

Research Project

Of Cultural, Poetic, and Medial Alterity: The Scholarship, Poetry, Photographs, and Films of Edward Sapir, Ruth Fulton Benedict, and Margaret Mead

Third-party funded project

Project title Of Cultural, Poetic, and Medial Alterity: The Scholarship, Poetry, Photographs, and Films of Edward Sapir, Ruth Fulton Benedict, and Margaret Mead

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Organisation / Research unit

Departement Gesellschaftswissenschaften / Kulturanthropologie (Leimgruber)

Departement Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaften / Amerikanistik (Schweighauser)

Department

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"Of Cultural, Poetic, and Medial Alterity: The Scholarship, Poetry, Photographs, and Films of Edward Sapir, Ruth Fulton Benedict, and Margaret Mead" is a 3-year research project that brings together literary scholars and cultural anthropologists to explore convergences between three types of alterity: cultural alterity (the otherness of the cultures anthropologists study), poetic alterity (the use of poetry in anthropological investigation), and medial alterity (the use of then non-conventional media such as photographs and films in anthropological investigation) in the work of three preeminent cultural anthropologists: Sapir, Benedict, and Mead, who conceptualized 'culture' and 'cultural relativism,' two of the most influential concepts in the 20th c. social sciences.

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Out of the three, it is Mead who has become famous for experimenting with media other than the standard ethnographic text already in the 1930s, particularly photography and film. What is less known is that, together, our three anthropologists wrote over 500 poems, dedicated poems to one another, and published a good number of them in renowned literary magazines such as *The Dial* and *Poetry*. This prolific, collaborative poetic output, much of which engages with the objects of the writers' anthropological investigations, makes them a unique group in the history of 20th-century Cultural Anthropology: they were the only anthropologists of the era that left a sizeable (yet sorely understudied) body of poetry. Along with their ethnographic writings and relevant selections from Mead's ethnographic films and photographs, these texts and (audio)visual media form the corpus of our research project.

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To date, neither our anthropologists' poems nor Mead's photographs and films have been the subjects of a sustained study: previous literary scholarship has analyzed but a fraction of the poems, largely from biographical perspectives that are in danger of reducing the poems to their authors' personal lives, and most of Mead's photographs and films still linger unexamined in the Library of Congress (LoC). The current project proposes to close this gap by asking what difference it makes whether one evokes the cultural Other in standard expository ethnographic prose, in poetic language, or in (what used to be) non-conventional media of ethnographic representation such as celluloid and photographic prints. In tackling this question, we present the first sustained study of Sapir's, Benedict's, and Mead's poetic

oeuvres; make an important, canon-revising intervention in the history of US modernism as well as the 20th -century history of anthropology; and propose a reassessment of Mead's role in the development of visual anthropology that takes into account the aesthetic/aesthetic nature of her work.

Keywords literary anthropology, anthropology of the senses, Mead, Margaret, medial alterity, visibility, aisthesis, visual anthropology, primitivism, cultural relativism, aesthetics, 20th c. literary history, Benedict, Ruth Fulton, sound, literariness

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Add publication

Published results

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3391985	Leimgruber, Walter; Chakkalaka, Silvy	Howes, Dawid, Prof. Dr.	Professor of Anthropology at Concordia University, Montreal and the Director of the Concordia Sensoria Research Team (CON-SERT) Department of Sociology and Anthropology Concordia University Montreal, Québec Canada	01.08.2014	31.07.2017
3391986	Leimgruber, Walter; Chakkalaka, Silvy	Buergel, Roger M., Direktor	Johann Jacobs Museum	01.08.2014	31.07.2017
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3391988	Leimgruber, Walter; Chakkalaka, Silvy	Bendix, Regina, Prof. Dr.	Institut für Kulturanthropologie/Europäische Ethnologie, Universität Göttingen	01.01.2015	31.07.2017
3391989	Leimgruber, Walter; Chakkalaka, Silvy	Soh Bejeng, Bonaventure, Dr., Artistic Director	Savvy Contemporary Berlin-Wedding	01.08.2014	31.07.2017