

RECONCILING ISSUES OF TIME-PAST AND TIME-PRESENT IN NEW WORKS OF BC ETHNOGRAPHY

A Review Essay

WENDY WICKWIRE

*Indian Myths & Legends From the North Pacific Coast of America:
A Translation of Franz Boas' 1895 Edition of
Indianische Sagen von der Nord-Pacifischen Kuste Amerikas*

RANDY BOUCHARD AND DOROTHY KENNEDY, EDITORS

Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2002, 702 pp. Illus. \$65.00 cloth

*Gateways: Exploring the Legacy of the
Jesup North Pacific Expedition, 1897-1902*

IGOR KRUPNIK AND WILLIAM W. FITZHUGH, EDITORS

Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 2001. 335 pp. Illus. us\$22.50 paper

*Q'sapi: A History of Okanagan People
as Told by Okanagan Families*

SHIRLEY LOUIS, EDITOR

Penticton: Theytus Books, 2002. 262 pp. Illus. \$24.95 paper

DURING THE "MUSEUM AGE" (1880-1920), British Columbia became a popular destination for ethnologists, curators, curio collectors and others. Anthropologist Franz Boas (1858-1942) established the parameters for much of this work. Concerned that the indigenous cultures of the region could not survive the onslaught of westernization, Boas initiated a rigorous research programme focused on fieldwork as an urgent rescue mission. As he stated in 1889, "we have to seek [the Indian] out in his own country where he lives according to his own customs, not

influenced by European customs."¹ Boas viewed the published monograph as a key to cultural preservation. Armed with sufficient field data, he was confident that he could produce textual portraits of the traditional cultures that could outlive those cultures. That his so-called "informants" were "dockworkers, craftsmen,

¹ Ronald P. Rohner and Evelyn C. Rohner, "Franz Boas and the Development of North American Ethnology and Ethnography," in *The Ethnography of Franz Boas: Letters and Diaries of Franz Boas Written on the Northwest Coast From 1886 to 1931*, Ronald P. Rohner, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 6.

fish venders, washerwomen, [and] worker women”² many generations removed from his imagined pristine contact point did not deter him. In just a few decades, Boas and his associates produced thousands of pages of written text framed against the backdrop of an idealized “golden age past.”³

Problems associated with such temporal distancing came sharply into focus with the publication in 1969 of Boas’s field letters and diaries⁴, which depicted a living cultural landscape that was non-existent in his monographs. From the late 1980s on, scholars such as James Clifford, David Murray, Michael Harkin and others⁵ began to draw this and related issues into their larger poststructuralist project. The Boasian ethnographic archive, they argued, was a cultural representation that needed to be analyzed as a set of interlocking discourses serving

particular ideological functions within the larger society.

Against this backdrop, I shall review three new ethnographic works. The first, *Indian Myths and Legends from the North Pacific Coast of America*, features 250 oral narratives collected by Boas during his earliest fieldtrips to BC in the 1880s.⁶ On discovering that these stories were available only in obscure nineteenth century German sources, most notably, *Indianische Sagen von der Nord-Pacifischen Küste Amerikas*,⁷ Victoria-based ethnographers Randy Bouchard and Dorothy Kennedy embarked on a project to re-issue them in English. After overseeing the translation of the stories by their colleague, Dietrich Bertz, they inserted annotated footnotes and an Introduction and published the original text under a new English title with a Foreword by anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss.

² *Ibid.*, 5-6.

³ For a listing of the major works, see Igor Krupnik, “A Jesup Bibliography: Tracking the Published and Archival Legacy of the Jesup Expedition,” in *Gateways: Exploring the Legacy of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition, 1897-1902*, eds. Igor Krupnik and William W. Fitzhugh, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 2001), 297-316.

⁴ Rohnner, 1969.

