



Knowledge from the Margins: W. Montague Cobb's Pioneering Research in Biocultural Anthropology

ABSTRACT W. Montague Cobb became the first African American to receive a doctorate in physical anthropology in the United States (1932). He was also among the first U.S. physical anthropologists to demonstrate a commitment to biocultural integration and racial equality in his research. Nonetheless, very few European American physical anthropologists responded to or utilized Cobb's work. This continued after bioanthropology took on a more biocultural focus in the 1980s, some 50 years after Cobb's first studies of this kind. In this essay, I highlight Cobb's research and writing from the first decades of his career to illustrate his contribution to developing biocultural perspectives in physical anthropology. As a result, I hope to move Cobb from the margins to the center of discussions about methodological and theoretical developments in bioanthropology over the past 30 years. [Keywords: W. Montague Cobb, physical anthropology, biocultural synthesis, African American anthropologist, American physical anthropology]

PHYSICIAN, educator, and physical anthropologist W. Montague Cobb was a leading scholar-activist in the African American community from the early 1930s through the 1980s. Locally and nationally, Cobb led movements that fought for the admission of black doctors to predominately white hospitals and medical organizations, improved health care for blacks, and organized national conferences on hospital discrimination and integration.¹ As the first African American to receive a doctorate in physical anthropology, Cobb attempted to facilitate the authoritative presence of African Americans in discussions about racial biology during the 1930s and 1940s. To that end, he conducted research that interrogated biodeterministic notions of health disparities and biological diversity. In fact, Cobb is credited with conducting some of the first demographic analyses exposing the impact of racism on the health of African Americans and U.S. citizens as a whole (National Medical Association 2005). He also established research facilities at Howard University for the purpose of training future African American scholars in physical anthropology.² Many of Cobb's 1,100-plus publications indicate his commitment to intellectual rigor and investment in achieving racial equality through antiracist teaching, research, and political activity.

Cobb achieved considerable esteem within institutions and professional and civil rights organizations. Cobb served as editor of the *Journal of the National Medical Association*

for 28 years (1950–77), during which time it developed into a highly respected medical journal. In 1959, Cobb was the first African American elected president of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists (AAPA).³ In 1969, he became the first professor to be elevated to the rank of Distinguished Professor at Howard University. After retiring from Howard in 1974, he held visiting professorships at leading universities throughout the country. Outside of the academy, he served as president of the NAACP from 1976 until 1982. In addition to these accolades, he received more than 100 awards throughout his career for his civil rights activities and distinguished work in the fields of anthropology and anatomy.⁴

A biography of Cobb by physical anthropologists Lesley Rankin-Hill and Michael Blakey (1994) is included in Faye Harrison and Ira Harrison's edited volume, *African American Pioneers in Anthropology* (1999). As stated, the book serves to "repossess and reposition the African American intellectual lineage within the history of anthropology" and "provide an invaluable view of the discipline's history 'from below' " (Harrison and Harrison 1999:2). They argue that such a volume is necessary because African Americans have been largely situated as marginal to the hierarchical order of knowledge that anthropology represents. As such, a very small amount of the scholarship they have produced is included in the texts and discourses that define the discipline (Harrison and Harrison 1999).

Given Cobb's prolific career and publication record, it at first seems curious that his biography would be included in a book with the purpose of recapturing anthropological knowledge from the margins. However, very little of Cobb's work on African Americans and race was either responded to or utilized by European American physical anthropologists. This continued after bioanthropology took on a more biocultural focus in the 1980s, some 50 years after Cobb's first studies of this kind.⁵ Arguably, the minimal recognition of Cobb's work in light of his prominence reflects the ambivalent relationship African Americans have had with the discipline, as noted by Harrison and Harrison, and indeed suggests that Cobb was in part marginal to it.

In this essay, I highlight Cobb's research and writing from the first decades of his career to render it visible as an important contribution to the development of biocultural perspectives in physical anthropology. I provide a review of select papers and research to highlight aspects of his work that warrant his inclusion in the bioanthropological canon.⁶ Specifically, I will focus on his denunciation of racial hierarchy and the complex understandings of human adaptation and diversity promoted in his work. I draw on previously developed histories, my own research on Cobb's manuscripts, and interviews conducted by Blakey and Rankin-Hill (n.d.) in 1985 to illustrate my points.

This discussion is important for two primary reasons. First, it provides an opportunity to consider the unique aspects of Cobb's approach to human biology studies and appropriately situate his work within the bioanthropological canon. Although T. Wingate Todd was an important influence as his doctoral advisor, Cobb's work had a decidedly more political character. Although there are similarities between Cobb and Franz Boas in terms of biocultural integration and contradiction to mainstream racial deterministic ideas, Cobb claimed no intellectual roots in the Boasian school or sociocultural anthropology. Therefore, it is worth exploring the differences between these perspectives lest Cobb's ideas be trivialized as derivative of Todd's or those of a "reluctant Boasian."⁷ In addition, methodological, theoretical, and activist foundations of the biocultural synthesis are generally attributed to the influence of ecological anthropology, political economy, and other developments in sociocultural anthropology on bioanthropological perspectives (Goodman and Leatherman 1998). Sherwood Washburn's tenets for a "New Physical Anthropology" (1951) are also noted as a point of origin for this perspective.⁸ However, Cobb's work serves as a reminder that there were other proponents of social responsibility among scientists and struggles against scientific racism occurring in Western bioanthropological discourse (Haraway 1989). It is therefore important to consider other contributing factors outside of those generally accepted and claimed among the majority of researchers.⁹

