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Race, Anthropology, and the American Public

An Introductory Essay

In 1933, the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago opened an exhibition to wide publicity and enormous attendance, timed to coincide with the World's Fair, right across the street. The new exhibit, a blockbuster in today's terms, was not devoted to Native Americans, American anthropology's signature object, or to dinosaurs, a Field Museum specialty. Instead, the marquee exhibit was the *Races of Mankind*, an exposition on race arrayed in a series of 101 life-size bronze sculptures by prominent sculptor Malvina Hoffman, each man, woman, and child depicting a distinct racial type, each the scientific doppelgänger to the diversity of Americans outside the museum doors and the spectacle of living "exotics" next door at the World's Fair. At the center of the exhibit stood a massive sculpture depicting the unity of humanity, symbolized by three idealized, but racialized, male figures, topped by a globe.

Created in a nexus of competing anthropological ideas about the nature and significance of race, the *Races of Mankind* promoted a vision of humanity that was both humanist and racialist, a panoply of human diversity refracted through the prism of racial typology. Presented to the public as insightful art and rigorous science, Hoffman's sculptures and the *Races of Mankind* exhibit boldly presented the discipline of physical anthropology to the public and asserted its relevance to American life. Coming on the heels of eugenic triumphs in immigration restriction, racial unrest in Chicago and around the nation, and the onset of the Depression, the exhibition offered a stable and familiar world order, frozen in bronze, at once unified and diverse in its preservation of endangered "primitives" and its reinforcement of the natural place of Europeans and Americans at the top of the racial heap.

In its time, this exhibit represented a stirring synthesis of art and anthropology, yet today it is all but forgotten. How did it slide into obscurity? Why has the history of anthropology and racial science in the interwar years been largely overlooked, and when addressed, frequently misconstrued, its complexities flattened? What impact did all this have on popular understanding about the nature of race? By 1968, the *Races of Mankind* exhibit was roundly denounced as racist and dismantled. Yet in the 1990s, Malvina Hoffman's sculptures, now scattered decoratively around the museum, stripped of their scientific status, were hailed by another generation as sensitive depictions of human multicultural diversity. How can we understand these shifting intersections of race and science in American life? What role have anthropology and its popularization played in American racial formation?

These are the fundamental questions at the heart of *Constructing Race*. Throughout the first decades of the twentieth century, until roughly the 1950s, racial science remained a critical part of professional and popular anthropology. It was a racial science characterized not only by forms of racial essentialism and biological determinism, but also by attempts to grasp human diversity in cultural, historicized terms. This study explores how physical anthropologists struggled to understand variation in bodies and cultures in a crucial yet understudied period, how they represented race to the public, and how their efforts contributed to an American formulation of race that has remained rooted in both bodies and cultures, heredity, and society.

At the core of this book is the argument that mid-century anthropology, along with other racial sciences, has been misconstrued in ways that have kept us from fully appreciating the causes and effects of American racial formation. The failure to see fully the range of racial conceptualizations, as well as the related failure to understand fully the complex interplay between cultural and biological theory, has hampered our ability to make sense of the persistent contradictions and complexity of the American racial landscape.

Much scholarship perpetuates a teleological narrative in which progressive scientists, chiefly Franz Boas and his students, championed a cultural understanding of human variation against pernicious essentialist, racist conceptions of difference. By contrast, this study reveals a much more complex and contested picture of racialist theorizing among anthropologists, not least by Boas himself, who was a leading racial scientist, in addition to being one of the foremost cultural anthropologists in America and a crusader against racism. In the interwar era, race was regarded

among physical anthropologists (and most Americans) as an essential, biological component of human identity. Within that consensus, however, there were serious debates over the nature of race, heredity, identity, classifications, and scientific methods. Moreover, the somatic emphasis of racial anthropology did not preclude anthropologists from also understanding race in cultural and historical terms. This study offers answers to questions that remain unanswered: How did Franz Boas, the father of American cultural anthropology and a champion against racism, regard race and racial science? What *was* the relationship between culture and race in anthropology before 1950? How and why do racial essentialism and biological determinism persist despite strenuous efforts to reject them? The chapters that follow demonstrate three central arguments about race and racial science between 1900 and 1960: pre–World War II anthropologists, including Franz Boas, struggled with a racial science that comprehended human variation in both biologically essentialist and culturally nuanced ways; these ideas were communicated to a vast American public through a variety of media over a period of decades; and the result is an American formulation of race that has remained fundamentally rooted in both bodies and cultures. Through an examination of select anthropologists, critical exhibitions, and exemplary texts, this book illuminates how physical anthropologists in the twentieth century promoted a vision of race rooted in bodies *and* cultures, a vision that shaped popular perceptions of race in America for generations.

