

# A Critical Paradigm for the Histories of Anthropology. The Generalization of Transportable Knowledge

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POUR CITER CET ARTICLE

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Cet essai est issu de la conférence inaugurale de la quatrième réunion du History of Anthropology Network (HOAN) de l'EASA, qui s'est tenue virtuellement le 18 novembre 2022.

We urgently need a critical paradigm for the histories of anthropology. [1] The old ones have not served us well. We must consider what 'critical' means in this context, not to criticize but to assess. I argue that in the first instance, it cannot be singular, or we will lose the possibility of generalization that enables us to compare and contrast instances that vary along multiple axes that do not always coincide. This is what I call 'transportable knowledge.'

The EASA's History of Anthropology Network (HOAN) is unique among the multiple and intersecting interdisciplinary networks with which I have been affiliated because it encompasses multiple scholarly audiences and publics in a way that specific organizations, institutions, and individuals cannot achieve because each vantage point is limited, despite an increasingly frequent commitment in principle to interdisciplinarity. I consider this an auspicious sign of the emerging opportunities opened up by the challenging and rapidly changing times in which we now live. The History of Anthropology Network is unique in that it is always already situated by its membership and structure to do this almost as a matter of course. I have said much of what follows previously in different venues and to different audiences, but my call for a new paradigm for the histories of anthropology comes together here around the concept of interdisciplinarity.

The history of anthropology burst upon the disciplinary scene as a specialization in the 1960s

with the seemingly revolutionary claim of intellectual historian George W. Stocking Jr. to be its proponent and gatekeeper, a role he clung to for five decades and transmitted to successive generations of Chicago anthropology students. Stocking drew a hegemonic disciplinary divide between the professional training and ethos of historians and anthropologists. Although he modified this binary formulation of historicism vs. presentism after he began to teach anthropology students, his 1968 manifesto *Race, Culture and Evolution* continues to be cited inaccurately with seeming unawareness of his later retrenchment. Stocking's history of anthropology series (HOA) at the University of Wisconsin) from 1983 to 1996 ended in 2010 with his retrospective and somewhat self-indulgent autobiography.

The Press website observes laconically: "This series is complete." [2] The bald statement seems to suggest that the history of anthropology exists only or mostly through Stocking as its founding figure and the series he developed at the University of Wisconsin. The entailed singularity is unacceptable today. That is why I insist, along with the History of Anthropology Network, that adequate histories can only exist in their plurality.

Each generation must revisit and reassess the meaning of history of anthropology in light of the assumptions and attitudes of its own generation, an iterative process that will continue indefinitely into the future. Stocking's in the 1960s is the first of such assessments that I have witnessed for five decades plus as a practicing historian of anthropology. Such cycles seem to run at roughly ten-year intervals. I returned to these issues in its next phase in the 1990s as Stocking was reevaluating his own career and attending to his legacy, a pastime to which many scholars turn as the end of their life looms with increasing immediacy. In the 2020s, I find myself doing likewise, although there is also substantial continuity to the work that I began so long ago.

In contrast to Stocking, I ground history of anthropology as an anthropological problem. A new paradigm must encompass real-world outcomes that are unpredictable in advance. Stocking's method depended on his ability to define how things came to be as they are relative to a known endpoint, a contention that I reject (see Darnell 2010). Closure as a precondition for 'objective' analysis reflects the positivism of his 1950s training and perhaps his flirtation with a particularly rigid form of Marxism in his prior career as a Communist Party organizer.

If moral judgment in the face of need to act is a fundamental imperative for the historian of anthropology, then we must jettison the historian's distanced approach. Despite good faith judgments that have proven less than ideal in hindsight, moral questions are rarely black and white. They force incommensurable choices of bad or worse, good or better. Historical research is useful only insofar as it guides response to the unique dilemmas of each age. 'Complete' closure is both impossible and undesirable. To judge the past by the standards of the present (Stocking's notion of 'presentism') does violence to both the facts and the moral caliber of those who weight them. Such a model makes the unjustified assumption that history is a singularity and perhaps even a linear trajectory. In such a model, we have to

know the outcome to access how it came to be so among the multiple outcomes that might have seemed possible at the time of an event.

An alternative to this inadequate epistemological stance even for the realities of the 1960s clears the way for an anthropologically based historicism celebrating the multiple potentials inherent in our own seminal moment in 2022.

