Jewelnel Davis: Chaplain Extraordinaire

The Reverend Jewelnel Davis joined Columbia last year as University Chaplain and Director of the Earl Hall Center. In returning to her native New York, Rev. Davis left behind her post at Carleton College in Minnesota, where she enjoyed her work as Chaplain and as Assistant to the President. Before accepting the Columbia position, Chaplain Davis had some initial reservations. Having attended to the broader community in Minnesota, and having been born in Brooklyn into a working-class black family, Chaplain Davis had concerns about joining what appeared to be the “gated community” of Columbia. However, after speaking at length with Provost Jonathan Cole, she felt confident of Columbia’s sense of responsibility to the neighborhood and to the larger New York community, and of its commitment to diversity on campus. A conversation with Professor Manning Marable, Director of the Institute for Research in African-American Studies, made her recognize that if Columbia could support his progressive politics, it could accommodate her “outrageous, flamboyant style,” as she playfully calls it.

It is through a broad-minded idea of commitment to community that Chaplain Davis is most effectively and comfortably able to carry out her work on campus and beyond. Her several roles include helping the university with its ritual functions by presiding over memorial services or delivering the invocation at campus events; counseling individuals, primarily in secular matters (one of her several degrees is in social work), but in spiritual ones, too; administering the organization of university functions; and serving as “the keeper of personal narratives of members of the campus community.” Chaplain Davis also preaches, or performs part of the liturgy, regularly at local churches. An ordained minister in the historically black National Baptist church, Chaplain Davis is able to serve the religious needs of the neighborhood and the broader New York community on Sundays because Columbia has no centralized community worship service. She finds this appropriate, given her sense that she represents the ethical, spiritual, and religious concerns of such a diverse campus constituency.

The emphasis Chaplain Davis places on community, and her sense that community is integrally connected to education, identity, religion, and ethical responsibility, she attributes to her childhood upbringing. Her parents, who had been sharecroppers in the segregated South, and who had very little formal education themselves, instilled in her, early on, a sense of the importance of education. Education, they hoped, would equip her with the “life skills” that, for them, “meant that you understood your responsibility to your family and to the community.” This early sense of responsibility was crucially united to religion, which was, in turn, inseparable from an African-American experience forged, in part, through hardship and alienation: “If religion is that which gives meaning and purpose and values to our world,” Chaplain Davis postulates, “and if it is a hedge against chaos and confusion, then for my parents being black was part of my religious understanding of myself.” Quoting purposefully from Psalm 137, Chaplain Davis wonders, “How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? Foreign lands can be

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Jewelnel Davis

Director’s Column

Teaching is at the heart of Women’s and Gender Studies at Columbia. Because the major is a small one, we are able—as many large departments at Columbia cannot—to offer our students the luxury of small classes. And because the program is an interdisciplinary one, many of those classes are team-taught by faculty in humanities and the social sciences. Every major has the opportunity to write a senior thesis with the support of the undergraduate director, a faculty member in one of the departments, and a writing tutor. The results are evident in the fine work produced by our graduating majors. On pages four and five of this newsletter we include descriptions of the senior projects they are in the process of completing.

Equally important are our graduate offerings. Each year the Institute offers three kinds of graduate courses open to any graduate student interested in feminist studies in Arts and Sciences or the professional schools. In the fall term we typically offer Feminist Genealogies, a course designed for those with little acquaintance with theoretical modes of inquiry, including feminist theory. Team-taught by a professor from the social sciences and one from humanities, it offers introductory readings in Marx, Freud, Levi-Strauss, Lacan, and feminist theorists such as de Beauvoir, Irigaray, and

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described in many different ways, metaphorically and physically, but as a black person in America, how you think about yourself as a responsible member of a family and community, and how you think about yourself as a child of God, go hand in hand. There isn’t any kind of neon light that says, ‘this is the sacred and this is the secular.’ I mean you’re talking seamless.”

The importance her parents attached to education, and the integration of the sacred with the secular, shaped Chaplain Davis’ life and outlook in college and beyond. Chaplain Davis had always been interested in science, and, while in college at Brown University during the late 1970s, she began studying for a career in genetics. (She had been drawn to Brown for its biology department, but also for the politicized student body, which cared about minority representation.) When she began to hear the call to ministry, she doubted her aptitude for the field, in part because she had envisioned herself as a scientist. Her parents, moreover, who had no models for self-supporting women in ministry, worried about her career prospects. In fact, at the time, many major Protestant denominations were not ordaining women at all. As she moved toward the academic study of religion, however, where “faith issues” are not a central concern, she nevertheless learned through study that spiritual and worldly reality need not be at odds with one another: “there didn’t have to be dissonance between the faith that I cherished and the challenges that I felt called to, to make my life whole, to ask those values questions, those ethical questions.”