A Distorted Past

The historiographic treatment of Franz Boas is particularly emblematic of the lens through which racial science has too often been viewed. The picture of Boas as the father of cultural relativism and a champion against scientific racism that developed in the late twentieth century was a consequence of developments within anthropology in the postwar period, as well a reflection of the way anthropologists and others selectively amplified the first serious efforts by a scholar outside anthropology to offer an historical account of American anthropology and Franz Boas.

It may come as a surprise to readers accustomed to accounts of Boas as the author of the modern, relativistic culture concept that in the years after his death in 1942 he was dismissed by many anthropologists, most notably his own students Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, as a diligent data collector but no theoretician, someone who failed to systematize his work, and who, in his relentless, a-theoretical empiricism,

actually stunted development of the culture concept and the field of anthropology.[1] A broader view of the history of anthropology helps explain why Boas was first dismissed as insufficiently theoretical in the 1950s, and then later embraced as the critical figure in the development and promulgation of the culture concept. In the 1940s and 1950s, American anthropology experienced a resurgence of theories about human cultural and social formations that emphasized commonalities and universal qualities, functions, or processes, and was especially concerned to put anthropology on a fully "scientific" footing. Functionalism prospered at the University of Chicago; cultural ecology thrived at the Smithsonian Institution's Institute of Social Anthropology under Julian Steward; Leslie White promoted an evolutionary culture theory that emphasized the discovery of universal cultural laws.[2] At odds with the evolutionists and others promoting a quest for universal laws of cultural development, Boasian anthropologists like Kroeber and Kluckhohn defended historical particularism by rooting the culture concept, not in Franz Boas's articulation of it across his decades of work, but further in the past, in English anthropologist Edward Tylor's 1871 definition of culture and its subsequent elaboration by a variety of anthropologists.[3]

Historian George Stocking's work on Boas and his development of the culture concept profoundly changed the earlier, dismissive view. Even though Stocking was careful to characterize Boas as a "transitional figure" who "retained strong residual elements" of the nineteenth-century evolutionary "commitment to 'progress in civilization,'" he nonetheless made the point that it was Boas, and not Tylor, who in the face of the enormous diversity of human traditions and social practices had articulated a systematic critique of cultural evolution. According to Stocking, it was left to his students to fully elaborate his discussion of "cultures"

[1] George W. Stocking, Jr., "Franz Boas and the Culture Concept in Historical Perspective," *American Anthropologist*, New Series, vol. 68, No. 4 (Aug. 1966), pp. 867–882; Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, "Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions," *Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archeology and Ethnology*, Harvard University, vol. 47, no. 1, 1952. See also Stocking, "Matthew Arnold, E. B. Tylor, and the Uses of Invention," *American Anthropologist*, vol. 65 (1963), pp. 783–799; *Race, Culture and Evolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1968] 1982).

[2] Regna Darnell, *And Along Came Boas: Continuity and Revolution in Americanist Anthropology* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: J. Benjamins, 1998); William J. Peace, *Leslie A. White: Evolution and Revolution in Anthropology* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), pp. 164–169.

[3] Stocking, "Franz Boas and the Culture Concept"; E.[dward] B.[urnett] Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom* (London: J. Murray, 1871).

into the modern culture concept.[4] The irony was that, in response to the postwar resurgence of evolutionism and scientism in anthropology, some influential Boasian anthropologists had promoted cultural relativism and historical particularism in part by dismissing Boas's critical contribution. Following Stocking's intervention in anthropologists' disciplinary history, and the eclipse of evolutionary and other universalizing theoretical orientations, Boas took on a founder's mantle in anthropology similar to that afforded Charles Darwin among modern evolutionary biologists.[5]

The embrace of Boas as the father of the culture concept was accompanied by a pronounced lack of interest in his racial science. Following World War II and the humanist turn that prompted disciplinary organizations, as well as international organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), to speak out against racism, Boas's antiracism was much more palatable, and more congruent with the politics of cultural relativism, than his racial science. By the 1970s, the treatment of Boas was enmeshed in the epistemological crisis that led humanists and social scientists, particularly anthropologists,

[4] Stocking, "Franz Boas and the Culture Concept," pp. 878–879.

