

His Own Best Narrator

Franz Boas and the *Kwakiutl Tales*

In the last ten years or so, ethnography has become an increasingly self-conscious discipline. Anthropologists express a keen awareness of the problematic dynamics of cultural appropriation within their work, and have begun to pay much closer attention to the part played in this dynamic by the act of writing itself. They have come to recognize themselves as authors, and thus as agents within their own texts. The problem of subjectivity in ethnographic material has been acknowledged since the emergence of anthropology as an academic discipline, but it is only recently that the anthropological observer has been understood as a rhetorical construction, and not simply a misleading “outside” presence to be filtered away. The question of authorship, as Clifford Geertz points out in 1987, is “not usually acknowledged as a narratological issue, a matter of how best to get an honest story honestly told, but as an epistemological one, a matter of how to prevent subjective views from colouring objective facts” (9). The ethnographer’s task, for Geertz, has become not simply a matter of pretending to an impossible objectivity or transparency, but instead a matter of discovering how such self-representations and cultural blurrings necessarily occur:

Getting themselves into their text (that is, representatively into their text) may be as difficult for ethnographers as getting themselves into the culture (that is, imaginatively into the culture). . . . But in one way or another, however unreflectively and with whatever misgivings about the propriety of it all, ethnographers all manage to do it. There are some very dull books in anthropology, but few if any anonymous murmurs. (17)

Writing, even writing which aims to withdraw from any sense of “signature” or subjectivity, by its nature constructs an authorial presence, and it is particularly crucial to attend critically to this presence in ethnographic discourse which is concerned with the analysis and interpretation of other cultural discourses. “No longer a marginal, or occulted, dimension,” James Clifford writes in 1986, “writing has emerged as central to what anthropologists do both in the field and thereafter” (2).

Alongside Malinowski and Lévi-Strauss, Geertz cites Franz Boas as one of the “founders of discursivity” in anthropology, a man whose name comes to “set the terms of discourse in which others thereafter move” (19). James Clifford calls Boas the “last virtuoso” of a coherent anthropology, apparently untroubled by such discursive concerns (4). Little attention has been paid in assessments of Boas’s work to the role played by his discourse in shaping his conception of anthropology, a conception which lies at the root of much contemporary ethnographic practice. But his own discourse occupies a crucial and fundamental position in his examinations of other cultures. To engage Boas’s rhetoric of self-representation is to challenge, in part, claims of objectivity and strategies of cultural appropriation not simply as epistemological quandaries, but as issues of anthropological discourse itself. Boas’s work on the Kwakwaka’wakw (formerly Kwakiutl) culture of Northwestern British Columbia occupies a particularly prominent position in his *oeuvre*, and the discursive strategies which Boas employs in that work evidence his own authorship or “signature” as much as they explain anything of Kwakwaka’wakw life. His *Kwakiutl Tales*, published in two bilingual series as one of his crowning achievements in cultural recuperation and analysis, are not merely narratives translated from their Native originals so that they may be more clearly understood and assimilated by curious anthropologists; they are narratives of this anthropological process of discovery and disclosure, and their “scientific” discourse, rather than offering some sort of an objective stance for Boas, provides a means by which he constructs himself figuratively as the protagonist, the hero, of his own anthropological texts.

Much of the critical rhetoric surrounding Franz Boas and his work stresses indebtedness. He is regarded as “the most important single force in shaping American anthropology in the first half of the twentieth century” (Stocking 1). Claude Lévi-Strauss, in a 1980 interview for a

television documentary on Boas, credits him with being one of the last intellectual giants of the nineteenth century, who set in motion all the diverse currents of contemporary anthropology and whose like will not be seen again; he repeats this same praise in his “conversations” with Didier Eribon, and affirms that “all of American anthropology issued from him” (36). Marshall Hyatt, in his recent biography, argues that Boas’s life and thought had “a profound impact on many diverse elements of American society,” and is keen to stress his pioneering work on race, particularly with regard to black studies, and his political and social activism:

As an intellectual, Boas attacked the misusers of science who promulgated theories of racial inferiority based on alleged mental differences between ethnic groups. As a scientist, he directed the professionalization of the field of anthropology, overseeing its evolution from an amateur hobby to its maturity as a rigorous academic discipline. As a social activist, he strove to eradicate prejudice and bigotry from American society, in an effort to ensure the promise of American democracy was articulated in reality and practice. (x)

Boas is widely credited with a sense of egalitarianism and of ethno-cultural relativity, a sensitivity to the nature of difference and otherness which informs most anthropological practice. In actively campaigning against ethnocentrism, Boas gives rise to a certain cult of himself as an anthropological hero, a seeker of justice and liberty, a man of truth.