Second, Cobb serves as an illustrative link between physical anthropology and an African American scholar-activist tradition, the latter of which can be traced back to the 19th century. Historically, vindicationists produced re-

search and writing that highlighted historical achievements of African Americans in response to biodeterministic studies (Douglass 1950; Drake 1980; DuBois 1940). Work also addressed problems associated with race and racial analysis, speaking in particular to the political embeddedness of U.S. anthropology relative to human diversity theories. In addition to academic rigor, the approach is rooted in a politicized identity on the part of the researcher, which engenders a sense of responsibility beyond professional interests. The critical connection between academic thought and action is appreciated as an integral part of one's research scope (Slocum 2001). Cobb's work reflected a scientific and civic activism associated with this tradition. In fact, Cobb's work remained decidedly political after the majority of scholars in physical anthropology turned to more academically oriented work. There is a well-documented history of vindicationist scholars using anthropological knowledge for their purposes (Baker 1998; Blakey 1998; Douglass 1950; Drake 1980, 1987; Du Bois 1939). However, the ways in which anthropology was shaped by activist scholars within the discipline is rarely examined. Using Cobb's work to explore this intersection has the potential to broaden the historical context of developments in physical anthropology, including the biocultural synthesis.

In the next section, Cobb's entry into the field is discussed, including background on key arguments and shifts in U.S. physical anthropology at the time. This is followed by a discussion of his early projects and writing that suggests a relationship to current biocultural syntheses in physical anthropology.

BACKGROUND

In 1928, Aleš Hrdlička, considered to be the leading U.S. physical anthropologist at the time, initiated the process of establishing professional independence from medicine and anatomy, which served as bioanthropology's first academic base. At the American Association for the Advancement of Science meetings that year, Hrdlička proposed the creation of a separate professional organization. This desire for independence was informed by Hrdlička's vision of physical anthropology as having "practical application through racial eugenics, directed at engineering the biology and social progress of American society" (Hrdlička 1921). Like many of his colleagues, his research focused on illustrating the racial superiority of whites on the basis of "inherent" differences in the development of the black and white brain and skeletal morphology. Hrdlička's proposal was accepted, and the American Association of Physical Anthropologists was founded in November of 1929, with the previously established American Journal of Physical Anthropology adopted as its organ.

Although in the minority, not all U.S. physical anthropologists were in agreement with Hrdlička's plan for the discipline or his research focus. Boas is widely recognized as leading the research movement that challenged assumptions of European intellectual and physical dominance over

"Asian," "Native American," and "Negro" types during the early 20th century (Blakey 1998; Drake 1980; Rankin-Hill 1997). His publications stressed the developmental plasticity of the body and mind rather than the notion of immutable racial difference (Boas 1895, 1910, 1912). Todd, another leading scholar in U.S. physical anthropology at the time, was also a strong critic of racial determinism. Although he opposed the use of physical anthropology for political ends, he lent his research to illustrate the fallacy of racial differences (Todd 1923, 1930). Biologists and geneticists also started to question mainstream beliefs, as their disciplines were in the process of piecing together the evolutionary synthesis of population genetics that eventually made them obsolete. Both the experimental challenges to biological determinism and reactions to the excesses of Nazi racial policies caused some scholars to retreat from scientific racism in the 1920s and 1930s (Barkan 1992; Jones-Kern 1997). Therefore, this period marked the beginning of debates between racial determinists and nondeterminists that continued into the 1950s when the "New Physical Anthropology" (Washburn 1951) emerged.

Therefore, Cobb entered the discipline during a period of great debate. Cobb began his postgraduate training in physical anthropology after completing Howard University School of Medicine in 1929. He was among three graduates selected by the dean of the school, Numa P. G. Adams, for advanced training to enhance the anatomy department. Although Cobb intended to open a private practice, he agreed to join the faculty on the condition that he could study physical anthropology. Dean Adams visited Todd's laboratory at Case Western University the previous year and thought he might take Cobb as a student based on the interaction. Todd agreed to direct Cobb's postgraduate studies, which he completed in 1932 (Blakey and Rankin-Hill n.d.; Rankin-Hill and Blakey 1994). As planned, Cobb's training with Todd served as a catalyst for establishing the Laboratory of Anatomy and Physical Anthropology at Howard University that same year.

LABORATORY ACTIVITIES

Racial Anatomy

Several aspects of the research and education plan of the laboratory illustrate Cobb's commitment to biocultural integration and the achievement of racial equality. Cobb states in his self-published book on the first four years of the laboratory that he envisioned it as a vehicle for African American scholars to authoritatively participate in debates on racial biology (Cobb 1936a). Cobb makes it clear that participation should be directed toward fighting against the impression of physical and mental inferiority of the Negro rather than defending it (Cobb 1936a). He understood that equipping Negroes and Negro institutions to conduct "physical studies of the Negro" was essential to countering the acceptance of biodeterministic ideas by blacks and whites (Cobb 1936a, 1942; Rankin-Hill and Blakey 1994). Cobb wrote to the dean of Howard's School of Medicine in 1941:

It is my belief that physical anthropology can make a significant contribution to our national welfare if it would by giving the people by modern propaganda methods the scientific facts we have about race. In this way, a great blow could be struck at the dominant group's entrenched belief in its racial superiority. . . . I do not believe that we can look to others to do this job for us. Nearly every distinguished living American anthropologist, and I know them all now, has private reservations about the intellectual possibilities of the Negro. We cannot expect them to be willing to go very far. [Cobb n.d.]