It was her college mentor, Rabbi Jacob Neusner, who suggested that she become a university chaplain, despite her own reservations, which arose in part from her observation that all the models in the profession were white and male. In 1983, Chaplain Davis completed a joint degree program, through which she was awarded the M. Div. from Yale University and the M. S. W. from the University of Connecticut School of Social Work. Her pastor bravely supported her bid for ordination and partially overcame the resistance of those opposed to the ordination of a woman. Before moving to Carleton, Chaplain Davis held positions in teaching and ministry at Yale, Colgate University, and the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee.

Considering her own remarkable achievements in a male-dominated field, it is not surprising that Chaplain Davis is directly concerned with issues that affect women on campus. While at Carleton, she became involved with educational programs relating to sexual harassment and sexual assault. She remains interested in these issues. It is important, she notes, that we help people to know that a violation of a sexual assault or sexual harassment policy on campus is “not just a violation of personal boundaries, or individual boundaries, but a violation of the standards of the community.” At Columbia, Chaplain Davis recognizes that women have only been fully a part of the university for a short time, since Columbia College, which is in some respects the centerpiece of the university, only began admitting women in the 1980s. Although she remains optimistic, there are still “a number of things that we need to become aware of, some of the things that might benignly be part of the structures that may not welcome women, that may exclude women....I don’t know that we will ever be strong as a university community unless we have women in every expected and unexpected position.”

As the first African-American woman to hold a chaplaincy at an ivy league institution, Rev. Davis’ very presence at Columbia is a corrective, and she is willy nilly a model for others. She does not, however, find this additional responsibility burdensome. “We as individuals have to be able to own our influence and our impact,” she observes. “I know that it would be impossible for anyone to not notice that the University Chaplain at Columbia University is an African-American woman...I feel often that, by presence and proximity, I am helping to raise questions about how we look and feel as a university community.” She adds, “we need to think about our strengths, Where do we want to be as a community and as a cutting edge international research university?...We need to have the strengths of everyone.”
IRWAG Hosts Three Conferences

Conference on Domestic Violence

On October 17, 1997, the Institute for Research on Women and Gender and the Columbia School of Social Work’s Social Intervention Group (SIG) co-sponsored a one-day conference entitled Domestic Violence among South Asian, East Asian, and Arab Immigrant Women: Challenges and Solutions. Speakers included researchers, advocates, and community-based organizations who addressed the unique problems facing groups of immigrant women who suffer domestic violence and psychological abuse. In her overview of global problems and solutions, a presentation that complemented the conference’s focus on immigrant women, keynote speaker Jacqelyn C. Campbell, Professor of Nursing at Johns Hopkins University, proposed the broad-based “Campbell hypothesis” for considering the causes of domestic violence: where women’s status is low, she surmises, so is wife battering; but where women’s status and power are in flux, battering is greater. This expansive hypothesis offers a way to consider the relationships among the global phenomenon of domestic violence; changing gender roles; and social, economic, and political conditions.

Campbell also recognizes the paramount importance of cultural specificity in defining the needs and problems of battered women, and she is concerned—as were most conference participants—that domestic violence be confronted through “culturally competent” research and practice. In explaining the researcher’s need for a “culturally sensitive instrument,” Malahat Baig-Amin, of SIG, remarked, for instance, that community organizations sometimes fear the intrusiveness of research on domestic violence, and they wonder who the primary beneficiaries of the research will be. Professor Marianne Yoshioka, also of SIG, offered a good example of the importance of this concern when she registered the fears of one Arab-American service provider, who worried that discussions of domestic violence outside the community might perpetuate stereotypes of Arabs as terrorists. Yoshioka remarked that a sensitivity to culturally specific fears, a building of trust, and an emphasis on the concerns of a community can facilitate, and increase the value of, research. In considering practical solutions, Yoshioka observed that an interviewer’s clarification or modification of terms can sometimes assuage a community informant’s anxieties; the interviewer’s shift from a focus on “domestic violence” to “family conflict,” for example, might enable a crucial exchange of dialogue on battering in the community.