In a 1990 special issue of *Canadian Literature* on Native writing, Robert Bringhurst describes Boas as “a kind of midwife” at the creation of a written literature for West Coast Native peoples, and credits his publications of Tsimshian and Kwakwaka’wakw texts with the salvation of West Coast native cultures:

To Boas and to other scholars whom he provoked, promoted and funded, we owe most of our knowledge of Northwest Coast mythology: the most coherent and intricate body of mythical thought that has been salvaged from the pre-colonial world of northern North America. (New 36-37)

This admiration and this feeling of indebtedness are carried over in the work of a number of Kwakwaka’wakw writers as well. David Grubb, himself a Kwakwaka’wakw, composes a Kwakw’ala dictionary in which he revises Boas’s complex orthography to suit the needs of Native writers; he sees Boas and his collaborator, George Hunt, as setting in motion a grand scheme of cultural recovery which the Kwakwaka’wakw people themselves must continue:

Much was done by Dr. Franz Boas and Mr. George Hunt in the early part of this century, but even their tremendous efforts have only made a dent in the culture and language of the *Kwagulh*. It is now up to the Indian people themselves to continue where Boas and Hunt left off. (1-2)

Boas appears to be responsible for the rescue and continuation of Kwakwaka'wakw language and culture, and has provided the means for cultural security which the Native people could not, at the time, provide for themselves. Kwakwaka'wakw story-teller Chief James Wallas (at least, in the English-language versions of his tales by Pamela Whitaker) includes among his own work texts and prayers salvaged by Boas as examples of the "beauty" of Kwakwaka'wakw culture; Boas seems to be credited with the same degree of "authenticity" as a Native narrator (Wallas 13). Boas's *Kwakiutl Tales* thus occupy a particularly important place in Native Canadian literature, in that they are the most complete and sustained record of Native writing that has been preserved in text. As transcriptions of Kwakwaka'wakw story-telling from almost one hundred years ago, they provide, in part, a basis for a Native literary tradition in this country, a tradition which is currently in the process of recuperating and rejuvenating itself.

Boas is praised repeatedly both as an advocate for and as a saviour of many significant North American ethnicities and cultural groups which might otherwise have suffered extinction under the pressures of a white, Eurocentric cultural dominant. He has apparently been justly cast by his readers and admirers in the role of the scholar-hero. However, this role remains a suspiciously rhetorical effect, a construction of the reception of Boas's work by the North American and European scholarly and academic establishment. It is not that he has been overpraised for his accomplishments, which are clearly significant, but that such praise cannot be allowed simply to overwrite or obliterate the intercultural and interracial dynamics of power and politics that such operations of "salvage" and advocacy entail. Boas's work, whether with Native peoples, with Blacks or with any of the numerous American ethnicities, describes an ongoing encounter with the cultural Other. And the very fact of this alterity, of the "otherness" of those for whom he writes and speaks, depends on a well-defined sense of white American normalcy, and on well-drawn boundaries between "us" (the "we" with whom Bringhurst implicitly sides, for instance) and "them."

Without exception, Boas positions himself in his writing self-consciously (despite his own origins as an immigrant) as a member of the white

American cultural dominant, but as one who, while acknowledging his part in an oppressive socio-cultural hegemony, sympathizes with those who are “different.” As he makes clear in his “Preface” to *Race, Culture and Language* (1940), this difference must no longer be regarded simply as an obstacle to national or cultural or personal autonomy for “Americans,” but forms a crucial part of “our” freedom:

Growing up in our civilization we know little how we ourselves are conditioned by it, how our bodies, our language, our modes of thinking and acting are determined by limits imposed upon us by our environment. Knowledge of the life processes and behaviour of man under conditions of life fundamentally different from our own can help us to obtain a freer view of our own lives and of our life problems. (v)

Anthropology provides the means for the liberation of the human mind. This liberation depends on a direct encounter with the Other, and upon a recognition of the contingency and relativity of “our own” value-systems and ways of life. Throughout his *oeuvre*, Boas is highly conscious of the relativity of cultures and of cultural values, and the purpose of anthropology, as “liberation,” is to cultivate an awareness of this relativity. In an essay on nationalism (first published in *The Dial* on March 8, 1919), he defines two sorts of cultural reification in the concept of national “feeling”: an intolerant “imperialistic nationalism of political and economic power” which “sets its own kind over and above every foreign form of feeling,” and what he calls “the nationalism of ideas,” which, by contrast, “endeavours to understand and appreciate foreign patterns of thought” (*Race and Democratic Society* 122). It is this second sort of nationalism which anthropology—as an organ of “understanding” which returns the foreign, respectfully, to the domain of “our civilization” for the sake of “our own” edification and identification—seeks to instill.

In a 1930 essay on the “Religion of the Kwakiutl,” Boas describes his suspicions about systematic anthropology, arguing in favour of analyses of particular phenomena over abstract “scientific” generalizations regarding cultural “laws” and systems, generalizations which, because of the amorphous and shifting nature of human cultures, will always be inadequate descriptors:

Generalizations will be the more significant the closer we adhere to definite forms. The attempts to reduce all social phenomena to a closed system of laws

applicable to every society and explaining its structure and history do not seem a promising undertaking. (Cited in Codera 66)

Stressing the intractability of cultural difference for anthropologists, Boas also points out that any attempts to generalize about the attributes of “culture” result only in an ascription of the observer’s own values to the culture being observed, and in a reification of these particular values, an overwriting of this valuable difference by likeness and sameness: “Absolute systems of phenomena as complex as those of culture are impossible. They will always be reflections of our own culture” (*Race, Language and Culture* 311). Nevertheless, Boas is determined to argue the significance of anthropology in terms of just such an overwriting, a systematic and ultimately coherent discovery of “ourselves” in these apparently unassimilable differences.

