In 1886, the young Franz Boas called himself “an incurable idealist,” and resolved to leave his German homeland behind to marry his beloved Marie Krackowizer and take up permanent residence in the U.S. (BPM FB/TB 12/10/1886, cited in Liss 1996:179). Motivated by ideals and duty but driven by the opportunity to institutionalize science in the U.S., Franz Boas quickly integrated himself within his wife’s German-immigrant social circle -- some of Manhattan’s most distinguished intellectuals. And it was this network that facilitated his appointment to the editorial staff of *Science*.

Boas moved quickly to establish himself as an ethnologist by trying to revive the moribund American Ethnological Society, participating in section H of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and advancing his perspectives on the nascent discipline in *Science* (Boas 1996[1887], 1887a;1887b; Liss 1996:179-181). In some respects, the timing of Boas’ decision to reside in the U.S. could not have been better. He came to the United States as science itself was becoming more professional: It was moving out of the local museums, societies, and lyceums and into national associations, universities, and large museums with decidedly global scopes and cosmopolitan views. This transition accompanied a shift in the actual discourse of science. Although books had always been important, lyceums and local societies mediated science through public lectures and debates. National associations and large museums, on the other hand, mediated science through print (Bender 1993:5).

In the most broad terms, small societies were constituted by shared locale and interest in broad topics--a scientific community with locality. Members of these communities often articulated partisan ideals while defending the laws of nature. Although these societies often published pamphlets and periodicals with limited circulation, scientific discourse was usually articulated by means of discussions, correspondence, and lectures (Boyd 1934:10-12). In contrast, national associations were constituted by shared interests in narrowing areas of specialization. These associations attempted to embrace universal ideals while advancing the scientific method. The print media of professionalizing science comprised articles, notices, and reviews selected or solicited by editors of specific institutions. Compiled into organs or journals that articulated an institution’s agenda, these journals were delivered to constituents of the institution (members, philanthropists, subscribers, libraries)-- a scientific community without locality (Darnell 1971).

Boas’ training within the institutions of German science served him well as he participated in this emerging trend of professionalizing science, and his academic work in the first decade in the U.S. was almost exclusively aimed at advancing anthropology and ethnology within the apparatus of academic institutions. Scholars who write about Franz Boas often point to his work in the public sphere, his relationships with African American intellectuals and activist, or the way he and his students changed the way scholars and lay people alike think about race, language, and
culture. Much of these contributions, however, were made after 1905 when he had produced the basic research, and formulated the basic arguments, for the two books that became the foundation for his public assertions about race and culture—*The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911) and *Changes in Bodily Form* (1912).

Prior to 1905, Boas only produced research and texts for colleagues at academic institutions. Even though Boas did not venture beyond the academic sphere, it did not preclude his participation in the public sphere. The initial research and preliminary findings he presented to the academic community raised the ire of partisan interests who understood the “potential” of Boas’ early findings. I will illustrate two cases where individuals launched viperous attacks on Boas’ academic work. The first was launched in 1891 by Austin Cristy, a committed nativist in the North, and the other in 1905 by William B. Smith, an avowed white supremacist in the South. In effect, writers like these pulled Boas out of the ivory tower and into the knock-down drag-out public debates mediated by sensationalist papers and tawdry tracts—typical of public discourse during the Progressive Era.

These colorful critiques of Boas’ early work raises an important historiographic issue: Franz Boas, and subsequently early professional anthropology, had a wider impact on public debates in the U.S. than historians of anthropology have previously considered. The fact that Boas’ early research and writing was pilloried in newspapers and tracts confirms the fact that his work was being read and interpreted as a threat in different regions of the country. Much to his chagrin, Boas was an actor on the public stage well before he cast his role on his own terms.

These early attacks on Boas’ work raise another issue that speaks to contemporary communities of interest—scientific or otherwise. With the advent of electronic discussion groups on the Internet and limited barrier-to-entry for publishing on the world wide web, the type of groups that discussed and debated scientific interests with alacrity, acrimony, and color, at the local lyceum have sort of re-emerged in cyberspace. Thomas Bender (1993), Martin Bulmer (1984), and others (Camic 1995:1004) have linked these 19th-century discourse communities to the notion of locality and peg their demise to the transformation of urban civil society, the emergence of national annual meetings, and widely disseminated journals. However, the local/non-local dichotomy of these interest-groups should be rethought if indeed the discourse dynamics at local sites in the 19th century are being reproduced on web sites in the 21st?