Another persistent concern among the speakers was the recognition that organizers, advocates, and researchers need to share knowledge and to develop strategies for working together in order to best identify and serve women who need help. Louisa Gilbert of SIG, for example, addressed this issue when she recounted an episode in which the effectiveness of her advocacy work would have been strengthened had she been armed with researchers’ statistical evidence. Gilbert described her efforts to lobby legislators to revise immigration laws that can inadvertently result in psychologically or physically abusive domestic relations. A 1986 federal law requires that an immigrant seeking permanent residence in the United States based on her spouse’s legal residence must, at the end of a two-year waiting period, file the necessary documents jointly with her spouse. This joint petition requirement, Gilbert argues, can be used by an abusive spouse as a means of control: a woman might stay in a physically abusive relationship and capitulate to the demands of a husband who, as a means of coercion, threatens to withhold his support for her bid for permanent residence. A practical problem, Gilbert explains, is that even as advocates and social workers who serve battered immigrant women see all too clearly the widespread harmful effects of such federal policy, legislators require researchers’ statistical data to be convinced that a problem exists, and that it is serious enough to warrant legislative change. Without communication among advocates, social workers, and researchers, necessary study might be left undone, and crucial data would not be generated.

The Academy and Feminist Activism

The Coalition of Feminist Graduate Students at Columbia, in conjunction with the Institute for Research on Women and Gender, recently hosted, on October 24-25, 1997, an interdisciplinary conference on Feminism and the Academy: Building Bridges to the World Outside. Primary goals of the conference were to consider ways in which feminists forge connections between academia and activism, produce politically engaged scholarship, and negotiate questions of identity and representation in the classroom.

In keeping with the goal of fostering politically engaged scholarship, conference participants viewed Camp Arirang, a documentary film co-directed and co-produced by Diana S. Lee and Grace Yoon-Kyung Lee. Alexandra Suh, of the Columbia Department of English, gave a presentation on the historical and political context of the film. Camp Arirang, most of which was filmed in 1992, focuses on prostitution at Korean camp towns for United States soldiers, who patrol the area of the 38th parallel, which divides South Korea from North Korea. The film concentrates on some of the difficulties camp town prostitutes face, such as invasive government regulation of their work and their bodies. Suh, moreover, acknowledged the problem of Korean society defining camp town prostitutes as helpless victims of U. S. imperialism or, alternatively, as traitors to their country. One reductive stereotype leaves women entirely bereft of agency, while the other demonizes them.

The film also described the racial dynamics of camp town prostitution. Formerly, camp town practices followed the dictates of American racial segregation: white and black soldiers had separate but equal access to Korean prostitutes in racially segregated camp town clubs. With increased U. S. efforts fully to integrate the armed forces, however, camp town prostitutes found themselves in a quandary. In accordance with U. S. policy, the Korean government dictated that camp town clubs integrate and that prostitutes not racially discriminate among clients. The problem, as one informant in the film pointed out, is that some white clients continue to expect

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Senior Projects

Four Women’s and Gender Studies majors at Columbia are presently writing senior theses under the direction of Professor Zita Nunes, who is the acting Director of Undergraduate Studies this year at the Institute for Research on Women and Gender. The group of seniors recently told Feminist News about how they came to Women’s and Gender Studies, and about the direction of their current projects.

Before returning to college after a hiatus of several years, Nyonnoweh Greene had become a massage therapist—a vocation that is not unrelated to her current research project on healing women—and had done feminist performance art. Upon resuming her studies at Columbia, Greene was first drawn to English as a major, but found the required emphasis on British literature unsatisfying. She knew she had interdisciplinary interests, too, and she found especially absorbing the subject of African diasporic healing women in literature and history. Professor Judith Weisenfeld of Barnard College steered her toward women’s studies.

In her senior thesis, Greene, who is interested in the religious aspects of healing, looks at “the possibilities that fiction allows for reclaiming the idea of what the African diasporic healing woman can be, and how she can fit into her society.” Greene is less concerned with addressing the impetus for this reclamation, which is the desire, on the part of the authors she examines, to correct the ill-informed stereotypes associated with the figure of the witch. Instead, Greene focuses on the alternative, more empowering idea of the healer. She considers the healer’s central position in her community, and how she achieves this position through her ability to straddle both the physical world and the spiritual world. The healer, Greene emphasizes, is by no means a marginal figure, as outsiders to the community might assume.