Boas remains committed to the notion of personal and national progress, and of self-recognition, through the scientific, responsible encounter with the Other:

The character of a person is moulded by the social medium in which he lives and his ideals and wishes reflect the national temper. Progress results from the peaceful struggle of national ideals and endeavours, and from the knowledge that what is dear to us is for that reason not the best for the rest of mankind, that we may cultivate our most valued ideals without ever harbouring the wish to impose them on others—unless they adopt them by their own free will. . . . In other words, the background of nationality is social individuality that neither brooks interference from other groups nor possesses the wish to deprive other nationalities of their individuality.

Conceived in this way nationality is one of the most fruitful sources of cultural progress. (*Race and Democratic Society* 121-22)

All of Boas’s work on the socio-cultural construction of race—his anti-determinist stance and his critique of the abuses of power in the name of racial conquest—is predicated on a recognition of the productive, positive aspects of cultural difference for nationality, particularly American nationality.

Education in anthropology offers, for Boas, a potentially just and balanced re-configuration of the American dream itself, as he makes clear in a 1937 interview in *Forum*:

We are not free from [racist] tendencies in the United States. . . . The obvious remedy is education—teaching the indisputable fact that colour of skin, class, religious belief, geographical or national origin are no tests of social adaptability. . . . It is time to restate the beliefs of the founders of this nation and drive home

again the democratic principle that a citizen is to be judged solely by the readiness with which he fits himself into the structure and by the value of his contributions to the country's development. (*Race and Democratic Society* 14)

The ideology of personal "liberty" encoded in the American Declaration of Independence, which has laid the foundation for the American dream of social progress and freedom, lies closely behind Boas's own program of "liberation" through anthropological work. The call for liberty and equality here, however, are subtly belied by Boas's demand that good citizens "fit into" the hegemony of American culture. Boas's sense of freedom and openness actually involves a promulgation of conformity, a demand that American ideologies of "liberty" be recognized as universal truths. But the "structure" and "value" which Boas lauds are in fact by-products of a White cultural dominant, and are largely controlled and determined by White interests. The racism which he deplores in the United States likely depends as much on this same demand for conformity as it does on any ethnic struggle for power, and the call for liberty tends to mask the fact that those who promote "freedom" are the same persons who have propagated the politics of racial inequality in the first place.

There is a latent contradiction in Boas's work, which is as concerned with a citizen accommodating American social structures as it is with a citizen's critical enlightenment as to the contingency of these very structures. Boas is fairly careful to assert the national bounds of this imposition, such that, while Americans may choose to live out their civilizing dream of freedom and progress, this dream need not be applied imperialistically outside of the nation. Problematically, however, the "foreign" cultures with which Boas deals, especially the West Coast Native and Black cultures, lie within the domain of North American governments and nationalities, and the very otherness which Boasian anthropology demands we productively encounter is, in national terms, an internal otherness, one which is not so easily exempted from the homogenizing pressures of White American nationalism. Boas himself is well aware of this problem, and his own negotiations with the "American" Other, the counterbalancing of "us" and "them" within his anthropological texts, forms the dialectical underpinning of his proper work. And it is this negotiation, this troubling dialectic, which informs the anthropological writing, and manifests itself vestigially in Boas's writing as narrative.

Paul Ricoeur, writing in 1955, points to the potential anxiety in given human responses to cultural difference:

When we discover that there are several cultures instead of just one and . . . when we acknowledge the end of a sort of cultural monopoly, be it illusory or real, we are threatened with destruction by our own discovery. Suddenly it becomes possible that there are just *others*, that we ourselves are an "other" among others. (*History and Truth* 278)

Ricoeur ascribes to this alterity a fundamental importance. In *Oneself as Another*, almost forty years later, Ricoeur suggests that the Other is implied intimately in selfhood *per se*, and, in a rather astute pun, that "one cannot be thought without the other" (3). Otherness, in other words, is a constitutive element of self-determination, whether personal, cultural or national. While Boas is much less willing to describe this "freer view," this cultural alterity, as rigorously as Ricoeur, he nevertheless points to a certain socio-cultural interdependence based on economies of difference, a hesitant dismantling of the (White, American) cultural monopoly which had levelled ethnicities and dissimilarities, and a valuation of difference itself as a force of cultural liberation. But Ricoeur is willing to ascribe to human existence a *fundamental* alterity, while Boas, finally, cannot; the collective "we," for Boas, remains intact and vigorously assimilative, in the sense that it takes cultural difference productively into its own sphere, as valuable knowledge to be possessed, as a form of self-knowledge. For Ricoeur, identification, the comfort of self-sameness, is upset by such an encounter, while for Boas this encounter, mediated by a scientific anthropology, can only intensify socio-cultural and/or national bonding, as we recognize the limits and capacities of our bodies, our languages, our thoughts both through and against these others.