Many anthropologists applaud the academic work Boas produced in the late 19th and early 20th century because it helped sound the death knell for the science of white supremacy. Yet, the same science Boas tried to combat is being circulated via the Internet to lend scientific authority to claims of white supremacy, eugenics, and nativism. Moreover, Boas remains a favorite target for anti-Semitic writers who fear science that demonstrates the equipotential of the races. Just as Boas was denounced in the popular media of 19th century-- in tracts and newspapers-- it continues in the 21st century-- on the Internet.

One of many examples includes the “White Nationalist Resource Page” (advocating ‘White Pride– World Wide” and boasting 7,000 hits a day). This site posts an article about the power of propaganda, which illustrates the way Jews have used it “to make it a dogmatic ‘fact’ that there are no measurable, scientific differences between races and, therefore, no races at all!” The author of the article explains how

The Jews first got a few of their boys into top university spots. . .
with the express purpose of giving academic respectability to their 'there-is-no-such-thing-as-race' lie. One of the first and most important of these was Franz Boas, a Jew heavily involved in communist causes. The whole of Jewry pitched in to boost their boy. Boas was praised in every Jewish-owned newspaper and periodical and given every academic prize they could promote. Little by little, Boas gained such "stature" by this Jewish mutual-admiration society technique that he became an "acknowledged authority" in social anthropology and ethnology. His students and colleagues at Columbia -- Herskovits, Klineberg, Ashley Montagu, Weltfish -- as unsavory a collection of left-wing Jews as one might hope for -- spread his doctrines far and wide, deliberately poisoning the minds of two generations of American students at many of our largest universities (www.stormfront.org/posterity/ns/prop.html).

Madison Grant, Thomas Dixon, Lothrop Stoddard, and the entire cast of late 19th and early 20th century characters who advanced a science of white supremacy are being disseminated along with latter-day racial determinist like J. Philippe Rushton and Charles Murray on the Internet today as if there was an uninterrupted and uncontest claim to the racial supremacy of the white race. Just like the clubby atmosphere of the local historical or science society in the 19th century, millions of interest-oriented web sites and electronic discussion groups foster a sense of community through a unique blend of chat, debate, correspondence, and passionate texts that have an uncanny resemblance to the broadsheets, pamphlets, and tracts, so popular in the 19th century. Web sites that promote white supremacy foster a sense of community in similar ways, but they also use the authority of science and the history of that science to bolster, interpret, and explain their view of the world.

Frankly, I am not terribly concerned with populist renditions of racialist science used to justify white supremacy, although the 7,000 hits per day is troubling. National associations, editorial boards, peer review processes, and the very high barrier to entry for getting published in the organs of national associations actually mitigates popular science and partisan interests. Private think-tanks and institutes, like the Heritage Foundation or the American Enterprise Institute, articulate a similar but far more sophisticated discourse of white supremacy that has a far greater influence on public policy.

My major concern here is documenting the way Boas was challenged in the popular media at the turn of the 20th century. Although I selected two texts that did not come from local scientific societies, in some cases they might be used as a reasonable proxy for such discourse. I chose one text from a local newspaper and another from a popular book authored for white supremacists. Each of these texts were used to advance an agenda and foster community. I want to draw a parallel between the way Boas was pilloried in the 19th century to the way he is pilloried in the 21st to basically argue that, if Boas gets bashed in similar ways by white supremacists and nativists across the span of three centuries, he must have been doing something right!
The Caliper Question

In 1889, G. Stanley Hall hired the inaugural faculty of Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts. Franz Boas was hired as part of a stellar team of scientists and researchers, which sought to rival Johns Hopkins as the nation’s leading research university. Serving as a Docent and teaching twice as much as his colleagues on the regular faculty, Boas launched an aggressive program researching growth and racial plasticity to complement his ongoing research in ethnography and folklore (Cole 1999:137-139).

