Bateson, and Maya Deren, among others. This lively group shared an interest in Boas's concept of "cultural relativism," which postulates that every society has its own cultural system of behaviors, norms, and values with its own social and historical logic. While twenty-first-century proponents of cultural relativism emphasize that "fundamentally different standards of morality, practices and belief systems operate in different cultures and cannot be judged with regard to their worth from a standpoint exterior to them" (Sedgwick 99), Boasians—most prominently among them Mead—explicitly brought their positive valuations of other cultures to bear on a defamiliarizing critique of their own culture. Rooted in countercultural movements of the 1920s, the Boasians employed "anthropology as a weapon in the attack upon 'Americanism'" (Matthews 17), involving themselves in a thorough critique of American society and intervening with joint force in socio-political debates of their time (see Janiewski and Banner; cf. Handler, *Critics* 49-140). Cultural relativism was not only an epistemological concept formulated in contrast to the then dominant anthropological evolutionism. As a tool for grasping the diversity and equality of cultures, it was also used to argue against ideas of the West's superiority and its supposedly advanced level of de-

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velopment (see Stocking). For the close-knit Boasian network of anthropologists and artists at the heart of the present special issue, the introduction of cultural relativism and, indeed, of the very concept of “culture” into the social sciences and the broader public sphere was as much a political as it was an anthropological program (see Manganaro).

Rather than proposing separate disciplinary histories of modernist poetry, cultural anthropology, photography, and film, *Boasian Aesthetics: American Poetry, Visual Culture, and Cultural Anthropology* seeks to disrupt conventional disciplinary historicization, engaging instead in analyses of entangled early-twentieth-century histories of reformist agendas, aesthetic production, and aesthetic practices at the intersection of art and anthropology. Boasian anthropologists and their artist peers shared a strong interest in creative expression as they focused their attention on various cultural forms: dances, ceremonies, ritual performances, stories, myths, images, and sculptures. These cultural forms were not only collected, described, and analyzed using the tools of anthropological research; they were also transformed into poems, choreographies, exhibitions, ethnographic photographs, and ethnographic films. In many of these practices, primitivist fascination with the cultural Other was intertwined with a critical attitude toward existing social norms and mechanisms of marginalization and exclusion within U.S. society (see Handler, “Benedict”; Chakkalakal, “Migration”). Boas and his students got actively involved in debates about racial segregation, patriarchal gender norms, and U.S. national identity. Ethnographic research infused known life-worlds with unknown behavioral patterns, new cultural forms and formats, and fundamentally different cultural orders. In working toward new forms of social coexistence at home, the cultural relativists thought that the cultures they studied held the potential to enrich and reform U.S. culture (see Mead, *World and Powder*). In many cases, the activist energy generated within this collaborative network was also channeled into conceptual work, resulting in broad theoretical and methodological inquiries into “art,” “expression,” and, most notably, “culture,” a key concept in the twentieth- and twenty-first-century social sciences and humanities.

The Boasians are of special interest to Americanists today, not only because of their significant contributions to debates about culture but also because they experimented with a wide variety of genres, styles, and media, thus bringing anthropology and aesthetics into close contact. At an early point in his career, while still self-identifying as a geographer, Boas himself used photography, cartography, and dioramas in his work. Mead, Benedict, and Sapir wrote a sizeable, still underexplored body of over one thousand poems of which they published a good number in renowned literary magazines such as *The Dial* and *Poetry*. Some of their prolific, collaborative poetic output dealt with their anthropological investigations, and they also heavily commented on each other’s poetic work.² Other actors in the Boasian network likewise produced work beyond the discipline of anthropology that engaged with ethnographic subjects and objects, including paintings (Walter Spies), ethnomusicological recordings (Alan Lomax), novels (Zora Neale

² See the texts by Handler, Reichel, Schweighauser, Reichel and Schweighauser, and Dowthwaite in the list of works cited.

Hurston), films (Maya Deren), choreographed performances (Beryl de Zoete), and musical compositions (Colin McPhee). Through their forays into literature and the arts and their experiments with various media technologies, the Boasians shaped the discipline of anthropology and negotiated its boundaries. Figures like Hurston, Benedict, and Mead also introduced new styles of ethnographic writing, availing themselves of literary devices, narrative structures, and lyrical forms that appealed to wider (often non-academic) audiences.

As Mead recounts in her introduction to *An Anthropologist at Work: Writings of Ruth Benedict* (1959), major Boasian anthropologists were as immersed in artistic activities as they were in their scientific work:

We needed some sense of whole cultures, of whole ways to bring home to us what anthropology was really about.

