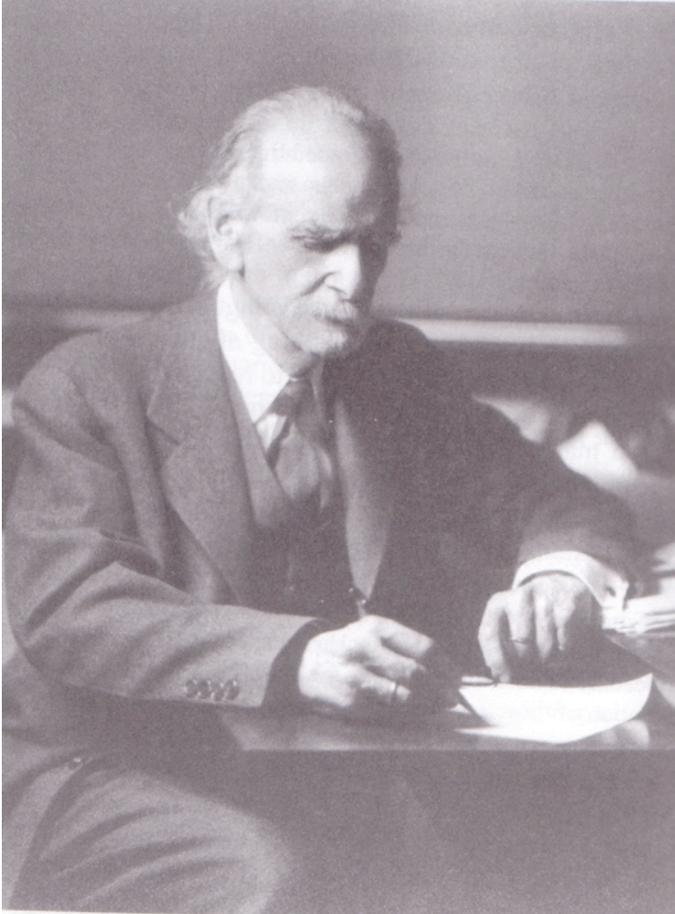


Commemorating Boas. Peter M. Whiteley (Curator of North American Ethnology, American Museum of Natural History), 4-1-2008.



[Franz Boas, 1930's. Source: N. Boas 2004]

I am deeply honored to be called upon to celebrate Franz Boas on this the 150th anniversary of his birth. 2008 also marks the centenary of the birth of Claude Lévi-Strauss, for whom birthday celebrations are planned in Paris for November. Connections between these two supernovas of the anthropological firmament proliferate beyond calendrical happenstance. Famously, Lévi-Strauss was sitting next to Boas in the Columbia faculty club, at a gathering to honor the great French anthropologist Paul Rivet, like Lévi-Strauss himself a recent refugee from Nazi tyranny, when Boas collapsed and died on December 21st, 1942. Rivet, who had been a military doctor, was soon aware that Boas was beyond recall, but not before Lévi-Strauss bent down to come to the man's aid. As more than one commentator has observed, there could be no more graphic image of the passing of the torch, especially in Americanist anthropology, than this.

Even at the hour of his doom, the gathering had been convened by Boas, who was holding forth on a signature and deeply-felt topic, the fallacies of race, shortly before he was struck, dying thus “with his boots on,” as his grandson Norman Boas has put it.



[The Hall of Northwest Coast Indians, ca. 1943, American Museum of Natural History]

Very shortly after Franz Boas' death, and seemingly as something of a quasi-elegy, Lévi-Strauss penned his lyrical tribute to the Northwest Coast Hall and its extraordinary concentration of First Nations art at the American Museum of Natural History:

There is in New York a magic place where all the dreams of childhood hold a rendezvous, where century old tree trunks sing or speak, where indefinable objects lie in wait for the visitor with an anxious stare; where animals of superhuman gentleness press their uplifted little paws, clasped in prayer for the privilege of constructing for the chosen one the palace of the beaver, of guiding him into the realm of the seals, or teaching him, with a mystic kiss, the language

of the frog and kingfisher. This region, to which disused but singularly effective museographic methods grant the supplementary prestige of the *clair-obscur* of caves and of the crumbling heap of lost treasure, can be visited daily from ten to five o'clock at the American Museum of Natural History, New York (Lévi-Strauss 1943).