After a decade and half of experiments, measurements, and careful documentation that took him to Oakland and Toronto, Boas began challenging some of the basic assumptions of physical anthropology while advancing bio-statistics in the U.S. (Camic and Xie 1994). These efforts culminated in a major study he conducted between 1908 and 1910 for the U.S. Immigration Commission and published as *Changes in Bodily Form of Descendants of Immigrants* (1912). In it, he demonstrated that the environment played a significant role in determining physical attributes, like head size, which were so often used to demarcate racial difference (Stocking 1974:189-90).

The method and preliminary findings for this study were conducted at Clark in 1891. When Franz Boas arrived in Worcester to begin his teaching career, the city had a population of just under 100,000. From its bucolic dairy and produce farms to its bustling business district and factories, the city was a major hub of the industrial revolution. Inhabited by blue-bloods from New England’s best families, but being rapidly populated by immigrants from Europe and Canada-- Boas arrived during a tumultuous period. The cities’ industrial might centered around a successful wire and steel industry that spawned subsequent industry and services to produce, among other things, thousands of miles of barbed wire shipped to the west for fencing (Southwick 1998:37-42).

Factories belched black smoke from hundreds of stacks across the city and workers poured in to fill the need for labor. In subsequent waves of immigration, beginning with French and English Canadians in 1860, the population of Worcester grew six fold between the 1840s and 1890s. By the mid 1890s, one third of the population was foreign born. Most of the immigrants were from Ireland, Sweden, and Canada, but there were sizeable communities of Armenians, Poles, Lithuanians, Syrians, Finns, Norwegians, Assyrians, Germans, Danes, Russians, Ukrainians, Greeks, Italians, and Albanians (Southwick 1998:38).

Although Worcester’s ethnic and religious diversity was unmatched by any in-land city of its size, the gulf between factory workers and the educated and monied elite was typical of many industrializing cities of the 1890s (Gutman 1973:671-585). Along with this diversity came polarizing politics and ensuing nativism. As Irish Catholics consolidated political power, the American Protective Association, which feared Papal conspiracies and organized against the interests of immigrant communities, emerged as a leading civic association in the city (Southwick 1998:58).

With an array of immigrants and a public school system that counted half of its student body as foreign-born or children of immigrants, Boas had an ideal laboratory at his disposal to gather data on patterns of growth from people with different heritages (Southwick 1998:38). With a proposal to study patterns of children’s growth, Boas quietly secured the permission of
the Worcester school committee to set up a small station in each school for measuring children. As a public service, Boas also proposed testing the hearing and eyesight of each child he took head, girth, and height measurements (WDT 3/4/1891). Although he had ideal subjects to measure, the ability to measure them proved less than ideal.

His modest program, modeled after the studies conducted in Boston’s public schools by Henry P. Bowditch (1877), alarmed some parents because they did not understand exactly why and what he was going to measure. To assuage any “mis apprehension [that] exists regarding measurements,” Boas printed a circular distributed to all the parents detailing the purpose of the measurements, which had the “object of getting data regarding growth of the head, growth of the brain, [and] growth of the bodies with questions as to nationality, etc. occupation of parents, numbers of brothers and sister, etc.” He carefully explained, to a reporter from the Worcester Daily Telegram, “that I do not desire to measure any child against its own wish or the will of his parents.” (WDT 3/7/1891).

This initial study of school children, which served as a foundation for his seminal work in physical anthropology was almost derailed by Austin P. Cristy, the acerbic publisher of the Worcester Daily Telegram--Worcester’s most popular daily. Punctuated with nativism and anti-Semitism, Cristy mounted a crusade against Boas. “Franz Boas, the man who has received from the school board the open sesame to the anatomies of the public school children of the city,” the Telegram reported, “must have been a scraper from way back.”

“He has scars on his face and head that would make a jailbird turn green with envy. His scalp is seared with saber cuts, and slashes over his eyes, on his nose, and on one cheek from mouth to ear, [which] give his countenance and appearance which is not generally considered au fait, outside the criminal class.” (WDT 3/5/1891). Christy sarcastically asked parents, how will they “enjoy the hero of German duels feeling their sons’ and daughters’ heads and bodies over, just as he did those of the Eskimaux” (WDT 3/5/1891). On a more sanguine note, Christy reported: “The chances are if Franz Boas, Ph.D. Kiel, should enter one of the schools the boys, as soon as they recognize his battle scarred visage, will draw their pea-shooters with one accord and annihilate him with a volley” (WDT 3/7/99).