[5] Anthropologists have been notably interested in their own disciplinary history, and in particular in examining the Boasian legacy. Numerous accounts of Boas's anthropology and of the history of anthropology have been authored by anthropologists themselves since Boas died in 1942. These include A. Irving Hallowell, "The History of Anthropology as an Anthropological Problem," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 1 (1965), pp. 24–38; Robert Lowie, "Boas Once More," *American Anthropologist*, vol. 58 (1956), pp. 159–164 and "Reminiscences of Anthropological Currents in America Half a Century Ago," *American Anthropologist*, vol. 58 (1956), pp. 995–1016; Alfred Kroeber, "The Place of Boas in Anthropology," *American Anthropologist*, vol. 58 (1956), pp. 151–159 and "A History of the Personality of Anthropology," *American Anthropologist*, vol. 61 (1959), pp. 398–404; Melville Herskovits, *Franz Boas: The Science of Man in the Making* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953); Margaret Mead and Ruth Bunzel, eds., *The Golden Age of American Anthropology* (New York: George Bazilier, 1960), as well as Mead's unconventional biography of Ruth Benedict, *An Anthropologist at Work: Writings of Ruth Benedict* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959) and the later work, *Ruth Benedict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), and her autobiography, *Blackberry Winter* (New York: Morrow, 1972); Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory* (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1968); Leslie White, "The Ethnography and Ethnology of Franz Boas," *Texas Memorial Museum Bulletin*, vol. 6 (1963); Stephen O. Murray, "The Non-Eclipse of Americanist Anthropology during the 1930s and 1940s," Lisa Valentine and Regna Darnell, eds., *Theorizing the Americanist Tradition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999). Regna Darnell has produced more than thirty books, articles, and edited volumes on the history of American anthropology, including *Along Came Boas* and *Theorizing the Americanist Tradition*, cited earlier, and *Invisible Genealogies: A History of Americanist Anthropology*, Critical Studies in the History of Anthropology (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2001).

to question positivism and claims to universal knowledge. Historian of anthropology Regna Darnell perhaps put it best when she noted: "The real Boas tends to disappear amidst the apotheosis of angst-ridden anthropological reflexivity."[6] For anthropologists and those who study the history of anthropology, the last quarter of the twentieth century saw a profound turn inward toward self-reflexiveness and an equally profound self-consciousness and discomfort with the traditional project of anthropology, its methods, and assumptions.[7] For anthropologists, history has functioned in part as identity formation, reconstructing a lineage that justifies or supports current commitments, particularly for a discipline acutely uncomfortable with its participation, direct and indirect, in racial injustice and its legacy around the world. All history is written from a situated vantage point, but a discipline's practitioners are especially burdened with the weight of their intellectual and methodological genealogy when attempting to reconstruct a fraught past. At the same time, cultural relativism and the multiplication of culture into cultures, from singular to plural – a part of the anthropological legacy – is so deeply and widely embraced that even the most self-reflexive scholars sometimes fail to see it as a historically evolving worldview. The corollary is an often adamant, ironically nearly reflexive, rejection of biology or heredity as useful or interesting explanatory frameworks for understanding humanity. Those few who espouse such notions often have been simply dismissed as racists, part of a genuinely repugnant tradition of slaveholders, racist eugenicists, and Nazis.

But I would argue that it is vital to understand the past of racial science as the range of practice that it was, from work that was regarded at the time as wholly sound and legitimate to racist propaganda, and the relation of all of it to the society in which it was produced, in this case a society that in the 1920s passed strict immigration restrictions, saw a resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, and witnessed race riots, entrenched Jim Crow laws, and eugenic denunciation of hereditary "defectives." Historians should not ignore scientific and intellectual contexts that existed in the past because they no longer seem to hang together as a legitimate whole, and retrieve

[6] Regna Darnell, "Review: Reenvisioning Boas and Boasian Anthropology," *American Anthropologist*, New Series, vol. 102, no. 4 (Dec. 2000), pp. 896–899.

[7] Regna Darnell, *Invisible Genealogies*; Julia Liss, "Diasporic Identities: The Science and Politics of Race in the Work of Franz Boas and W. E. B. Du Bois, 1894–1919," *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 13, no. 2 (May 1998), pp. 127–166; James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

only the science, the ideas that make the story coherent from a presentist point of view. Indeed, recapturing the fullest possible picture of how science and scientists functioned within society serves an epistemological and historical purpose in counteracting to some degree the powerful ideological and rhetorical force of science itself, which continually recasts itself, through reconstructed histories of its great researchers and fundamental ideas, as a process outside of history and society. Anthropology, among the most self-conscious of the sciences, is surely less guilty of this than some. But even anthropology has often constructed a history that served current purposes and theoretical commitments more than the historical record. The failure to face unpalatable pasts squarely has too often led otherwise thoughtful, perspicacious scholars to abandon rigorous analysis of the ideas, motives, and choices of intelligent, politically savvy historical characters in favor of limp excuses like capitulation to the zeitgeist.