And it still can, retaining enormous power for the imagination of visitors, whether they hail from the cultures in question, or have specialized ethnographic knowledge of the area, or are merely casually passing by. The Hall is certainly Boas' signal contribution to the American Museum of Natural History, and it embodies the results both of his practice as an anthropologist and as the grandest shaper of 20th century public discourse on questions of culture. I will return to the Hall below. But as the museum begins to prepare refurbishing a Hall which has not been seriously renewed since 1910, we are keenly aware of this legacy, though, 65 years on, I reserve the right to dissent somewhat from Lévi-Strauss' museological approval.

Ethnographically, however, Lévi-Strauss certainly knew whereof he spoke. By this time, Lévi-Strauss was perhaps more well-read in Americanist ethnography than any other scholar, especially via Boas' own monumental writings on Tsimshian mythology, Kwakwaka'wakw secret societies, Salish masking, etc. Lévi-Strauss included this same passage just quoted in his theoretical excursus on Northwest Coast masking 30 years later, based especially on a comparison of Kwakwaka'wakw and Salish masks in the Hall. Indeed, much of Lévi-Strauss' own brilliant writings about mythology, totemism, shamanism, and so on, drew directly on the extraordinary ethnographic record Boas compiled on First Nations of the Northwest Coast as well as on the Inuit of Baffin-land. But importantly for Lévi-Strauss, these ideas and their cultures were not only textual, but were all, thanks to Boas, vitally embodied at the American Museum of Natural History, during his presence in New York in the early 1940's.

Boas has often been called the father of American anthropology, a subject which effectively began as such with his tenure at AMNH and Columbia in the 1890's. But like any statement of founding fatherhood, this is something of an origin myth, and there are multiple earlier precedents—in the U.S., Morgan, Powell, Schoolcraft, Lewis and Clark, and perhaps most notably Thomas Jefferson, who exerted enormous influence, especially via his role in the American Philosophical Society in the study of Native American cultures and languages. And, in case the patriarchal blinders of disciplinary history still obscure this, birth requires mothers too, among whom we should not underestimate Alice Fletcher and Matilda Coxe Stevenson, and a little earlier, Catherine the Great, and a little later of course Boas' own associate, Elsie Clews Parsons.

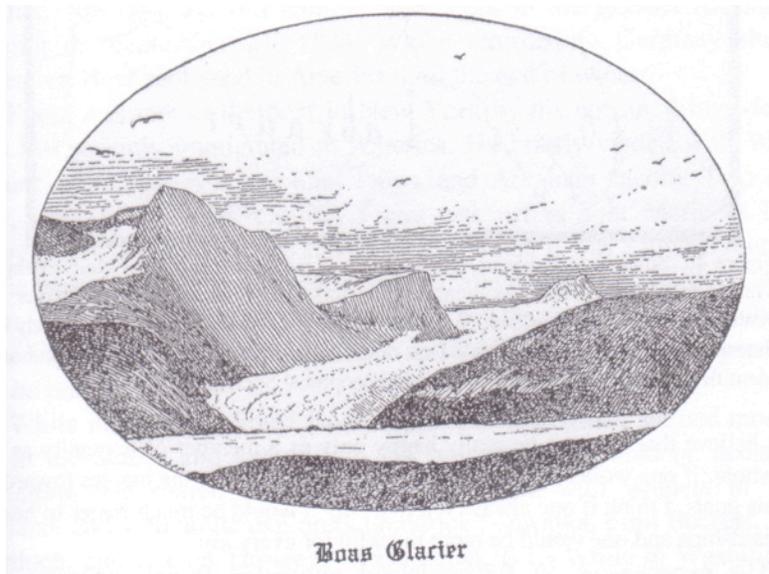
Boas' distinctive contribution was twofold: 1) to transform anthropology into an organized discipline of inquiry, and 2) to do this via an insistence on the study of individual cultures, their internal constituents and their relations with their neighbors

within a “culture area.” Boas’s attraction to what was to become “anthropology” emerged from a coalescence of interests in physics, mathematics and physical geography, as well as a deep-rooted family background in social justice, especially via the European revolutions of 1848, not to mention the several deep saber scars that he bore from a series of duels in college, which he evidently undertook with relish, in response to anti-semitic slurs. In consequence, Boas’s take on the interpretation of culture was both rigorously empirical, and assiduously attentive to the discourses and practices of his Native American interlocutors.



