

# Ways of Knowing: The Aesthetics of Boasian Poetry

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## ABSTRACT

This essay surveys one of the less explored Boasian legacies: the significant body of over 1,000 poems written by the three major Boasian anthropologists Margaret Mead, Ruth Fulton Benedict, and Edward Sapir. Over 380 of these poems were published, some of them in renowned magazines such as *Poetry*, *The Dial*, *The Measure*, *The Nation*, and *The New Republic*. Focusing on what I call their “ethnographic poems”—poems that engage with subjects and issues they encountered in their ethnographic work—I draw on two understandings of the word “aesthetics” (as the Baumgartian “science of sensuous cognition” and as the philosophy of art and beauty) to probe what ethical, political, and epistemological differences it makes whether one writes about other cultures in verse or scientific prose. The essay offers close readings of one poem by each: Mead’s “Monuments Rejected” (1925), Benedict’s “In Parables” (1926), and Sapir’s “Zuni” (1926).

Widely recognized as founding documents in the history of visual anthropology, Margaret Mead’s experiments with forms other than conventional ethnographic writing—in particular photography and film—have received much scholarly attention.<sup>1</sup> It is far less well known that Mead also wrote over 180 poems. Mead is in good Boasian company here: Her close collaborators Edward Sapir and Ruth Fulton Benedict also wrote and published a great deal of verse, some of it in renowned magazines such as *Poetry*, *The Dial*, *The Measure*, *The Nation*, and *The New Republic*. Between 1919 and 1931, Sapir alone was able to place no fewer than twenty-three poems in *Poetry*, the flagship little magazine of the modernist movement. Out of the three, Sapir was the most productive, publishing over three hundred of his poems and writing over three hundred additional, unpublished ones. But Benedict’s and Mead’s poetic oeuvres are substantial too. By my co-editor A. Elisabeth Reichel’s count, this corpus of Boasian poetry encompasses 1,003 texts: “318 published and 345 unpublished poems written by Sapir, 10 published and 173 unpublished poems written by Mead, and 61 published and 96 unpublished poems written by Benedict” (Reichel, *Sounding* 13). Sapir, Benedict, and Mead read each other’s poems, collected them, commented on them, and dedicated poems to one another. *An Anthropologist at Work* (1959), an anthology of Benedict’s writings edited by Mead, provides a glimpse into the importance

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<sup>1</sup> One indicator of this is that Paul Hockings’ standard anthology of the subfield, *Principles of Visual Anthropology*, now available in its third edition, begins with Mead’s classic essay “Visual Anthropology in a Discipline of Words” (1975). For an assessment of Mead’s and Gregory Bateson’s roles in the development of visual anthropology, see also Silvy Chakkalalakal’s contribution to this issue and Pink (9-10, 25-28).

they attributed to each other's lyrical work: Next to letters by Sapir that provide detailed responses to Benedict's verse, the volume contains in full the selection of poems that Benedict made for Mead in 1941 and presented to her as a gift in a hand-bound book. In this rich yet sorely understudied corpus of Boasian lyrical production,<sup>2</sup> those texts that I call "ethnographic poems" are of particular interest to me: the substantial part of Sapir's, Benedict's, and Mead's poetic oeuvre that engages with subjects and issues that they encountered in their ethnographic work. Reading these poems, one question immediately imposes itself: What difference does it make when anthropologists decide to write about another culture in verse instead of ethnographic prose? This is the most general question my essay asks—a question that is simultaneously aesthetic (since it inquires into the specific functions of specific genres) and epistemological (since it asks about the different kinds of knowledge enabled by different generic choices).

In what follows, I focus on one poem by each: Mead's "Monuments Rejected" (1925), Benedict's "In Parables" (1926), and Sapir's "Zuni" (1926). Written in the mid-1920s, these poems are related in their exploration of the sensuous dimensions of both the cultural practices that ethnographers study and the research that they conduct. Thus, they invite us to explore the nexus between aesthetics and *aisthēsis* (sense perception, sensation, feeling), which is at the heart of our special issue's thematic concerns: aesthetics understood not solely as the theory of art, beauty, and taste; understood not solely as referring to specific, individual styles of writing (as in "Mead's aesthetics"); but understood also in its original, Baumgartian sense, as "the science of sensuous cognition" (Baumgarten § 1, I:60; my translation), i. e., the science that explores how humans acquire knowledge through their senses, through *aisthēsis*.

