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Book Review: Cora DuBois: Anthropologist, Diplomat, Agent

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Cora DuBois: Anthropologist, Diplomat, Agent (Critical Studies in the History of Anthropology) Susan C. Seymour, May 10, 2015 [U.K.: July 1, 2015] Publisher: University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln, NE and London. 423 pages, 22 Photographs (listed as "Illustrations"): Index Included:

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Susan C. Seymour provides a biographical description of both the personal and professional life of anthropological pioneer, Cora DuBois. As the title indicates, she was a diplomat and agent of the United States government, however contents of the book indicate that DuBois was, foremost, an educator and social scientist. Having earned a PhD in Anthropology at the University of California, Berkley, she eventually became the first tenured female professor at Harvard University. The author indicates that her book is offered to describe the life and times of "a twentieth-century first woman," and, considering the barriers that even the most talented women faced at the time, the accomplishments of Cora DuBois are noteworthy. The book also includes extensive information about the development of American anthropology during the period when Freud's theories dominated the social and behavioral science disciplines.

Born in Brooklyn, New York on October 26, 1903, Cora Alice DuBois was the second child, and only daughter, of an international entrepreneur who had extensive business interests in Switzerland and Johannesburg, South Africa. She would have been born there if the Second Boer War had not forced foreign businessmen to flee the nation. Reared by a very loving father and a mother who withheld affection from her, DuBois developed what she described as the ability to be a 'distant observer of mankind.' Throughout, the book includes inferences, as well as direct personal writings, which indicate that Cora was "a lesbian." The author was careful, however, to refrain from including details of homosexual interactions between the subject and significant others in her life.

Seymour provides an interesting description of the subject's life from early childhood onward. Biography enthusiasts are likely to enjoy reading that, in 1908, the five-year-old moved with her family to St. Quentin France, where her father would establish and manage a chemical factory. Cora's mother, Mattie Schreiber DuBois, was described as "a typical American girl" whose father became a dentist while serving as commissioner of education for the "city of Brooklyn, New York."

During her years in France, DuBois began keeping a diary. The contents of that chronicle enabled the author to ascertain the inner thoughts of her subject, who prided herself in the ability to disguise feelings. As a result, readers will learn about the myriad considerations that caused DuBois to make the decisions that led to her incredibly unique and successful life. In France, she developed a love for writing and honed skills that would be recognized throughout her career.

Fortunately, the DuBois family left France just before the outbreak of World War I. Having achieved a measure of financial security, the patriarch was transferred to Perth Amboy, New

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Jersey, where he would manage another large company and expose his family to a life of wealth and privilege. Cora DuBois was fortunate to also have wealthy relatives in Europe, whom she visited following graduation from high school. Originally, the parents intended to make the trip with their daughter. The father was very ill, however, and was advised to remain home. Unwilling for their daughter to travel alone, the parents hired a young French professor from Smith College to accompany her. Merely by chance, they selected someone who was described as “sensitive, attentive, and a lesbian.” Seymour recounts a diary entry in which Cora expressed joy that she was finally able to “intimately relate” with someone about her sexual identity.

While in Europe, Du Bose had very enjoyable experiences as she met with family members, and traveled extensively. Unfortunately, her father passed-away and a return home was necessary. The loss of her father’s income, and need to care for her mother, caused Cora to delay enrollment in college. Instead, she accepted employment at a branch of the New York Public Library. She still clung to the desire for a college education, however, and, after 18 months, enrolled at Barnard College. Barnard was situated in an area of New York that could be accessed by train; therefore, she commuted to the campus four hours daily. When Cora neared the end of her third year, her mother accepted a marriage proposal, thereby freeing the young scholar to finally move into a campus dormitory. As expected, Cora continued to excel and eventually earned both her undergraduate degree from Barnard and Master of Arts (in History) from Columbia, University. Having reached those academic milestones, DuBois would soon make decisions that would determine the course of her future life.