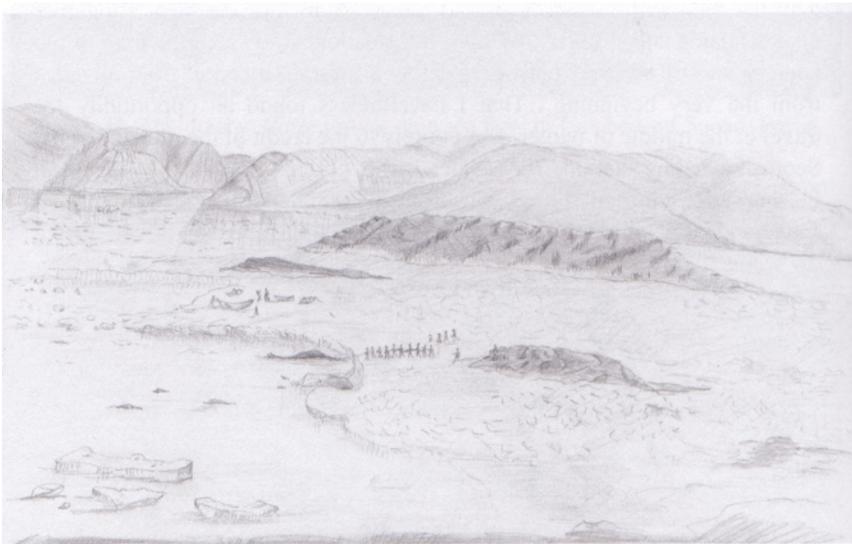
[Franz Boas’ own hand-drawn map of Baffinland, before his journey began. Source N. Boas 2004]

Remote beyond compare, and frequently in perilous circumstances of 50 below zero weather (with several bouts of frostbite, and more than one occasion of near-starvation) Boas spent a year mapping Cumberland Sound, frequently in complete isolation except for his Inuit hosts. The enormity of this project is ill-understood nowadays, but may be reflected in the fact that not only does Boas have a river in the area named for him, but also his own glacier. He himself would not have approved of that, however, and the names were imposed later than his own traverses through the area. He was far more interested in the Native names, recording more than 900, discovering that these were much more representative of environmental conditions than the biographical impositions of European explorer toponymy



[Source: N. Boas 2004]

The project combined a study of physical geography with its influence on Inuit thought; the field he envisioned lay at the interface of environment with the human mind. Boas quickly assimilated the lesson of all good fieldworkers, that like a new language, a new landscape is best learned by listening to those familiar with it. He learned a good deal of Inuktitut, and it's clear that his Inuit hosts saved his life on occasion in the bitter, sometimes trackless wastes of Baffin land in the winter of 1883-84.



[Franz Boas' drawing of Inuit "hauling a whale to shore," 1883. Source N. Boas 2004]

His record of Inuit place names inaugurated a fascination with American Indian languages that eventuated in numerous other formal studies – of Kwakwaka, Tsimshian,

Chinook, Keresan, among many others, and ultimately his monumental multi-volume Handbook of American Indian Languages.