Meanwhile we lived, in a sense, lives in which the arts and the sciences fought uneven battles for pre-eminence. Boas would leave his office and his labor over the particularities of some nearly extinct American language to spend the evening improvising at his piano. Sapir would let his Nootka texts half-finished while he wrote [the poem "Distant Strumming of Strings."] Or he would work at a piece of music [...]. And Ruth Benedict firmly continued to keep the parts of her life separate, signing her married name [...] to such papers as "A Matter for the Field Worker in Folklore" in the *American Journal of Folk-Lore*, and not publishing her poems at all. (Mead, "Introduction" xviii-xix)

In its overemphasis on the opposition between art and science, Mead's account provides an important insight into cultural anthropology's phase of professionalization, bearing testimony to the process of creating a discipline. At the same time, her and fellow Boasians' repeated juxtaposition of the two spheres illustrates how art and anthropology constitute a figuration. In fact, for many a Boasian anthropologist, ethnographic work, poetry, music, painting, photography, and film were intimately related matters. Mead's own writings show an awareness that the visual anthropology that she pioneered with Gregory Bateson, Frances C. Macgregor, and other collaborators had an aesthetic dimension to it (see Jacknis; Chakkalal, "Sensible Ethnographien"), although she did insist on the objectivity of photography and film (see Reichel, "Gifted Speakers").

The six contributions collected in this special issue of *Amerikastudien / American Studies* shed light on the representational potential of and rivalries between different media and forms of writing as they manifest themselves, for instance, in Mead's visual anthropology (her use of photography and film), Boas's popular social science writings, and Benedict's poetry. The Boasians knew that it makes a difference whether one evokes the cultural Other in standard expository ethnographic prose, in poetic/literary language, or in (what used to be) nonconventional media for ethnographic representation such as celluloid and photographic prints. They understood the power of looking at other cultures through nonconventional means of ethnographic representation, choices that impact not only the research objects but also the researcher's sensory perception (see Fischer and Marcus; Hall; Hallam and Street). It seems that Sapir, Benedict, and Mead turned to poetry as a special form of language use that allowed them to approach the objects of their research in different, perhaps more ethically viable ways. We may speculate that they considered these alternative modes of representing the cultural Other as a

means to transcend primitivist and evolutionist tendencies as well as the inescapably evaluative dimension of cultural description (see Schweighauser, “Anthropologist”; Reichel, “Unnerving,” “Poetry”; Chakkalakal, “Patterning”).

What is certain is that, in negotiating the affordances of different genres and media, the Boasians intervened not only in the twentieth-century history of anthropology but also in the history of modern poetry. In inquiring into the specific functions of specific genres and media, our contributors invite their readers to think together cultural alterity (the otherness of the cultures anthropologists study), poetic alterity (the use of poetry in anthropological investigation), and medial alterity (the use of then-nonconventional media such as photographs and films in anthropological investigation) to explore what difference it makes whether one films or photographs another culture, or writes a poem or an ethnographic study about it. In taking this approach to the Boasians, we seek to reassess their role in the founding of cultural and visual anthropology, define their place in the history of modern poetry, and reconsider the era’s multiple intersections between modern poetry, the visual arts, and cultural anthropology.

What unites our contributors’ engagements with a wide variety of scientific and artistic practices most closely is their shared focus on “aesthetics” in a threefold sense. As Susan Hegeman and Richard Handler explore how various Boasians (chief among them Mead, Benedict, Hurston, and Boas himself) creatively refashioned and popularized ethnographic writing, they are concerned with aesthetics in the sense of specific writing styles. Thus, Hegeman is invested in exploring the aesthetics of the genre of popular social science writing, to which the Boasian protagonists of this special issue made significant contributions: from Boas’s *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911) to the bestselling ethnographies of Mead, Benedict, and Elsie Clews Parsons, to Hurston’s *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Tell My Horse* (1938). Rather than engaging in the currently fashionable exercise of reconceiving these writings as formative of anthropology “as it should currently be practiced” (dialogical, self-reflexive, and so on), Hegeman proposes to approach their academic marginality more productively and positively to give an account of a popular genre whose forms and conventions are worth analyzing in more detail. In her analysis, Hegeman identifies specific forms of popular social science writing in the work of Boas, Mead, Benedict, Parsons, and Hurston that partake in what she calls an “aesthetics of cultural relativism”—an aesthetics that foregrounds the category of the “interesting” and often adopts a modernist style characterized by e(n)strangement, disjunction, and radical juxtaposition.