To that end, Cobb began immediately began collecting skeletal remains, anthropometric measurements, and limb, hand, and foot X-rays of living populations. In response to the lack of "Negro materials" in established human skeletal collections, Cobb assembled a research sample of African American skeletons from cadavera used in anatomy classes beginning in 1932 until 1969. The collection included records with personal data, which Cobb deemed necessary for "studying the remains of a human being" and indicating how accurately mortality statistics and demographics reflected sociocultural context, which he referred to as "ecological phenomena" (Cobb n.d., 1935, 1936a). It was standard practice for students in Cobb's anatomy classes to study these records along with the skeletons (Cobb 1936a).

Cobb believed that Howard University was in a unique position to contribute to identifying errors in racial anatomy studies by conducting physical studies of statistically significant numbers of Negro remains lacking in major collections in the United States and abroad. He also hoped to promote studying the "facts of variation and hybridization" rather than to "determine the best brands of human beings" (Cobb 1936a:77). Early data gathered from the skeletal collection was included in Cobb's article titled, "The Physical Constitution of the American Negro," published in the *Journal of Negro Education* in 1934. Cobb referenced the collection in arguing against the notion of racial differences in body type (Cobb 1934).¹⁰ Data were also used in his research countering assumed racial differences in the musculoskeletal structure of athletes (Cobb 1936b).

Child Development

Cobb also wanted the laboratory to be at the center of child development research. His plan for child development studies also illustrates his orientation toward both rigorous scholarship and activism. He stated that it is "science's function to discover the best means by which the child may realize his full capacities for development . . . and the function of the national economy to make the means accessible" (Cobb 1936a:78). As with racial anatomy studies, Cobb saw child development research as part of a scientist's promotion of racial equality; for this was a key area of research indicating that development is not primarily determined by biological innateness but, instead, by environment. Therefore, Cobb understood that a child's physical development reflected social circumstances and had implications for school performance as well as future quality of life and health.

Data were collected to chart the course of the normal development of the child. Specifically, he planned to develop general standards of dimensional growth for the U.S. Negro child in Washington, D.C. He envisioned these data being pooled with that collected by a psychologist, a sociologist, a biochemist, and an educator to develop a profile that could identify a child's developmental status, as well as the presence and absence of defects. Cobb argued that this information should also be used to create more detailed training curricula in child development for teachers. Therefore, he viewed the physical development of the child as part of an integrated whole that involved other aspects of development: "It is but a short step to the time when the mental patterns will be viewed as an integral part of the whole child and a phase that cannot be adequately studied without a knowledge of physical, physiological and behavioral patterns of growth" (Cobb 1936a:78-79).

Collection of these data led to Cobb's involvement in a study developed and funded by the Bureau of Home Economics (U.S. Department of Agriculture) on the nutritive value of dried milk for underfed children in the District of Columbia. Male children between the ages of 2.5 and 4.5 years living in economically poor areas were the focus of analysis. The first set of physical data and medical histories for the "Dried Skim Milk Study" were collected at the Howard University laboratory (Cobb 1936a). Data included a physical examination, 17 measurements, hand and wrist X-rays, and a range of blood work. Six months from the starting date, the laboratory was scheduled to collect a second set of observations to determine if adding milk had any impact on development.¹¹

Cobb saw both projects as central to Howard University's role in promoting what he referred to in his self-published book as human betterment:

In the study of both racial anatomy and child development, Howard University has an opportunity to be on the front lines of progress. It can do its fair share of advancing the welfare of the nation. It further has the special opportunity of paying just heed to the conditions and need of a segment of the population often insufficiently taken into account. [Cobb 1936a:80]

While Cobb's belief in both social and biological influences on human development clearly represented a departure from biodeterminism, his belief in human betterment and constitution presents for some a less clear distinction between biodeterminist thinking and his own.¹² It is clear from texts that he did not advocate eugenics:

At a recent eugenics conference, Charles Davenport in his presidential address, stated that today the great obstacle to mass improvement by eugenical means is the same as it has ever been, namely, that birth control is practiced in the upper classes and neglected in the lower classes, whereas the reverse should be the case. . . . People still seem to marry who they will, and eugenical propaganda is so dangerously liable to react unfavorably on minority groups that this approach is best left alone. [Cobb 1936a:77-78]

In other words, he did not believe that eugenic practices could exist outside of nonbiological influences (Cobb 1938a).

However, Cobb did believe in the cultivation of an individual's constitutional heritage to produce better bodies and in the notion that some individuals are biologically superior to others. In an article called "Frontiers of Human Biology" (1938a), Cobb expressed a concern for overpopulation and the need to improve the quality of humanity. Specifically, he states that "human effort should be directed to the end that all localities would be peopled with only as many individuals as could be comfortably supported and that, in the interest of peace and progress, these individuals would be of superior quality" (Cobb 1938a:1). However, he goes on to state that an individual or group's superiority is not tied to stature, skin color, or other characters considered "racial":

It would not be necessary to give specifications for any of the traits by which race is determined because none of these traits have direct survival value in our civilization or bear significant relationship to human caliber or fitness. We could thus let our superior subjects choose what head form, skin color, eye color, hair form, nose form, lip thickness . . . because in respect to human capacity these items are of no moment. [Cobb 1938a:2]