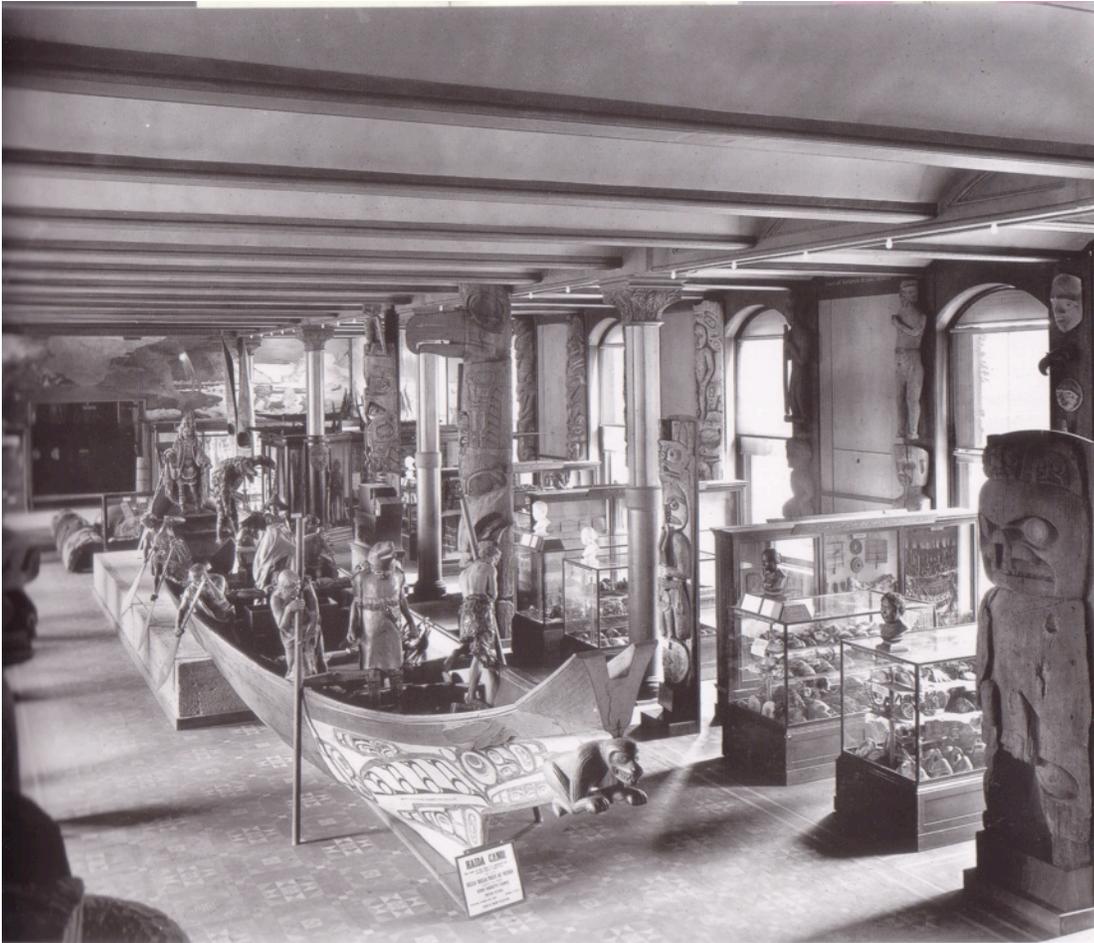
The arctic experience shifted his interest firmly away from physical toward human cultural geography, convinced that an understanding of the latter could not be had without serious engagement with the interests, ideas, and actions of local people, not as exemplars of some universal human type, but *sui generis*, in their own right. Thus even at this early moment of his researches, Boas was beginning to think in terms of his hallmark contribution to anthropological thought, of individuated cultures, and individuals within them. Certainly scientific in his analytical approach to recording customs and lifeways, the guiding force of his genius was simultaneously humanistic, dedicated to honoring the uniqueness of each culture.

Today this may strike both those with an anthropological background and those without as banal, a mere truism. The language of individuated cultures has penetrated so far into public discourse and vernacular consciousness as to marshal policy decisions about human rights at the U.N., and ethical pronouncements in papal encyclicals, as well as indigenist political resistance to hegemony the world over. Cultural identities and language rights that rest upon the Boasian notion of individuated human cultures have become policy-wonk jargon, a true sign of their saturation of public consciousness. Lest we forget, however, it was not always thus.



[Hall of Northwest Coast Indians, ca. 1900. American Museum of Natural History]

As well as for this museum specifically, the Northwest Coast Hall represents Boas' legacy more broadly, as the primary embodiment of his argument about culture in the world. Boas himself envisioned 3 roles for an ethnological museum – for research, for education, and for entertainment (Jacknis 1985). The museum's engagement of scientific knowledge with public discourse is its very *raison d'être*. And the Boasian vision as represented in the Northwest Coast Hall cannot be underestimated for the impact of its transformation of global consciousness over the course of the last one hundred years.



[Hall of Northwest Coast Indians, ca. 1910. American Museum of Natural History]

The Hall as it stands at present is not exactly in the mould Boas cast it in 1900 (cf. Jacknis 2004). It underwent significant transformations in 1908-1910, when the canoe was placed on the floor and passengers were placed inside to depict a scene on the way to a potlatch. Boas left the museum in 1905 in part because of a dispute over the Museum President's re-exerted influence in the South American Hall, that sought to reintroduce the social-evolutionist paradigm that Boas had fought so hard against since his first writings on ethnological displays in the 1880s. The 1908-10 iteration, conducted under some sufferance by Clark Wissler, depleted the Hall of much of Boas' explanatory armature, but the fundamental structural arrangement remained.