Cristy used Boas’ research plan to fuel the tension between the populist working class who read his paper and “the best people of the city.” This was not the first time, however, that Christy targeted the faculty at Clark to articulate his agenda. Although the editor caused a stir, the majority of the school committee did not back down because this was, after all, the age of science and it was not going to let a provincial publisher get in the way of progress. Members of the school committee stood by their decision to provide Boas the opportunity and facility with which to measure students’ bodies, and they spoke out against Cristy’s efforts to derail scientific progress.

The committee’s major concerns included the fact that “The Telegram” did “not give them an opportunity to demonstrate the wisdom and value” of the research, the paper did not reflect the “large majority of the best people of the city who approve of the action of the school committee,” and finally, The Telegram did “not fairly reflect the prevailing public sentiment, in opposing the measurements.” (WDT 4/15/1891). Cristy railed against each charge, noting that his paper prints the written “opinions or letters of those with whom it differs,” and “not a line attempting to demonstrate the wisdom or value of the proposed measure has been offered to The
Telegram for publication.” “As for ‘correctly reflecting public sentiment,’ ” Christy lamented, “The Telegram don’t pretend to try to; it reflects its own ‘sentiment’ to a hair and that is all the ‘sentiment’ it ever pretends to ‘reflect.’” Christy was particularly upset with the charge that he should report the views of “the majority of the best people in the city [who] supported the school committee.” He clarified that “The Telegram is not very well posted as to ‘best people’; it don’t take much stock in ‘best people,’ anyway” (WDT 4/15/1891).

Although Christy was explicit that “The Telegram does not believe that anything like a majority . . . approve” of the board’s action, he decided to give the committee “a chance to demonstrate the Telegram is mistaken,” by giving “‘public opinion’ a chance to ‘reflect’ itself” (WDT 4/15/1891).

In an article that headlined “Telegram Offers All a Chance to Vote on Boas Measurements,” Christy argued “the only known way to get anything like the sentiment of a community is by voting. Therefore, vote and find out how Worcester stands.”

There is but one way to get the facts; if the measurers and their friends have got the public sentiment they boast of, let them say so in votes. If the opponents of the scheme are the more numerous or sufficiently numerous to be entitled to immunity from having any such outside enterprise thrust upon the school system–let them say so in votes. . . . The votes, “yes,” or “no,” must be written upon a ballot printed in The Telegram and sent by mail, or brought to The Telegram office. Everybody buys the paper anyway. . . .The Telegram has always advocated female suffrage, and mothers as well as fathers and all teachers and all school pupils and all others can vote during this expression of the sentiment of all the people. School committee members and docents can vote, also. Prepare your ballots! (WDT 4/15/91).

Cristy’s timing could not have been better, and Boas’ timing could not have been worse. After several fits and starts, Boas went forward with his plan for measuring eighth and ninth graders in the Woodland-street School, April 16, 1891, the day after Christy’s printed the ballots and called for the vote.

Christy, of course, shouldered the press’ responsibility as community watch-dog and despatched one of his reporters to the school to write “a detailed description of the way they do it.” The Telegram reported that “Docent Boas and his two assistants, Docent G.M. West and Mr. A.F. Chamberlain of Clark University . . . arrived before 8:30 o’clock.” The reporter detailed how the scientists used their “paraphernalia,” which included calipers, sheet lead, paper, a square box, and a “machine for measuring the strength of the eyes,” and a “chart used for detecting astigmatism of the eyes.” While the reporter detailed what Boas measured, he was more concerned with how he measured – especially the girls.