Fieldwork predisposes anthropologists to privilege the complex intersection of variables transferable from one case to another. My own scholarship, based in fieldwork and archive, both in collaboration with Indigenous communities as source and primary end-users of the documentary recovery that supports cultural and linguistic revitalization, focuses on the Americanist tradition that emerged around the work of Franz Boas, Edward Sapir and others. I argue that the use of 'American anthropology' as a cover term for the Boasian tradition does not apply across the four subdisciplines as they are usually defined in North America. 'Americanist,' in contrast, facilitated the contributions of Boas, including the oscillation between North American and his native Germany that persisted to the end of his life. Both Boas and Sapir provide prescient models for an updated history of anthropology.

As general editor of a documentary edition of the Franz Boas professional papers for more than a decade now, I have supervised an unruly team of volume editors who collectively encompass the range of Boas's engagements beyond the experience of any single scholar. *The Franz Boas Papers, Volume 1: Franz Boas as Public Intellectual-Theory, Ethnography, Activism* in 2015 reports on a conference held in London, Ontario in 2012 to assess the impact of the Boas professional papers. The contributors served as an initial planning group for the documentary edition and initiated a fluidly evolving process of revisionist assessment for the history of anthropology that continues to the present day. A partnership grant to myself and the University of Western Ontario supported the collaboration of the American Philosophical Society and its library where the Boas papers are housed. The Society as a whole is committed to maintaining the Boasian legacy even though it is divergent from contemporary practice because Boas is remembered there as the founder of Americanist anthropology, and it is acknowledged that the Boas papers formed the initial core of the Society's collections. The Centre for Native American and Indigenous Research and the commitment of its archivist Brian Carpenter continue to sustain these initiatives today.

The University of Nebraska Press will publish and market the completed volumes. Then senior acquisitions editor Matthew Bokovoy proposed a critical edition of the Boas papers to me at the time of his appointment in 2008 and continues to work tirelessly alongside the research team to obtain funding and create a seminal resource for the social sciences and Indigenous communities. Canadian universities in three provinces across the country are associated with the Boas papers project: the University of British Columbia in Vancouver and the University of Victoria on Vancouver Island, where a strong program has emerged under the leadership of Metis scholar Robert L.A. Hancock in the Office of Indigenous Affairs, the Department of Anthropology, and in partnership with the Musgaamagw Dzawada'eneuxw Tribal Council; and the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario, where I have held

an appointment since 1990.

The value of a documentary edition is that it presents its documents in the words of Boas and his contemporaries. This kind of collaboration works as long as they can talk to each other. The results have been mixed, chaotic, rhizomatic, and incomplete. I am particularly fond of the 'Arbor vs. Rhizome' contrast posed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in 1986; it captures for me the rigidity of literal meaning in a branching tree that cannot escape the modes of its branches as opposed to the non-linear fluidity of rhizomatic roots that enter from any point germane to the question at hand. Metaphors pose a rich contrast between literal and figurative meanings; the former is static and the latter resonant with potentialities and permutations that challenge the hearer to focus on the dimensions that the poles of metaphor have in common and their consequences for action in the world beyond the text.

Boas's paradigm statement, *The Mind of Primitive Man* in 1911, was revised in 1938 with virtually no change in argument. Its importance resonates across multiple dimensions. I offer several caveats:

The 'primitive' and 'man' in Boas's title were not pejorative in his lifetime. Lest we commit what I have called 'assassination by anachronism,' we should understand that the catchy title was designed to capture the attention of curious readers. Titles matter. They show up in citation indexes that will only be searched if they are remembered. We must consider the argument Boas actually made. Contemporary scholars sadly often cite a single source at one point in time, usually that of its original formulation. This fails to capture changes in a scholar's position over a lifetime.

Boas's anthropometric studies for the 1910 U.S. Census demonstrated plasticity of biological types ('Races') in a single generation. 'Race,' therefore, could not be the cause of human diversity. The alternative of 'racism' did not exist at the time he wrote, although it is associated with what his students later called cultural relativism. He transposed 'plasticity' to the unique intersection of culture, environment and history in each ethnographic case. His method moves analogically from biology to culture. He proceeds from the most rigorous to the least; the distinction is binary here, but by *Race, Language and Culture* in 1940, a compilation of his collected papers at the end of his life, the three options offer alternative combinations and entry points.

