

CLIO'S FANCY: DOCUMENTS TO PIQUE THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

The Anthropological Revels of Frederick Starr: Marihumana, Microcephaly and the Anthropology of the Bizarre

Anthropology at the University of Chicago was twice founded, once in 1892, when William Rainey Harper hired his Chatauqua colleague Frederick Starr to join what was to become the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, and again in the late 1920s, when the revival of anthropology under Fay-Cooper Cole led to the formation of a separate department. Although Starr's various expeditions to Mexico, Africa, the Philippines, Korea and Japan give him a minor place in the development of ethnographic fieldwork, his role in the history of anthropology is perhaps better understood as a kind of negative instance in the role of the individual in the processes of institutionalization: his personal idiosyncracies and intellectual marginality seem to have played a major role in the failure of anthropology to become established at the University after its first founding (Miller 1978). The news item reproduced below is only one of many instances in which Starr's activities proved a public embarrassment to the University, and his relations to his academic colleagues seem to have been as problematic as his relations to the University's President soon became. Although he trained two early doctorates, within a decade he seems to have withdrawn to undergraduate teaching, for reasons the news article illuminates. According to one informant, Starr's penchant for ice cream was such that he substituted it for final exams in his lecture courses--which remained quite popular until his retirement in 1923.

Even so, one notes that Starr was not the only turn-of-the-century figure in the history of the social sciences to experiment with drugs. And from another point of view, the "dope party" episode, with its resonances of cannibalism and saturnalia, as well as its microcephalic idiot and "human freak," illustrates an important theme in the history of anthropology: its ties, at every stage of its development, to the more extreme currents of European cultural exoticism, which whirl again and again around cultural practices that by European standards are not simply different, but shocking and bizarre. From this perspective, western anthropology is grounded, back beyond the era of European expansion, in the medieval fascination with "monstrous races" (Friedman 1981) and the early modern witchcraft craze. Parallel to rationalistic speculation about the evolution of human religion and marriage there has run a fascination with the demonic and the phallic. Forced underground to some extent in the Victorian century, it bubbled to the surface in the preoccupations of Richard Burton and some of his colleagues in the Anthropological Society of London, and in marginally pornographic "anthropological" volumes of the later nineteenth century which in the minds of some gave the word a slight aura of obscenity.

The work of Tylor and McClennan was in a sense a taming of this current. But it has not yet lost its force in motivating either public interest or the activities of anthropologists [G.W.S.].

JOY AT A "DOPE" PARTY

Prof. Starr Entertains Midway Students with Mexican Jag Producer

MARIHUMANA IS THE NAME

Microcephalic Idiot and a Human Freak Help Toward a Happy Evening

Professor Frederick Starr, the versatile Midway anthropologist, has achieved the "dope party." He held one last night for his students, and those who were admitted to the revel pronounced it by far the best and raciest of all the professor's innovations. Dr. Starr's latest discovery, the wonderful Mexican jag producer, which may revolutionize the present methods of intoxicification, received a thorough tryout, the only rivals being the skull of a microcephalic idiot, and a real live freak of nature.

The party was the professor's first opportunity to test effectually the virtues or vices of the marihumana, whose "tangle-foot" properties he revealed to science two weeks ago.

Original "Dope Party"

For the exploitation of the anthropological cigarette, Professor Starr was informed that his entertainment would be recorded in Midway chronicles as the original "dope party." Fully half of the fifty students present sampled the fumes of the weed. The others, mostly girls, declared that according to their belief the marihumana was no better than ordinary tobacco for all its fancy name, and declined to indulge. Those who smoked declared they saw double, and that their legs became wobbly.

As to the freak, whose particular attraction was a superfluity of fingers and thumbs, he was quite outshone by the skull of the dead and gone microcephalic idiot.

Professor Starr explained that the microcephalic had been the most unfortunate of men in that his head was very thick, thicker even than that of his dullest pupil. The osseous tissue of his cranium, moreover, had shown a tendency to grow according

to its own sweet will, with the pathetic result that it had reached its present humble position as a parlor entertainer.

Of course Professor Starr showed his collection of plaster casts, which numbers something more than a thousand heads and busts, but that is mere incident, for they have participated in just exactly ninety-one of Professor Starr's parties. But they never before had been to a "dope party" along with a microcephalic and a freak.

Orders Ice Cream

The professor repeated his explanation of the "only true origin of the American Indian and the hairy Ainu," and then ordered up ice cream. In all his ninety-one parties Professor Starr never has forgotten the ice cream, for he believes it is the very nicest thing to eat he knows of.

Four daring students, who thought the same thing, stole the ice cream from his eighty-ninth party, and so great was his disappointment and rage at the theft of his favorite delicacy that they were forced to leave the university.

The "dope party" was held in Haskell Museum, the home of the Midway divinity school, and the assorted plaster criminals and abnormalities have witnessed many a ridiculous incident since they began attending the anthropological revels of their keeper.

It was way back at number sixty-six, just after Professor Starr had been adopted into a tribe of South American Indians, that a timid co-ed fainted from fright when the professor realistically recalled some of his hair-raising experiences among the savages. Again, two years ago, at number eighty-three, a very fleshy girl was thrown into convulsions when he made his startling profession in favor of cannibalism.

[From the front page of the Chicago Record-Herald, March 10, 1905]

Friedman, J. B. The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought
(Cambridge, 1981)

Miller, R. B. 1978. "Anthropology and Institutionalization:
Frederick Starr at the University of Chicago, 1892-1923"
Kroeber Anthropological Society Papers, 51/52 (Sp. &
Fall, 1975)