The reporter watched carefully as Boas and his assistant weighed and measured children. The Telegram reported the entire processes, which began by the student answering questions about nationality, age, color of eyes, etc. “Next the docent took a small strip of sheet lead, a quarter of an inch in thickness, and, telling the subject to shut the eyes, leaving the impression [of the nose] in the soft lead.” The paper painted Boas as a lecherous foreigner who would paw at the
bodies of innocent girls with “a hand that fooled around the topknots of medicine men and toyed with the war paint of bloodthirsty Indians” (WDT 3/5/1891)

“Please remove the shoes,” was the next request. This did not trouble the boys, but when there were two girls and one boy together with Docent West and a Telegram reporter in the little room. . . the reporter noticed the girls, young ladies, rather, of 15 or 16 years, glance from one to the other hesitatingly before removing the shoes and appearing in stockings.

There was more removing, too. The young ladies who had long hair braided and knotted on the back part of the head had to take it down, and hair-pins and ribbon had to be removed. Then the subjects were ready for Docent Boas and his calipers. . .Those calipers of Docent Boas’s are triple-jointed affairs, made of cold steel. One end of the cold steel Docent Boas put in amongst the young lady’s back hair till it rested on the extreme point of the occiput. Then he closed them together over the top of the head till the other end rested on the middle of the forehead.” (WDT 4/17/1891).

The votes and editorials began to pour into the offices of the Daily Telegram. After the first day of voting, there were 870 ‘No’ votes and only 11 votes affirming Boas’ research. Quickly deemed the “caliper question,” editorials proposed “giving Mr. Boaz [sic.] a new suit of clothes made of tar and feathers, and a free ride on a rail. . .to the wharf where he can get a nice whiff of sea air as he returns to the land of his nativity” (WDT 4/17/99).

Although Boas was “fed up with the whole thing,” he was unmoved by the popular sentiment reflected in the paper and continued to measure children for whom he had received written permission slips. Apparently, Boas and his measurements were more popular than Cristy and his paper would have the public believe. As the weeks wore on, 80 percent of the permission slips given to the schoolchildren were returned with the signatures of their parents (Cole 1999:143, c.f. WDT 4/23/1891). However, the support of the parents and enthusiasm of the students did not square with overwhelming opposition for the measurements voiced by the public. On May 12, 1891, Cristy reported the final tally on the caliper question, “Shall Docent Boas and ‘his assistants’ measure the public school pupils of Worcester?” It stood at 15,116 ‘No’ and 345 ‘Yes.’ Yet, Boas was able to measure hundreds of children with their parents’ consent. Cristy’s grand scheme to derail Boas’ research ultimately backfired, but not without a thorough investigation by a newspaper reporter.

Cristy sent out reporters to investigate the disconnect between public opinion as measured by his poll and the success of Boas’ data collection. For the teenagers of Worcester, being measured by an exotic man with unusual instruments while raising the ire of parents and the press alike became irresistible and quite fashionable. In an article that headlined “Parents Send ‘No’ Votes But Sign Permission Blanks,” the paper explained that “a great number” of children “beg their parents’ permission to have the measurements made. . . ‘My boy teased me so much to let Docent Boas measure him,’ said a parent yesterday, ‘that I signed the blank presented for the purpose, although I am opposed to the measurements and have voted ‘no’ in The Telegram’s
vote contest.’ ” (WDT 4/23/1891). “When a reporter asked” some boys from a local baseball team, “if they had been measured, they said they had and that they liked it first rate. ‘I’ve voted, too,’ said one of them. ‘So has pa and ma.’ ‘What did you vote?’ queried the reporter. ‘I voted ‘no’ and so did all of us. But we like to get measured all the same because it is such fun.” The reporter continued:

The pupils of the lowest grades are having even more fun out of Docent Boas than those of the higher grades. The youngsters haven’t the slightest idea whether they are being sized up according to the requirements of the Shamanistic rites with which Docent Boas is conversant, or to furnish statistics for gumdrop manufacturers. They wink and blink at the shining calipers and cabalistic measuring beam, and step on the scales as if they were going to receive a stick of candy at the conclusion of the examination. All the while they keep up a huge expression of merriment and, the thought of studies and recitation never enter their heads (WDT 4/23/1891).

So thanks, in large measure, to the indiscretion of Worcester teens, Boas was able to circumvent the ‘power of the press’ and the putative ‘will of the people,’ to conduct a pilot study that laid an important foundation for his efforts to challenge the science of the body in the late nineteenth century.