There are five typescript versions of Mead's unpublished poem "Monuments Rejected," three of which end with a note on the poem's place and date of composition. Here is the full text of the poem as it is available in folder 10 of box Q15 of the Margaret Mead Papers at the Library of Congress—one of the three neat versions with near-identical wording and no handwritten revisions.

The race of men who built in stone  
 Were blind to all earth's loveliness,  
 Their only thought was where to leave  
 Stones in the blossoming wilderness.

And while you sojourn in my heart,  
 You take no comfort in the flower-starred sod,  
 Eyes closed and scheming how you may  
 Clear ground for altars to your God.

Mine is no northern landscape, cold,  
 Where great fields lie, arid and waste,  
 For arrogant travelers to build  
 Pretentious temples sculptured to their taste.

<sup>2</sup> For existing scholarship on Boasian poetry, see the texts by Handler, Reichel, Reichel and Schweighauser, Schweighauser, and Douthwaite in the list of works cited. Handler's *Critics against Culture: Anthropological Observers of Mass Societies* contains several of his pioneering essays on Sapir's and Benedict's verse.

My flowers are for no moving scythe;  
 They bloom for joyousness alone,  
 And lightly shrink from hands that seek  
 To smother them with heavy stone.  
 So kiss the flowers, and cease to weep!  
 In southern gardens there's no way  
 To crush while loving and so leave  
 A temple there to mark your stay.

Pago Pago,  
 September 1, 1925.

Mead indicates that she wrote this poem in the territorial capital of American Samoa. She had arrived in Pago Pago only the day before (cf. Bowman-Kruhm 34), choosing the capital as the site where she prepared for the actual fieldwork that she did on the island of Ta'ū. Mead would report on this research in her classic and controversial first book, *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilization* (1928).<sup>3</sup>

To whom the “race of men who built in stone” refers is not entirely clear but we may hear echoes of Mead’s initial sense of disappointment upon arriving, first, in Honolulu, her last stop on the way to American Samoa, then in Pago Pago itself. As her ship approaches Honolulu harbor on August 11, 1925, Mead writes in her fieldnotes:

We woke up this morning at five with land in sight and everyone excited except me. I was blue and disgruntled because I was blue. It seemed a poor fashion to be greeting the Paradise of the Pacific.

Eleanor Dillingham and I watched the ship come into harbor, rounding point after point of rugged clay-colored mountains. There was no color in the landscape, occasional patches of green showed as pale gray. The city itself was hardly resting on the sea, and the wandering mists, which seemed extensions of the clouds which covered the tops of the mountains, hid all the signs of industrial civilization. Two huge straight smokestacks became silver towers with white highlights on one side. (Mead, *Letters* 24)

Her first sensory impressions of Pago Pago as she arrives there on August 31, 1925—the day before she wrote “Monuments Rejected”—are rendered in a similar tone:

We got in early this morning at daybreak, a cloudy daybreak, with the sun appearing sullenly for a moment and the surf showing white along the shores of the steep black cliffs as we entered the ‘only land-locked harbor in the South Seas.’ The harbor is the one-time crater of a volcano and the sides are almost perpendicular. It is densely wooded down to the sea and ringed with palm trees along the narrow beach. The Navy have really done nobly in preserving the native tone; their houses are low green-roofed affairs which cluster under the trees much as the native houses do; only the radio stations and one smokestack really damage the scene.

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<sup>3</sup> The sharpest attack on *Coming of Age in Samoa* was staged posthumously, in two books by the Australian anthropologist Derek Freeman: *Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth* (1983) and *The Fateful Hoaxing of Margaret Mead* (1999). For a balanced account of the controversy that ensued, see Paul Shankman’s *The Trashing of Margaret Mead* (2009).

The presence of the fleet today skews the whole picture badly. There are numerous battleships in the harbor and on all sides of the island, mostly not in the harbor because they make the water oily and spoil the governor's bathing. Airplanes scream overhead; the band of some ship is constantly playing ragtime. All the natives on the island and many from Manu'a and Apia are here, laden with *kava* bowls, tapa, grass skirts, models of outrigger canoes, bead necklaces and baskets. They are spread out in the *malae*—market place—with whole families contentedly munching their lunches around them. (Mead, *Letters* 25-26; emphasis in orig.)