⁵ See, for example, the following: James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); David Murray, *Forked Tongues: Speech, Writing and Representation in North American Indian Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Michael Harkin, “Past Presence: Conceptions of History in Northwest Coast Studies,” *Arctic Anthropology* 33, 2 (1996) 1-15; Michael Harkin, “(Dis)pleasures of the Text: Boasian Ethnology on the Central Northwest Coast,” in *Gateways: Exploring the Legacy of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition, 1897-1902*, eds. Igor Krupnik and William W. Fitzhugh, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 2001), 93-105; Charles Briggs and Richard Bauman, “The Foundation of

All Future Researches’: Franz Boas, George Hunt, Native American Texts, and the Construction of Modernity,” *American Quarterly* 51, 3 (1999): 479-527; Judith Berman, “The Culture As It Appears to the Indian Himself’: Boas, George Hunt, and the Methods of Ethnography,” in *Volkgeist as Method and Ethic: Essays on Boasian Ethnography and the German Anthropological Tradition*, George W. Stocking, Jr., (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 215-56; Arnold Krupat, *Ethnocriticism: Ethnography, History, Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Michael Elliott, *The Culture Concept: Writing and Difference in the Age of Realism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Rosalind Morris, *New Worlds from Fragments: Film Ethnography, and the Representation of Northwest Coast Cultures* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994); Christopher Bracken, *The Potlatch Papers: A Colonial Case Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

⁶ Edited and Annotated by Randy Bouchard and Dorothy Kennedy (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2002).

⁷ Berlin: Verlag von A. Asher & Co., 1895.

Drawing on a reviewer's comment that "the publication of *Indian Myths and Legends* is almost equivalent to the discovery of a group of hundred-and-fifty-year-olds from these Native groups, all in full possession of their faculties and anxious to share their knowledge with anthropologists,"⁸ the editors emphasize the notion of ethnographic discovery associated with their publication project.⁹ The texts, they argue, had been "neglected far too long."¹⁰ Claude Lévi-Strauss reinforces this point in his Foreword. *Indian Myths*, he writes, is "one of the richest collections of mythological texts available for the whole of the American continent." [It is] "a true epitome of the mythology of the Pacific Coast and part of the interior."¹¹

And indeed, the English translation of *Indianische Sagen* should be celebrated as a timely and important contribution to the ethnography of Aboriginal British Columbia. With their established record of ethnographic fieldwork and archival research, Bouchard and Kennedy add a rich perspective to the stories featured in this collection. They compensate for the paucity of contextual detail in the original volume by including detailed commentary in their annotated footnotes, explaining everything from the meanings of various Aboriginal terms used in the stories to the particular circumstances of the gathering of the stories.

⁸ "Acknowledgements," *Indian Myths*, 17.

⁹ This is not a new strategy. British Columbia poet, Robert Bringhurst, has been successfully marketing his re-issues of Boasian anthropologist John Swanton's collections of Haida material under the banner of ethnographic "discovery" since the publication of *A Story as Sharp as a Knife: The Classical Haida Mythtellers and Their World* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre and Lincoln: University of Nebraska) in 1999.

¹⁰ "Introduction," 41.

¹¹ "Foreword," *Indian Myths*, 11-12.

Their perspective on Boas is refreshingly balanced. They portray the "father of American Anthropology" at the outset of his career as a "frenzied," "relatively inexperienced" twenty-eight-year-old with limited financial resources who moved so quickly from place to place that he had hardly a minute for reflection. They also help us understand the complex communicatory exchange between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in British Columbia in the 1880s, for example, the disadvantages of conducting field research in Chinook Jargon, a trading language. Bouchard and Kennedy draw on Boas's letter-diary of September 29th, 1886 to underscore the problem: "It is characteristic of Chinook," noted Boas, "that one must guess the meaning of a sentence; one never knows what is subject and what is object. Even verbs and nouns can often not be distinguished, and one has to be very alert in listening to their mythological tales."¹² Knowing these details aids greatly in assessing the value of the 1895 collection.

There are some oversights, however. Although the editors incorporate a rich body of empirical detail, drawn mainly from Boas's diaries and their own fieldnotes, they neglect to link their discussion to established theoretical debates on Boas, some of which deal specifically with the latter's work on oral narratives.¹³ David Murray, for example, explores issues of power and language associated with text-making in the Boasian era. His efforts to track the "the ideological investments in the idea of translation, its ease, or its impossibility" and "the rhetorical strategies in the making of ethnographic texts" have direct applications to Boas's *Indianische Sagen* project.¹⁴ Charles Briggs

¹² "Introduction," *Indian Myths*, 24.

¹³ See footnote #5.