Rather, Cobb views superiority in terms of longevity (as indicated by the longevity of one's forbearers), which depends on the nurturing of proper development throughout pre- and postnatal phases. Cobb saw anthropology as useful to human biology and child development research for identifying, nurturing, and breeding the most superior human beings. It is clear from his discussion in this article and other texts that Cobb does not advocate the use of anthropology to promote or justify elimination or sterilization of "less superior" beings. Rather, studying child development made it possible to identify aberrations, their significance, probable causes, and possible means of correction (Cobb 1936a, 1938a). Therefore, rather than a belief in biological fixity, Cobb believed in using anthropology to study the growth and proper care of children to develop the means for improving human biology when and where possible.¹³

It is also important to note that equipping Negroes with tools for research and a nonhierarchical understanding human variation included public education. In addition to developing a museum in the laboratory that received visitors, Cobb regularly gave speeches at schools and civic organization meetings, which he considered to be laboratory activities (Cobb 1936a). Most of the speeches were based on research being conducted in the laboratory or on ongoing research on collections located elsewhere. The titles of these speeches further illustrate Cobb's commitment to biocultural integration and highlight the research focus of the laboratory (Cobb 1936a).¹⁴ Cobb's activist orientation and commitment to public education is further illustrated by the information he regularly published on black health and race in the popular press.¹⁵

In sum, Cobb's research and education schemes include a number of components relevant to biocultural research in physical anthropology today. In the study of both skeletal and living populations, history and social context were considered. Demography was an important consideration in research, including socioeconomic status, nativity, and other cultural factors (Cobb 1935, 1936a).¹⁶ Cobb also embraced an interdisciplinary research perspective and supported the use of research to address social problems. Specifically, his research and writing promoted an understanding of human diversity outside of the realm of racial hierarchy and brought attention to the social and environmental conditions of a neglected segment of the population.

PUBLICATIONS

Cobb's articles titled "Race and Runners" (1936b) and "The Negro as a Biological Element in the American Population" (1939) are often cited by present-day physical anthropologists relative to current biocultural perspectives. However, these are only two of the over 1,100 publications Cobb produced during his career. In light of the pioneering work represented in these articles, more of his work deserves to be brought to light in discussions. Therefore, I present this literature review in the spirit of bringing additional publications by Cobb from the margins to the center of discussions about emerging paradigm shifts in bioanthropology.

As stated, the two often-cited papers mentioned above indicate his nonracialist orientation, as well as his commitment to promoting racial equality that led him to develop the laboratory at Howard University. In "The Negro as a Biological Element in the American Population" (1939), Cobb discusses the biological and demographic character of African Americans observed in the 1930s, as well as the historical and social processes associated with his observations. Cobb describes the Negro as "a hybrid, presenting varying degrees of admixture of African, Indian and European blood. He is today an intrabreeding group, being prevented by circumstance and law from large scale intermixture with the white majority" (Cobb 1939:336). In addition to suggesting special aptitudes for "pitch and rhythm," Cobb states that the Negro's physical strength, mental ability, and general adaptability (constitution) were likely enhanced by the selective bottleneck of slavery (Cobb 1939). Nonetheless, he indicates that no data exists that indicates superiority in Negro anatomy or physiology. Cobb wrote the article to counter arguments that U.S. blacks had not been exposed to European civilization sufficiently enough "to gain competence and management of the complexities of modern life" (Cobb 1939:342). Rather than indicating inferiority, Cobb asserts that in light of social and economic barriers associated with slavery and racial discrimination, the intellectual achievements of African Americans are extraordinary. In addition to documenting the toll that racism was exacting on African Americans, he also discussed the costs to the larger society.

"Race and Runners" (1936b) "still stands as a poignant counter argument to biodeterministic explanations of athletic abilities" (Rankin-Hill and Blakey 1994). Written in response to the furor over Jesse Owens's performance at the 1936 Olympic Games, Cobb presented data from skeletal collections indicating little or no difference between the length of calf muscles, legs, feet, and heels of black and white athletes. Cobb also used data from his personal examinations of Owens's and white athletes' anatomy. Owens's anatomy exhibited both "Caucasoid" and "Negroid" characteristics, thus indicating the discordance of racial traits. Cobb also noted that the supplanting of world records with each successive year of the Olympiad suggested that training was more important than racial or genetic endowment in athletic performance. That this article was published in the *Journal of Health and Physical Education* speaks to Cobb's lack of adherence to conventional disciplinary boundaries in the study of human biology.¹⁷

Cobb's exhaustive review of racial typology studies in "The Physical Constitution of the American Negro" (1934) underscores his commitment to exposing political influences on these scientific studies and to promoting racial equality. Therefore, the article not only presents research on the subject conducted to date but also addresses the circumstances under which research was undertaken. Cobb includes such information "to aid in the appraisal of the value and difficulties of the work" (Cobb 1934:387). This statement is useful in situating Cobb's motivations within the continuum of African American vindicationist scholarship that critiqued determinist studies for being a reflection of social attitudes rather than rigorous scientific research (see, e.g., Douglass 1950). In his conclusion, Cobb states that research indicates the imprecise nature of racial categorization. Furthermore, he critiques the perverted understanding of Mendelian genetics used to argue that race mixing is dysgenic and that the genes of blacks and whites are "disharmonic."