While the first passage records Mead's visual impressions, the second is more densely sensuous as it gives expression to both the sights she sees and the sounds she hears. In both, Mead's recording of her sensory perceptions sets up oppositions between the paradisiacal character of a foreign, potentially pastoral world ("the Paradise of the Pacific," the volcano, the palms, and "whole families contentedly munching their lunches" in the "*malae*") and the technological-industrial disruption of paradise. It is not only the unpleasant sights she sees (the smokestack, the radio stations, and the battleships) and the jarring sounds she hears (the screaming airplanes, ragtime) that "ske[w] the whole picture badly." Mead's emotional disposition ("I was blue and disgruntled because I was blue") and the weather conditions (the mists and the clouds) likewise impact the ethnographer's perception of a foreign world. Both passages testify to David Howes's assertion that Mead was "among the first true predecessors of the 'anthropology of the senses,' as this field would come to be known in the 1990s" (10), not only because she takes great care to document the sensuous qualities of other cultures but also because she highlights the ethnographer's sensory experience of those cultures, inviting us to reflect on the factors that affect this experience. Finally, in singling out the governor and the U.S. Navy as causes of the technological-industrial intrusion into paradise, Mead also stresses the colonial nature of that intrusion. When Mead arrived in Pago Pago in 1925, American Samoa was under administrative control of the U.S. Navy, which it had been since 1899, when Samoa was divided between Germany and the United States. Eastern Samoa came under American rule, and U.S. President William McKinley placed the island group under the Navy's authority (see Wendt and Foster).

In "Monuments Rejected," Mead combines images from three realms—anthropology, religion, and gender—to stage a critique of various forms of taking possession. As Mead does in many of her ethnographic poems—"The Need that Is Left" (1927), "I Have Prepared a Place for You" (1928), and "Traveler's Faith" (1925) are three examples—she interweaves the public and the private, the cultural and the personal. In her poem's third stanza, she specifies that the first line's "race of men" are "arrogant travelers." Who are these travelers? To American(ist) readers of this American writer's poem, the travelers' blindness to "all earth's loveliness" in the face of a "blossoming wilderness" renders them akin to the first Puritan settlers, who saw but a "hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men" instead of the marvels and wonders that Columbus described in his first letter to the Spanish court (Bradford 62).<sup>4</sup> Their desire "to

<sup>4</sup> See Greenblatt for his influential reading of Columbus's colonial/economic language of wonder.

build / Pretentious temples sculptured to their taste” likewise suggests that we are dealing with religiously minded intruders, though not necessarily the Puritans, who are hardly a temple-building people. The English, American, and French missionaries who successfully Christianized the Pacific Islands starting in 1797, when the London Missionary Society sent its first party to Tahiti (see West and Foster), emerge as more immediate historical reference points for “[t]he race of men who built in stone.”

In present-day American Samoa, where Mead wrote her poem, the first representatives of the London Missionary Society arrived in the 1830s (see Wendt and Foster). These Congregationalist proselytizers were followed by missionaries from other denominations, primarily Methodists and Catholics, who like the Congregationalists, sought access to power by converting indigenous chiefs (John Williams’s conversion of the Samoan chief Malietoa Vainu’upo is the most famous example), recruited local missionaries to spread the gospel, and had churches built on the islands (see Ernst and Anisi). It may well be those missionaries that Mead’s poetic speaker accuses of “scheming how you may / Clear ground for altars to your God.” At the same time, the poem’s critique is, of course, of a more general nature, censuring the taking of foreign lands more broadly. What is clear is that the poem draws a sharp contrast between two actors: those who, “blind” to the beauty of the earth, and with their “[e]yes closed,” build rigid, lifeless structures that take up space and those who remain aware of the sensuous fullness of the land, of “earth’s loveliness,” “the blossoming wilderness,” and “the flower-starred sod.” What is also clear is that the arrogant travelers come from the north—a space that the poem characterizes, in Eliotesque fashion, as “cold,” “arid,” and “waste”—while the potential victims of northern intrusion live “[i]n southern gardens.” Mead opposes a barren northern culture of stones to a lush southern culture of flowers. These geographical specifications clearly situate the encounter between the two actors in a colonial context, and the poem takes the northern intruders to task, talking back to them—a fact that is underscored by an early title that Mead chose for the poem: “South to North.”<sup>5</sup>

But who is it that talks back to the north? Who is the poem’s persona? Mead’s use of sexually charged flower imagery in the final two stanzas embeds itself in a powerful female artistic tradition—from Emily Dickinson’s flower and bee poems to Georgia O’Keeffe’s flower paintings and beyond—that associates flowers with women’s anatomy and sexuality. Mead’s use of this imagery strongly suggests that the poem’s persona is a woman—a woman who, moreover, lays claim to a heightened sensitivity to the sensuous fullness of the south. What this woman renounces from the third stanza onward are attempts to take possession of her body, a threat that the poem expresses through its violent imagery of deflowering: “My flowers are for no moving scythe,” the persona declares, adding that she resists any attempt “[t]o crush while loving.” What the poem opposes to the threat of sexual domination and violation is the vision of more loving and more sensual