¹⁴ Murray, *Forked Tongues: Speech, Writing and Representation in North American Indian Texts*, 3-4.

and Richard Bauman focus on related issues in Boas's ethnographic project, for example "the role of language ideologies – representations of the nature of language, communication, speech, and the like – and of what we call meta-discursive practices – techniques for regulating the production, circulation, and reception of discourse – in the making of modernity."¹⁵ Given the extent to which this theoretical literature, now more than a decade old, has influenced the way many scholars now approach Boasian ethnography, it is mandatory for any current discussion of Boas's narrative collections to include it.

Consider the following: to illustrate the "authenticity of the stories gathered in the field," in particular Boas's success in negotiating positive ethnographic exchanges with his Aboriginal "informants," Bouchard and Kennedy draw on Boas's descriptions of his dealings with the Hope Island Nahwitti community in 1886. "Working conditions," note Bouchard and Kennedy, "were obviously good at Nahwitti on Hope Island, for Boas was to write soon after his arrival that 'everyone is most anxious to tell me something.'"¹⁶ One individual told Boas that "since he was a 'chief' from a distant land, a dance would be held to celebrate his visit."¹⁷

With its focus on the unequal power relations in sites of early cultural encounter, the new theory demands more critical readings of original texts. In the case of the Hope Island Nahwitti, the full text suggests a very different interpretation than that provided in the snippets given by Bouchard and Kennedy. That Boas was able to collect in this

community "two long stories" from two "big chiefs" that he had "been looking for some time" may not necessarily be the result of villagers having understood his intentions, as Bouchard and Kennedy suggest, but rather the opposite. They may have complied because they *misunderstood* his objectives.

On attending a potlatch at Nahwitti in 1886, Boas was eagerly listening to speeches when suddenly he noticed that *he* "had become the subject of their speeches":

But naturally I had no idea what they wanted. At last they sent a young man who had been in Victoria for some time to interpret for me. I must add that the natives were not too clear about why I was there and what I wanted and that they were making all kinds of conjectures. At first they thought I was a priest, and now, because I had bought nothing, they thought I might be a government agent come to put a stop to the festival.... The agent said he would send a gunboat if they did not obey, but they did not believe him and were not going to pay attention to the warning.

Whether I wanted to or not I had to make a speech. So I arose and said: "My country is far from yours, much further even than that of the Queen. The commands of the Queen do not affect me. I am a chief and no one may command me. I alone determine what I am to do." (I was introduced as a chief as soon as I arrived here and am so introduced wherever I go.).... "My people live far away and would like to know what people in distant lands do, and so I set out. I was

¹⁵ Briggs and Bauman, "The Foundation of All Future Researches": Franz Boas, George Hunt, Native American Texts, and the Construction of Modernity," 481.

¹⁶ "Introduction," in *Indian Myths*, 26–27.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

in warm lands and cold lands. I saw many different people and told them at home how they live. And they said to me, 'Go and see what the people in this land do.' And so I went and I came here and I saw you eat and drink, sing and dance. And I shall go back and say: 'See? That is how the people there live. They were good to me and asked me to live with them.'" This beautiful speech, which fits in with their style of storytelling, was translated and caused great joy.... They mistook me for a very important personage and demanded a written statement from me that no gunboat would be sent. So I had to explain to them that the Queen was somewhat more powerful than I, but I promised to say that I liked to see them sing and dance.¹⁸

This segment from Boas's letter-diary in which he reflects on how the Aboriginal peoples were responding to his requests conveys the sense of fear and ambiguity that the latter felt toward Boas as an outsider.

To illustrate Boas's efforts to remunerate his storytellers, Bouchard and Kennedy present the latter's description of an exchange between Boas and Chief Joseph of the Squamish Mission Indian Reserve at North Vancouver.¹⁹ This example could be used to support the Nahwitti example above concerning the ambivalence some individuals felt about their roles as ethnographic "informants." Boas noted that the chief agreed to tell stories only on condition that he deliver a message to Queen Victoria on his next

trip to London. Boas described the exchange as follows in his June 2, 1888 diary entry:

Then we had the following conversation. "Who sent you here?" "I have come to see the Indians and to tell the white people about them." "Do you come from the Queen's Country?" "No, I am from another country." "Will you go to the Queen's Country?" "Perhaps." "Good, when you get there go to the Queen and tell her this. Now write down what I say."²⁰

Chief Joseph then told Boas about three men who came to make treaties on behalf of the Queen. "This has made our hearts sad and we are angry at the three men. But the Queen does not know this. We are not angry at her. God gave this land to my ancestors and it is not right that the three men take it." Joseph asked Boas to read back what he had said. Boas noted that he "stayed there until five in the evening and found out a lot of what I needed to know."²¹

Both the Squamish and the Nahwitti exchanges depict a collector-storyteller relationship that was much more complex than "a group of hundred-and-fifty-year-olds from these Native groups ... anxious to share their knowledge with anthropologists." The Introduction could have done much more to elucidate this complexity for its readers.

