

Before Boas: The Genesis of Ethnography and Ethnology in the German Enlightenment.* Han F. Vermeulen. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015. 760 pp.

Reviewed by Madhuvanti Karyekar

Before Boas is a very engaging and extensive research study that seeks to unravel the intellectual lineage of two of the most important components of anthropology—ethnology and ethnography—during the early German Enlightenment. There are numerous accounts on the history of anthropology and its relation to the practice of ethnology and ethnography, written from multifarious perspectives that complicate the context and scope of anthropology by pointing out how the discipline had its roots in diverse fields—scientific travels, medicine, and philosophy and hence, how its scope was not clearly defined. Han Vermeulen makes a significant contribution through *Before Boas* to that discourse by establishing that ethnology or ethnography grew parallel to anthropology and not as a subfield, as understood in the nineteenth century, when anthropology became the umbrella science. He argues that ethnology and ethnography developed in the German Enlightenment, long before these studies were established in other parts of Europe and America (xiii), with significant fieldwork being done as early as the 1730s. His investigation locates the roots of these disciplines not in the works of eighteenth century philosophers such as Kant and Herder, or naturalists like Linnaeus and Buffon, but some German speaking enlightenment historians like Gerhard Friedrich Müller (1705-1783), August Ludwig Schlözer (1735-1809), and Adam Frantisek Kollár (1718-1783), who studied diversity of peoples and nations, which is better understood as “multiethnicity,” rather than alterity or culture.

This book is an impressive investigation of ethnographic documents from the early eighteenth century, drawing from several primary and secondary documents such as archival reports, travel accounts, and travel reviews from Russia, Germany, Austria, the United States, the Netherlands, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, France, and Great Britain from as early as the 1730s. It maps out the rise of ethnography and ethnology in eight chapters that cover about four hundred and sixty pages with the addition of about two hundred pages of notes and bibliography. Perhaps the most unique claim of this book is that the inception of ethnography and ethnology in the works of the field-historians was aided by Leibniz’s (1646-1716) historical linguistics. Through close reading of Leibniz’s work on language, Vermeulen effectively argues in the second chapter that Leibniz was the first scholar who attempted to arrange peoples on the basis of their languages, and thus laid out a “foundation for a modern ethnological way of thinking,” almost a century prior to Kant (39). Influenced by Leibniz’s historical studies on peoples and their languages, German-speaking historians such as Daniel Gottlieb Messerschmidt (1685-1735) and Müller, who participated in various research expeditions in Siberia under Russian banner, developed a vocabulary and methodology to deal with the variety they encountered in languages and cultures. The next couple of chapters prove that the primary goal of these historians was to map out a “history or a detailed description of peoples,” or as Müller named it, “Völker-Beschreibung.” In studying peoples, Vermeulen argues, these historians developed the first

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methods of fieldwork such as participant observation, interviewing people, and documenting political events—even when the sophisticated academic vocabulary was not developed at that time. As the fifth and sixth chapter illustrate, the terminology used in these field methods was adopted in the works of academic historians like Schlözer and Kollár, which promoted the academic growth of ethnology and ethnography (particularly in Göttingen and Vienna). Their work defined the primary aim of ethnology as “to be able to better to judge the peoples and nations in their own times” (447), which made the history of not just past times but also present times and conditions systematically possible. The subsequent chapters talk about how anthropology in the eighteenth century went through the phases of “natural history or a science of man” to “a science of human diversity,” which strengthened its relation to ethnography and ethnology, and how these disciplines were adopted in other academic centers of Europe and the US. In conclusion, Vermeulen asserts that anthropology and ethnology or ethnography developed parallel and in distinct domains of science during the eighteenth century, the natural sciences and historical sciences or humanities, respectively. This finding is important because it highlights that their subject matters differed, too: ethnology or ethnography primarily studied “multiethnicity,” while anthropology busied itself with racial diversity. Vermeulen then highlights that ethnicity, the subject matter of ethnology or ethnography, is not a euphemistic term for race, not within the context of eighteenth century.

Overall, this is a unique and detailed study of the eighteenth century origins of ethnology or ethnography that offers a new insight in reexamining the scope and subject matter of these disciplines in their earlier stages. By uncovering the long neglected sources from various archives and libraries to support his main claim and by emphasizing the roles played by eighteenth century history and ethnolinguistics, Vermeulen greatly contributes to understandings of the genesis of modern ethnography and ethnology, especially that of Franz Boas, who brought the German approach to anthropology and ethnology to the United States and professionalized its holistic study.

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