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<sup>5</sup> An early version of the poem, also available in box Q15, folder 10 of the Margaret Mead Papers, bears the typewritten title “South to North,” which Mead’s handwriting changes to “Monuments Rejected.”

forms of bodily encounter, where “flowers [...] bloom for joyousness alone,” and the poem’s addressee is invited to “kiss the flowers” rather than taking possession of them and “leav[ing] / A temple there to mark your stay.” One does not have to share Mead’s psychoanalytical inclinations to conclude that the “southern gardens” of the poem’s final stanza are both a geographical and a corporeal marker. Ultimately, the analogy that the text sets up is that between colonial and sexual domination, between the taking of land and the taking of the female body. In re-gendering the first line’s supposedly gender-neutral “race of men” the poem takes aim at both.

Significantly, the poem’s vision of harmonious “southern” bodily encounters returns with force in the book that came out of the fieldwork that Mead was about to begin when she wrote “Monuments Rejected.” The second chapter of *Coming of Age in Samoa*—the first, really, since it comes after “I. Introduction”—already sets the tone as it introduces the reader to “lovers slip[ping] home from trysts beneath the palm trees or in the shadow of beached canoes” (Mead, *Samoa* 12), to “[g]irls” that “stop to giggle over some young ne’er-do-well who escaped during the night from an angry father’s pursuit” (12-13), to “[h]alf-clad, unhurried women, with babies at their breasts” (13), and, in the wee hours, “the mellow thunder of the reef and the whisper of lovers, as the village rests until dawn” (15). Mead’s book (in)famously and consistently caters to primitivist desire as it evokes the sensuous richness of another culture that she considers more simple, more coherent, more harmonious, and more sensual than her own.

The opposition that Mead draws in “Monuments Rejected” between an oppressive, cold, and arid north and a harmonious, fertile, and sensual south returns in different guise in the final two chapters of *Coming of Age in Samoa*, in which she uses Samoan culture, where “[s]ex is a natural, pleasurable thing” and “casual sex relations carry no onus of strong attachment” as a foil (139, 145), inviting her American readers to reconsider not only sexual morality but also the model of the nuclear family and the education of American youths. What neither Mead’s poem nor her ethnographic study explore to any significant extent is what the *Writing Culture* debate has taught anthropologists: that the cultural relativists’ fascination with supposedly simpler cultures, which the poem’s sensuous richness gives expression to, was itself in danger of doing the work of domination and reification of “arrogant travelers.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, for twenty-first-century readers, the northern blindness that the poem takes to task is at least partially also its Boasian author’s own. In both the poem and Mead’s first ethnographic study, sexually charged evocations of southern sensuousness take discursive possession of Samoan culture, othering and instrumentalizing it for the critique of “northern” ways.

In the colonial imaginary of “Monuments Rejected,” blindness carries entirely negative connotations: The blindness of the northern “race of men” to “all earth’s loveliness” is a precondition for the violence the north exerts over the south. In

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<sup>6</sup> The classic text of the *Writing Culture* debate, which initiated a linguistic turn in cultural anthropology and was instrumental in sharpening anthropologists’ awareness of the rhetorical construction of ethnographic authority, is James Clifford and George E. Marcus’s *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986).

her poem “In Parables,” Benedict explores sightlessness in a different, mythological register:

Once having sight, seek not  
 Dear blindness any more.  
 Our eyes are open; here  
 Is the estranging door.

Men have told long since  
 This parable;  
 Of the great darkness then,  
 The merciful,

When lay as lovers lie  
 In passionate reach,  
 The sweet-fleshed earth and sky  
 Close-bosomed each to each.

Light flowered that day  
 The violent sea  
 Drove salt between their lips'  
 Idolatry.

Cursed with unblinking light  
 We too endure,  
 They drink, men dreamed, this gall  
 Of forfeiture.

Here, unlike in Mead’s poem, blindness is not primarily an ideological but an epistemic condition. Published in *Palms* in 1926, “In Parables” frames the dialectic of blindness and (in)sight as a properly aesthetic issue not only because it is staged in a poem but also because the original, Baumgartian meaning of aesthetics—the science of *aisthēsis*—firmly established the kind of intimate relation between the sensory and the cognitive that the poem takes for granted: Seeing is knowing.