"The Kwakiutl have no better friend than I," wrote Boas in a letter to Chief Hemasaka of the Fort Rupert Kwakwaka'wakw in February of 1899. "Whenever I can, I speak for you" (Stocking 127). But what exactly do such texts of friendship, as the book of speeches Boas sends to the chief to prove his loyalty, offer these cultures whose substance they incorporate and whose cause they take up? Advocacy, speaking for others, is conditioned by a sense of palimpsest, of one voice overwriting another, even as it articulates the ghostly presence of those for whom it speaks. Attending the texts and voices of a given culture, the reader is pointed back, by the anthropologist's gesture, to some of the essential stylistic or constitutive elements of that culture. A given Kwakwaka'wakw text, for instance, appears to position itself as a bounded, fixed artifact, as utterances from a distinct elsewhere, as an emblematic otherness which can be regarded, categorized, interpreted and

known. But there remains, in the advocal text, a troubling multiplicity. Knowing and interpreting have already been inscribed into the advocal text, by the time it reaches its audience, in the gesture of advocacy. Who is it who speaks in or through such a text? In what sense are the tacit “outsiders” given any legitimate voice, a voice which, in Boas’s American context, must be rendered culturally acceptable or understandable in order to achieve its mission of education and liberation? And if, in following his task, the advocate Boas renders these texts readable, how can he not violate the *positive* estrangement, the liberating foreignness, which he aims so dearly to safeguard in the first place? The familiar and the strange, the Other, are by Boas’s definition incommensurable. How can Boas’s advocacy possibly refrain from transgressing his own first principle, namely to maintain the sanctity of the other, not to lapse into an “imperialistic” American nationalism? Advocacy, by its very nature, runs dangerously close to appropriation.

Anthologies of Kwakwaka’wakw texts and films of the Kwakwaka’wakw compiled by Boas make no excuses as to their authorship; they are owned by Boas himself. The title frames of his documentary footage *The Kwakiutl of British Columbia*, taken in the autumn of 1930, ascribe the contents of film directly and immediately to him, in bold capital letters: “BY FRANZ BOAS.” His two series of *Kwakiutl Tales*, published as part of the *Columbia University Contributions to Anthropology* which he himself edited, are similarly ascribed on their title pages: “By Franz Boas.” Despite the internal crediting of the tales to various native authors, it is Boas himself who assumes the position, not of collector or translator or even editor alone, but of author. These are his tales, his films, his cultures. Boas adopts the proprietary stance of the field anthropologist obsessed either with safeguarding or with shepherding “his” people, those whom he has discovered and to whom he alone has the rights of access. One might recall here Boas’s outrage over Edward S. Curtis’s 1914 film on the Kwakwaka’wakw, *In the Land of the War Canoes*, which he saw as distortional and subjective, or his repeated requests to George Hunt not to offer information about Kwakwaka’wakw culture to rival anthropologists. To get to the Kwakwaka’wakw, one must read through Boas, look through Boas’s lens.

Boas’s presence in his work, as photographer, editor, transcriber, collector, translator and writer, is articulated as a shadow. In his films of the Kwakwaka’wakw, for instance, his subjects, positioned in obviously contrived situations, demonstrate certain aspects of their daily lives. They stare

into the camera, and speak to someone apparently behind the lens; they draw our attention, in effect, to the presence of the filmmaker, of a shaping intelligence, someone in charge of our point-of-view, who is Boas himself. At times, the viewer catches a glimpse of his shadow in the lower portions of the frame; the sun behind him, the outline of his human form and camera appears in the peripheral foreground, and one is suddenly made aware that this film is not simply a documentary record, but a carefully guided and contrived perspective on the cultural material it presents. The presences of photographer and camera intrude upon what seems at first to be pristine, unmediated footage. A sense of the anthropologist inhabiting and shaping what he offers as objective evidence builds throughout the film. Each action, game and dance is categorized and separated off from any naturalistic context by Boas's titles; single events in what appears to be the "daily life" of the Kwakwaka'wakw are isolated, and the viewer watches, as the titles indicate, first a woman at a "Cradle," then a man "Woodworking," then "Drilling," then a woman "Weaving Mats" and so on. People are made to perform tasks without reference to the purpose or function of these tasks. In effect, the film imposes anthropological schema on the life of the Kwakwaka'wakw to the extent that it erases this life in favour of its own formal, organizational principles.

A clear example of this erasure occurs in a section of the second part of the film, dedicated to "Chiefs Boasting." Boas intends, evidently, to recreate some of the hyperbolic gesturing associated with potlatch and with copper exchange, and he places two chiefs on a road behind a row of houses in order to have them perform some of these gestures, however out of context, for his film. While the two are performing, two figures who seem to be women begin walking up the road toward the camera in the distance. As they approach, Boas suddenly cuts away, and they vanish before the chiefs go on, apparently allowed to pass, or simply asked to step out of the camera's way, while the camera is turned off. Boas wants no accidents of present, hybridized or Westernized Kwakwaka'wakw life to intrude upon his (almost) pristine, highly staged recreations. He wants to abstract certain instances, traces, of pre-colonial Kwakwaka'wakw culture for the sake of anthropological clarity.

A famous photograph taken by O.C. Hastings for Boas also encodes this sense of erasure. Boas and George Hunt, at the edge of the frame, hold up a blanket to cover the Western-style colonial buildings of Fort Rupert, and to isolate an image of a Kwakwaka'wakw woman spinning, to locate this

image, in effect, in an ahistorical, decontextualized setting (Halpin 4). In a commentary on his own representational aesthetic, Kwakwaka'wakw photographer David Neel argues that such hypostatizing photographs of Native people tend to perpetuate narrow stereotypes of Native peoples, either as "noble savages" or a "vanishing race," images which he deplors as dehumanizing and threatening (Neel 14). Citing the work, in particular, of Edward R. Curtis, Boas's contemporary and "competitor" for West Coast anthropological knowledge, Neel suggests that what these posed photographs of Native life actually offered the White cultural dominant of the time was a confirmation of their own superiority, held in sharp contrast to images "of a primitive human, existing like a hunting trophy or a fish in an aquarium" (16). These photographs may be "good art," Neel argues, art which adheres to the demands of a Western Romantic aesthetic of primitive nobility, but they also involve a sustained "campaign of misinformation" which has ultimately degraded Native culture, and locked it safely into a history of conquest and assimilation (18).