Boas' hall as installed in 1900 represented the first public display of his position that individual cultures could only be understood as such in their own contexts, with their own histories of influence and innovation. The individual cultures were made manifest in the Hall's arrangement by tribal alcoves, of mutually informing utilitarian, artistic, and religious artifacts. The second prong in Boas' paradigm revolution was the grouping into a culture-area. He argued that cultures with similar adaptive strategies, within a delimited geographical environment and climatic regime, share diagnostic traits, which are collectively distinctive vis-à-vis adjacent culture-areas. Similarities in economy, social forms, and material culture occur through shared histories, trade, and environmental adaptation. He thus enacted in the Hall his vigorous argument with the National Museum in Washington over that institution's evolutionist arrangement of human culture, from "lower savagery," upward through "barbarism" and finally "civilization." All other ethnological museums followed that pattern until Boas, though most subsequently shifted after he had overwhelmingly convinced with his museum displays at AMNH. The argument for individual cultures was truly revolutionary, especially when he first made it in 1887:

The main object of ethnological collections should be the dissemination of the fact that civilization is not something absolute, but that it is relative, and that our ideas and conceptions are true only so far as our civilization goes (F. Boas 1887).

The presence of relativity in Boas' discourse about human culture thus antedated by almost two decades Einstein's famous series of papers in 1905, including his theory of special relativity in physics, and it is fair to say that the effect of Boas' argument was equally earth-shattering in our collective consciousness. Although a few scholars had used the term "culture" in the plural before, it was Boas who truly transformed scientific and in time popular understanding by his insistence on individual cultures as opposed to a great, monolithic plod of social evolution from lower to higher forms of culture. Darwin's ideas had not only been extended analogously to social theory, but had transfigured the very *Zeitgeist*. Now with an explanatory mechanism to go with earlier social-philosophical perspectives on the progress of human societies, associated with earlier social contract theorists like Locke and Rousseau, and then in the 19th century with Comte and Spencer, it was a short step to Morgan's depiction in 1877 of human social and cultural forms arranged on an evolutionary scale, where "contemporary primitives" – principally Native Americans and Africans - were the stand-ins for savage European forebears in a universalist progression toward the enlightened state of latter 19th century European and Euro-American "civilization." The effect was a triumphalist re-affirmation of the supposed virtues of Manifest Destiny, at this moment of active warfare with Native peoples of the Plains, Southwest, and California. The Museum as nationalist project thus reproduced and reaffirmed an infamous ideology of expansion, domination and racial hierarchy. It was this structure that Boas so effectively overturned, opening a space both

textual and visual for cultures to be perceived and valued in their own right, the results of their own histories, social practices, and environmental adaptations.

Boas' early practice was also biological anthropology, and in the darkest aspect of his legacy, he was directly involved in collecting human remains, including from graves, as David Hurst Thomas (2000) has powerfully reminded us in recent years. This was par for the course of scientific research at the time, and while we cannot excuse the grave-robbing, perhaps its saving grace in Boas's case was his anthropometric measurements of skeletons and living individuals, including European immigrants, and schoolchildren in Worcester Mass., to demonstrate the fallacies of somatic determinism: that even within a single generation skeletal and head form might alter appreciably under new environmental conditions, nutritional habits, and social class differentials in access to resources, and the like.

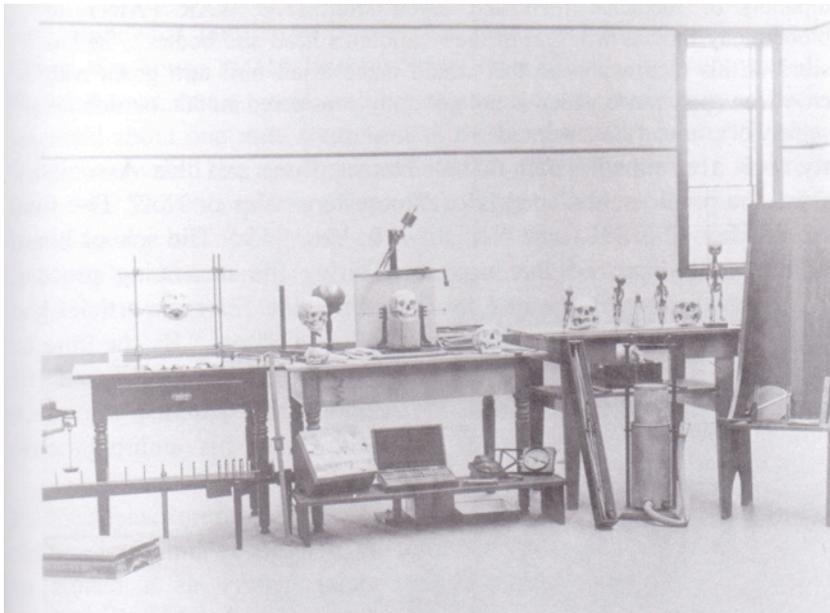


Figure 63. Franz Boas's anthropometric laboratory (Clark University).