Two years after the publication of his *Indianische Sagen*, Franz Boas launched his Jesup North Pacific Expedition under the auspices of the American Museum of Natural History. His goal was to salvage ethnological and linguistic information from indigenous

¹⁸ Boas, "Letter-Diary, 7 October 1886," in *The Ethnography of Franz Boas*, Rohner, 33-4.

¹⁹ "Introduction," *Indian Legends*, 27.

²⁰ Boas, "Letter-Diary, 2 June 1888," in *The Ethnography of Franz Boas*, Rohner, 86.

²¹ *Ibid.*

peoples on both sides of the Bering Strait. A new book, *Gateways: Exploring the Legacy of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition, 1897–1902*, co-edited by Igor Krupnik and William Fitzhugh, curators at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C. draws on prominent academics and museum curators throughout North America and Russia to cover a broad range of topics, for example, historical overviews of the Expedition (Douglas Cole and Nikolai Vakhtin), assessments of the contributions of some of the key participants (Michal Harkin, Barbara Mathé, Thomas Miller, Brian Thom, and Judith Berman), and a review of the major Jesup collections (Sergei Kan, Steven Ousley, Richard Jantz, Richard Keeling, Igor Krupnik and Paula Willey).

The volume is particularly important for highlighting a feature of Boas's scholarship that is little known: his scholarly pursuits beyond Aboriginal North America. Essays by Nikolai Vakhtin and Sergei Kan on the Siberian component of the Jesup Expedition address this issue. Barbara Mathé, Thomas Miller and Paula Willey cover photographic and musicological work in both North American and Russian contexts. Several essays focus on individual Jesup researchers, for example, Judith Berman's essay on George Hunt, Brian Thom's essay on Harlan Smith, and Sergei Kan's essay on Lev Shternberg in Russia. The volume is an ideal research tool, providing overviews of large segments of the Jesup archive. Berman covers the Hunt-Boas collection; Keeling covers the song collections; and Willey reviews the photographic records.

Michael Harkin's essay, "(Dis)pleasures of the Text: Boasian Ethnology on the Central Northwest Coast," provides the critical theoretical context for Boas that is missing in Bouchard and Kennedy's new book. Harkin analyzes Boas's "textualism"

as "a strategy designed to quarantine the object from lived reality."²² His key concern is the suppression of "the role of the anthropologist in eliciting the texts, and the role of the narrator in creating and performing them." Harkin also highlights the effects of denying "the role of translation, both cultural and linguistic."²³

The absence of "lived reality" in the Boasian monographs may account for the relative lack of Aboriginal interest in them over the years. When the monographs were first released, few Aboriginal peoples possessed the English language skills necessary to access such literary works. But even as Aboriginal people became fluent in English, they continued to ignore the large ethnographic archive, preferring instead to engage in social commentary through other literary genres, most notably, fiction.²⁴

Q'sapi: A History of Okanagan People as Told by Okanagan Families by Okanagan writer, Shirley Louis, is a striking exception to this pattern.²⁵ An oral his-

²² Ibid., 98.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ See, for example, Jeannette Armstrong, *Slash* (Penticton: Theytus Books, 1985) and *Whispering Shadows: A Novel* (Penticton: Theytus Books, 2000). See also Lee Maracle, *I am Woman* (Vancouver: Write-on Press Publishers, 1988); and *Ravensong* (Penticton: Theytus Books, 1992); Eden Robinson, *Monkey Beach* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2000); and Shirley Sterling, *My Name is Seepetza* (Vancouver: Groundwood Books, 1992).