Cobb elaborates on the "taxonomic rather than survival value" of racial characteristics in his article entitled "Education in Human Biology: An Essential for the Present and Future" (1943). Although he references much of the work detailed in "The Physical Constitution of the American Negro," this article is a more broadly accessible critique of so-called scientific evidence of racial variation. In the discussion, Cobb takes on specific pseudoscientific ideas such as racial differences in cranial morphology, skeletal structure, and musculature, athletic ability, and intelligence. Moreover, the footnotes of this article provide a representative list of articles Cobb wrote for popular audiences.

However, it is important to keep in mind that the notion of "race" as a biological concept had yet to be dismissed outright by physical anthropologists.¹⁸ Cobb states in this article that race is a biological reality not a myth (1943:142).¹⁹ At the same time, he argues that "racial traits have in themselves no survival value in life as man lives it today. Race as a biological is no index of physical, mental or cultural capacity [*sic*]" (Cobb 1943:142). Cobb's

characterization of the taxonomic rather than survival value of racial differences reflects the complex understanding of and belief in race by nonracialist physical anthropologists at the time:

One can admit that the narrow nose is better suited for slow intake and easier warming of air in a cool climate, while a more ample aperture is permissible in a warmer climate, yet one could not infer that the Bushmen could not survive in the Alps or the Tyrolean on the Kalahari because of their nasal form. [Cobb 1943:139]

Cobb saw these physical differences as characteristics of race, which he stated was one of the most obvious aspects of human variation. Therefore, features such as nasal form, skin pigmentation, and hair type are considered to be racial characters. However, rather than attributing these characters to distinct human groups, Cobb is attributing differences in racial characters to geographical affinity.²⁰

Finally, Cobb's article entitled "Municipal History from Anatomical Records" (1935) details his approach to human biology studies with cadaver populations. It also provides the clearest evidence of Cobb's contribution to the present-day biocultural synthesis. The article is an assessment of how representative a cadaver collection from Cleveland, Ohio, was of the general population in the 1930s.²¹ To this end, he conducted an analysis of cause of death and clinical histories "in light of known sociological and historical facts" (1935:157). According to his findings,

Although this laboratory population constitutes but one per cent of the total dead of the city of Cleveland for the twenty-one year period during which it was assembled, it reflects to a remarkable degree the major concurrent social and industrial developments. This is because most of the cadavera were conscripted as unclaimed dead from the least stable elements of marginal economic groups in the living population. [Cobb 1935:157]

In particular, he found that while there were 12 times as many white deaths as Negro deaths in the city, there were only twice as many white as Negro cadavera. In addition, between 1915 and 1930, there was a steady increase in the number of Negro cadavera deliveries. He went on to elaborate that the specific distribution of individuals was correlated with the influx of Negro industrial workers from the South. Between the years 1930 and 1935, the ratio of Negro to white cadavera was "higher than would be expected from the number of city deaths" (Cobb 1935:158). Documentary evidence of Negroes being disproportionately "hardest hit" by the Great Depression in the city lends insight into this phenomenon.

Cobb's analysis does not merely address white versus Negro differences. Rather, he provides an analysis of native and foreign-born whites in the population. Cobb notes that the presence of a variety of foreign-born individuals in the population, as well as the common social stratum between them, was a result of both "old" and "new" immigrations. That the majority of native-born whites in the population were born in Ohio was attributed to the location

of the laboratory rather than broader migratory processes. Again, drawing on documentary data, he notes that New York and Pennsylvania were the states where most "new" immigrants settled. However, because most of the individuals who were not native Ohioans were born in New York and Pennsylvania, Cobb was able to conclude that most of these individuals were of foreign ancestry (Cobb 1935). He also indicated how their socioeconomic status and occupation were related to their foreign ancestry based on documentary evidence of how susceptible immigrants were to urbanization. Cobb used the same documentary sources to show that the variety of states in which Negroes were born other than Ohio indicated that they were a part of what is known as "The Great Migration." In spite of the small number of Negro cadavera relative to the general population, almost 30 states, most southern, are represented in the sample. Cobb goes on to illustrate how the mortality curve and causes of death reflects mass social movements and the existing economic depression. In conclusion, he notes that the population "as a whole . . . is from a low economic stratum of society subjected to more than the usual hazards of modern life" (Cobb 1935:162).

In addition to illustrating the general relationship between health and social process, several components of what we physical anthropologists term *the new biocultural synthesis* are present in Cobb's 70-year-old discussion. First, Cobb is discussing and conceptualizing poverty in non-generalized, nonracialized terms. The impact of material constraints on human health in black and white populations is addressed. Rather than generally relating cause of death and mortality to proximate social indicators like socioeconomic status, Cobb addresses the different responses to the stressors of urbanization and The Great Depression within populations. In addition, Cobb does not treat the collection as a representative population of poor people in Cleveland, Ohio. Rather, these individuals represent the "least stable" segment of a marginal population. His focus on health outcomes in a particular segment of the poor in Cleveland indicates that he is not treating poverty as a naturalized condition. Cobb most clearly articulates this in his discussion of nativity in the sample. While the demographic patterns in the population are explained in part by the general migratory history of blacks and foreign immigrants, he also considers the particularly local history of migration in his analysis. This consideration of events in their local and extralocal contexts is what allows him to see how the population reflects life for migrants and immigrants in the United States at the time—as well as in Cleveland in particular.

