

[Leonard on Zumwalt, 'Franz Boas: The Emergence of the Anthropologist'](#)

Review published on Monday, February 22, 2021

Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt. *Franz Boas: The Emergence of the Anthropologist*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019. 464 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4962-1554-3.

Reviewed by Douglas Leonard (USAF Academy) **Published on** H-Ideas (February, 2021)
Commissioned by Eliah Bures

Printable Version: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=55922>

Biography between Worlds

Writing history is a delicate act, requiring a deft balance between readability and academic rigor. David Hackett Fischer, one of the great practitioners of that "braided narrative," described the problem well in 1976: "In short, it seems to me that the progress of social history, as both an art and a science, consists in the development of new forms of narration, the use of new techniques of characterization, and the refinement of all the apparatus of scholarship." [1] Human lives conveyed through biographical narration offer a potential avenue out of this bind, though biographers, too, walk a tightrope between commercial sensationalism and academic seriousness. Rosemary Zumwalt, a well-established scholar of twentieth-century anthropology and folklore studies, took on just such a challenge in her biography of Franz Boas for the University of Nebraska Press. *Franz Boas: The Emergence of the Anthropologist* appeared in 2019 as the first piece of a wide-ranging study, with a second volume expected in the next several years. Zumwalt's work follows her earlier biographical examinations of Arnold Van Gennep and Elsie Clews Parsons, making her an experienced practitioner of this difficult art. [2] Following the recent surge of interest in Boas and his students, Zumwalt generated what could be termed an epistolary biography, focused on correspondence and the insight that letters delivered into Boas's origins, influences, and intentions. The focus on correspondence provides deep emotional context on Boas's family life and innermost thoughts but leaves the book astride numerous approaches with no real home: it is somewhere between an institutional history of American anthropology, an intellectual examination of the emerging anti-racist views of Boas, and a critical engagement with anthropological theory wrapped in what Zumwalt conceived as a "love story," presumably between Boas and his wife and between Boas and the discipline (p. xx). She does little to clarify this approach, so readers are left to infer her meaning and emphasis in the rest of the book. Readers interested in understanding the social world of Boas in Germany, Canada, and the United States will find great value in this work, while those looking for a deep examination of the rise of American anthropological theory will either have to wait for the second volume for a more comprehensive portrait, or pair the book with a more theoretically engaged study.

As one of the newest entries in the now eight-year-old University of Nebraska Press series Critical Studies in the History of Anthropology, Zumwalt's book stands as its own sort of "salvage ethnography," offering a social reframing of Boas's correspondence. Rescuing Boas's intimate

thoughts from obscurity is a worthy effort that mirrors his own approach of recording Native American social practices in the face of their imminent destruction by American and Canadian encroachment. Boas remains an important founder of academic anthropology in the United States and beyond, and his anti-racist social scientific findings offered important ammunition to activists attempting to destroy US segregation and Jim Crow laws. Zumwalt's biography thus offers useful background to these powerful movements. The book is organized chronologically in eleven chapters, beginning with the circumstances of Boas's birth and concluding with his final entry into established academia as a professor of anthropology at Columbia University.

The first chapter, "Ardently Desired Boy," traces the collision of communist revolutionary activity and Judaism in Boas's family. While hardly a revolutionary himself, Boas did become focused on secular pursuits and rapidly developed a scientific worldview. Resisting his father's push into medicine, the young thinker made use of extended periods of illness to focus on the natural world, following his interests into botany, natural history, zoology, and physics. As he moved into secondary school and university, the subject of "Student Life into its Deepest Depths," the second chapter, Boas explored these areas with greater rigor and specificity. Framing Boas's journey through his period using the concept of "rites of passage" first developed by Van Gennep, Zumwalt portrays Boas as "liminal" (p. 55). Indeed, Zumwalt concludes that Boas engaged in ritualistic duels with schoolmates as symbolic class conflict while also acting out against latent anti-Semitism during the wider reckoning of the newly unified German state with Jewishness as an integral component of national identity (pp. 56, 59). The placement of Boas in a wider context aids in understanding the broad currents of thought that influenced virtually all Germans in this period. However, the intellectual flows that Zumwalt considers seem restricted almost entirely to political thought. While those concepts were no doubt important and certainly consequential during the era of Otto von Bismarck, there were also important movements in philosophy, such as the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, that were crucial to the development of anthropological thought in Germany and beyond, as Michel Foucault has found.[3] A deeper examination of these intellectual influences would have generated a more complete portrait of the forces acting on the young thinker. In tracing that development, Zumwalt focuses on the personal rather than the environmental—ironically, given Boas's own emphasis on broadening understanding beyond narrow, European-derived concepts.

