

CLIO'S FANCY: DOCUMENTS TO PIQUE THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

Marriage as Mystery Writ Symbiotically:

The Benedicts' Unpublished "Chemical Detective" Story of the "The Bo-Cu Plant"

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When we think of Ruth Fulton Benedict's other genre, we think of her poetry, perhaps even her poetic "nom de plume," Anne Singleton. The following tale of "a strange plant and a strange curse" was written in 1916 and represents yet another of her pre-anthropological experiments in Othering herself, her only surviving "chemical detective story." Complicating the picture of her many female pseudonyms (including "Sally," and "Ruth Stanhope"), it is written under the name Edgar Stanhope, the only male pseudonym Benedict is known to have used. At least one biographer, Margaret Caffrey (1989:361, fn. 19), believes that the name is modeled on Edgar Allen Poe's and that "Stanhope could be a pun on [her husband] Stanley's hope for the story genre of chemical detective stories, and also a pun on Ruth's aspirations, because Lady Mary Stanhope was a famous bluestocking in eighteenth-century England" (1989:361 n19). It may also be glossed as a note of desperation about the future of her two-year-old marriage to Stanley R. Benedict, a Cornell biochemist; already foundering, their relationship was by 1916 at best a "friendship" (in Mead 1959[1916]:138). Such speculations aside, it can also be argued that Benedict, having crafted pseudonyms before coming to craft cultures as "personalities writ large," used this name as a way to include her husband among her private society of selves. When this failed, she transferred her married name and the reference it had to his science to her own Boasian "science of custom." The name Ruth Fulton Benedict was simply another in a long line of pseudonyms; by Mead's account, she in fact referred to it as a name "which I always think of as a nom de plume" (in Mead 1959:xix).

Stanley's role in the creation of this piece cannot be overestimated. Benedict not only thought of him as her co-author, etching in the upper right hand of the title page "written with Stanley"; she also seemed to want this work together to resolve the mystery that their marriage was to her at that time. In a journal entry reprinted by Mead in An Anthropologist at Work (1959) Benedict said "For Stanley I shall try to write out the chemical detective stories for which he supplies the plot" (1959:535 fn. 7). It was as if the symbiotic name "Stanhope" was meant to bring together not only their talents, but to produce from them a kind of surrogate child, offspring of his "chemistry" and her writing. This mystery story as marriage writ violently contains not only the passion that she felt her own marriage lacked, but also the plot as child which she hoped Stanley would help her supply. A few years after the story was written, Benedict, Mead tells us, found out "she could not have a child without undergoing a very problematic operation for which Stanley refused to give his consent." At about that time, she began graduate study of anthropology under Elsie Clews Parsons and Alexander Goldenweiser at the New School: "Facing empty years in a childless marriage, she recognized that she must commit herself to her 'own world of effort and creation,'" and henceforth her creative energy went into publishing as a scientist in her own right (Mead 1974:18). Writing then as Ruth Fulton

Benedict, she became in a sense her own child—as she herself suggested in a journal entry (in Mead 1959:141). But the new pseudonym carried into her “science of custom” writings a version (draft?) of herself still attached in name to her husband and her father, a homeopathic surgeon whose death when she was two Benedict marked as the starting point of her own life (in Mead 1959:97). These incomplete relationships with her father and husband may be glossed as setting the stage for the important roles that Franz Boas and Edward Sapir would play as anthropological mentors.

At the time “The Bo-Cu Plant” was written, five years before coming under Boas’ influence, Benedict was also working on a book called “Adventures in Womanhood,” which was to contain the biographies of three “highly enslaved women,” themselves cursed, if not martyred. Although the biographical chapters planned for Mary Wollstonecraft, Margaret Fuller and Olive Schreiner present an analogue in form to Patterns of Culture (1934), these early biographical “adventures” in “enslavement” yielded only one unpublished paper on Wollstonecraft. By 1934 Benedict’s early feminist interest had yielded to a “salvage anthropology” study of colonized cultures. Foreshadowing this development, the Bo-Cu story recounts the experience of an adventurous doctor, who, in order to “see something of South America,” attached himself to the surveying party of an American company colonizing the resources of a peripheral “upper Amazon” group, itself already colonized and influenced by peoples of Spanish descent. Early on, therefore, Benedict was aware of the colonial context of the Bo-Cu narrative—well before she ever formulated her sense of cultural patterns or the critique of the West these “patterns” elicited.