Greene’s project, “Sisters of the Mami Wata: The Figure of the Healing Woman in Three African Diasporic Novels,” compares representations of healing women in novels by Gloria Naylor, Simone Schwartz-Bart, and Maryse Condé. She considers the title character of Naylor’s Mama Day as a community mother, a role that she sees as related to Mama Day’s regret for not being an actual mother. Greene also looks at the ancillary character of the healer in Schwartz-Bart’s novel The Bridge of Beyond, a woman who, for a short time, accepts the main character as an apprentice. Finally, Greene discusses Condé’s I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem, a fictional revision of the events surrounding the Salem witch trials. In keeping with her project of identifying the central position African diasporic healing women occupy, Greene is especially interested in Condé’s deliberate effort to relocate the figure of Tituba from the margins of the historical narrative to the center. Greene notes that in a recent interview she conducted with Condé, Condé remarked that her novel identifies the disparate perceptions of the African witch, who is central to her community, and the European witch, who is marginal. Condé’s comparison reinforces Greene’s own emphasis on the cultural prominence of the African healer. In discussing the relationship between the African diasporic healing woman and geography, Greene focuses on the fictional exploration of an idea of the island as home to an isolated African diasporic community. On the one hand, the island represents the possibility of independence and an insular culture. On the other hand, there is considerable cultural flow on the fictional islands Greene examines, and she investigates what happens socially and culturally when an outsider arrives at the island community and what bearing the outsider’s actions have on a society whose center is the healing woman.

Page Jackson first entered Columbia College in 1970, “when there was no Women’s and Gender Studies department”; nor, for that matter, he observes with irony, were there any women. He left Columbia to work, travel, and perform as a singer; and, in 1979, he helped to found the New York City Gay Men’s Chorus. Although by the time he returned to Columbia in 1995, he had known first-hand the avant-garde of New York gay culture and politics, he nevertheless found Professor Ann Pellegrini’s Introduction to Gay and Lesbian Studies class enlightening. At the instigation of Professor Maggie Sale, he began to move toward the Women’s and Gender Studies major, although he is a double major in Italian as well.

Jackson’s senior thesis, entitled, “Girls with Something Extra,” is the study of three African-American male performers who, over a span of three decades, have achieved mainstream success by cross-dressing. Jackson argues that these three performers, who have had success in television, film, radio, and books, owe their popularity to elements within mainstream American culture. “Glamorous drag queens are popular,” Jackson argues, “because the conservative culture applauds their retrograde clinging to outmoded ideals of femininity. They’re allowed to do it because women don’t want to spend three hours getting ready to go out in seven-inch heels.” All three performers, Jackson notes, have a “Georgia connection,” which may help to explain why the performances are, in part, imitations of southern upper-middle-class white femininity.

The earliest figure of Jackson’s study is Flip Wilson, whose Geraldine character helped, during the 1970s, to make The Flip Wilson Show the second most popular series on network television for two years running (the show was second only to All in the Family). The second figure, RuPaul, rose to fame in the 1980s and has become a household name in the 1990s; he currently hosts a successful talkshow on VH1. Finally, The Lady Chablis, a relative newcomer to national fame, will lead us, Jackson speculates, into the next millennium. The Lady Chablis is a performer from Savannah,
Georgia, who first came to the attention of people outside the South as a character in John Berendt’s book, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, which has been a bestseller, in hardback, for well over three years. In the movie version that recently opened, directed by Clint Eastwood, The Lady Chablis plays herself (The Lady Chablis self-identifies with the feminine gender). Jackson explains that there appears to be no subversive subtext to the performances, or a separate “underground” politics. The artists, for the most part, “just want to be popular” and to make money. These simple motivations, as Jackson see it, are themselves integral to the phenomenon of the superstar African-American cross-dresser, and account for his (or her) rise to fame. The trajectory of the career inspired by a desire for popularity and financial gain is to begin in gay clubs, move to mainstream night clubs and discos, and then to television and film.

**Ann Kansfield** became a feminist only recently, although her parents taught her early on to challenge gender stereotypes when they encouraged her passion for baseball, and demanded that she be allowed to try out for an all-male team at school. At Columbia, Kansfield was initially drawn to the history major, and then to African-American studies. Although she continues to be interested in these areas, courses she took with Professors Kathryn Gravdal and Ann Pellegrini motivated her to pursue women’s studies.