Both Neel and Marjorie Halpin, who provides an afterword to his text, distinguish between the work of Curtis, who encouraged the expression of "some individuality" and artistic personality in photographs, thereby deliberately skewing the representation of the Native life to suit the photographer's preconceptions, and the work of Boas, which situates itself in the "scientific" tradition and resists pictorialist impulses (186). Nevertheless, both Boas and Curtis resort to "bribery and deception" to appropriate sacred Native "artifacts" and to alter the Native realities they encountered to suit their anthropological needs (17). The "desired image," Neel writes,

is moulded by adding props, deleting signs of contemporary life, and selecting background to correspond to White ideas of the "authentic" Native person. . . . A good deal of omission, selection, and propping was required to mould a publicly acceptable image. There was a market for photographs of the noble savage, not the degraded heathen. (15)

While Boas may not have been so crassly commercial as Curtis, his representations of Native life were nonetheless determined by the demands of his own consumer culture. Halpin goes so far as to argue that "the attempted removal of non-native elements from their photographs" is in fact an assertion of directorial power, of control over their subjects, who, Halpin notes, show "few smiles and little evidence of presentational energy" (187). Boas's erasures, despite his pretence of objectivity and withdrawal, are in fact a

form of distortion that involves a calculated self-insertion into the seemingly untainted photographic frame. Boas is made present in his representations by his supposed absence; the colonizing mind enters the picture by gesturing to remove itself.

Boas also later used frames from his films in an exhibit on the Hamatsa Dance, but hired an artist to remove the western clothing of the Kwakwaka'wakw worn in the film in order to give the images more of a primeval, pre-colonial appearance. The pre-colonial, in other words, is not simply to be collected in the vestiges of present Kwakwaka'wakw life, but must in fact be constructed imaginatively, conjecturally. And Boasian anthropology, despite Boas's objections to Edward Curtis, aims to perform just such an imaginative leap, as it attempts to discover or to invent (whether scientifically or not) what Boas calls, in an essay on Canadian ethnography, "the fundamental tendencies common to humanity" (*Race, Language and Culture* 341).

Authorial presence is manifested in Boas's texts paradoxically as a gesture of withdrawal. There is no actual withdrawal; after all, no such complete absencing of oneself from one's "own" signed texts could be possible. Boas's shadow casts itself across his texts as the appearance of a personal absence, of an objectivity. Boas's *Kwakiutl Tales* appear to be renderings of a number of voices; each is credited to a particular author or to a given tradition, and there is little obvious evidence of authorial mediation. They are presented as if in the form in which they were first told, translations accompanying transliterations of the original language on facing pages, so that the knowledgeable scholar may confirm the accuracy of the English renderings. Problematically, however, this objectivity is an illusion of the *Kwakiutl Tales*. The transliterations themselves are Boas's, as he makes clear in his preface to the 1910 series. Boas alone mediates all levels of textuality; the translations would naturally be accurate, then, given that both texts are by Boas. In fact, Boas claims all aspects of the texts as his own:

The following series of Kwakiutl tales was collected by me on various journeys to British Columbia. . . . I have published a considerable number of myths written down by Mr. George Hunt of Fort Rupert, B.C., who speaks Kwakiutl as his native language. These tales were written under my direction, and the language was revised by me phonetically, the text being dictated to me in part by Mr. Hunt, in part by other natives. (v)

Despite his pretence of scientific objectivity, Boas remains the central shaping intelligence behind the recasting of these tales. They become his own stories.

But how is it that this ascription takes on a specifically narrative form? Boas has argued that the “fundamental problem” of the anthropologist is the description of the progress of cultures, and that the West Coast Natives provide remarkably favourable “conditions” for the fulfilment of this task (*Race, Language and Culture* 341). The Kwakwaka’wakw provide a nearly ideal context for the writing out of an anthropological master-narrative, the story of the discovery of these human fundamentals. But these “conditions,” in so far as they require the manifest traces of pre-White civilizations, are themselves constructions of the anthropological mind. The collation of Kwakwaka’wakw tales occasions the potential solving of a narrative problem: the heroic, scholarly task of solving this “fundamental problem,” of doing anthropology, through the creation of anthropological *fictions* of the “basic tendencies” of humankind. Furthermore, Boas imposes on his collection of tales another narratological sequencing, a meta-narrative which overwrites the individual narratives he translates and recounts, a master-plot of anthropological discovery of which he himself is the protagonist. In his zeal for human (that is, chiefly American) “progress” and liberation, Boas uses the tales to tell his own story of how these tales lead him toward personal enlightenment, through a productive conflict with and assimilation of cultural difference, with otherness. The gaps of difference, of differentiation, whether merely cultural or essentially human, are closed by anthropology itself, as it seeks a positive productivity in its Western context by turning a relative cultural liberation into a holistic human enterprise. The anthropological becomes what Boas sees as the fully human, as the anthropologist assimilates and understands the differences of the peoples he studies. Boasian anthropology, despite its provisos, aims then to determine what this humanity is, and to impose its standards, as if they were universal, on those for whom it purports beneficently to speak. Boas’s scientific commentaries on the tales are not static or atemporal, not strictly “objective,” but narrate a progress toward the liberating resolution promised by Boas’s own westernized anthropological ideals.