[Boas' laboratory at Clark University, ca. 1890. Source: N. Boas 2004]

This was the groundwork for Boas' rejection of scientific racialism and eugenics, both in the academy and in his public activism. By the 1890's Boas was publicly critical of biological arguments on inherent racial traits, that what we would today refer to as phenotypic differences were the product of genetic interaction with specific environments, that variation within supposed geographic races was greater than between them, and that therefore purported biological races were meaningless as determinants of social and individual capacities. Invited in 1906 by W.E.B. Dubois to address the graduating class of Atlanta University, an African-American college, Boas compared the situation of African-Americans in the United States to that of Jews in Europe, and

repudiated arguments of inherent racial hierarchy. The same year, he attempted to raise funds to establish an African Museum and for a nationwide study of African-Americans to support his contentions against the pernicious racist theory that dominated much American discourse during this period. In the short term he failed, but his student Melville Herskovits later succeeded in establishing the first program in African studies in the U.S. at Northwestern University. By 1909 Boas' article "Race Problems in America" published in *Science* was going hand in hand with more activist commitments, including writing for *The Southern Workman*, and *The Crisis*, the journal of the NAACP. Boas thus walked the walk, insistent that the social implications of his scientific determinations needed public dissemination where they could influence policy. His landmark *The Mind of Primitive Man* in 1911, which directly opposed racial determinism, was published in German as *Kultur und Rasse* (Culture and Race). Inter alia, he demonstrated from his work with Northwest Coast languages the fallacy of the prevailing idea that "primitive languages" were simpler than European languages, and that they prevented a capacity for abstract thought.

Boas vigorously opposed the rise of eugenics in the U.S., sadly prominently associated with President Henry Fairfield Osborn at the American Museum of Natural History. He fought in print with Osborn over the effects of his movement on events in Europe and in the U.S. When we assess the history and future of cultural and anthropological studies at this museum, we must never forget this deep stain on the institution that persisted in its effects into the 1950's, when there were still displays showing an evolutionary progression of races from "apes to whites" as Stephen Jay Gould put it, in recalling Osborn's "Hall of the Age of Man" from his childhood. And we must never forget too the influence of Osborn and his AMNH Trustee protégé, Madison Grant, "the high priest" of American racism as Gunnar Myrdal put it; Grant's "The Passing of the Great Race" (1916) Hitler evidently described in a letter to Grant as "his bible" (Pierpont 2004). Thanks in no small part to Osborn, this atmosphere was alas not confined to Germany, and the Supreme Court in 1927 infamously approved sterilization for "unfit" citizens, a practice that remained in place (with variant justifications) on Indian Reservations for several decades. It is no coincidence that Boas' *Kultur und Rasse* was among the first books to be publicly burned in Germany in 1933.

It is impossible to imagine that AMNH could have promoted this line had Boas remained at the museum, and it is impossible to imagine him remaining under such auspices. And indeed we should be clear that the anthropology department evidently had little or no involvement with Osborn's program, with the peripheral exception of Clark Wissler.



[Robert Lowie and Margaret Mead. Source: Google images]

But in its continuing to hire Boas students like Robert Lowie (another vigorous opponent of eugenics) and Margaret Mead, this department can be seen to have stood in opposition to Osborn's racialist program. We must also proudly note that in the long run, if not the short term, Boas won the scientific argument. In her remarkable summary of Boas' life in *The New Yorker*, Claudia Roth Pierpont directly associates the Brown vs. Board of Education decision with the work of Boas and his students, with Thurgood Marshall directly drawing on the evidence of several of their studies in arguments before the court. "Angry segregationists" protesting the decision, according to Pierpont "decried the overpowering influence of the "Boas cult" and claimed that "the ghost of Boas" had served as a powerful tenth justice on the Court" (Pierpont 2004)

A secular Jew, Boas's roots in the ethical movement emerged from the commitments of several of his senior relatives to the social revolutions in Europe of 1848. As Douglas Cole has emphasized, Boas' uncle Abraham Jacobi, who became a famous New York City physician and medical activist for rights of children, had been an associate of Marx and Engels in the mid-century opposition to class tyrannies compounded by the industrial revolution. Jacobi served time in jail in Prussia, when the others escaped to America or Britain, later emigrating upon his release, and setting up an influential cadre of activists in New York City, including Carl Schurz, an advisor to Abraham Lincoln. In light of this powerful circle of influence, in which Boas became an integral figure, especially after taking up residence in New York, we should see his culturalism, his anti-racism, and anti-nazism, as all of one piece. They emerged from the combination of a deep-seated familial commitment to social justice and a long-term intellectual commitment to the debunking of pernicious social theories of difference, whether based on culture, race, or class.