When she wrote the Bo-Cu story, Benedict had not yet given up on her marriage, or brought the conflicting tendencies of her personality together under the rubric of Dr. Ruth F. Benedict’s “science of custom.” Still, it is very possible she had already begun, in 1916, to ferret around in the botanical if not anthropological literature. The “Bo-Cu” or “dream” plant she refers to in the story and title may have a place in myth if not in more conventional realities. In The Raw and the Cooked, Lévi-Strauss refers to a Tugare myth-hero named Bokuaddorireu, whose name he notes in an aside might be “from *bokwaddo* ‘jatoba tree’?” (1969:43). This reference from the Bororo fits with the South American context of Benedict’s tale, if not, more specifically, with its plot of murder most incestuous.

Other features of the story, however, can be glossed as indirect reflections of Benedict’s own biography, both marital and anthropological. Dr. Moran, the narrator, discovers early on that the Bo-Cu plant alters reality and that this native plant is, in a sense, the guardian of the indigenous mahogany trees he and his Western colleagues have come to colonize. In Dr. Moran’s first story of the Bo-Cu’s effects, three of the four lumbermen who went to explore the trees are killed, dreamed to death as it were, and the fourth, found sitting “grinning like an idiot,” never recovers his sanity. A similar tale of death and insanity is manifest in the tragic fate of the dream of the “ideal” marriage between these cultural worlds through the union of Carl, a “blond viking type” and the crew’s second surveyor, and Nita, “the witch and lovely fairy of the camp.” The same pattern of death and insanity (or death by insanity) recurs in the relationships of Nita to her mother Dolores, and of Nita’s father the Don to his memory of his wife.

The motif that signals the Bo-Cu's imminent strike is the transformation of black into white, night into day, black hair into gray: thus, the Bo-Cu's flowers "gave the tributary stream the appearance of marking the boundary between day and night." These reversals in turn signal the inversion of conventional cultural ideals: the "ideal" marriage is now "cursed," the plant has made night enter day and dream enter reality in the form of demonic insanity. What should have been the passionate screams of a new bride or, in Benedict's narrator's account, "the scream of a girl at a flash of lightening" during a "drenching storm" is, in the reality of this story, something palpably evil, an inversion in the form of death for sex, "a cry of unimaginable horror" at the realization that her husband had become her executioner, not her lover. After the Don's hair turns from black to white, we learn from him the reason why the gypsy's fortune came true in a form that no one, not even the reader, could imagine. At the point where the reader is guessing that someone or something besides Carl killed Nita, we learn of the earlier curse. It is here that Benedict introduces the crux of the story, how Nita's mother, dying in childbirth, lost her health, then her sanity, and "cursed" her daughter, "swore that Nita should never know the joys of marriage, that marriage should mean death." One wonders what Stanley Benedict thought of this tale, and if he connected the plot to his wife's feelings about their own marriage.

The denouement of the mother's curse is not unlike like that of Benedict's "Mary Wollstonecraft." Indeed, two of the three heroines of Benedict's unfinished "Adventures in Womanhood" died tragically and young, their talents cut short of fulfillment (Caffrey 1989:89). Fuller, whose biography she took notes for, drowned with her son and lover within sight of shore. Wollstonecraft died in the childbirth of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. Perhaps reflecting her own loss of her father at the age of two, at the end of "Mary Wollstonecraft" Benedict criticized Wollstonecraft for not living long enough to guide either of her daughters through their tempestuous lives (Benedict herself had a sister, Margery): "But she left no instructions. Why did no prevision of the starved, rebellious life of her two little daughters in the home of a coarse-grained stepmother, no picture of their girlhood escape, Fanny by a piteous self-destruction, Mary at seventeen by an elopement with the poet Shelley—why did not the desperate need of her in their childish lives force her back to life? Their death was not her tragedy; it was theirs" (in Mead 1959:518).

Benedict's interpretation of her own life was very much channeled through the written integration she created for the lives of others. She hoped to solve the mystery her marriage represented to her in a similar way; failing the creation of children in her relationship to Stanley, she attempted instead a new personal integration in a work-centered creativity, marked by yet another new name. As Mead says, Benedict "had not thrown over biography for anthropology. She had instead widened the range of 'vicarious living' and added descriptive details about other societies to her accounts of other personalities. She also gradually widened 'the issues' from women to any individual in society" (1959:116). So it is through writing biographies and the lives of Others that Benedict transformed her losses into a matter of science, a science that engaged the questions that lives represented to her. Soon after this piece was written, Benedict transformed herself from a "nameless research fellow" into Dr. Ruth F. Benedict, and went on to live her own "dream within a dream."

"The Bo-Cu Plant" violates the most sacred taboo of mystery writing, relying on information that the reader is not given to solve the crime. But the tale is still potent as a "mystery" that gives us clues to the themes in Benedict's "integration" of self writ symbiotically, her painstaking weaving of her life into those of her significant and exotic Others and, in terms of her anthropology, back again, into the lives of that great lay-audience, who like her, read in order to be someone somewhere else.