Yet while blindness is a strongly undesirable condition in Mead’s “Monuments Rejected,” it has a more ambivalent valence in Benedict’s poem. It is “[d]ear blindness” and “merciful” darkness that must not be sought anymore once sight is achieved. Blindness marks a state of blissful innocence—in both its moral and its noetic sense—that the inquisitive mind must overcome, though not without a sense of loss. Once knowledge is gained, the original state of innocence is no longer directly attainable, which renders, the final stanza makes clear, sight/knowledge a curse as well as a gift. The poem frames this loss of innocence in two mythical registers—a duality that the poem’s title announces through its plural noun. Its biblical language (“blindness,” “parable,” “idolatry,” “cursed”) references the fall from innocence that Adam and Eve’s tasting of the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil brought about. In stanzas three to five, we enter, as Mead explains in a note added to the poem’s reproduction in *An Anthropologist at Work*, a different mythical realm: “The central image in this poem derives from the Maori creation myth” (Benedict, *Anthropologist* 542n8).

In the New Zealand Māori version of this foundational myth, Rangi (Sky Father) and Papa (Earth Mother) are the primordial parents, the source of all living



beings and things. Locked in a tight embrace, their many children—gods and goddesses themselves—live in the darkness between them. Yearning to escape from this dark and cramped condition as they grow up, they discuss various options, from killing their parents to prying them apart. It is Tāne-mahuta, the god of the forests, who manages to force his parents apart through sheer physical strength. Rangi and Papa are separated to their great surprise and grief: While Rangi is pushed into the heavens, Papa remains on earth to nurture her children. Light pours into darkness so that the children gods and goddesses can see their parents' creation for the first time. Disagreeing about the means of escape and the outcome of their parents' separation, the children and their offspring wage war against one another. This combat changes the face of the earth, submerging a good part of it under water and creating today's world. Rangi and Papa continue to yearn and grieve for one another: The dew and the rain that fall to earth are the tears that Rangi cries in the sky; the mists that rise from the lakes, mountains, and valleys are Papa's sighs. Eventually, Papa's body is turned over so that the lovers no longer have to endure the pain of facing each other.<sup>7</sup>

The analogy between the biblical fall and the Māori creation myth seems clear. The coming to light/knowledge is a profoundly ambivalent event: Moral knowledge (of good and evil) is gained in one culture and the creation becomes visible in the other, but both processes are accompanied by a significant sense of loss (of innocence and paradise in Christian culture; of bodily warmth and intimacy in Māori culture). In her reading of the poem, Reichel, who also notes the text's ambivalence toward enlightenment and its use of Māori and biblical mythology, makes an important point when she remarks that, in bringing together the two myths, Benedict's poem confuses the strict distinctions between cultures that are portrayed as radically different, even incommensurable in Benedict's ethnographic writing (see "Unnerving"). I would, however, argue that, in the final analysis, the poem's use of another culture is not categorically different from Benedict's portrayal of "Apollonian" Zuni culture as a more harmonious and balanced foil to Western social pathologies in *Patterns of Culture* or Mead's admonitory final two chapters in *Coming of Age in Samoa*. Like these, "In Parables" ultimately aims at a sharper perspective on the self by way of a detour through the other. This is how I read the "estranging door" of the poem's first stanza: This line literally marks the moment when the poem opens itself up to another culture. As its readers move from the first stanza to the second, they walk through an "estranging door," and what they encounter on the other side is a foreign culture's myth, knowledge of which allows for a heightened understanding of the culture of the self. The encounter with the other culture renders the familiar strange again.

That literary texts are privileged sites for such transformative experiences has become a commonplace in literary studies ever since the Russian Formalist thinker Victor Shklovsky argued, a decade before Benedict wrote her poem,

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<sup>7</sup> This account relies on Robert D. Craig's *Handbook of Polynesian Mythology* (39-58). For a historical narrative available in Benedict's time, see George Grey's *Polynesian Mythology and Ancient Traditional History of the Maori as Told by Their Priests and Chiefs* (1855).



And so, in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art. The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition. By 'enstranging' objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and 'laborious.' The perceptual process in art has a purpose all its own and ought to be extended to the fullest. *Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity. The artifact itself is quite unimportant.* (6; emphasis in orig.)