By training, Boas was a physical anthropologist who liked statistics and counting things. But the gaps in the binary classification forced themselves to his attention and intellectual integrity required him to reformulate his position in response.

The 1938 edition of *The Mind of Primitive Man* substitutes anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany in the second edition in 1938 for 'race in America' in 1911 as the target of his claim for the universal capacity of the human mind and the consequent challenge to ameliorate the myriad social causes of injustice. Science provided Boas with an empirical standard that aimed for

an objectivity never fully or finally attainable. The rest of his chapter is virtually unchanged. It is an exercise in cross-cultural defamiliarization, an application of ethnographic method to shake loose what he called 'the shackles of tradition.' Boas exhorts his fellow citizens to embrace critical thought. His argument is targeted to general as well as academic audiences and publics. He argues that anthropology is the best starting point because it is predisposed to seek alternative points of view, presumably as a result of fieldwork and contact it brought with real-world users and the consequences of their actions.

The potential for transportability across cases is why *The Mind of Primitive Man* still provides a model of how to think like an anthropologist. Boas's fundamental break with the deeply entrenched ethnocentrism of his own society cleared a space to expand the capacity for civilization to the claims of any so-called 'others' that might capture the focus of disciplinary or public attention.

In contrast, Edward Sapir's model for an open-ended humanism compatible with science also merits revisiting to note its complexity. Sapir and Boas were not as different as they seem on the surface. An administrative role taken on to facilitate valuable work requires a different persona than the open-ended one that was emerging in Sapir's work as well as in Boas's. "Culture, Genuine and Spurious," written in the 1920s, attributed higher value to the self-fulfilling life of the Nuu-Chah-Nulth fisherman (whom he called Nootka in the terminology used at the time he wrote) as opposed to the stultifying routine of the female telephone operator in his own society. The argument transposes easily to gender, where Sapir is undeniably open to contemporary criticism, an unrecognized and thus unacknowledged bias.

Our disciplinary forbears had feet of clay. They were not immune to the blinders of their own age and often said things that today seem dumb, wrong-headed, and downright mistaken. Sometimes they were right according to contemporary standards for the wrong reasons. Nonetheless, warts and all, I submit that it makes no sense to throw out the baby of analytic tools we can apply to contemporary decisions, with the bathwater. To do otherwise, makes neither good science nor good history of anthropology. It fails to apply the insights of our characteristic practice as anthropologists to changing the world around us. It is a two-stage process of accepting what the documents say at face value before evaluating them, the same process Boas himself employed in practice.

The disciplines of anthropology, history, Indigenous studies, and public discourse all engage productive approaches to the history of anthropology. But they are limited by the perspectives of each situated discipline. The diversity within each does not bring in external interlocutors. Interdisciplinarity leads my own list and poses the problematic of this talk.

Museums, libraries and archives are all repositories of documentation, each with its own standpoint that it is difficult if not impossible to transcend. Recent trends to open public meeting spaces within these institutions, however, replicate the rhizomatic strategy I have been advocating. Interdisciplinarity is the sine qua non.

Intergenerational trauma has resulted from residential school loss of language, culture, and access to traditional pedagogy in oral tradition. I adopt Indigenous protocols that do not polarize positions within and across communities but bridge them by seeking consensus and adapting to the needs of multiple partners. The dialogue spans the scales of Canadian federation, nationhood in Quebec, and aims to reinforce a shared sense of the public good.

Canadian, American, British, French, German, and other national traditions intersect in a global economy of connection. Global and local cannot be disaggregated. They are sides of the same coin, and we must toggle between them to gain a full picture of how they intersect and enrich one another. This is why, for me, interdisciplinarity is the missing term that enables a new critical paradigm. I thank the History of Anthropology Network for its support of this position and for the opportunity to present my views on the urgent need of a critical paradigm for the histories of anthropology.

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[1] Regna Darnell, Christine Laurière and Frederico Delgado Rosa wish to thank HOAN convenors Fabiana Dimpflmeier and Hande Birkalan-Gedik for their kind support to the publication of this keynote address



in *BEROSE International Encyclopaedia of the Histories of Anthropology*. The video-recording of Regna Darnell's lecture is available on the [HOAN Meetings](#) webpage.

[2] <https://uwpress.wisc.edu/series/anthropology-history.html>