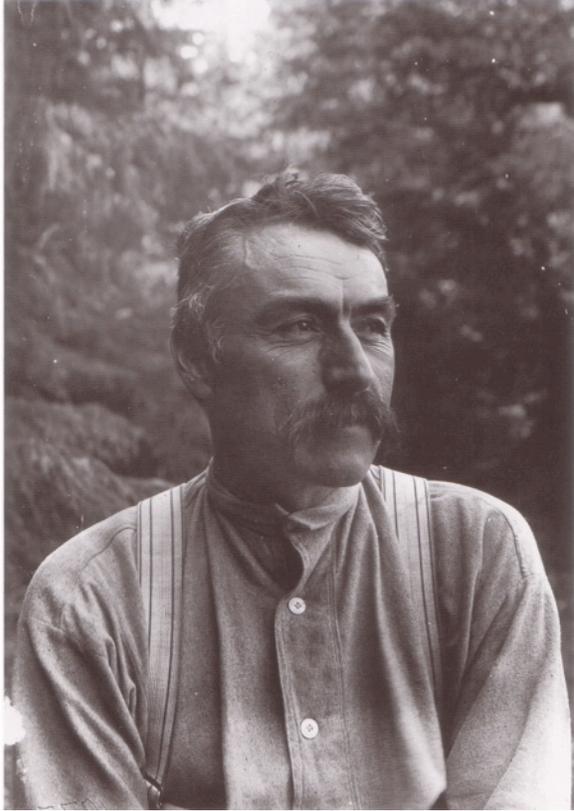
[Potlatch sponsored by Franz Boas at Fort Rupert, British Columbia, 1894. American Museum of Natural History]

Boas walked the walk in other ways too. His work on the Northwest Coast frequently involved intimate ties in Native communities where he was typically made to feel welcome. Boas supported Kwakwaka'wakw rights to engage in traditional cultural activities, sponsoring potlatches, like this one at Fort Rupert in 1894, even though they were against Canadian law by this time. His prodigious work recording aspects of traditional cultures and languages was scrupulously attentive to accuracy of detail, and remains extensively used by Native communities, scholars, and museums.



[Franz Boas, far right, with George Hunt, second from left, and family, 1894. Source Jonaitis 1991]

His lifelong collaborator on the Northwest Coast George Hunt was explicitly credited as co-author on a major work on Kwakiutl Texts (Boas and Hunt 1902), even though Hunt himself had very little formal education and no mastery of academic discourse.



[George Hunt, 1898, Fort Rupert. American Museum of Natural History]

Hunt was clearly Boas' ethnographic mentor and his intellectual partner, who vigorously pushed Boas to understand the intricacies of Native American philosophical thought and cultural practices. And Boas' commitment to the Hunt family continued into subsequent generations.



[Agnes Cranmer, George Hunt's granddaughter, and Franziska Boas, Franz Boas' daughter, at AMNH, 1986. Photo by Barbara Boas. Source: N. Boas 2004.]

In defiance of the Canadian Government's ban on the potlatch, Kwakwaka'wakw leader Dan Cranmer (whose wife Agnes was George Hunt's granddaughter; the Cranmers hosted Boas on his last visit to Alert Bay in 1931) sponsored a major potlatch in 1922. Government officials appeared to break it up: Cranmer was arrested and jailed, and the potlatch regalia was confiscated, ending up in museums and private collections in Canada and the U.S. for the next fifty years. Thanks to the relentless efforts of the Kwakwaka'wakw, including notably Cranmer's daughter and Hunt's great-granddaughter, Gloria Cranmer, the stolen treasures were repatriated to the U'Mista Cultural Center at Alert Bay in the 1970's (where they are still the principal subject of display in the U'Mista museum). Almost immediately after Dan Cranmer's jailing and the heavy-handed breaking up of the potlatch, Boas again wrote publicly to express his outrage. A few years later, Dan Cranmer spent much time with Boas in New York, staying at his home in New Jersey, and working on a dictionary of Kwakwaka. Similarly Boas collaborated directly with his Lakota student Ella Cara Deloria in her extended work on the Dakota language (e.g., Boas and Deloria 1941; cf. Boas bibliography in Kroeber et al 1943). And in the same vein, several of his other students who went onto notable careers within or on the margins of the anthropological discipline, but always with a public voice, included several women, Native Americans and African Americans, most notably Zora Neale Hurston, whose ethnographic research on southern Black and Haitian folklore directly informed her novels, now at last properly celebrated for their vital contribution to the canon of American letters.