A Brief on Behalf of the Unborn

As the 19th century closed, Boas was establishing his leadership in the field and moving anthropology in new directions. Content with organizational leadership and debating scholars via scholarly publications and association meetings, Boas remained focused on making contributions to the academic arena. By the turn of the century, Boas was trying to move anthropology beyond the comparative method and rigid racial topologies. And as early as 1894, Boas addressed the so-called Negro problem by brining together his critique of the comparative method and his understanding that one could not prove racial inferiority. Titled “Human Faculty as Determined by Race,” Boas gave this paper at the annual meeting of the AAAS, and it was subsequently published in its annals (Boas 1895). One could safely say, however, it did not get wide circulation.3

After nearly a decade, William Benjamin Smith, gave Boas’ “Human Faculty” national attention when he subjected it a paragraph by paragraph analysis in an effort to “refute it thoroughly” (Smith 1905:xi). In Smith’s popular book titled The Color Line: A Brief on Behalf of the Unborn, he committed an entire chapter to challenging Boas’ 1894 address to the AAAS, calling it “by far the ablest plea yet made for the ‘backward races.’” 4

Smith framed his book by asking and then answering what he saw as a central question: Is the South justified in this absolute denial of social equality to the Negro, no matter what his virtues or abilities or accomplishments? We affirm, then, that the South is entirely right in thus keeping open at all times, at all hazards, and at all sacrifices an impassable social chasm between Black and White. This she must do in behalf of her blood, her essence, of the stock of her
Caucasian Race (Smith 1905:7).

William Benjamin Smith (1850 - 1934) was one of many early 20th Century hucksters of White supremacy who peddled, to the rich and poor alike, ideological and scientific rationales for lynching, defamation, and the subjugation of the “lesser races.” Although he practiced science in the lyceum tradition, he was no amateur. W.B. Smith was the chair of the Mathematics Department at Tulane University, an active participant in the social and intellectual circles of New Orleans, and wrote on a wide range of topics for both the scholarly and popular press. Such topics included international trade, disease, and the origins of Christianity. Smith also labored for years producing a line for line translation in dactylic hexameters of The Iliad of Homer (Cattell and Brimhall 1921:641; Smith and Miller 1944; http://indigo.lib.lsu.edu/la/s.html).

Smith’s 1905 “Brief on Behalf of the Unborn” had far reaching and lasting influence. In 1916, attorneys for the state of Kentucky used it as scientific proof of Negro inferiority when they argued the constitutionality of Louisville’s residential segregation before the Supreme Court (Buchanan v. Warley 245 U.S. 60 (1917); Bernstein 1998:849). In 1931, the Church of Jesus Christ of Later-Day Saints used it to scientifically defend their belief in the racial inferiority of Negroes (Roberts 1931:231-233). And in 1947, Mississippi Senator Theodore G. Bilbo featured it prominently as a scientific source in his invective tract Take Your Choice; Separation or Mongrelization (1947). Today, William B. Smith is cited as an authority on web sites like “Imperial Klans of America,” to outline how interracial dating will destroy the white race (http://www.k-k-k.com/story.html).

Smith wrote his book about the color line in the South during the first decade of the 20th Century. A wash in racial tension that simply translated into the brutal oppression and repression of African Americans, Jim Crow segregation, disfranchisement, poor sanitary conditions, and little to no wage work circumscribe the omnipresent color line. The rationale for the color line had to be constantly described and inscribed by the rich and poor who had a stake in maintaining split-labor markets, less Republicans, and the “Southern way of life.”

The mass media played an integral role in shoring up the ideological demarcation of the color line. Technological advancements and rising literacy rates increased the circulation and decreased the prices of magazines, newspapers, and books. By 1905, stereotypes that had previously been reinforced by folklore or expensive texts were now voraciously consumed by the public in the mass media.