To provide background that enables readers to understand future career decisions made by Cora DuBois, the author describes events that occurred prior to her choice of an anthropological career. At the beginning of the twentieth-century, concern about homosexuality was widespread, particularly when sexologist Havelock Ellis published his book “Sexual Inversion.” Banned in England, the book addressed same-sex relationships, including those between women, and included an argument that bisexuality and homosexuality were inborn characteristics, not social perversions. The term “lesbianism” had been introduced to the world, and Ellis considered lesbians a danger to society. Ellis also said that the number of lesbians was increasing and he blamed increasing opportunities for women. The person who had the greatest impact upon perceptions of lesbianism was, however, Sigmund Freud. Although his ideas about human sexuality were already being taught at U.S. institutions, his series of lectures at Clark University in 1909 heightened concerns across the nation. Among the many negative aspects Freud reported was the belief that acts by women were most aberrant. As a result, those theories were used to discourage ambitious women from assuming leadership roles. The fears fostered by such reports and attitudinal changes that resulted, occurred as Cora was sexually maturing, therefore she realized that same-sex relationships had become socially stigmatized. The furor intensified during the years that followed and Cora made every effort to disguise her feelings. Still, she was fascinated by the fact that social scientists held such sway over the beliefs and actions of humans, therefore, upon graduation from Columbia, she considered careers that had the potential to affect human perceptions.

During her final year at Barnard, Cora’s History Advisor recommended that she enroll in a year-long anthropology course taught by two Columbia Professors. Franz Boas (considered the Father of American Anthropology) and Ruth Benedict, were leaders in the field, while Margaret Mead (who was to become more widely-recognized than her professors) served as a teaching assistant. DuBois was exposed to three of the leading anthropological figures in America, and two of them were women. Following graduation from Columbia, Cora enrolled in the Anthropology

PhD program at the University of California, Berkley rather than Columbia because she detested life in New York City.

Seymour describes the many aspects of life that DuBois experienced while pursuing her doctoral degree at Berkley. The list of distinguished anthropologists she met continued to expand as the network was comprised of counterparts at Harvard, the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Chicago as well. All knew each other and exposed their students to fellow members of the “cabal.” Having studied under Franz Boas DuBois was readily accepted into the inner-circle. While there, she conducted extensive field work studying the Native American Wintu tribe and published noteworthy articles. During that period, she also developed an affinity for a concept that was new to anthropology. She began to identify an important theoretical orientation for herself - studying the psychological characteristics of seemingly aberrant individuals and their “fit within society.” Mindful that her latent hidden homosexual tendencies remained, Cora considered her lifestyle aberrant, therefore she identified with individuals who were regarded as such. Further, during her initial fieldwork expedition, she had witnessed the relationship of culture to personality. The combination of those experiences, her education, and personal feelings, inspired Du Bose to become a member of a new interdisciplinary field that would become known as “culture and personality.” Doctor Cora Alice DuBois would graduate from the University of California at Berkley in the fall of 1932.

In spite of their accomplishments, Cora – and most female anthropologists – were rarely offered full-time teaching positions. Further, the worsening American Depression caused reductions in funding that limited opportunities for males as well. Cora found neither a teaching position nor doctoral fellowship that would allow her to pursue her interests in anthropology and psychology therefore she continued to do fieldwork and publish scholarly articles. Seymour devotes a considerable amount of commentary to the lack of opportunities for women at that time, citing the fact that the few openings were assigned to men. Despite her superior skills and innovative ideas, DuBois was disenfranchised as well. Finally, in 1925, she was awarded a one-year National Research Council fellowship in response to her proposal entitled “Personality Types in Shamanism,” written while observing the Wintu’s who served as “shamins” (spiritual doctors), following field work at Berkley. Happy to have received the \$1,620 honorarium, Du Bose left California for Boston Psychopathic Hospital and the Harvard Psychology Clinic to begin pioneering work in “culture and personality.”