Boas’s collation of two instances of the same Kwakwaka’wakw tale provides a clear example of this narrative in motion. In his second series of *Kwakiutl Tales*, Boas offers a 1932 re-telling by the same narrator, Charlie Wilson, of the story of “Scab,” which he had already collected in 1900 for his first series of tales. In a note on the versions, Boas compares the two to each other and to an unrecounted version of the same story (a version to which

he alone has access) which he heard and transcribed in Alert Bay in 1890 (229). The purpose of this comparison, for Boas, is to offer, at a geographical and historical separation, evidence of cultural continuity. Continuity of occurrence, he argues in his 1910 essay on ethnological problems in Canada, is a key to the determination both of cultural traits and of deeper human psychological laws (the “fundamental tendencies common to humanity”), both essential goals of anthropology itself (*Race, Language and Culture* 342-3). The collation is an attempt to fill in the gaps, to overwrite difference with continuity, and to write his own efforts at achieving his goals across the texts of the Kwakwaka’wakw stories.

“The two versions,” Boas tells us, “are essentially the same in content except on two points,” which he goes on to list (*Kwakiutl Tales New Series* 229). Boas attempts to construct a narratology of the folk-tale and to establish, in a localized abbreviated form, an essential structure for this tale; one might compare similar efforts, conducted on a much larger scale, of Vladimir Propp in Eastern Europe or of Claude Lévi-Strauss in his *tristes tropiques*. Boas offers a page-long schematic for the two stories, suggesting non-essential divergences and deeper continuities. At certain points, he even alludes to a more general morphology of the “Kwakiutl tale,” as when, for instance, he notes that a particular figure in the later version is a man, while by “analogy with all other tales she should be a woman” (230). Boas’s emerging narratology becomes a narrative itself, a meta-narrative, as he intrudes into his material, commenting on and modifying its essential elements to suit his own synthesizing purpose. “I presume in a more complete version [of the story],” he interjects, “that [Scab] would have hidden in a tree and been discovered by the reflection in the water. Here the remark that the water was like a looking glass seems uncalled for” (230). This commentary is not, as it might initially seem, a passing critique by an erudite anthropologist, but involves a wilful, deliberate intrusion into the body of the texts, a presumptuous re-narration of these same texts in terms more amenable to the anthropological mission of understanding and progress. Boas announces his own presence, asserts himself in the first person—no longer as mere shadow—in order to assume direct control of the process of discovery.

Boas intrudes into the stories themselves as well, as translator and as a kind of stylistic mediator. In most of his prefaces to the various collections of tales and verbal artifacts collected from the Kwakwaka’wakw, Boas clearly positions himself as transcriber, translator, editor, and even author; it was

he, after all, who gave this language its first system of orthography, who in effect gave birth to its written form. And as the source of this system, its control remains ultimately in his hands, as he makes clear in a 1913 introduction to George Hunt's manuscripts:

[George Hunt] was taught to write the language by Franz Boas in 1891, and by constant correction of his method of writing, the system of spelling applied in the present manuscript was gradually developed. Nevertheless the phonetics required revision, and everything written by Mr. Hunt up to 1901 inclusive has been revised by Franz Boas from dictation. The materials contained in the following volumes [of manuscripts] have been published with such changes in the spelling, and a few times also in grammar, as seemed necessary.

The appeal to scientific necessity and the tone of objectivity that Boas strikes here by, among other things, referring to himself in the third person, suggest that the orthography fabricated and overseen by Boas, as well as the interlinear glosses and translations in the text, are in effect as transparent as possible to the Kwakw'ala "mother tongue" and consequently offer direct ethnographic access to that language through the supposedly corrective filter of Boas himself. Boas, as writer, positions himself as the singular advocate for Kwakwaka'wakw culture in North America.

This illusion of transparency, however, is precisely that: an illusion. While Boas wants to appear as scientifically objective, his texts, by their very nature, involve considerable intrusive meddling. Key evidence of such an intrusion into his material, of the presence of Boas's shadow self in the *Kwakiutl Texts*, appears as a narratological feature of his translations themselves. In his prefatory note to *Kwakiutl Texts*, a 1902 parallel text in Kwakw'ala and English, published by the American Museum of Natural History and accredited to both Boas and Hunt, Boas offers some explanation of his own methods of translation:

In all these texts the ever-recurring quotative, "it is said," has been omitted in the translation. In the English translation, words enclosed in parentheses have been added for the sake of clearness; words enclosed in brackets are literal translations of the corresponding Indian text, but should be omitted on the English text. Indian proper names have been translated with considerable freedom to avoid encumbering the English translation with the strange phonetics of the Kwakiutl language. (4)

Boas intends to make his translations as "clear" as possible, by which he means not, as one might expect, to offer access to some sense of the stylistic or narrative texture of the original, but instead to remove any traces of

awkwardness, strangeness and “encumbrance” of the phonetics or syntax of Kwakw’ala that may intrude onto the English translations. He wants to present a smooth, readable, English text. In his famous essay on “The Task of the Translator,” Walter Benjamin cites Rudolph Pannwitz to suggest that translation ought to allow the essential “foreignness” of the original to emerge in the target language:

“The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. Particularly when translating from a language very remote from his own he must go back to the primal elements of language itself and penetrate to the point where work, image, and tone converge.”
(Benjamin 81)

For Benjamin, this deliberate commingling of languages is necessary for the work of re-creation, liberation and discursive “flux” which he understands as the prerogatives of linguistic artifacts. Boas refuses this commingling in his translations, preferring instead to reinforce the contingent boundaries of his own English, to make the Kwakw’ala into good English, and thus to eliminate any destabilizing “foreign” elements in his language.