[The text below is preserved in the Benedict papers at Vassar University Library, and is reproduced with the permission of Mary Catherine Bateson and The Institute for Cultural Studies, Inc.]

The BO-CU Plant
by Edgar Stanhope

In a room in a fashionable house in the west end of London a strange little company had gathered together on a stormy November night. Cross legged on the floor with a large hookah before him sat Ah Sing, an Indian who spoke freely the various tongues of Asia, and who had visited all the high and secret places from Thibet to the Red Sea. There was Lord Dunstan, a tall spare Englishman who had spent half of his life in India and Africa, and who acted as unofficial adviser to the British Government in the East. He knew the habits of the eastern mind better than any other man living, and had saved many crises in eastern affairs. In a deeply upholstered chair near the center table sat Bollo, an inky black prince of the upper Congo. He held degrees from two leading English universities and had thrice circled the globe. Our host, Dr. Moran, was born an American, but belonged to no time or country. In his great silent house in London today, in a few weeks he might be walking the sands of Patagonia or scaling the vanishing Mountain of the Moon in northern Africa. Finally there was myself, a Research Fellow in geography at Cambridge, with an independent income which let me freely welcome the spirit of wanderlust which so often took possession of me.

This little group had in common the love of travel, the love of the bizarre, the mysterious, in whatever form and in whatever corner of the earth these were to be found. Our meetings were necessarily irregular and infrequent. When any of us were in London we communicated with Dr. Moran's house and would get together for an evening. It was rare indeed that all five of us met as on this night, and on such occasions dawn would frequently find us still sitting smoking oriental tobacco and exchanging experiences.

Tonight the conversation had turned to rare and exotic plants, perhaps in opposition to the howling November night[,] which made us move closer to the big log fire which was the only source of light in the room and which cast fitful shadows of the weird [sic] eastern trophies which were all about us. Lord Dunstan had been talking of the Needle Plant of northern India, a prick from whose blood red point would render the victim unconscious for three days, during which time he had constant horrible visions which would excel anything in Dante. Ah Sing related a story of a traveler on the island of Cassia, in the south seas[,], who slept beneath a Giant Orchid

and who never awoke because the plant had pushed a tendril into one of his veins and drawn every drop of blood while he slept. Finally Dr. Moran broke the silence which followed Ah Sing's story. I will tell you tonight said he, the story of the Bo-Cu, or dream plant. It is a strange story, and how much the plant itself contributed to what I shall tell you, you yourselves must judge.

Ten years ago, began the doctor, I wanted to see something of South America. My financial resources were not what they are now and I had therefore to fall back upon my professional training to secure the opportunity I wanted. A large lumber firm in the [United S]tates was planning the purchase of about two thousand acres of mahogany timber land along the upper Amazon, and I secured appointment as doctor to the surveying party which went out to learn details of the proposition. There were eight of us in the party that left the States. Two surveyors and their assistants, two men versed in tropical lumber, one chief carpenter, and myself. Mr. Erricson, the chief surveyor[,] was vice-president of the company and had authority to complete the deal and begin operations if conditions were satisfactory. At Loma we chartered a small steamer, took on additional help and then steamed over a thousand miles up the silent reaches of that never ending giant of rivers, the Amazon. Some day I may tell you of that trip up the river, but my story tonight is concerned with some happenings at the camp after we were well settled and nearly ready to begin sending mahogany logs down stream.

A Spaniard, Don Velque, known to all as the Don, had joined our camp as a sort of consultant. His knowledge of tropical forests was profound, and he seemed to know or be able to predict the type of timber to be found in any part of the forests. A man of about fifty, he could lead any of us youngsters a merry race through the woods. Without compass or path he could go all day through the trackless forests and never hesitate a second about direction when it came time to return to camp. The Don had a daughter, Nita, who was as lovely a girl as I have ever seen. Small and lithe, with the jet black hair and olive skin of Spain, Nita was the witch and lovely fairy of the camp.