In his Brief on Behalf of the Unborn, William B. Smith explored one “of the most important question that is likely to engage the attention of the American People for many years and even generations to come” (Smith 1905:ix). Like the latter-day authors of the Bell Curve, he framed his study by suggesting he has made every “effort to make the whole discussion purely scientific, an ethnological inquiry, undisturbed by any partisan or political influence” (Smith 1905:x). Smith used what he called “ethnological principles” to defend the South’s rigid color line, explaining how “in the South the colour line must be drawn firmly, unflinchingly--without deviation or interruption of any kind whatever” (Smith 1905:5). Smith was unequivocal: “The Negro is markedly inferior to the Caucasian is proved both craniologically and by six thousand years of planet-wide experimentation” (Smith 1905:12). Like many politicians, tycoons, and Supreme Court justices at the turn of the century, he turned to the ubiquitous Social Darwinianism to rest his case (Baker 1998:54-81).
If accepted science teaches anything at all, it teaches that the heights of being in civilized man have been reached along one path and one only—the path of selection, of the preservation of favoured individuals and of favoured races. . . . It is idle to talk of education and civilization and the like as corrective or compensative agencies. All are weak and beggarly as over against the almightiness of heredity, the omnipotence of the transmitted germ-plasma (Smith 1905:13) . . . If this be not true, then history and biology are alike false; then Darwin and Spencer, Haeckel and Weismann, Mendel and Pearson, have lived and laboured in vain.(Smith 1905:14).

Smith carefully laid out his argument, although it was not exactly novel. He recycled the same rationales that had been routinized in American popular culture and reified within the scientific literature. He trotted out accounts about cranial capacity, arrested development of the children, and higher rates of crime, immorality, and disease (all of which were linked). He devoted much of the book to depicting the horrors of miscegenation and how “mulattoes” receive the worst traits of both races. He couched these dire straits in terms of “the race instinct” and “blood purity,” and warned: “The moment the bar of absolute separation is thrown down in the South, that moment the bloom of her spirit is blighted forever . . . the idea of the race is far more sacred than that of the family. It is, in fact, the most sacred thing on earth” (1905:10).

William Smith really believed he was being a scientist and many of his readers did as well. Charles Ellwood, for example, highlighted the book’s polemic style in a review for the American Journal of Sociology, but he emphasized that Smith’s style “should not be permitted to obscure its value as a contribution to the study of the Negro problem in the United States” (Ellwood 1906:570).

As a good scientist, Smith wanted to test his theories against the strongest counter arguments. He believed, and perhaps he was right, that Franz Boas’ Human Faculty offered the most prestigious and best defense of people of color within the then current discourse on race. Smith’s whole argument rested on the notion that Africans and African Americans were the most inferior of the races both anatomically and culturally. He sought to “prove” that Sub-Saharan Africans had no art, religion, philosophy, or morality and West Africans in particular had never demonstrated “even one single aspect of civilization or culture or higher humanity” (Smith 1905:32).

Smith titled the chapter that he challenged Boas “Plea and Counter Plea,” and opened it by noting: “This distinguished anthropologists, now of Columbia University, New York City, speaks from the pinnacles of science, and his words must not go unregarded. We shall notice every salient point in his twenty-six pages . . . such a formal defense seems to call for an equally formal rejoinder” (Smith 1905:111). Smith cited Nott & Gliddon, De Gobineau, and Quattrefages, to challenge Boas’ two major claims in “Human Faculty” that various peoples contributed to each major civilization, and the evidence is not conclusive that certain races are inferior to others.

Although Smith exempted the “present backward races—African especially and Australian” (1905:113), he concurred with Boas about how different races contributed to various forms of civilization. While Boas viewed the so-called “contribution” of one race as just as important as
the contribution of another towards a civilization, Smith questioned:

But to all in equal measure? Or to some in far higher measure? That is the question. We must not think of the Senate, where all states vote alike; but of the House of Representatives, where “Little Rhody” vanishes by the side of New York or Texas. Even if all races did contribute to the sum total, which is far from true, there is an immense difference between contributions that may vary from a penny to a pound (Smith 1905:115).

Smith dismissed Boas as a “penny wise, and a pound foolish” (1905:121), and suggested that “the savant has been unscientific in his procedure; he has gone too far; he has thrown out the baby with the bath.” (1905:131).