Handler, on the other hand, analyzes the “voices” (and “vices”)—in the sense of specific styles of writing marked by distinctive features—of his Boasian antecedents and in particular Sapir. Taking as his point of departure the Boasians’ use of the words “primitive” and “savage” and the skepticism toward their work this induces in twenty-first-century students, Handler traces in detail those stylistic features in their writing that render them still relevant to current anthropologists. Most important among these is the recurring move, first executed in Boas’s seminal piece “On Alternating Sounds” (1889), to reveal that there are no “primitive” languages and no “primitive” modes of thought by uncovering the different ways in which a person’s perception is shaped by preexisting linguistic knowledge and

social and historical forces. In concluding, Handler returns to Sapir's ambivalent use of the word "savage" and suggests that it is indicative of his engagement with a wider public, thus concurring with Hegeman's notion of a Boasian aesthetics of popular social science writing. For Handler, the racially charged vocabulary that his students find disturbing was "the price to be paid for working the details of linguistic and anthropological study into more general arguments that could engage, and challenge, an audience whose education was grounded on the socio-evolutionary principles of white and Western racial and cultural supremacy."

Understood in this first sense of specific styles of writing, aesthetics is an individualist notion that is intimately tied to specific authors' identities. Hence we speak of "Benedict's aesthetic(s)" or "Mead's aesthetic(s)." But our contributors are keenly aware that there is also a communal dimension to this understanding of style/aesthetics. In Rémy de Gourmont's words from 1916, "[h]aving a style means that in the midst of language shared with others one speaks a particular, unique and inimitable dialect, which is at the same time everybody's language and the language of a single individual" (qtd. in Olsen 44). Though David Howes's contribution to this special issue serves as a forceful reminder of the limitations of the textualist paradigm in cultural anthropology, we can define aesthetics-as-style as an "ensemble of *individual particularities in the use of language*" (Gumbrecht 750-51; our translation, emphasis in orig.). As such, aesthetics is situated right at the intersection of the subject and society and thus at the very heart of the nexus that cultural anthropologists explore. As Handler and Hegeman remind us, moreover, the Boasians not only explored this nexus but also intervened in it, often employing a popular social science aesthetics that fashioned other cultures as foils, inviting Western readers to cast an e(n)stranged, critical glance at their own cultures.

Howes and Silvy Chakkalakal use "aesthetics" in a second sense that resonates with its original, Baumgartian meaning as the "science of sensuous cognition" (Baumgarten § 1, I:60; our translation). Exploring Boasian anthropological practices—chief among them Boas's, Mead's, and Métraux's—they take seriously the epistemic value of anthropologists' sensory experiences during fieldwork and transdisciplinary collaborations. One of Howes's key tenets is that cultural anthropology has been concerned with the senses since its inception. His contribution presents a reading of his discipline's history through this sensory dimension, first reaching back to late-nineteenth-century British and French anthropology only to throw into relief the rupture that Boas's "On Alternating Sounds" marked in this second sense of Boasian aesthetics: the acute attunement of Boas and his students to the cultural logistics of sense perception. Howes's historical account goes on to argue that this preoccupation with "sensing patterns" was overwritten by a focus on interpretation and "reading culture" in the 1970s and textualization and "writing culture" in the 1980s. This rendering of anthropology's postmodern crisis of representation as a crisis in sensory acuity is then further complicated by a letter by Clifford Geertz, reprinted in full in the present special issue, suggesting that the sensual and the textual were indeed more balanced in Geertz's approach than Howes's reading has so far acknowledged. Still, it was not until the 1990s, Howes concludes, that a sustained concern with the senses was restored in anthropology.

Chakkalakal's understanding of "aesthetics" likewise resonates with Baumgarten's concept: aesthetics understood as a sensory, practical, and interventionist type of knowledge production (see Reckwitz; Moeran) with a strong anticipatory view toward societal change. Here, her concept of "creative figuration" allows for a focus on dynamic processes of artistic-anthropological collaboration, experimental play with form and expression, and the constant negotiation of boundaries between art and anthropology. Chakkalakal probes these entanglements by traversing a wide range of anthropological and artistic sites, from Maya Deren's engagement with anthropological questions to Sapir's notion of "genuine culture"; from Bateson and Mead's multimedial ethnography *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis* to Bateson's MoMA exhibition *Bali, Background for War: The Human Problem of Reoccupation*; and from Xanti Schawinsky's Bauhaus designs and relationships with the Chicago School of Sociology to Boas's work as assistant curator at New York's Museum of Natural History.