This normalizing carries a certain force in any translation, but where the text aims for scientific objectivity, its presence is particularly troubling: why, after all, ought the anthropologist attempt to remove all the awkward traces of “foreignness” when, according to Boas himself, the goal of comparative ethnography of the sort he undertakes with the Kwakwaka’wakw is precisely to enlarge mainstream American knowledge and to “liberate” the American mind from its ethnocentric confines? These stylistic encumbrances, the trace elements of Kwakw’ala, ought to be the focus of any anthropological interrogation of these translations, of the importation of Kwakwaka’wakw culture into the American mainstream.

Benjamin recommends both literal (and thus agrammatical) word-by-word renderings of original texts into target languages, and suggests that the form of translation which best comes to terms with the “primal elements” of language itself is the interlinear gloss (79, 82). Boas, in his 1910 primer on Kwakw’ala (called *Kwakiutl: An Illustrative Sketch*), provides such a double text (using his own system of orthography) to give some sense to the English reader of the textures and word-orders of Kwakw’ala speech, which he then follows up with what he calls a “translation” of the work into a normalized English (553-557). In *Kwakiutl Texts*, which had appeared sev-

eral years earlier, he follows a similar procedure, offering the first text with interlinear glosses and then all subsequent works as parallel texts, with the transcribed Kwakw'ala originals on the left of the page and a normalized English version on the right. Once students have mastered the first literal rendering and are somewhat familiar with Kwakw'ala syntax and Boasian orthography, Boas asserts that they will be more readily able to identify parallels between Kwakw'ala and English texts (4).

But these “parallels” are deceptive; instead of allowing scholarly access to the original, they obscure the Kwakw'ala in a form of anglicization. By erasing the literal stylistic markings of the Kwakw'ala, Boas forces his readers, in learning the language, to anglicize it. Instead of sensing the Kwakw'ala impinging on their anglocentric world-views, in other words, comparative readers end up imposing the forms and shapes of English onto the Kwakw'ala, effectively reversing the “task” of translation that Benjamin and Pannwitz describe. The cultural “liberation” that Boas wants to bring about is thus merely a cloaked form of linguistic imperialism, an overwriting of the “foreign” text by an English cultural dominant.

To demonstrate how this anthropological overwriting is realized in Boas's translations, I want to look briefly at the sample text he supplies in his Kwakw'ala grammar, and then turn to the *Kwakiutl Tales* themselves to suggest some of its narratological consequences. Here is an extract from the middle of the text as Boas provides it, with his own glosses:

Hē'x'idaEm'lā'wis	G·ē'dEn	lā	qā's'id	lā'xa	Wāk·!ēgēsLa.
That began referred to it is said	G·ē'dEn	went	walk-began	to the	Bent-Bay its name.
Lā'laē	dō'x'waLElaxa	'nEqā'ts!aqē	xwā'k!una	mExē's lāq.	
Then it is said he discovered the		ten long	canoes		hollow things on beach at it.
Lā'laē	'w'un'wīg·aq,	laE'm'lā'wis	lā'x	ā'La'yasa	xwā'xwak!una.
Then it is said	he hid back of them,	then referred to it is said and so he went	at	landward of the	canoes

Boas's subsequent “translation” normalizes the glosses, making them grammatical and recognizably English: “At once G·ē'dEn went to bent Bay. There he discovered ten canoes on the beach. He hid behind them landward from the canoes” (557). The most obvious emendation to the text is the expurgation of what Boas wearily refers to as the “ever-recurring quotative,” which he transcribes as Lā'laē, “then it is said.” To him, this term is apparently little more than a narratological tic which impedes the unfolding of the story

itself; his own narratology here, in other words, centres on event-content, and he regards such quotatives as incidental, of no consequence to the actual matter of the tale at hand. But such an assumption depends on a certain narrow notion of what it is to tell a story, or of what a story is. Given that the quotative is “ever recurring,” it should be self-evident that it plays an important, even a key, role in Kwakwaka’wakw narration; where Boas, because of his own notions of what is essential here, chooses in translating to emphasize the mimetic and the representative in the tale, the “original” transcribed text, by employing some form of quotative in every sentence, points to a more diegetically-oriented sense of story-telling. The Kwakw’ala text emphasizes the process of telling itself, which suggests a very different role for story in that culture than Boas’s content-centred renderings indicate. It is possible even to speculate, based on the stylistic evidence from the “original” texts Boas provides, that stories in Kwakwaka’wakw culture focus as much on the importance of the act of narrating as on what is narrated, a role which is obscured by Boas’s ethnocentric re-tellings.