Despite extensive historical and anthropological attention paid to Boas by scholars and anthropologists, the scholarship (with some important exceptions) has not comprehensively – even adequately – addressed Boas as a physical anthropologist, but rather, and revealingly, the contrary. Boas is a key figure in the story of physical anthropology prior to World War II not only for the ways he, and others, notably Harry Shapiro, defined the problem of race and its solutions, but also because in delineating his views and practices we confront prevailing historiographies, both visions of the past created by historians writing the history of anthropology, as well as in the history anthropology tells itself, that have been significantly at odds with what seems to have been, for lack of a better term, true. Much of the historiography has elided or distorted the actual character of his physical anthropology, and specifically his interest and belief in race. Much of the historical work that treats Boas fails to confront the full nature of his views, perhaps because it does not seem to comport with the kind of figure many historians, anthropologists, and others want him to be, one crucial to a historiographical narrative about the ascendance of culture and the decline of scientific racism.[8] One rarely

[8] In introductory remarks to selections of Boas's early writings on race, George Stocking made a similar point, noting that Boas has been recognized principally as a critic of racism, but that early arguments that "were conditioned by the racist milieu in which he wrote," which brought together various aspects of anthropology and which revealed early conception of culture embedded in his critique of racial determinism had been overlooked. George W. Stocking, Jr., "Racial Capacity and Cultural Determinism," *The Shaping of American Anthropology, 1883–1911: A Franz Boas Reader*, Midway Reprint,

reads about Boas's racial science,[9] except in cursory, often apologetic or dismissive terms, whereas his credentials as an innovator in the practice of cultural anthropology are widely recounted. Our understanding of physical anthropology and the history of racial science is distorted because the view of race and the biological study of human difference that Boas, and later Harry Shapiro, espoused has been neglected or flattened, and the tensions within even the most apparently typological racial science forgotten.

In gaining a deeper understanding of mid-century racial science, we can begin to see the outlines of a broader story about how race disappeared from anthropology in very specific ways, replaced by or transformed into other concepts and categories, and how the transformation of physical anthropology into biological anthropology both contributed to and reflected similar major shifts in modern social and political discourse in America.[10] By looking more carefully at the actual landscape of theory

(Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, [1974] 1989), pp. 219–221. For a similar critique, see John S. Allen, "Franz Boas's Physical Anthropology: The Critique of Racial Formalism Revisited," *Current Anthropology*, vol. 30, no. 1 (Feb. 1989), pp. 79–84.

[9] There are a number of important exceptions to this. George Stocking's work is a prominent and crucial exception, along with more recent work by Liss, "Disaporic Identities," and "The Cosmopolitan Imagination: Franz Boas and the Development of American Anthropology" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1990). Also notable are Darnell, *Invisible Genealogies*; Lee D. Baker, *From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race, 1896–1954* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998); Vernon J. Williams, Jr., *Rethinking Race: Franz Boas and His Contemporaries* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1996); and Nancy Leys Stepan, "Race, Gender, Science and Citizenship," *Gender & History*, vol. 10, no. 1 (Apr. 1998), pp. 26–52. Elazar Barkan discusses Boasian racial science and interwar racial science more generally at length in *The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States Between the World Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), although this work relies heavily on an unfortunate dichotomization of scientists into "racists" and "egalitarians," a retrospective oversimplification that obscures more than it illuminates.