Granted, these ideas are not fully developed or articulated in the article. For instance, Cobb does not discuss the specific processes associated with the particular disadvantages with which populations live. Nonetheless, his research suggests an understanding of poverty as a historically and socially contingent formation. Moreover, given the prevailing research interests in the discipline at the time, Cobb's integration of biological and historical

information allowed him to develop a fairly complex discussion about the utility of skeletal samples for making inferences about health in general populations. Such discussions were not broadly engaged in the discipline until the early 1990s (such as Byers 1994; Cohen 1997; Cohen et al. 1994; Wood et al. 1992). Arguably, his discussion represents one of first among physical anthropologists regarding how social phenomena are embedded in the biological record (Phillips 2001, 2003). Nonetheless, Cobb viewed the relationship between biological and cultural anthropology as “functional, not organic” (Cobb 1942: 140).

UNIQUE FEATURES OF THE COBBIAN PERSPECTIVE

As with Cobb's laboratory activities, he expresses an integrative and political orientation in his writing that is reflected in current biocultural research in physical anthropology.²² Indeed, Cobb's work reflects the influence of individuals who trained him, such as Todd. His work also suggests agreement with Boasian contradictions to mainstream racial deterministic ideas. However, his work also represents a departure from this scholarship. Moreover, it is important to note that at the time Cobb began carrying out his bioanthropological projects, the focus of the discipline was changing. In the mid-1930s, the AAPA began to distance itself from political goals, declaring itself politically neutral. An academic shift toward a more biological orientation, leaning more toward objectivity rather than advocacy, continued into the later 1930s. This had implications for the policy-oriented racial typology and eugenics studies of scholars like Hrdlička, as well as for Cobb's use of physical anthropology toward the end of promoting racial equality. Addressing some of these differences is helpful in determining where Cobb's work fits within the biocultural lineage as well as why it is deserving of attention in a historicization of the biocultural synthesis.

As stated, Cobb was indeed influenced by Todd's progressive approach to human biological studies. However, Todd was not in favor of using anthropological work on race to political ends. As an imperfectly developed science, Todd believed that it was dangerous to discuss research in contexts possibly rendering it useful to “unsympathetic sides” for lending further scientific credence to racialist and racist ideas (Todd 1929). As a result, he preferred that scientists develop statements based solely on moral indignation for political ends (Jones-Kern 1997). Therefore, Cobb's use of physical anthropology for legal and political ends cannot simply be viewed as an outcome of his entry into the discipline via Todd. Rather, Cobb's research orientation also reflected a vindicationist approach to science. Although aware of the abuses of anthropological data, Cobb perceived that his identity as a Negro scientist limited his ability not to use anthropology to advance the cause of the Negro. This also speaks to his awareness that researchers, including Todd, maintained a safe distance from political interests because

their privilege as white men allowed them to do so. The investment or lack thereof did not have the same implications for them as it did for Cobb. Therefore, Cobb's identity as an African American heavily influenced his research orientation and practice.

In considering where to situate Cobb within the canon, it is also important to note his lack of association with Boas. Although there are similarities in their approaches, there are clear points of departure as well that give credence to Cobb's disassociation. Cobb's perspective on race and Negro culture represented a departure from that of Boas in two important ways. Although Cobb's work was often parallel to Boas's, Cobb asserted throughout his career that Boas had minimal influence on his work, if any. This position may at first seem questionable in light of Boas's influence on challenging assumptions of European intellectual and physical dominance over African Americans during the early 20th century (Blakey 1998; Drake 1980; Rankin-Hill 1997). However, there are some significant differences in their ideas about race that suggest Cobb's statement should not be dismissed outright. Boas argued that so-called racial characteristics were not immutable but, instead, were influenced by environment. However, in spite of his commitment to racial equality, he deferred to the work of physical anthropologists about racial inferiority (Baker 1998). Therefore, changes and overlap in racial characters were merely evidence that it was possible for certain races to achieve higher civilization.

Unlike Boas, Cobb did not consider so-called scientific studies of racial inferiority valid in any way. This is because he had a thorough understanding of Darwinian natural selection and adaptation. Therefore, Cobb understood changes and overlap in racial characteristics to be evidence of human diversity, admixture, and evidence of adaptation to one's environment. In addition, Cobb perceived human biological diversity not merely in terms of plasticity and frequency but also hybridity. Cobb characterized the Negro American as an Afro-Euro-Indian hybrid biologically and culturally (Cobb 1939). Like Boas, Cobb viewed Negro culture not as deficient but, instead as amazing in light of hardships associated with racism. However, not only did Cobb discuss the Negroes achievements, he also addressed the shortcomings of Euro-American culture. Therefore, developing a counterhegemonic discourse regarding racial inferiority was an important part of his scientific practice.

Noting the distinctions between Cobb's perspective and those of Boas and Todd is important for properly situating Cobb and his work within African American as well as anthropological intellectual traditions. Cobb's tutelage under Todd and his subsequent approach to conducting research reflects the progressive anthropological tradition of which he is a part. Cobb's motivations for engaging in bioanthropological research, establishing a laboratory at Howard University, and critiquing pseudoscientific racial typology studies also locates his work within the tradition of African American vindicationist scholarship.

CONCLUSION

In the 21st century, physical anthropology continues toward a more biocultural orientation in the form of political, economic, and archive-centered human biology studies. Researchers are also placing an increased emphasis on the biological impacts of environments of inequality in which people live. However, this transition is taking place within the discipline with minimal recognition of Cobb's work and its relevance to the development of the new biocultural synthesis.