Smith’s 1905 “Brief on behalf of the Unborn” simply mirrored that of many earlier 20th-century pundits. Yet, Smith effectively dragged Boas out of the halls of the academy, where gentleman scholars discussed cultural diffusion and Inca ruins in scholarly tomes, and into the streets, where reformers and racists vociferously debated the “problem of the Negro” in sensational monthlies and newspapers. According to William S. Willis, the impact of Smith’s chapter on Boas was twofold: It introduced Boas’ work to reformers and scholars engaged in so-called racial uplift, and formed the basis for lasting labels. Boas was quickly labeled a “nigger lover” by some or a much needed “friend of the Negro” by others.5

In the wake of Smith’s incendiary text, Boas published his first article about African Americans in a popular magazine. In 1905, Boas wrote ”The Negro and the Demands of Modern Life: Ethnic and Anatomical Considerations” for the October 7th issue of Charities, which was a special number addressing Negro migration. A modified versions of the article Smith challenged, it was sandwiched between the W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and Mary White Ovington (the reformer who initially organized the NAACP). From that point forward, Boas was identified as an important scholar who could be called upon to help “uplift the race.” W.E.B. Du Bois wasted no time. Four days after that volume of Charities was published, Du Bois wrote Boas a letter inviting him to Atlanta University to address a conference scheduled for May of the next year (Du Bois/Boas 10/11/1905).6 That letter, on the heels of the Boas’ article in Charities, which came on the heels of Smith’s effort to attack Boas’ work, was the beginning of a long and profitable relationship between Du Bois and Boas and the endeavors they pursued.

Cliques and Clicks

Austin P. Christy and William B. Smith are not normally considered important contributors to the history of anthropology. The way they wrote about Franz Boas and his research is important because they demonstrate how early anthropology was understood outside academic circles. Providing some context and analysis of William B. Smith’s attacks of Boas’ work helps to explain the way early Boasian anthropology posed a threat to the color line in the South. Providing an overview of the way Albert P. Cristy painted Boas as a lecherous immigrant, provides a vivid picture of the stark contrast between the Boas’ identity and the way he was identified (Liss 1996). Cristy’s bombastic display of the age-old tension between the town and gown, also, helps explain the difficult and often tense relationships between Clark’s President, G. Stanley Hall, and the University’s benefactor, Jonas G. Clark– a longtime local booster. Although the fracas around the ‘Caliper Question,’ ended on a positive note with regard to Boas’
research on children’s growth, it did play into the various reasons why he left Clark University (Cole 1998:142-144).

More suggestive than the historiographic aspects of these two chronicles in the history of anthropology is the fact that Boas remains a target for people who write invective and racist prose on the Internet today. Perhaps more important, the type science Boas tried so hard to combat through the institutions of science is being reproduced whole cloth on sites that promote white supremacy.

Like the 19th century club movement in the black community, or the local scientific societies more than a century ago, various Internet sites foster a similar sense of community around shared interests. Whether it is cancer patients or rock collectors, discourse communities are constituted in cyberspace. Writing passionate prose and collecting, organizing, and disseminating information through chat rooms, email lists, and posted articles, rests on the shoulders of a few committed individuals. These individuals spend countless hours enabling access to that information for members and potential members of their online communities. Web sites that articulate white supremacy are no different. Although the Bible remains the chief justification for white supremacy, scientifically “proving” the supremacy of the white race is a dominant theme that runs through these many sites. Routinely this proof is couched in the long and copious history of science that documented that putative supremacy.

The Internet is increasingly a populist medium. Like passionate pamphleteers of yesteryear, people believe deeply in their cause. The commitment and alacrity with which leaders of white supremacist sites have busied themselves transcribing, scanning, and citing these historical texts has created a type of disparity on the Internet. Although one can easily find excerpts or full texts written by Madison Grant, Senator Bilbo, or William B. Smith, one does not have the same access to texts written by Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict, or Ashley Montagu.

NOTES

1. See John Higham’s 1957 classic, “Anti-Semitism in the Gilded Age: A Reinterpretation,” (especially pages 564-578) for an interesting discussion of the various and ambivalent forms anti-Semitism took on during the Gilded Age.

2. (FB to Parents 4/19/1891, Quoted in Cole 1999:143)

3. See Baker (2000) and Williams (1998) for longer discussions about the impact of this article.

4. Charles Ellwood notes the high sales volume as well as comments on the publisher’s marketing practices (Ellwood 1906:570).


6. Professional Correspondence of Franz Boas, American Philosophical Society.
Reference List