The critique of anthropology that emerged especially in the 1980's has tended to caricature the ethnographic practice of disciplinary ancestors as an exploitative engagement. Nothing could be further from the truth in Boas's case. Ethnography, or any that is worth its salt anyway, is inherently a culturally hybrid practice that depends on mutual speaking and listening across boundaries of difference. That mutuality depends on the good faith of the ethnographer, and on the trust that develops for the beneficial preservation and dissemination of cultural ideas for posterity. That the ties between the Boas and Hunt families were anything but the caricature of colonial ethnographer and colonized informant is revealed in the long-term relationships of the Boas and Hunt families, that continue into the present. When Boas died in 1942, Dan Cranmer wrote to his daughter Helene:

“The sorrowful tidings of our deep affliction reached me today and, oh my dear Helene, if only sympathy were like waves of light, how the rays would pour from my heart to illumine the gloomy veil of grief which wraps you in its somber folds” [and he wrote that]... he would sing mourning songs at an upcoming potlatch and that the Kwakiutl Indians of Ft. Rupert had already sung mourning songs for Boas (N. Boas 2004).

In 1997, as she had on other joyful occasions reuniting Kwakwaka'wakw people with the American Museum of Natural History as in Chiefly Feasts, Gloria Cranmer, an influential Kwakwaka'wakw anthropologist in her own right, came to the American Museum of Natural History to celebrate the centenary of the Jesup expedition, organized among others by my colleague Laurel Kendall. Among her other remarks, many of which should serve as a caution to those who mindlessly condemn ethnological museums, their value for public knowledge, and for the history of ethnographic practice, she stated:

“We strengthen what is left of our culture after the white people did their best to destroy it. In that task we are more fortunate than most indigenous groups, because we have a strong foundation to build on and for that we owe much to Hi_dzaKwal's (Franz Boas) and Kixitasu' (George Hunt)...I wonder how many people whom other anthropologists have studied have the same feeling of respect and affection that our people had and still have for Franz Boas?” (N. Boas 2004).



[Gloria Cranmer and Norman Boas at Boas-Hunt family reunion, U'Mista Cultural Centre, Alert Bay, British Columbia, 1986. Source: N. Boas 2004]

This is Boas' legacy and still the profoundest personal example for the discipline of anthropology at large and for the work of cultural studies at the museum: 1) a paradigm shift in the understanding of human cultures that over time has transformed all global thought on the subject, 2) an explicitly collaborative record of Native American cultural and linguistic forms that in its range and depth is almost incredible, 3) a bottom-line commitment to human rights enacted in his own life and practice, 4) a fierce defense

of the sanctity of academic freedom to inquire and to speak out as a public intellectual, especially in his activist antipathy to the cant of racist argument, scientific and otherwise. Boas' anthropology, as that of many of his students, notably Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Ella Cara Deloria, Zora Neale Hurston, went against the grain of conventional wisdom and conventional practice, to produce a truly liberating discourse celebrating the varieties of the human condition that has now spread to all corners of the globe and multiple forms of social discourse. This did not come lightly or amid an atmosphere of benign indifference either in the museum or in the world at large. To the contrary, Boas had to fight, often alone, and fight he did. In the words of an obituary published by Albert Deutsch in the newspaper *PM* (12-22-1942) the day after he died:

In the death of Franz Boas yesterday the world lost one of its greatest men, science one of its outstanding leaders, mankind one of its best friends, democracy one of its staunchest defenders... Boas did prove, by incontestable scientific facts, the essential unity of all races and the fallacy of the myth that any particular race is inherently superior to others. He was the St. George of anthropology who destroyed the race-myth dragon forever, insofar as scientific validity is concerned. He represented the apotheosis of scientific integrity, following truth wherever it led, regardless of personal consequences. He fought fiercely and unceasingly for the cause of academic freedom, and led many a cause in behalf of colleagues whose positions were endangered because of their unpopular ideas.... Few men of our time have loved truth as passionately as did Boas. Few pursued it with such relentless courage. Few possessed that rare combination of scholarship, scientific achievement and democratic idealism that he represented (quoted in N. Boas 2004).

Few indeed, before or since. As engaged anthropologist, Boas' example is little short of awe-inspiring.

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