Surely, the reasons for the lack of professional attention to Cobb's work among bioanthropologists are complex. This examination of his work provides some clues as to why his publications were and continue to be underrecognized among bioanthropologists. Cobb's research and publication strategies as a physical anthropologist during his most active period are closely tied to an African American scholar-activist tradition. The political nature of his work was not always complimentary to research emphases in the discipline or the political stance of the majority of scholars. In addition, Cobb's lack of association with Boas also possibly contributed to the marginalization of his work in physical anthropology. This aspect of his self-identification is also rooted in his association with an African American scholar-activist tradition based on a commitment to interdisciplinarity.

Rankin-Hill and Blakey remind us that Cobb made a commitment to remain at Howard University Medical School for the duration of his career, which prevented him from passing on a legacy through students of anthropology (Rankin-Hill and Blakey 1994).²³ It is also important to note that for most of Cobb's career, black faculty were barred from teaching at white institutions that employed U.S. anthropologists; concurrently, a graduate program or department of anthropology was never established at an African American college or university. Arguably, this lack of recognition is also related to the minimal effort put into "rescuing neglected precursors of paradigmatic alternatives" in physical anthropology (Stocking 1992:8). This condition has been appropriately tied to the discipline's gender and racial politics, which have played a significant role in the marginalization and outright erasure of work produced by women and people of color (Behar 1993; Harrison 1988, 1991; Lutz 1990). This factor suggests that the treatment of Cobb's work cannot and should not be examined outside of the context of the discipline's racial politics. Although the discipline articulates a responsibility to research and theorize racism and inequality, the contributions of African Americans and other minorities are often omitted (Barrett 1984; Harrison and Harrison 1999). Given that Cobb was the sole representative of black concerns in physical anthropology for an extended period of time,²⁴ it is important to explore the lack of attention to his writings as a possible outcome of the dimension and weight of (t)his position. While Cobb's decision to publish in a variety of journals and publications was influenced by his desire to "get the word

out," he also notes that he experienced publication and membership obstacles familiar to black professors (Douglass 1981).

Kevin Jones-Kern (1997) argued that Todd personified the full spectrum of physical anthropology's transition to modern biological anthropology. Because of his progressive views about race, as well as his adherence to a traditional view of physical anthropology as a subfield of anatomy and medicine, Jones-Kern argues that Todd is an ideal lens through which to view this formative period of physical anthropology. I argue that the same is true for Cobb. Like Todd, Cobb advocated more traditional, medical-style training and sought to discredit racial differences in his work. In addition, as stated, Cobb's work also ties U.S. physical anthropology to African American scholar-activism, which potentially expands the historical context of current trends and shifts in the discipline.

In reviewing the distinctions between his work and canonized bioanthropologists such as Boas and Todd, we see that the lack of attention to Cobb's work perhaps reflects an uncritical adherence to a particular historical narrative of biological anthropology and associated leadership rather than possible shortcomings of his work. Among other things, his early contribution to applying biological knowledge to health and social problems warrants his recognition as a significant figure in U.S. physical anthropology and as one of the forefathers of the biocultural synthesis. Recent attention to his work in dissertations (Jones-Kern 1997; Watkins 2003), journal articles (Rankin-Hill and Blakey 1994; Wailoo 1996), books (Baker 1998), and documentaries emphasize this point.²⁵ As this work has taken place along side efforts to bring the work of other minority anthropologists to light, it can be viewed as a part of the larger project to "decolonize" and rehistoricize anthropology (Harrison and Harrison 1999).

This review of Cobb's work during the early part of his career demonstrates how it was a precursor to methodological and theoretical changes in physical anthropology today. Therefore, rescuing Cobb's knowledge from the margins is important because of his contributions to not only biological studies of African Americans but also human biology studies within physical anthropology as a whole.²⁶ Therefore, this discussion of Cobb's work is not simply geared toward telling the story of someone forgotten in the bioanthropological record. Rather, this discussion is engaged in the spirit of turning our attention to other early interpretations of a biocultural synthesis to bring about a fuller understanding of the lineage. Exploring a greater variety of approaches to this synthesis can assist us with better understanding and addressing current social and health dilemmas, which is in keeping with the historical and contemporary use of biocultural anthropology as a tool for societal change and social justice.

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NOTES

Acknowledgments. I thank Lesley Rankin-Hill, Michael Blakey, Diane Levy, Karla Slocum, and Brett Williams for their assistance and encouragement in developing this article. I also wish to thank the AA anonymous reviewers of an earlier draft of this essay for their comments and suggestions. The W. Montague Cobb Papers are housed at the Mooreland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.

1. Cobb's accomplishments in this regard are well recognized and covered extensively in public health and medical literature.

2. This project, as well as his attendant view of physical anthropology, was greatly influenced by his training under Todd, who espoused many of the views on racial description that Cobb adopted and promoted throughout his career.

3. Until 1995, Cobb was the only African American elected to the highest office of an anthropological organization in the United States.

4. This includes a number of posthumous awards. Most recently, the National Medical Association established and named their Health Policy Institute in honor of Cobb's life and work as an "outstanding anthropologist, educator, and activist" (National Medical Association 2005).

5. Rankin-Hill and Blakey note that Cobb's study of craniofacial suture closure and human aging was the only one of his 1,100 publications cited in the physical anthropological literature. This is in stark contrast to the high recognition and visibility of his work in medical and public health literature. To date, a very small number of physical anthropologists cite his work in articles and or talks. An anonymous reviewer of an earlier draft of this article claims to have used one of Cobb's papers in his class for the past 30 years. A review of syllabi and citation indexes clearly indicate that this is the exception rather than the rule.