Kansfield’s senior project, “Early Rumblings: The History of the Student Homophile League and Gay People at Columbia, 1967-1972,” traces the early history of the Columbia student organization now known as the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Coalition (LGBC). Kansfield developed the idea for the project when she became the chair of the LGBC last spring and was concerned about the meager attendance at coalition meetings and the apparent lack of community spirit. In order to find answers to her practical questions about how best to lead the current organization, she decided to look to its past.

The organization, which was founded thirty years ago, is, Kansfield notes, the oldest gay student group in the world. Her thesis looks at the LGBC’s early incarnations, the Student Homophile League, as it was first called, and at Gay People at Columbia and Barnard, as it later became. The name changes signify shifts in the organizational mission, which, in turn, bespeak broader changes in gay and lesbian politics. At its inception, the group’s outlook was in keeping with that of the 1960s homophile movement. The tone of this movement was exemplified by the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis, two groups that engaged in conciliatory, rather than revolutionary, politics, and whose unthreatening protest came in the form of sedate picketing or distributing leaflets. At Columbia, this early politics was typified in the way the organization conceded to the university administration’s homophobic mandate that they not sponsor social functions. The 1969 Stonewall Riots for gay liberation, however, which took place in New York’s Greenwich Village, marked a turning point for gay politics at Columbia and across the nation. After Stonewall, the Columbia organization and its leadership became aligned with the Gay Activist Alliance (GAA), and, indeed, the Columbia chair, Morty Manford, went on to become the president of GAA. The Columbia group began to embrace a gay liberation political model, which was evinced through the unflinching demand for a gay lounge in Furnald Hall, and an insistence on the right to organize dances.

Kansfield’s thesis is that the demand for space to socialize remains one of the goals of lesbian and gay politics. “Being lesbian or gay,” she argues, “is based upon relationships and is predicated upon enjoying one another socially. The end of the politics will be having a space where you can do that, where you can have relationships—having the space to have a dance, or a lounge, a place where you won’t be bashed, where you won’t have to worry about safety and where you can be viewed as a full human being.”

**Peggy Lawlis** has been a feminist already during her high school years in Dallas, Texas, was quickly drawn to the welcoming environment of the Women’s and Gender Studies Department at Columbia. She had originally thought of majoring in political science, but, she reports, as soon as she realized women’s studies existed, she enlisted. (When asked why she had not heard of women’s studies sooner, she declares, by way of explanation, “I’m from Texas.”)

Lawlis’ thesis is entitled “Hysterical Drag: Female Madness and the Management of Gender Crisis in Tracy Thompson’s *The Beast* and Kay Redfield Jamison’s *An Unquiet Mind.*” She focuses on contemporary women’s confessional memoirs of mental illness, a genre that was ushered in by the 1994 publication of *Prozac Nation* by Elizabeth Wurtzel. This book, which Lawlis describes as “a slick, Generation X critique of Second Wave feminism and psychoanalysis,” recuperates and redefines the figure of the female hysteric first shaped and given cultural currency by Charcot and Freud. “The postmodern hysteric,” Lawlis comments, “can now write her own case history.” Lawlis explains that “in the wake of *Prozac Nation*, a proliferation of memoirs by and about mentally ill women have landed on the bookstore shelves. Like Wurtzel, the authors of these texts claim and, in fact, flaunt hysterical identities. And, like Wurtzel, they call for the use of medications such as lithium and Prozac as treatments of choice for their threatening conditions.”

Lawlis examines two works, Kay Redfield Jamison’s *An Unquiet Mind*, which records the author’s history of bipolar disorder, and Tracy Thompson’s *The Beast*, which looks at chronic depression. Unlike Wurtzel’s manifesto on “youth and madness,” these two books trace the middle-aged white professional woman’s incarnation as the new-model “hysteric.” In discussing the relation between the new shape of hysteria and changing cultural ideas about femininity, Lawlis notes that “confessional authorship allows women to expose aspects of selfhood that their participation in power feminist culture has asked them to elide.” Lawlis is especially interested in how the manifestation of hysteria, and the narratives that are told about it, are specific not only to gender, but to class and race, as well. She also considers the way these narratives emphasize medication as cure—the “discourse of psychopharmacology,” as she puts it. In considering the strategic effects of the memoir genre, Lawlis argues that, for Thompson and Jamison, this narrative format allows the “writers [to] become symbolic therapists through authoring their own case histories. Hysteria transforms into a respected career associated with public service.”
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The women who serve them to work exclusively with white men. The women are in an economic bind: they must integrate in order to remain in business, yet they lose business through integration.