[10] Other scholars who have begun to reexamine twentieth-century racial science include: Mitchell B. Hart, "Jews and Race: An Introductory Essay," Mitchel B. Hart, ed., *Jews and Race: Writings on Identity and Difference, 1880–1940* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2011), pp. xiii–xxxix; Joanne Meyerowitz, "'How Common Culture Shapes the Separate Lives': Sexuality, Race, and Mid-Twentieth Century Social Constructionist Thought," *Journal of American History*, vol. 96, no. 4 (Mar. 2010), pp. 1057–1084; Gavin Schaffer, *Racial Science and British Society, 1930–1962* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Anthony Q. Hazard, Jr., "Postwar Anti-racism: The United States, UNESCO and 'Race', 1945–1968" (PhD diss., Temple University, 2008); Michael Yudell, "Making Race: Biology and the Evolution of the Race Concept in 20th Century American Thought" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2008); Michelle

and practice surrounding the study of race in the decades before and after World War II, we can begin to see where the real disjunctions and actual continuities lie between various pasts and presents. With a fuller understanding of Boas's views, and of those who came after him and followed his lead, Harry Shapiro, Ruth Benedict, and Ashley Montagu prominently among them – as well as those who did not, such as Henry Field, Arthur Keith, and Earnest Hooton – we can begin to see continuity with views about race that are more typical of the post–World War II period in the United States, the very views that seem to have made it difficult to lucidly comprehend the racial science Boas and others practiced. This book corrects the historiographical tilt toward culture in the history of anthropology by arguing that anthropology was foundational to American racial formation precisely because it promoted both racial essentialism and cultural relativism. Taking the science of race seriously, understanding it as its practitioners did, in all its complexities, contradictions, and shifting emphases, illuminates not only how Americans used to think about race and culture, but why we still think about it the way we do. A study of early and mid-century physical anthropology can help explain how and why race and science seem to have reemerged with such force in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

Race in America, Race in Science

In the 1990s, biological determinism linked to race seemed to have reemerged. Physicians promised better health via race-targeted drugs like BiDil. Companies offering DNA tests prompted genealogical odysseys as celebrities like Oprah Winfrey searched for their origins. Long-festering debates over race and IQ exploded back into public view with *The*

Brattain, "Race, Racism, and Antiracism: UNESCO and the Politics of Presenting Science to the Postwar Public," *The American Historical Review*, vol. 112, no. 5 (Dec. 2007), pp. 1386–1413; Keith Wailoo and Stephen Pemberton, *The Troubled Dream of Genetic Medicine: Ethnicity and Innovation in Tay-Sachs, Cystic Fibrosis and Sickle Cell Disease* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Richard H. King, *Race, Culture, and the Intellectuals, 1940–1970* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); William H. Tucker, *The Funding of Scientific Racism: Wickliffe Draper and the Pioneer Fund* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002); John P. Jackson, *Social Scientists for Social Justice: Making the Case against Segregation* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Kenan Malik, *The Meaning of Race: Race History and Culture in Western Society* (New York: Macmillan Press, 1996).

Bell Curve.[11] Many who thought racial essentialism and biological determinism had been safely discredited decades earlier viewed these developments with alarm, and puzzlement. From a longer historical perspective, however, we can see recent developments as yet another stage in an ongoing dynamic in the United States between predominantly biological and predominantly social solutions to pressing problems. The discourses of nature and nurture, biology and society, have been consistently part of American culture for more than a century.

The complex mix of biologically essentialist explanations and historically or culturally grounded theorizing that one finds in the work of Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict, Harry Shapiro, or at the Field Museum in the interwar period is distinctive of its era but also remarkable in the ways it reaches across the supposed gulf of World War II (and the Evolutionary Synthesis) to illuminate tensions and connections between the biological and the cultural in the latter half of the twentieth century. Indeed, *inter*war racial science was much like *post*war racial science in its complex brew of biology and society, the promiscuous intermingling of bodies and cultures. Rather than seeing the postwar reaction against race and racism as either decisive or unique, we should view it as one era in an ongoing construction of human variation that has always consisted of a volatile, unstable mix of cultures and bodies.

The construction of race in science has never been an either/or proposition. It has never been a question of race *or* culture, heredity *or* society, bodies *or* minds. The discourses of human variation since the eighteenth century have always incorporated visions of bodies, capabilities, and cultures as a means to explain diversity and justify hierarchy. That is not to say that there has been easy consensus. For an entity that supposedly encompasses a set of patently evident natural kinds, race has been a profoundly unstable scientific object, subject to constant contestation and in need of continual reconstruction. The science of race has been marked

[11] On Bidil, see Jonathan Kahn, *Race in a Bottle: The Story of BiDil and Racialized Medicine in a Post-Genomic Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Wailoo and Pemberton, *The Troubled Dream of Genetic Medicine*; Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Harlem Moon, 2006). Also see www.bidil.com. On Oprah Winfrey's search for her ancestors through DNA analysis, and the making of the PBS documentary, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Finding Oprah's Roots, Finding Your Own* (New York: Random House, Crown Publishing Group, 2007). Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: Free Press, 1994).