

Publication

Of Syncretisms, Foils, and Cautionary Examples: Ruth Fulton Benedict's Poetic and Ethnographic Styles

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Starting from the Comte de Buffon's loose 1753 definition of 'style' as "nothing but the order and movement one gives to one's thoughts" while insisting on the potentially violent act of inscription that the etymological origin of 'style' in Latin stilus points to, this essay explores major Boasian anthropologist Ruth Fulton Benedict's ethnographic and poetic styles. Focusing on her bestselling *Patterns of Culture* and her remarkable poem "Myth," I probe Benedict's politics of representation of ethnic others, which takes divergent forms depending on the author's choice of genre: while her ethnographic prose styles ethnic others as foils to Western civilization or cautionary examples in the service of cultural critique, her poetry expresses a profound desire for redemption through the syncretistic fusion of cultures that is primitivist in nature even as it qualifies the doctrine of the incommensurability of cultures that her brand of cultural relativism announces.

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