The question of racial integration was one of the film’s gestures toward exposing the political infrastructure of the camp towns. Although prostitution in South Korea is officially illegal, the camp town trade is nevertheless regulated by the Korean government. This apparent contradiction exposes the Korean government’s need to accommodate U.S. imperial presence. The U.S. armed forces, in turn, while they do not officially condone prostitution, adopt a “boys will be boys” attitude. Suh emphasizes that this attitude elides the way in which the U.S. government actively fosters prostitution. It is, ironically, the primary vehicle of cultural exchange between Koreans and Americans in Korea.

**Interdisciplinarity**

The Institute for Research on Women and Gender, on November 7, 1997, hosted a one-day conference sponsored by the Coalition for Graduate Programs in Women’s and Gender Studies in Greater New York. Panelists from several universities in the region presented short papers and engaged in dialogue with audience members around the theme of “The Politics of Interdisciplinary counterpart, which is that the subject of LGBT studies and its students risk inhabiting an institutional ghetto.

In contrast to LGBT studies, which occupies an institutional site, sexuality, analyzed from a queer perspective, Duggan maintains, is a “set of questions,” rather than a “site” in the university. Duggan distinguishes “queer” as a political and critical perspective that raises a set of questions about “heteronormativity.” One can adopt a queer perspective toward “any site...any discipline,” Duggan explains. The less effective use of the term “queer,” she adds, is to identify a population, Queer carries a stigma, yet it holds an “integrative goal.” “Its ambitions are vast,” Duggan asserts. In terms of institutional relations, queerness intervenes critically on interdisciplinary sites, yet, Duggan argues, it should not be a site itself. The institutional problem is that if queerness is a perspective everywhere, it is in danger of being forgotten in terms of practical concerns in academic departments. Thus, LGBT studies, which is, by definition, concerned with representation, occupies a strategic site in the university, since it draws attention to questions of sexuality and fosters queer perspectives.

In another discussion of some of the epistemological questions that surround interdisciplinary studies, and of the concerns for representation, Professor Judith Weisenfeld, of the Department of Religion at Barnard College, noted that religion remains largely invisible in interdisciplinary projects, except in studies of the rise of religious conservatism. Responding to Weisenfeld’s point that religion seems increasingly marginalized as a disciplinary concern in interdisciplinary studies, Professor Afsaneh Najtabadi, Chair of Women’s Studies at Barnard, noted that the lack of consideration accorded the importance of religion varies with national and cultural context, as do the stereotypes surrounding the importance of religion in people’s lives. In teaching a course on women in the Middle East, for example, Najtabadi finds that her students need to be convinced that religion may not be the exclusive concern in Middle Eastern women’s lives. Some students, Najtabadi quipped, are surprised to find that women in the Middle East do anything except “breathe Quranic verse.”
Ruth Benedict: Pioneering Anthropologist

This is the first in a series of articles on the history of women at Columbia.

Ruth Fulton Benedict (1887-1948), one of the most influential anthropologists of the twentieth century, spent most of her career in the Columbia Department of Anthropology. Born in New York City into a respectable white middle-class Protestant family, the young Ruth Fulton (later Benedict) was rebellious and a loner. Her alienation could, in part, be attributed to her partial deafness, a disability that created problems throughout her career in the classroom and in fieldwork. Although during her teenage years Benedict’s family had fallen into financial difficulties, her exceptional performance at school and her family connections led to a scholarship to Vassar College, from which she graduated as an English major in 1909.