The "enstranging" work that the cultural relativists did for their own, Western culture might not be entirely different from literature's work of "enstrangement"—as Benjamin Sher's new translation of Shklovsky's Russian *ostranenie* reads. When Benedict writes that "here / Is the estranging door," she betrays an awareness that the work of estrangement happens precisely *here*, i.e., in and through poetry—a form of writing which, Shklovsky has taught us, has the power to render the familiar strange and new again so as to restore a sensual intensity (the stoniness of the stone) to things that has been lost due to habitualized, automatized perception. The poem itself is an "enstranging door." "In Parables" is self-reflexive to this extent: In it, blindness is not only a condition that is overcome in Christian and Māori myths; it is also the state of sensory attenuation that anthropologists seek to remedy as they introduce new ways of sensing and knowing to the world. Benedict's poem opens itself up to these new ways as it foregrounds sensory experiences beyond sight: the touch of bodies and the taste of salt on Papa's and Rangi's lips.

Lest we paint too rosy a picture of the work that ethnographers and writers do, we should, however, remember that the transition from blindness to sight comes with a sense of bitterness and loss so profound that the poem's final words liken the salty sea that drives the lovers apart to "this gall / Of forfeiture." What is lost is a state of sensuous fullness beyond sight, a state of passion and physical intimacy of two bodies lying "as lovers lie / In passionate reach" while their children huddled in the dark yet warm enclosure between them. Who is it, then, that speaks "Idolatry"—a word foregrounded by the poem since it is the only one that takes up a full line—and what does it mean in this specific context? In its Judeo-Christian usage, the term denotes a pagan practice that must be overcome: "The worship of idols or images 'made with hands'; more generally, the paying or offering of divine honours to any created object" (OED). A cursory reading of "In Parables" may see in it a Christian observer's critique of a pagan myth, a reading that gains strength if we take into account an early, now obsolete sense of "forfeiture": "Transgression or violation of a law; crime, sin" (OED). In this reading, the law that is transgressed would be the second commandment. Yet such a reading stands on shaky ground, for one simple reason: There are no idols in Benedict's poem. Thus, it is more likely that "idolatry" is used in a broader, more secular sense, denoting an "[i]mmoderate attachment to or veneration for any person or thing; admiration savouring of adoration" (OED). In this reading, it is Rangi and Papa's intimate embrace that qualifies as idolatry since their "immoderate attachment" obstructs their children's coming to light and knowledge of the creation. Crucially, the persona does not share the harsh judgment that "Idolatry" implies: She simultaneously channels and ironizes such a false indictment. After all, the

poem's predominant attitude toward the primordial couple's violent separation is not jubilation but a sense of loss that is captured by the modern sense of "forfeiture": "The fact of losing or becoming liable to deprivation of (an estate, goods, life, an office, right, etc.) in consequence of a crime, offence, or breach of engagement" (OED). What the poem ultimately stages, then, is less an evolution from blindness to sight, from innocence to knowledge, than a temporary return to plenitude. What "In Parables" gives us as it takes us through its "estranging door" is a glimpse of a sensuous fullness that, the poem suggests, both the Christian and the Māori world once knew.

At least at first sight, Sapir's "Zuni," which he published in the January 1926 issue of *Poetry* and dedicated "To R. F. B." (Ruth Fulton Benedict), adopts a very different stance on sensory experience:

I send you this. Through the monotony  
Of mumbling melody, the established fall  
And rise of the slow, dreaming ritual,  
Through the dry glitter of the desert sea  
And sharpness of the mesa, keep the flowing  
Of your spirit, in many branching ways!  
Be running mirrors to the colored maze,  
Not pool enchanted nor a water slowing.

Hear on the wing, see in a flash, retreat!—  
Beauty is brightest when the eye is fleet.  
The priests are singing softly on the sand,  
And the four colored points and zenith stand;  
The desert crawls and leaps, the eagle flies.  
Put wax into your ears and close your eyes.

In "Sonophilia / Sonophobia: Sonic Others in the Poetry of Edward Sapir," Reichel provides a compelling reading of this poem, arguing that it gives expression to what she terms "sonophobia"—"the rejection of sound and auditory perception as a threat because of their presumed Otherness" ("Sonophilia" 217-18)—to warn its addressee against losing herself in the seductive acoustic atmosphere of another culture. Sapir wrote this poem in August 1924, one-and-a-half years before he published it in *Poetry* and just in time to reach Benedict before she embarked on her first field trip to the Southwest Pueblos, where she would study the Zuni in 1924, 1925, and then again in 1927 (cf. Mead, "Benedict" 459-60)—work that would result in her two-volume *Zuñi Mythology* (1935). Reichel notes the final line's reference to the myth of Odysseus, "one of the earliest literary manifestations of sonophobia" ("Sonophilia" 225), and cites the letter Sapir sent to Benedict alongside the poem on August 26, 1924, to corroborate her reading: "You see I am warning you against the Desert Siren. It would be terrible to have you come back overpunctuated with Oh and Ah like any well-behaved acolyte of the Santa Fé school" (Sapir, "Letter"; qtd. in Reichel, "Sonophilia" 225-26). The "Santa Fé School" was a motley group of anthropologists, artists, writers, tourists, and others who, urged on by the marketing efforts of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railway Company, flocked to the Southwest from the late nineteenth century to the 1930s to experience "primitive culture" firsthand

