Occasioning Character:  
On the History of Princeton Anthropology  
and the Possibility of Disciplinary Representation  

An Interview with Professor Emeritus James Boon, by Luke Johnson

LJ: How do we go about structuring an interview on the history of Princeton anthropology, particularly insofar as it relates to the broader history of the discipline? Is it still possible to do a sort of bird’s-eye inventory taking, of the type that Sherry Ortner did when she mapped out the relationships between symbolic anthropology, cultural ecology, structuralism, and so on (with, to be fair, a great deal of hedging)?

JB: These are cozy categories. I’ve worked on structuralism, but never as an -ism. I resist any sort of sequencing. I think the sequence from structuralism to post-structuralism is a faux sequence. And all my work on the history of anthropology stays true to this rejection. Sherry’s style in that article—doing kind of a potted plotting of theoretical progress—is something that I think has value, but is not dispositive.

LJ: So is there a sort of mid-way between, on the one hand, an exhaustive record of everything that anthropologists have ever written over the past 50 years, and on the other, a border-line reductivist periodization? How might you begin to debrief an interested outsider on Princeton anthropology’s role in the discipline over the past 50 years without lapsing into complete detail or complete schematics?

JB: Let’s take Carol Greenhouse’s operative term: the conversation. This is a phenomenally important philosophical term—say for people like Stanley Cavell. Carol Greenhouse makes of conversation the representative notion of that which runs between the extremes you just mentioned. Conversation is wonderful because it not only takes two, it takes—as any linguist would acknowledge—the notion of beings spoken to as well as speaking. We could go to Bakhtin’s dialogism here, or to Boasian Sapir (and I’m always happy to rescue Whorf!). All the interesting chariots can be driven between the extremes. I suspect you could open any book by our faculty—or for that matter, 99% of the dissertations of Princeton graduate students—and by the first paragraph those two extremes would be aufhebung’ed [sublated]. This department’s work is wedded to an engagement of the embroiled richness, complexity, sorrow, and resourcefulness of the subjects being depicted. Carolyn Rouse is breathtaking in this regard. João Biehl weeps at this thought. Yet there are exceeding differences among all of these colleagues.

We could relate this point to Lévi-Strauss as well. One goal of my work on Lévi-Strauss has been to rescue him from the charge of formalism. He was not a formalist. Of course, I’m closest to Cliff Geertz’s interpretive turn, but I loved to work the differences among rival approaches. Cliff had little sympathy for Lévi-Strauss’s “theory;” I have lots of sympathy for the “lifeworks” of both.

I was just leafing through John Borneman’s [Anthropology Core Graduate Seminar] syllabus—a class I taught for 25 years. And John’s array of assignments seems quite similar to mine. We’d do Boas, we’d do Marx, we’d do psychoanalysis with lots of obliqueness, particularly through the lens of film studies. I would use issues of fetishism—which were having a revival at the time. This approach seems characteristic of the department: you take
what appears a recent, cutting-edge topic, and you show how—not old-hat it is—but how venerable and human it is. And I personally resist any kind of easy notion of progress. Particularly in the history of ideas. I once did a chapter called “Comparative De-Enlightenment,” in Other Tribes, Other Scribes. It implied that if you ever think you’re moving toward Enlightenment, it’s gonna bite you!

LJ: If this skepticism of progress—paired with a dogged commitment to historicization—is one characteristic of the department, how might you describe some others? How else would you describe Princeton Anthropology?

"...our department is ardent, trim, and intent on interpreting human promise and plights in an ever-complicating world." - JB

JB: Well it’s always been a small department, and it became almost programmatically so. Princeton decided from the beginning not to try to cover the four fields. Rather we remained a largely socio-cultural faculty, complemented by key exceptions (e.g., Alan Mann) to enhance graduate education and undergraduate teaching. Later other departments followed suit—Stanford, for example. We always managed to do a lot with a little, and even more as we expanded.

Again though, it’s hard for me to dissociate characterizing the department from historical specifics. I’m an anthropologist! Culture lives in specifics.

My time as chair stretched from 2001-2006. During that period after 9/11, Princeton’s institutional arrangements were shifting. The university established PIIRS, forged out of smaller programs in regional and area studies. Princeton hoped to advance an administratively effective way to confront intensifying difficulties in the world.

Anthropology is part of that, of course, but this department also insisted on the value of scaled down operations — devoted to fieldwork, personal encounters, textual complexity, and so on. We maintained a very Boasian and Malinowskian commitment to those sorts of engagements.