About a month before the events which I am now going to relate, continued Dr. Moran, we first became acquainted with the Bo[-]Cu plant. Opposite to our camp, on the other side of the river, a tributary stream came in which presented a very peculiar appear[a]nce. On one side of this stream was the densest, blackest forest I have ever seen, while on the other side there were only scattered small trees, interlaced among which was a nearly solid network of vines. A few days earlier these vines had begun to blossom and at the time I am telling you about the whole network was covered with the flowers like a solid wall. The flowers were flat, snow white circular blossoms, but on one of each of the five petals was a small black spot about the shape of a quarter moon. The wall of white foliage on one side of the stream, over against the black forest on the other[,] gave the tributary stream the appearance of marking the boundary between day and night. We soon found out that the Bo-Cu itself was far more strange than anything in its appearance. When it was first beginning to flower a party of four of our lumbermen went to explore the tributary stream in a canoe one Sunday. In the early evening the canoe drifted out of the stream and when it was brought ashore we found two of the men dead in the bottom, one unconscious, and one sitting m[e]wing and grinning like an idiot. A large mass of Bo-Cu flowers

was in the bottom of the canoe, and the sweet stinging odor of the flowers filled the air all about. Two of the men who had brought the canoe to shore soon began to act strangely and to talk about the strange things they could see in the water. Luckily I concluded that there was something wrong with the plant and I soon chucked the flowers into the stream and watched them drift down with the current. The man who was unconscious when the canoe was brought in soon died, and as far as I know the fourth who took that trip never recovered his sanity. It was later that a native told us that Bo-Cu, meaning dream, was the name of the plant and that no one ever went near it who knew its powers. As long as the plant was in bloom if the south wind was blowing it would bring the stinging odor to our camp and our whole company would sometimes show its effects. Our men would return from the forests on such days and recount the strangest happenings as soberly as could be imagined. Some times I have seen the whole fifty of us who were now at our camp telling each other of the queer things happening all about, and no one quite believing what he heard or what he himself said. It was something of a mad house at such times. I myself have seen gnomes climbing in and out of my medicine cabinets, and have seen strange damsels slip in and out of the trees in the somb[e]r forest. But then a north or a west wind would come and our minds would clear as a mist disperses in the sunshine.

Nita, the darling of the camp[,] was to be married. Her lovely face and lovely spirit, her grace of heart and of form had won the adoration of each of us, and at last Carl Mathews, our second surveyor, had won her consent and that of the Don. Carl was of the blond viking type, a splendid man physically and in every other way. We were all glad that our Nita had selected him from among her many suitors. Those two surely loved each other! It appeared to be an ideal match. The day of the wedding arrived. A minister had come from a camp up the river, and they were to be married at dusk. There was a little south in the wind that day, and I remember that as I walked through the forest in the early afternoon I suspicioned that we might suffer a touch of Bo-Cu before nightfall. I came on Nita and Carl seated at the foot of a tall tree. They were close together, but they did not separate or show embar[r]as[s]ment when I came upon them. The three of us were very good friends and they had very little to hide from me. "Would you, would you"[,] "Don Carlos, Carlos mio"[,] Nita was saying, with her arms about his neck. "Carlos mio[,] would you live without me" Nita repeated. "Nita" said Carl gravely, "you must not talk like this." "Come[,] come" said I, "this talk four hours before the wedding. It is that cursed Bo-Cu plant," and I glanced at the gleaming white across the river. "Better postpone the wedding until a change of wind." "No[,] no" they both cried in a breath. "It is nothing" said Carl. "Then tell me about it" said I, sitting down beside them and inhaling a breath of stinging sweetness at the same time. "Mora, the camp gypsy" said Carl, told Nita's fortune today and said that she would die on her wedding night. I have no faith in such truck, but I wish Nita had kept away from Mora." "Dear[,] dear Nita" he continued, "don't think of it a moment." "Carlos dear" whispered Nita, "we are wonderfully happy." "We will be married—I will forget Mora—we will be even happier."

They were married very simply about eight o'clock that evening. A new little cottage had been built between mine and the Don's, and in this they were to live. The south breeze was bringing a thunderstorm, and we hoped for a change of wind before morning. Indeed[,] strange

stories were beginning to circulate before the wedding party broke up at about eleven. I said goodnight to Nita and Carl as they went into their new little cottage. A crash of thunder woke me a little after midnight. I lay awake for a time, the crackling white flashes alternating with booming claps of thunder as the storm drew nearer. And then came a scream from the cottage next to mine—that of Carl and Nita. Though half drowned by a clap of thunder, there was something about that scream which made me quiver all over. It was not the scream of a girl at a flash of lightning. Rather was it a cry of unimaginable horror. For a moment or two I lay listening, but no further sound came from the cottage. Even so, I could not lie quiet, but slipped into my clothes, determined to make sure whether all was well in the new cottage. A moment later I stepped into the drenching storm which now raged outside. One of the shades of the cottage was up a little, and a light shone through the narrow slit out into the night. I ran across the fifty yards which separated the houses, and up on to their small veranda. I knocked softly and then more loudly, but still no answer came. With a feeling of alarm I pounded on the door with my fist, but still no answer came. In desperation I flung myself upon the door and crashed through. Stumbling on into the sitting room I came upon Nita lying face up upon the floor, quite dead. Her head had received a terrific blow from a heavy axe which lay nearby. Dr. Moran shuddered. Never, he continued, shall I forget that sight. The dark shadows all about, and Nita lying dead in the little circle [?] of light from the lamp. I called for Carl but no answer came. A search of the house showed no trace of him, though his hat and rain coat hung on a nail in the hall. The back door was open. I called for Carl out into the stormy night, but no answer came.