(see Dye).<sup>8</sup> Sapir was deeply distrustful of this craze, whereas Benedict's fashioning of the Zuni as an integrated, sober, and well-balanced "Apollonian" people in her bestselling *Patterns of Culture* (1934) helped promote the destination. For her as for the "Santa Fé School," "[t]he Pueblo Indians of the Southwest are one of the most widely known primitive peoples in Western civilization" (Benedict, *Patterns* 57) and "[t]he Zuñi" in particular "are a ceremonious people, a people who value sobriety and inoffensiveness above all other virtues. Their interest is centered upon their rich and complex ceremonial life" (59).<sup>9</sup> In line with Richard Handler's convincing claim that, "[f]or Sapir, art became a medium in which to work out an approach to questions of culture" ("Dainty" 289), what Sapir gives Benedict in "Zuni" is professional advice in poetic form: Do not let yourself be seduced by the Southwest's alluring sounds and sights; "[b]e "running mirrors" that record the sensible quickly, as if running past it, "in a flash," rather than immerse yourself in it; try to keep your scientific distance and objectivity. Yet in choosing the genre of poetry to give his advice, Sapir details the sensuous splendor of the Pueblo Southwest before he reins it in again, most explicitly in the volta that marks the transition from the octave to the sestet and in the poem's final line. This impure Petrarchan sonnet derives its power less from the warning it communicates than from its evocation of the "mumbling melody, the established fall / And rise of the slow, dreaming ritual" and the "priests singing softly on the sand." Thus, the final line's Homeric advice cautions against the very allure that the poem itself creates. "Zuni" may warn against the desert siren, but it also *is* the desert siren.

Still, Sapir's letter to Benedict attests that "Zuni" was sent as a piece of professional advice, and thus the poem goes beyond Sapir's own conception of "true art as subjective truth externalized in unique form" (Handler, "Dainty" 302). So what is the counsel that the poem gives? Consider again the poem's concluding imperative: "Put wax into your ears and close your eyes." This seems an odd piece of advice, for how could a fieldworker possibly gain knowledge about another culture with her eyes shut and her ears plugged? One explanation readily suggests itself: Sapir the poet exerts his poetic license here, staging a hyperbolic command that exceeds the bounds of professional advice-giving that the poem also performs. Yet there is also a second kind of poetic excess at work in this line. An anthropologist who closes her eyes and seals her ears is not shut off from sensory perception: She is still able to smell, taste, and touch her surroundings. She is not cut off from the possibility of sensory experience, but the experience she remains open to is different from that afforded by scientific uses of sight and

<sup>8</sup> Victoria E. Dye notes that "[i]n the early guidebooks published by the AT&SF, the Pueblo people were referred to as "savage" or "wild," and the AT&SF continued to portray Native Americans as "living relics" of a culture that continued and sometimes struggled to hold on to its ancient religious beliefs and notions of tradition. The railroad used the "primitive" to sell Santa Fe as a cultural destination" (Dye 97).

<sup>9</sup> Benedict's preference for "Apollonian" cultures (such as the Zuni) over "Dionysian" cultures (such as the Kwakiutl) is so pronounced that Stocking groups her among "the Apollonians" and "the Apollonian ethnographers" (Stocking 334). On Benedict's Apollonian ethnography, see also Manganaro 158-61.

hearing, potentially closer to the more visceral types of encounter sought by the “Santa Fé school.” My point is not that Sapir the poet intends to communicate this; my point is that, as it ends, the poem ironically opens itself up to the kind of somatic sensory experience of the Southwest that it cautions against. Thus, “Zuni” provides a glimpse into a dimension of anthropological work that neither its poetic speaker nor its addressee, neither its empirical author nor dedicatee, but their mutual friend and colleague Margaret Mead would explore most fully. As she notes in her introduction to her *Letters from the Field, 1925-1975* (1977), anthropologists’ awareness of the importance of the senses was raised dramatically when fieldwork and participant observation became professional norms and “anthropologists went to live in the community and shared, twenty-four hours a day, in the sights and sounds, the tastes and smells, the pace and rhythm of a reality in which every detail was not only different in itself but was differently organized as a perceptual scheme” (Mead, *Letters* 16). It was in their research manual *The Study of Culture at a Distance* (1953) that Mead and Rhoda Métraux most systematically reflected on the consequences of this fact for ethnographic practice. Calling upon fellow anthropologists to understand that “all cultural behavior is mediated by human beings who not only hear and speak and communicate through words, but also use all their senses, in ways that are equally systematic” (Mead and Métraux 16), they pushed for ethnographers’ recognition of the sensory foundations of both the cultures that they study and of the work that they do in them.