²⁵ There are other exceptions. Historian Keith Carlson is coordinating similar community research among the Stó:lō in the Fraser Valley. See Keith Thor Carlson, editor, *You are Asked to Witness: The Stó:lō in Canada's Pacific Coast History*. Chilliwack: Stó:lō Heritage Trust, 1997; Keith Thor Carlson, editor, *A Stó:lō Coast Salish Historical Atlas* (Chilliwack, Vancouver and Seattle: Douglas & McIntyre, University of Washington and the Stó:lō Heritage Trust, 2001).

tory of the Head of the Lake Okanagan, this book could not be further removed from the Boasian model. As a community member, Arnie Louis explains:

Q'sapi is a book about renewal. It is the re-birth of a First Nations community's identity. It is about making right a wrong that has plagued this country since colonization. It is an exercise of re-uniting families. It is an education of a people's history and the stories associated with that history. More importantly, it is about how the printed word can come alive and demonstrate the memories of Elders, and the usage of language and how language and culture changed. Lastly, it is a book about photographs and how pictures, inter-connected with words, become alive and real to be absorbed and to be remembered.²⁶

Although *Q'sapi's* author, Shirley Louis, occasionally invokes the official historical and ethnographic record for the Head of the Lake Okanagan, she relies mainly on her elders' stories. The result is a rare community perspective. As contributor Ned Louis explains: "The history of our people and the names of the places need to be written for our kids. It's just like the white people call the road on the west side, the Hudson's Bay Brigade Trail and claim that all the names of the places from here to Kamloops were given names by the whites, but actually these places had Native names long before the White man came here. Our ancestors lived at these places ... The Kalamalka Hotel is built right where Billy Swalwel's uncle's teepee was."²⁷ Much of the information

is drawn from inside sources, such as the Abel family's "death book," a hand-written accounting of all of the deaths on the Reserve.²⁸

Visuals are key. The hundreds of photographs of Okanagan soldiers in military attire, of Okanagan baseball teams, boxing clubs, formal family portraits, wedding and funeral gatherings stand in stark contrast to the stock ethnographic photographs of un-named "Indians" in traditional attire that we commonly associate with Aboriginal peoples from the region.²⁹ Shirley Louis's interviews bring these new photographs to life. Lavina Lum's description of her photo taken just before she was sent to the residential school in Kamloops is typical:

We were sittin' down eatin' when the police and Indian Agent come. My mom (Annie) braids my hair all the time and in that picture my hair is loose and I didn't like it ... In this picture it's not my own dress. I was mad because they put that dress on me and undone my hair. I was really mad. You can see that! ... You see my sister she was happy because I was there. Then later that day they put us on a train for Kamloops and I cried just about all the way 'cause they took me away from my mom and dad.... When we got there them nuns cut my hair and that really, really hurt me.³⁰

²⁸ Ibid., 60

²⁹ For critical commentary on such ethnographic photography, see Gloria Jean Frank, "That's My Dinner on Display": A First Nations Reflection on Museum Culture," in Wendy Wickwire, editor, "Ethnographic Eyes," *BC Studies* 125/126, Spring/Summer 2000: 163-78.

³⁰ Ibid., 30

²⁶ *Q'sapi*, 9.

²⁷ Ibid., 14

Viewed together, these three new books on British Columbia ethnography are key to understanding the extent to which Aboriginal peoples have been denied their place in the larger history of the region. From Franz Boas at the turn of the century to Claude Lévi-Strauss more recently, Native North Americans have been classified as peoples with no significant history and relegated to a realm of mythic timelessness. As historian Richard White expresses it within the context of his own discipline: "living Native Americans become invisible [and] dead Native

Americans become visible without becoming historical."³¹ With its verbatim accounts of contemporary family stories, genealogical charts and photographs presented explicitly to confront the colonialism that fragmented kinship lines and eroded the sense of personal and community identity, *Q'sapi* makes a clear break from what some refer to as the "hegemony" of the Boasian anthropological tradition.³² It is bound to serve as an inspiration to other Aboriginal communities seeking outlets for such cultural expression.

³¹ Richard White, "Using the Past: History and Native American Studies," in *Studying Native America: Problems and Prospects*, Russell Thornton, ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 218.

³² Michael Harkin, "Past Presence: Conceptions of History in Northwest Coast Studies," *Arctic Anthropology* 33 (2), 1996: 3.