I cannot tell you how shocked and upset was the whole camp by this horrible affair. Weeks passed with no word from Carl. Out into the night he had gone after that horrible deed, and no one had seen or heard of him since. It broke the old Don. He was never the same man again. His black hair turned white in two weeks, and in body and soul he was a broken man.

Naturally[,] after the first, we did not speak of the affair to the Don. But some two weeks after the remains of the poor Nita had been laid beneath a great tree in the dark forest, the Don came to me one night and told me the strange story of Nita and her mother. They met in a small native village in the interior. Nita's mother was, like the Don, of Spanish descent, but her parents, as well as she herself[,] had been born in South America, and there was thus quite a touch of the native in Nita's mother. She was named Dolores, and was, said the Don, even more beautiful, more strange, more lovely than Nita. Never, said he, have I seen mortal woman like her. Our common love of nature first drew us together. I shall not, he continued, attempt to give you any account of that wonderful girl. It is over. She is long dead and I soon follow. But a little I want you to know. It links strangely with Nita's fate. Dolores and I both loved the outdoors, but with Dolores it was a strange love—almost a madness. I have seen her leave our house at night in the wind and storm and glide into the forest. Sometimes she would fling herself laughing onto a giant tree, put her arms around it and cry out with wild delight while they swayed together in the rushing wind. But she loved me too, did my Dolores, as truly and as passionately as ever woman loved man. For two years we lived as one in that perfect happiness which, I know, is seldom the lot of mortals. Then Nita came, and the light of heaven went out. Dolores was sick, sick unto death. My Dolores, who loved life, the open, the forest, with every fibre of her being. My darling

who had never known a moment[']s illness, to whom physical pain was unknown, went into that hell of torture which led to death. Death will soon take me now, continued the Don, and thank God the memory of that last hour will leave me. Dolores was lying in our cabin gasping with pain and fever. I knew the end was near. Nita, the innocent cause of it all[,] lay nearby in a little basket crib. And Dolores, dazed and out of her mind[,] turned and cursed our little Nita with the bitterness of insanity and of death. I will not recount that terror. It is enough to say that in her ravings she swore that Nita should never know the joys of marriage, that marriage should mean death. And so the Don finished his story.

Dr. Moran paused. Our little company waited expectantly for the conclusion of this strange narrative. The Doctor took a sip of an eastern liqu[o]r and then resumed his story. There is not a great deal still to tell[,] he said. Nothing happened for three months to explain in any way the fate of Carl Mathews, or to tell the story of what happened in that cottage that night. Then one day came a message to me that Carl was sick with fever in a distant camp of ours and had sent for me. I hurried to him and I arrived only a little before the end. Carl was a ghost of his former self. He had barely enough strength to talk, but haltingly, word by word, he gave me the following story. Moran, he said, I must tell someone before I die. It was like this. You know how I loved Nita and how she loved me. We worshipped each other. You know that, Moran, you know that. Yes, I said. The wedding night[,] he continued, we came together into our new home, Nita and I. I paused to hang my hat and coat on a hook in the hallway, and Nita went first into the living room and sat down near the table. I followed, and as I came into the room toward her I noticed a change. And then, O God, Moran, Hell's nightmare was down upon us. Nita sat silent, and her face—it changed and changed and changed. I swear it[,] Moran—there Nita sat and her face changed into the concentrated fury of a thousand devils. Speechless she sat, and I saw the devil sitting there grinning at me. My reason went, Moran. I struck and staggered out into the night. Maybe she still sits there speechless[,] he muttered. Then his mind cleared, that final moment between life and death. Since then[,] he said, I have wandered in the swamps and native villages. Too sane to want to live, too insane to kill myself. Thank God now I go—and Nita, Nita, I see you as of old, my Nita again. And so died Carl Mathews.

Friends, said Dr. Moran, I have told you a long story, a true story, a story of a strange plant and a strange curse. Was it all begotten of the Bo[-]Cu plant? Who can tell? Light comes in the east. Day is breaking. And so we filed out into the bleak morning. Brief adieus, and each went his way, to meet again, who can tell just when?

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