Boas's evolution into an anthropologist, and the origin of some of his foundational ideas on anthropological practice, begins in the third chapter, "In Heaven, In Love, and Separation," Zumwalt demonstrates Boas's movement away from physics and into geography in the 1880s, which would remain his disciplinary home until his transition to academic anthropology in the early twentieth century. Focused on a "holistic" understanding of man and his environment, the young Boas formed early ideas on the connection between ecology and social structure that he would later apply to studies of Native Americans (p. 92). At the same time, perhaps following the example of Alexander von Humboldt and other prominent naturalists, and working against the armchair style of prominent English and French anthropologists, Boas became fixated on travel and interdisciplinary practice as key demonstrations of the "mettle of the scientist" (p. 93). The fourth chapter, entitled "Creating a Future for Us," builds from this concept through a strong examination of Boas's field notes along with his correspondence, offering a useful examination of his emerging fieldcraft as he developed his relativistic approach to language and social practice. Framed by Zumwalt as something of an adventure story, Boas's experiences in Greenland demonstrated the physical risks of fieldwork as well

as the sometimes exploitative collection of artifacts and stories. Perhaps most importantly, Zumwalt does well in pointing out Boas's innovative employment of locals to draw and interpret maps while also calling out the impatience that drove him to abuse relationships with Inuit groups as he completed his research in what he thought a reasonable amount of time (pp. 111, 126-127). These chapters provide the best analysis in the book while helping the reader understand early anthropological practices. Unfortunately, the succeeding chapter, "Divided Desires," loses that momentum as it focuses on Boas's angst about future employment in the US or Europe.

The following three chapters, "West to the Indians," "All our Hopes Come to Such a Disgrace," and "The World's Columbian Exposition" offer further examples of Boas's emerging disciplinary views, still expressed as a form of human geography. Zumwalt traces the scientist's purchase or outright theft of ethnographic artifacts to sell to collectors on the US East Coast, his acquisition of skulls and skeletons of Native Americans, his creation of new forms of anthropometric measurement, and ultimately his attempts to salvage Native American social forms and beliefs through observation and recording. While the accounts of his movements and efforts are at times entertaining, they fall once again into a liminal zone between two different styles. They do not approach the intrigue or bravura storytelling of Erik Larson's *Devil in the White City* (2004), an account of the same 1883 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, on which Boas toiled. At the same time, Zumwalt does not offer any commentary on the racialized layout of the villages at that same exposition or engage Boas's theft of skulls from the American Northwest, among other dubious practices, thus shying away from the critiques of anthropological practice from James Clifford, Vincent Crapanzano, and others.[4] These chapters, as well as the concluding troika that follow, suffer from an emphasis on experience without real consideration of the impact of those ideas on the wider discipline and on the subjects of study.

The ninth chapter, "Your Orphan Boy," for example, documents Boas's increasingly frantic search for long-term employment after the conclusion of his work in Chicago. The period offers a potential window into Boas's early ruminations on the fallacy of the same hierarchical racial charts he developed while in Chicago (pp. 242-243). However, Zumwalt employs his 1884 address in Brooklyn as a sort of milestone, never giving it full context or taking apart its innovative content. She thus misses an opportunity to connect to important concepts that will presumably form the core of the second volume of this biography, when Boas connected with W. E. B. DuBois and educated a generation of anthropologists from Alfred Kroeber to Margaret Mead. Instead, Zumwalt continues down the chronological road as the final two chapters form more of an institutional history of American anthropology through the lenses of museum collection and university disciplinary development. Chapter 10, "The Greatest Undertaking of its Kind," is a strong, blow-by-blow account of the intrigue that surrounded the Jesup North Pacific Expedition, a massive undertaking that set the standard for North American scientific endeavors for the next half-century. Again, Zumwalt offers enormous evidence of emerging Boasian fieldwork approaches and standards that would guide generations of future researchers but without real engagement with the findings generated by those efforts. Remaining focused on the chronology of Boas's correspondence, Zumwalt transitions from these events into the final chapter, "Taking Hold in New York." Moving away from museum intrigue, the chapter offers an interesting institutional history of what would become the American Anthropological Association as the discipline slowly found purchase in East Coast universities. Written generally as an account of the battle of Boas to professionalize the nascent discipline within academia, the chapter does engage somewhat with the problematic treatment of the Inuit people brought to New York by Robert Peary. The deaths and displacement of those people, in Zumwalt's