It was at Vassar that she first read Nietzsche, who provided the dualistic model that Benedict would later appropriate and modify for the controversial Apollonian and Dionysian cultural analogies put forth in her seminal work, *Patterns of Culture* (1934). She employed these categories to describe the cultural “configurations,” as she termed it, of Native American groups. At Vassar, too, Benedict read Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Women and Economics*, which helped shape Benedict’s feminist ideals. In fact, several years after graduating from college, Benedict decided to write a series of biographies, which she partly completed, on the feminists Mary Wollstonecraft, Margaret Fuller, and Olive Schreiner. She was also strongly influenced by the work of Swedish feminist Ellen Key. Although Benedict supported suffrage and women’s access to financial independence, she followed Key in believing these goals to be secondary to women’s struggle for a state of interior, psychological liberation.1

After having taught school in California for a time, Ruth Fulton met Stanley Benedict, a chemistry professor, and married him in 1914. The marriage rapidly deteriorated, however, and she returned to her intellectual pursuits. Having developed an interest in the progressive educational philosophy of John Dewey, Ruth Benedict enrolled at Columbia in 1918 to take courses with Dewey, who was on the faculty. When Dewey left on sabbatical the following year, Benedict began attending courses taught by the progressive and feminist sociologist Else Clews Parsons at the New School for Social Research.

Benedict’s studies with Parsons and other progressive intellectuals in sociology and anthropology at the New School eventually led her to the renowned Columbia anthropologist Franz Boas. Benedict formally entered the Ph.D. program in anthropology at Columbia in 1921. At this time, the department was still reeling from the effects of a public dispute between Boas, who opposed American intervention in World War I, and Columbia President Nicholas Murray Butler, who refused to tolerate dissension among the faculty ranks. The indirect result was a partial dismantling of funding for the Anthropology Department. Benedict arrived to a modest department, then housed in the Journalism building, a department that Boas was in the process of rebuilding.

Benedict finished her Ph.D. in a mere three semesters, thanks, in part, to Boas’ efforts to help her transfer credits for her course work at the New School. She achieved early recognition for a paper she published on “The Vision in Plains Culture,” and her 1923 dissertation, entitled *The Concept of the Guardian Spirit in North America*, was well received. The dissertation—her first book—was based on library research, but Benedict soon began fieldwork, initially among the Serrano Indians of California, under the direction of the famous Berkeley anthropologist, and former Boas student, Alfred Kroeber. When she returned to New York after her first trip, Benedict’s career prospects were precarious. She managed to obtain a one-year position at Barnard as teaching assistant to Boas. When a full-time position opened up at Barnard, Boas appointed a younger, single woman for the position, apparently because he assumed she had greater financial need.2

Benedict survived, for a time, as a research assistant, and while this position was hardly the career she sought, it at least prompted her next field trips to study the Zuni, whose matrilineal culture

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1. Ruth Benedict in her office at Columbia University. Courtesy, Special Collections, Vassar College Libraries, Poughkeepsie, NY.

2. As Benedict’s career began to flourish, she and her husband grew further apart. Before Ruth and Stanley separated in 1930, she had grown close to her Barnard student, Margaret Mead, with whom she eventually began to travel and to collaborate on work. After Benedict and Mead became lovers, both published implicit and explicit defenses of homosexuality. Mead eventually married a man, while Benedict moved on to other long-term lesbian relationships.

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patterns” or “configurations,” Patterns of Culture, fostered the Culture and Personality movement in anthropology.

Like her mentor, Boas, Benedict was a cultural relativist. Another key concern in her work was to challenge racism and ethnocentrism, and she effectively refuted biological arguments for racial inferiority. Her influential Race: Science and Politics was first published in 1940, and formed a complement to Boas’ scholarly efforts to debunk Nazi racial theories. Her defense of, and explanation of, Japanese culture, The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture (1946), was published as a response to World War II American xenophobia toward Japan.

Over the years, there have emerged a number of critiques of Benedict’s work. In 1937, the Chinese anthropologist Li An-che argued that Benedict’s assessment of Zuni and Plains Indians culture, according to her Dionysian and Apollonian models of cultural configuration, were construed through Western perceptions whose flawed subjectivity she had failed to recognize. Some scholars offered wholesale dismissals of Benedict’s duality model. Critics of her study of Japan have observed that Benedict’s unifying impulses resulted in her failure to account for class and regional differences. She has also been challenged for ignoring historical contingency in her description of Japanese culture, a failure that unwittingly produces reductive stereotypes. Johannes Fabian, in a critique of the concept of cultural relativism, indicates the deleterious effects of Benedict’s and other early anthropologists’ reductive and unifying cultural theories. In the wake of World War II, relativistic studies explained “entire nations in terms of their basic values and patterns of socialization and institutionalization.”

Still, Benedict’s pioneering contribution to the development of the field of anthropology cannot be overestimated.

2Caffrey, pp. 106, 111.
3Caffrey, p. 114.