Such overwritings pervade the *Kwakiutl Tales*. For instance, in the first version of “Scab,” Boas offers (in parallel with the Kwakw’ala “original”) what appears to be a very straightforward rendering of a myth into English:

Then he sat down with his child. He felt lonely. He felt really lonely. Then Scab spoke, and said to his father, “Don’t long for me. I shall go to the other side of the beach.” Then the child Scab started and went to the other side of the beach. He went to a river. He waded across, and went straight to the place where the dead sisters of his father were (buried in) boxes on the point of land. Then he took needles (of an evergreen tree) and put them in the fold of his shirt. Then he started and went into the water at the mouth of the river. He went straight down to the mouth of the river. (43)

His sentences here employ a predominantly simple syntactic form, which, along with the folkloric repetitions, makes them seem rhetorically to gesture back to a primitive origin. Boas clearly wants to offer some sense of the narrative style of the original, as Charlie Wilson told it. The aspect of the translation that one might take at first glance as intrusive, the parentheses which he has said he includes to clarify the meanings of the original, in fact make obvious the self-conscious presence of the anthropologist, and his apparent unwillingness to tamper with his source material. They indicate typographically for the reader that he is an editorializing presence here. Such intrusions deliberately disrupt the smooth surface of the text itself and confirm its hybrid state for us.

What is actually troubling here, however, are the numerous tacit emendations and smoothings that Boas does not indicate. His two parenthetical gestures cannot rhetorically redress, as they seem intended to do, the subtle narratological distortions that he has managed in this brief passage. Every sentence in the Kwakw'ala version, with the exception of Scab's speech, begins with the quotative "Lā'laē" (42). Boas makes a limited effort to gesture toward the narrative form of the original by occasionally beginning his sentences with "Then," but this practice is evidently capricious and hardly approximate to the texture and substance of the Kwakw'ala. (Boas may have taken his cue from George Hunt here. In the original manuscript transcriptions of this and other tales by Hunt, "Lā'laē" is rendered alternatively as "it is said" and "then," though it encompasses both meanings.) This hyper-use of the quotative may be peculiar to Charlie Wilson, but if one peruses the other tales, it becomes obvious that, while the quotative may not begin every sentence, its appearance is frequent, and Boas has almost without exception purged it from his text. The diegetic nature of the *Kwakiutl Tales* themselves has thus been altered, and in normalizing the text by erasing the "foreign" qualities of Kwakwaka'wakw narrative practices, Boas has imposed his own notion of what a "primitive" story ought to sound like, and what it should contain. The anthropologist, as a seemingly objective "scientist," tends largely to discover in the Other his own preconceptions of what he ought to find, preconceptions which are informed not by the experience of so-called "primitive" cultures, but by the ideas of the Native that were current in American society at the time.

This erasure is closely akin to the elimination of colonial or "Western" detail in the photographs that Boas had taken at Fort Rupert. But here Boas has eliminated not simply the apparent Western European "contaminations" of Kwakwaka'wakw culture, but elements of that culture itself, those which do not conform to his own preconception of what a Kwakwaka'wakw story ought to sound like in English. He tends to substitute, on the level of style in particular, a narratology of his own making for one which might have been more "objectively" determined from the Kwakw'ala originals. This erasure still operates under the guise of objectivity, but now it is proactive, in the sense that it calls for the scientist not to be recordist but co-creator, maker. Boas himself, through his apparent withdrawals and clarifications, becomes a narrative filter, a mediating presence in his tales. By reshaping the narratology of the *Kwakiutl Tales*, he manages to mould the "Native"

stories to suit his own tonal and conceptual demands. The stories he rewrites are hybrids, as much his own as those of his appropriated subjects.

What the reader finds manifest in such texts as the *Kwakiutl Tales* are episodes, events, in this narrative process. Boas positions himself, finally, as if he were Kwakwaka'wakw—or at least, as he says, their finest friend—speaking through the stories he collects, correcting them to suit his own vision of who the Kwakwaka'wakw essentially are. But instead of articulating cultural difference and diversity, Boas imposes his own anthropological framework on this work, so that speaking for others, in this case, becomes a mode of speaking for himself, and of narrating events in his own autobiography of progress and liberation through anthropology. The *Kwakiutl Tales*, despite their value as cultural artifacts, artifacts without which the Kwakwaka'wakw would certainly be poorer, are indelibly overwritten by Boas's own personal narration, as he endeavours to construct his own ethnographic tale.

For Boas, the interplay between the normal and the strange which conditions his salvage and rescue of “other” cultures manifests itself as a narrative: not so much a cultural history—whether of others' or of his own culture—as an autobiography, a writing of himself into the position of the protagonist of the very texts and artifacts he aims to salvage, as the hero of his own life's work. The advocate and saviour described by his readers and interpreters is not simply the creation of a cult of admirers, but is based in Boas's own methods of collection, of transcription, and of rewriting. These methods, finally, subtend a decidedly narrative presence, a tale-telling which writes itself episodically into the interstices and the margins of the myths and stories Boas sought so ardently to preserve. The Native offers the White dominant of North America, with Boas as its key scientific and cultural representative, a functional counter-discursive space, in which the dominant discourse can discover itself as otherwise than it is, as fully self-conscious and fully known and articulated to itself, a space in which it can construct a “freer view” of its limitations, and thus assert its universal validity. In Boasian ethnography, the Native is “recovered” for the White cultural dominant, and installed in the position of the valuable Other, but an Other, this time, which cannot escape the determinations of the White dominant, which has been rewritten and overwritten by a narrative of White self-discovery.

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