telling, represented a challenge to anthropology's survival, but her account does not clarify, follow, or specify the challenges it posed to anthropological practice per se. As a result, the reader reaches the end of the book with a sympathetic understanding of Boas as a man swimming against the current, overcoming enormous institutional challenges while remaining emotionally engaged with his family and in love with science. The enormous theoretical and practical challenges to the discipline that emerged from American imperial expansion or European colonial domination remain largely unexplored.

Zumwalt's sympathetic approach stems from a heavy reliance on letters. She employs that correspondence as the book's narrative thread, in most cases allowing Boas and his family to speak for themselves as they work through the anthropologist's life. Such an approach provides useful insight into Boas's thinking and avoids ahistorical reading

back of meaning and intent, but at times the larger methodological and disciplinary story is lost in the details. In a few passages, unfortunately, the emotional sweep of that writing translates into somewhat overwrought prose as Zumwalt summarizes events. For instance, Zumwalt introduces Boas's slow movement into institutional positions in anthropology through important sponsors in grandiloquent terms: "Boas did, however, have the support of his two guardian angels, Putnam and Jacobi, and the wind beneath their wings would eventually carry him to joint positions at the AMNH and at Columbia University" (p. 241). She further describes Boas's steadfastness in the face of disciplinary uncertainty: "All of this rich tapestry comes to us through the years because Franz Boas had the amplified vision to dream on a large scale, to plan without a foregrounded fear of failure, and the courage to dare" (p. 299). Thankfully, such diversions are rare in the book, and the thread of Boas's correspondence generally provides useful continuity and an easily accessible narrative voice. Zumwalt's experienced analytical acumen, regrettably, rarely comes through in such a densely epistolary text.

Readers thus engage Boas on a highly personal level throughout Zumwalt's account of his life. Sometimes an institutional history but always a chronological biography, the book does a superb job of recovering Boas's voice and presenting it to the reader without significant interruption. However, that focus leaves the book without a real argument and lacking significant critical engagement with Boas's anthropological work. Instead, Zumwalt generates a detailed chronology of Boas's early life seen through his own eyes with only occasional authorial intervention or analysis. The result is a relatively straightforward accounting of that life without theoretical or critical apparatus. While that approach may work with some biographical subjects, letting the ideas of an early theoretician in a field with enormously complex and consequential intellectual debates speak for themselves brings risk and requires either a reader already familiar with those arguments or a companion book to point out inconsistencies and excesses in what Boas did or what he had to say. This first volume of the biography, well produced in hardcover and including some useful photographic inserts following chapter 7, remains an incomplete work that awaits conclusion. The second volume will determine whether this narrative reaches a fully braided conclusion—one built from engagement with anthropological theory in the context of its creation over the course of the life of this important, relevant, and worthy subject.

Notes

[1]. David Hackett Fischer, "The Braided Narrative: Substance and Form in Social History," in *Literature of Fact: Selected Papers from the English Institute*, ed. Angus Fletcher (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 109-33; 132.

[2]. *The Enigma of Arnold Van Gennep (1873-1957): Master of French Folklore and Hermit of Bourgl-la-Reine* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1988); *Wealth and Rebellion: Elsie Clews Parsons, Anthropologist and Folklorist*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

[3]. Michel Foucault, "La vie: L'expérience et la science," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 90, no. 1 (January-March 1985): 3-14. See also *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1970).

[4] The range of anthropological disciplinary criticism is enormous, but see, for instance, James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); and Vincent Crapanzano, *Hermes' Dilemma and Hamlet's Desire: On the Epistemology of Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

Citation: Douglas Leonard. Review of Zumwalt, Rosemary Lévy, *Franz Boas: The Emergence of the Anthropologist*. H-Ideas, H-Net Reviews. February, 2021. **URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=55922>

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).