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# Studies in the History of Anthropology in the United States

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# Studies in the History of Anthropology in the United States

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In his book *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*, Paul Rabinow describes a dialectical tension between standard academic scholarship typified by library research and anthropological research, which requires extended fieldwork in a foreign community before one can be accepted as an anthropologist. This tension is poignant for me, since even before I began college I had decided that I wanted to become an anthropologist, yet I also felt drawn to the study of history. Of course, many anthropologists use historical sources to some extent, but I was so focused on anthropology that I became interested in the history of anthropology itself. My first opportunity to explore this subject was in a term paper for a class on the history of colleges and universities in America.

My involvement with the history of anthropology took a decisive turn when I got a research internship at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago to study material culture collections relating to the Bagobo and neighboring ethnic groups indigenous to south-central Mindanao in the Philippines, a topic suggested to me by my advisor, whose own fieldwork had been on the Bagobo. While the project was designed to focus on ethnographic artifacts such as native tools and clothing that one would expect to find in a museum, my research in the museum's archives also unearthed the letters of a totally unknown anthropologist, Laura Watson Benedict, who had done fieldwork on the Bagobo from 1906 to 1907. Benedict was a student working toward her Ph.D., but at 45 she was no youngster, and graduate education in anthropology was virtually nonexistent.

To put her career into historical context, she was just about the first woman in anthropology, and certainly the first to do fieldwork as it is conventionally understood to mean extended research in an overseas land. Most research by American anthropologists had been done among American Indian tribes and consisted of brief stays consisting of interviews with native experts or elders mediated through

interpreters, who were culturally marginal, being knowledgeable in English yet able to communicate in the native language.

Modern anthropological fieldwork in the sense of extended work by an outsider immersed in the life of a native community is generally considered to have been pioneered by Bronislaw Malinowski, a Polish scholar with a Ph.D. in mathematics, beginning in 1915 in the Trobriand Islands near New Guinea. A 1922 book by Malinowski codified the principles of participant observation as a method that has remained the gold standard for ethnographic work ever since.

But as early as 1883, Franz Boas, a German Jew with a Ph.D. in physics, began doing anthropological research on Baffin Island in what is now Nunavut and later among the Kwakiutl in British Columbia. Boas's concept of anthropology included not just cultural anthropology but archaeology, folklore, linguistics, and physical anthropology. In 1896, after four years as one of the original faculty members at Clark University, he moved to Columbia University, where his influence was so profound that most of American anthropology as it later evolved is traced back to his teaching.

At a time before Malinowski, when Boas had only recently begun to train the first generation of professionally educated anthropologists, Benedict embarked on fieldwork in the overseas possession of the Philippines, in an area that was not just conventionally remote and backwards but in a tribal society known for holding human sacrifices. At that time, before research foundations existed, scholars needed other means to finance their work. Benedict obtained an offer from the Field Museum of Natural History to buy her collection of Bagobo artifacts for \$3,000. But she received no funding in advance, so to obtain money to acquire artifacts Benedict worked as a primary school teacher in a coastal town accessible to Bagobo villages while beginning her study of Bagobo culture. She then moved to a mountain village to study their ceremonies, folklore, and customs more intensively. The village was so deep in the interior that reaching it took fourteen hours either on foot or by horse.

Benedict endured many problems in her fieldwork as documented in her letters and suffered from great isolation and financial worries. Over time, she worried that the American plantation owners who were her neighbors were trying to destroy her research and even poison her. Although she had planned

two years of fieldwork, her breakdown and hospitalization after fourteen months caused her to return home prematurely. After that ordeal, she learned that the collection she had acquired in order to sell to the Field Museum of Natural History had become too elaborate and massive for them to afford, and the curator who had agreed to buy it backed away from his offer, leaving her trying to find another buyer.

Benedict ended up moving to New York, where she sold her collection to the American Museum of Natural History and completed her Ph.D. at Columbia under Boas, becoming in 1914 the first woman graduate of a program that later produced many world-famous women anthropologists including Ruth Benedict (no relation to her) and Margaret Mead. The only woman to have gotten a Ph.D. in anthropology before her was Miriam van Waters, who achieved notability as a prison superintendent rather than as an anthropologist. Benedict published a 300 page monograph and two articles but was not heard from again as a scholar. Part of her collection can be viewed in the Margaret Mead Hall of Pacific Peoples at the American Museum of Natural History. I wish I could show you a picture of this woman whose contribution to anthropology I have long pondered, but I have never seen one.

Whatever became of her? Would it surprise you to find out that she taught as a lecturer in social service at Hunter College and later gained employment as academic librarian in the days before library school was required? In 1932 she died at the age of 71.

In developing my research on Benedict for publication I decided I needed to learn about the all of first people to get Ph.D.s in anthropology in the United States: who they were, what their dissertations were about, and their professional fates. Before the online age such an inquiry required significant effort, but eventually I had compiled a complete bibliography of all Ph.D.s done in anthropology up to 1920, which I showed to the anthropology librarian at Berkeley. Upon reading it, she advised me get a master's degree in library science. I should have taken her advice, but I was so committed to my plan to do a project involving fieldwork that I did not even attempt to reach out to the faculty in the library school on campus, to my later everlasting regret.

How I eventually left the profession of anthropology and become a librarian is a subject for another day. But I later returned to my project on early doctorates because I thought of the Ph.D.

dissertation as crystalizing the interests of scholars at the beginning of their careers, being both the capstone of one's education and pointing a direction toward future work. I wanted to analyze dissertations as part of the scholarly communication system, as evidence of the growth of and dead ends in educational programs, and to understand the demography of the profession as revealed in the age, gender, and ethnicities of people who got Ph.D.s.

I saw my article as contributing not just to the history but the bibliography of anthropology, a library science concern. Even though it was published in the most prestigious anthropology journal, the *American Anthropologist*, it did not advance my career, since I wrote it when I was a librarian without faculty status.

As for future work I would like to do on the history of anthropology, I remain fascinated by the often traumatizing subjective experiences anthropologists undergo in separating from their own societies and trying to penetrate the consciousness of people living in different ways in other societies, a phenomenon described by John Wengle in *The Ethnographer in the Field* and George Devereux in *From Anxiety to Method in the Behavioral Sciences*. I would also like to examine the history of anthropological research and publication on Southeast Asia, my geographical area of specialization.