As Europe battled Nazi forces, DuBois and most Americans cautiously observed the conflict. Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, however, she and many of her peers supported the war effort and even joined the fight. Having concluded her groundbreaking work on the people of Atimelang, and written a widely-heralded book, “The People of Alor: A Social-Psychological Study of an East Indian Island” (eventually published in 1944), DuBois was uncertain about her future. Seymour wrote that the book permanently established Cora’s reputation in American anthropology, specifically because it was collaborative and used “a multiplicity of research techniques.” Because of her recognition as an expert on East Indian affairs, DuBois was asked to join the fledgling Office of Strategic Services (OSS). The organization was comprised of business executives, corporate lawyers, “left-wing intellectuals, artists and university scholars, most of whom were Ivy League professors. After accepting the appointment to serve in the Research & Analysis Branch of the OSS, DuBois began a tour of service that was exemplary and resulted in her eventual elevation to the highest position held by any woman during World War II. When the war ended, however, she was again unemployed as President Truman dissolved the OSS shortly after Japan surrendered in August 1945.

Before the war concluded, military leaders wanted to transfer the skills and knowledge developed during the conflict to a new, independent intelligence agency. Therefore, in December 1945, Cora DuBois was appointed as Chief of the State Department's East Asian Branch, a unit of the Division of Research for the Far East and a subsidiary of the newly-created Office of Intelligence. Although her work there remains "secret," she presented a number of public lectures, participated in a variety of professional organizations, and, in 1949, published a noteworthy book entitled "Social Forces in Southeast Asia," which addressed issues and outcomes that were eventually realized during the Vietnam War. In her personal life, DuBois moved into a Washington, DC apartment previously rented by Berkley friends and welcomed her OSS colleague Jeanne Taylor to join her. The couple would cohabitate the remainder of Cora's life.

Dr. DuBois remained with the State Department until 1953. During the period, she survived the "red scare," wherein paranoia was fostered by opponents of the Truman administration, as well as the McCarthy era and "blacklisting" that it engendered. Years later, the former affected Cora's decision to accept a full professorship and chairmanship of the Anthropology Department at her beloved UC Berkley because, in 1942 and 1949, Regents of that university had initiated a "loyalty oath" policy. Instead, after leaving the State Department, she accepted a position in Washington as Director of Research for the Institute of International Education. From 1951-54, she toiled there awaiting an offer in academia. Although she was no longer a full-time federal employee, the FBI began an investigation of her that didn't end until September 1960. The Bureau justified its actions by citing an executive order with prescribed loyalty investigations for United Nations employees, despite the fact that, by 1953, Cora's twelve-month affiliation with the World Health Organization had ended. Apparently, her refusal to accept the UC Berkley position because of unwillingness to sign the loyalty oath was the primary reason.

In 1953, DuBois was finally offered a full professorship (with tenure) at Harvard University. The Samuel and Doris Zemurray Stone (Radcliffe) Professorship was designated for a distinguished woman scholar who would teach both Radcliffe and Harvard students. The first of its kind, the momentous appointment was accompanied by a \$250,000 endowment.

Despite the great honor, the author includes slights that DuBois experienced as a result of being the first woman of her stature among the Harvard faculty. She was required, for example to enter the all-male Faculty Club through a side door and take meals in a separate dining room, to "preserve the ambience of the main dining room." Eventually, she would integrate that dining room, becoming the first woman to eat there and break down other barriers for Harvard women. Further, she was a lesbian, a fact that the author ensures is mentioned in her book.

Things were not all bad however. Upon her arrival, Harvard and Radcliffe publicized Cora's appointment and republished two of her books in the Harvard University Press. New editions of "Social Forces in Southeast Asia," (1959) and "The People of Alor," (1960) were published with new prefaces.

Seymour includes excerpts of Cora DuBois' diary entries and earlier-written poems to explain events that happened much later. As a result, readers are transported between periods - often decades apart - thereby making it difficult to follow a traditional biographic story-line. The book concludes with inward-looking self-analyses by the subject that address previous interactions with family members, colleagues and antagonists. Cora Alice DuBois died, at the age of eighty-seven, on April 7, 1991 in a nursing home following a fall that resulted in a broken hip. The author included an account provided by long-time companion Jeanne Taylor, that indicated Cora's acceptance of the life she lived, as well as those with whom she interacted.

Seymour attempted to make the publication interesting to average readers and informative

to anthropologists; however, one can easily understand why members of the former group may feel overwhelmed by the voluminous anthropology-related references and explanations that permeate the text.