In 2006, I wrote my last chair’s report to President Shirley Tilghman, summarizing all the graduate student research, course contents, and faculty projects (in 15 or 20 single spaced pages) and trying to make the case for what’s distinctive about it all. As always, I offered a view of the department tied to historical circumstances. You can never dissociate them.

[Excerpts]

I here gladly echo my previous missives in reporting that our department is ardent, trim, and intent on interpreting human promise and plights in an ever-complicating world.

... In our age of radically accelerating information flow, yet increased surveillance of border crossing (both literal and figurative) anthropology strives for spirited and humane cross-cultural understanding -- buttressed by circumstantial doubt, mindful of contingencies. Such remains the task of our department. Forces of centralization and standardization have been aggravated by 9/11, and by so-called advances in certain technologies. These developments reinforce a tendency to equate with security and defense much in human experience that only partly pertains to these urgencies. Princeton must of course be responsive to urgencies ... But by the same token Princeton University — thanks to its special qualities, ideal scale, and minimal tails [i.e. professional schools] wagging the dog — should remain more agile and flexible than peer institutions of research, teaching, and learning.

...Anthropology is a seasoned cross-cultural pursuit, sensitive to perils of too-quick solutions, and to drawbacks of marketable fixes for complicated matters. Non-dogmatic interpretation is rightly wary of reductive analyses. It resists capitulating to schemes based on restricted encounter, or simply geared to regulations of surveillance.
Research and study cannot be governed by mechanisms of control or by reactive policies. As Ruth Benedict once counseled in The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: “The study of comparative religions has flourished only when men were secure enough in their own conviction to be unusually generous. They might be Jesuits, or Arabic savants, or unbelievers, but they could not be zealots. The study of comparative cultures too, cannot flourish when men are so defensive about their own way of life, that it appears to them, to be by definition, the sole solution in the world.” It was Benedict’s genius and ethic to direct this admonishment to ourselves, as well as to others.

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LJ: Listening to you talk about the department throughout this interview, I’m reminded of Kroeber’s Culture Patterns and Processes, where he notes that in the long term, cultures remain the same more than they change. You’ve highlighted many similar commitments at play among the anthropologists at Princeton—commitments that span ontological, epistemological, ethical, and political registers. But I do have to say as a graduate student in 2019, this is surprising to me. Reading Malinowski, Boas, and Benedict beside, say, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Aimee Cox, and Angela Garcia, I’m struck by how much anthropology has changed. Can you speak a bit to the changes or surprises you’ve seen in recent years—either in the department or the discipline more broadly?

JB: Well, you won’t like this answer, but as an Emeritus, about the only thing I’ve taken a break from is trying to assess what the current state of the field is. So, I don’t really have an answer. I can say that medical anthropology and the anthropology of finance are incredibly important right now. Then, of course, race is always important. But you can’t say that’s a new trend—it goes at least back to Boas. I published a piece for the American Philosophical Society called “Alternating Generations” on Boasian succession that, by way of Kroeber, makes the point you were making before. Subsequently I made a presentation at the New York Academy of Sciences on the 100th anniversary of the publication of The Mind of Primitive Man [by Boas]. There I compared the first and revised editions—separated by the consolidation of Nazism’s racist policies – to demonstrate Boas’s signature sensibilities and stance against various racisms. His concerns are a lasting fixture of anthropology.

I’ll also mention Gananath Obeyesekere and close reading (the kind I try to achieve). Close reading is the commitment to volatile circumstantiality and to otherwise. My baseline is doubting the literal. And that doesn’t mean everything is wishy-washy. Call me Kantian, if nothing else! We can get bold philosophically, epistemologically, but each such stance brings you back to detail.

LJ: I sense a slight ambivalence here. On the one hand you’ve emphasized great continuity in anthropology throughout your career, but on the other, you’ve persistently resisted the possibility of dispositive characterizations.

JB: You argue what’s happening in the field at particular occasions—when you’re hiring, when you’re writing applications, or when you’re making tenure decisions. Such occasions require speculating about where the discipline is moving and how it’s going to get there. But you attach these presentiments to bodies of work. For the past few years, I haven’t been doing much that occasions envisioning anthropology’s future. Any department has to justify itself under actual circumstances. And that can be a thrill! For example, I still relish my above-cited salute to Ruth Benedict in that 2006 report that I labored over for weeks and weeks. Truth to tell, it seems to me equally apposite today!

I am a [philosophical] pragmatist. As was Geertz; and by the way, as was (in part) Levi-Strauss (he cited [Charles Sanders] Peirce, you know). And as a pragmatist might say, I don’t have something ex cathedra to enunciate—but when it’s time to harvest the peas, to have a meal, to reproduce, or to yearn for something… that’s what thought (and theory) is part of.