In closing, I want to return to Mead’s sense of disappointment as she first encountered the sights and sounds of Honolulu and Pago Pago. As if trying to assuage the initial letdown, Mead supplements her first impressions with an even fuller account of these places’ sensuous richness and her experience of that richness:

If modern wanderers are to repeat the thrills which early travelers experienced, they will have to cultivate the much neglected senses of taste and smell. The movies and the phonograph have effectually eliminated the other two senses and touch doesn’t seem to have much of a role here. But taste and smell are still untampered with by Asia and Pathé News. And here alone I get my real sense of being in a strange land. The morning I landed in Honolulu, I had papaya for breakfast and Honolulu will always taste like papaya with Chinese oranges. Samoa tastes like papaya without Chinese oranges. There is a great difference here. Papaya and coconut oil and taro, that tasteless yet individual carbohydrate, serve for taste and the frangipani blossoms with their heavy oppressive odor for smell, mixed on the warm breeze with the odor of slightly fermented overripe bananas, an odor which is like bee-stung grapes. (Mead, *Letters* 28)

Written in Tutuila on September 27, 1925, twenty-seven days after she had arrived on American Samoa, this is a remarkable passage, not only because it deftly shifts the focus from sight and hearing to the less studied senses of smell and taste but also because it is so very open about its own embeddedness in colonial discourse. What sets a text such as this apart from both the accounts of “early travelers” (or, indeed, the “arrogant travelers” of “Monuments Rejected”) and our three Boasians’ exploration of sense perception in their ethnographic poems is that it contains the seeds of an anthropology of the senses. Thirty-nine years before Marshall McLuhan would define “the ‘message’ of

any medium or technology” as “the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs” (8), Mead notes that the introduction of new media radically affects the relationships and hierarchies between the senses. Thus, even before she and Bateson started experimenting with photography and film, Mead reflects on the “distribution of the sensible”—the proper domain of aesthetics, according to Jacques Rancière—across different media.<sup>10</sup> Mead’s inquiry into the epistemological value of all the senses (except, in this specific case, touch) reminds us just how closely the development of visual anthropology is related to first stirrings in the history of sensory anthropology. It is early observations such as these that prepared the ground for Mead and Métraux’s later, more sustained investigation of the senses, which would allow them to develop a tentative sensory anthropology which recognizes that the human use of smell and taste is “equally systematic” as that of sight and hearing, and should be studied as such, for instance through analyses of other cultures’ popular media.<sup>11</sup> We can find first intimations of such an anthropology as aesthetics in the original sense of the word in the sensuous richness of Mead’s field notes; we can glimpse them in these three Boasians’ reflections on the relations between anthropology, media, and the senses; and we can see them at work in the literary negotiation of sensory experience in aesthetic objects such as Mead’s “Monuments Rejected,” Benedict’s “In Parables,” and Sapir’s “Zuni.” If Handler is correct in arguing (as I think he is) that “the essential elements of Sapir’s culture theory [...] were elaborated in Sapir’s literary and poetic practice between 1916 and 1922” (“Sapir’s Poetic Experience” 416), we should add that all three Boasians wrote poetry that explored the aesthetic question of the relation between sensing and knowing well before any one of them theorized it in their anthropological work.

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<sup>10</sup> In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Rancière rethinks aesthetics as a site that explores “the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it” (12). Rancière names Kant as a major ally in his endeavor; I contend that Baumgarten would be the more apposite reference point.

<sup>11</sup> In truly structuralist fashion, Mead and Métraux add that “the traditional cuisine of a people can be as distinctive and as organized as a language” (16). Howes notes that this linguistic turn makes Mead and Métraux ambivalent early figures in the history of sensory anthropology: “This methodological pronouncement, with its privileging of linguistics as a model for cultural analysis, contained the seeds of its own destruction. However, the stripping of the senses that the foregrounding of the language metaphor would eventually precipitate [due to the influence of the *Writing Culture* paradigm] was held in check, at least for the time being, by the emphasis on developing *all* the senses” (11; emphasis in orig.). See also Howes’s contribution in this special issue.

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