While cultural anthropologists most commonly discuss sensory practices in ethnographic work under headings such as "the anthropology of the senses," "sensory anthropology," or "sensory ethnography," they share with recent returns to aesthetics a sustained interest in the epistemic dimensions of *aisthēsis* (sense perception, sensation, feeling). In philosophy and literary studies, this earliest meaning of aesthetics has received much attention in recent decades. Today, Gernot Böhme (*Asthetik; Atmosphäre*) and Wolfgang Iser (*Aktualität; "Aesthetics Beyond Aesthetics"; Ästhetisches Denken*) are among the most prominent advocates for understanding aesthetics again as a theory of sensuous cognition, seeking to "bring about an aesthetics which manages to cover the full range of the expression 'aesthetic' and the various domains and states of *aisthesis*" as "[t]here are no good reasons for aesthetics to restrict itself to artistic. [...] [A]s a discipline aesthetics should comprehend the *full* range of such endeavours" (Iser, "Aesthetics Beyond Aesthetics" 14-15; emphasis in orig.). In this broad understanding, aesthetics is a discipline that allows us to rethink the Boasians' empiricist ethos, the relationship of their work to Deweyan pragmatism, and their intertwinement of artistic and scientific practices, which is central to Chakkalakal's argument in her contribution to this issue.

Jacques Rancière has given the original notion of aesthetics a political twist that is also relevant to several contributions gathered here. Rancière redefines "aesthetics" as a site that explores the "distribution of the sensible" in social space to probe "aesthetic acts as configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity" (9). From this perspective, aesthetics is a decisively political notion in the sense that "[p]olitics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak" (13).

Ute Holl's essay explores the medial foundations of this sense of "aesthetics" in her discussion of Franz Boas's use of technical media—particularly photography and motion-picture film—in his ethnographic work. It is no coincidence that, among our contributors, it is a media theorist who has the most emphatic notion of aesthetics in this sense. After all, it was Marshall McLuhan, the founder of modern media theory, who most insistently called upon his readers to consider the

social and psychological effects of new media and technologies. For McLuhan, the real message of the medium is its impact on the distribution of the senses: “The effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without resistance” (18). Four decades before Rancière, McLuhan already explored what the French thinker calls “the politics of aesthetics” in its Baumgartian sense. More specifically, as Holl notes, in their recording of the visual and acoustic “real,” technical media such as photography, phonography, and cinematography document the singular and particular, working against the generalizations of evolutionary anthropology. They are thus integral to Boas’s distinctive approach to cultural anthropology: “Technical media convey information through marks and traces of difference, of the deviant and the divergent, not through generalization or identity. In this, they match Boas’s anthropological methods,” Holl writes. On the other hand, she shows, Boas is one of the first anthropologists to use visual technical media to extrapolate general laws of a culture and cultural identities from the temporal and spatial perception of a typical specimen that such media evoke. Invoking Lacan’s concept of the mirror stage, Holl holds that the modern subjects of technical media involve the forces of the imaginary to form a coherent perception of the self. The “specific virtue of technical media,” then, is the integration of archives of singular historical and cultural experiences with the cultural contact zone that the anthropologist imagines, exposing the power relations involved.

Philipp Schweighauser’s overview of the ethnographic poetry of Sapir, Benedict, and Mead closely relates to these concerns as it probes what epistemological, ethical, and political differences it makes whether one (re)presents another culture in ethnographic prose or poetry. By “ethnographic poetry,” Schweighauser means poems that “engag[e] with subjects and issues that [Sapir, Benedict, and Mead] encountered in their ethnographic work.” In order to showcase such poetic negotiations of ethnographic themes, he selects one poem by each author for a close reading: Mead’s poem “Monuments Rejected” (1925) combines imagery from three realms (anthropology, religion, gender) to stage a critique of different forms of taking possession. Benedict’s “In Parables” (1926) grapples with processes of knowledge acquisition, not only by interweaving enlightenment imagery with biblical and Maori mythology, but also by offering an “estranging door,” that is, a sharper perspective on the self by way of a detour through the Other. Finally, Sapir’s poem “Zuni” (1926) gives counsel to avoid sensory excess while at the same time opening itself up to excessive somatic and aesthetic experience. In seeking to do justice to the specific forms and specific functions of generically specific negotiations of ethnographic subject matters, Schweighauser also draws on a third sense of aesthetics as the philosophy of art and beauty. While this sense of aesthetics may be most familiar to readers of *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, the editors of this special issue join Welsch and Böhme in seeking to broaden the scope of aesthetic inquiry beyond the literary and artistic domains so as to do justice to the closely interrelated practices of a Boasian network of anthropologists and artists whose combined efforts forever changed what we mean when we say “culture.”

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