6. This article focuses on the relevance of Cobb's work to a specific movement within physical anthropology, known as the new biocultural synthesis. Most of the researchers who were a part of this initial movement were either taught or trained at University of Massachusetts, Amherst. During this time, human biology came to be examined by some researchers from a more political economic perspective. Therefore, health was seen as a reflection of social relations and access to resources. As a result, biological diversity was assumed to reflect the experience of stress as well as adaptation. Goodman and Leatherman's edited volume *Building a New Biocultural Synthesis: Political-Economic Perspectives on Human Biology* (1998) provides an historical overview of the movement, including theoretical developments and future directions. D. Ann Herring and Alan Swedlund's recent edited volume *Human Biologists in the Archives* (2003) builds on biocultural syntheses discussed in the previous book in terms of integrating the biological and historical record.

7. This type of uncritical characterization of Cobb's work, which does not allow for considering possible distinctions in his approach to human biology studies, is an example of what critical race theorists call "vulgar anti-essentialism" (Crenshaw 1995; Epperson 2004). This practice is defined as one that includes minorities in academic discourse and knowledge production in a way that validates perspectives already established or embraced by Euroamerican scholars (Blakey 1997).

8. This point was raised by one of the anonymous reviewers of an earlier draft of this article.

9. For instance, physical anthropologists such as Blakey and Rankin-Hill note the influence and situate their work within the continuum of African American scholar-activism. Typically, politically engaged physical anthropology is not linked to this tradition in spite of individuals like Cobb and Bond-Day who were interacting with and conducting research with prominent white scholars in the field.

10. Research tested Huber's hypothesis regarding Negro patterns of facial musculature: "The pattern of facial musculature described by Huber as typical of the Negro does occur but it is not the rule even among subjects of marked Negroid external features" (Cobb 1934:366). This is the only mention of research conducted with

collection in any of the publications and monographs reviewed for this article.

11. No mention of the second phase or outcome of the study was made in the monograph or other documents. At the time, Cobb noted that this was the first government-sponsored study of its kind in which Howard University was involved.

12. An anonymous reviewer questioned Cobb's membership in the Eugenics Society. I include this discussion to help clarify Cobb's position on eugenics, which shows that he is clearly not in favor of it. Cobb was a member of the organization for the purpose of watching and monitoring them from within. He saw himself as an "undercover agent" who might be able to effectuate change (Rankin-Hill, conversation with author, May 26, 2006). A more detailed treatment of his position will be taken up in future papers.

13. Cobb envisioned the establishment of child development clinics throughout the country, where the developmental progress of normal children is studied and reported. He says of the idea: "It is the view here that the possibilities for community service of normal developmental clinics is such, that they cannot fail of wide adoption, once these possibilities are realized, and the knowledge of the field are adequately advanced" (Cobb 1936a:80).

14. "Anatomical Mortality Statistics as a City Mirror, Academy of Medicine," delivered in Cleveland, Ohio, 1932; "Adolescent Guideposts and Community Fitness," Five-Point Health Awards, Dunbar Highschool, 1932; "Validity of Criteria of Racial Status," New Negro Alliance meeting, 1934; "Gummatous Destruction of the Nose, Osteitis and Permanent Dislocation of the Jaw in a Laboratory Cadaver," Daniel Hale Medical Reading Club, Washington, D.C., 1934; "Crucibles and Crises in Human Development," The Futurists, a Washington Mother's Club, 1934; "Athletics and Anthropology," award of school letters, Dunbar High School, 1935.

15. One of most popular of these articles was titled, "Your Nose Won't Tell," published in the Crisis (1938b). This also includes pamphlets he published on hospital discrimination. "Medical Care and the Plight of the Negro" (1947) and "Progress and Portents of the Negro" (1949) focused on the inadequate pool of black health professionals produced within segregated framework and the necessity of open medical schools (Cobb 1978). "Old Clothes to Sam," a section within "Medical Care and the Plight of the Negro," became a nationally used term for the practice of passing on old and substandard white hospitals to blacks.

16. Cobb's use of the term *ecological* is significant because within physical anthropology, social and economic stressors were not considered to be environmental until the beginning of the "biocultural turn." See Alan Goodman et al. 1988 for an elaboration.

17. A former teacher who was also the director of physical education at Howard University suggested that Cobb publish the article in this journal. In fact, he withdrew his own manuscript, which was of a similar nature to "Race and Runners," to remove any obstacle to publication for Cobb's work (Cobb 1936a).

18. However, W. E. B. Du Bois was already refuting the concept in his writings during this time (1940).

19. In part, this statement is a response to M. F. Ashley Montagu's book, *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race*, published the previous year (Montagu 1942).

20. Although Cobb believed in the existence of racial characteristics and their evolutionary significance for survival of our species, he viewed racial characteristics in a way that was suggestive of clinal variation. However, the concept of a "cline," a gradual change in genotypes and phenotypes over geographical space, was not fully embraced in the discipline until the 1960s (Brace 1964; Livingstone 1962).

21. This collection was developed by Todd and was the subject of Cobb's dissertation, *Human Archives* (1932). This collection, still housed at Case Western Reserve University, is now known as the Hamman-Todd collection.

22. For instance, Blakey and researchers directly reference Cobb and the African American scholar-activist tradition as influences in the research design for New York African Burial Ground Project (Blakey and Rankin-Hill 2004). Blakey notes in an earlier article that the "Cobbian perspective" did indeed influence contemporary

physical anthropology and is reflected in current research approaches that involve biocultural anthropologists seeking a human position for science in their work (Blakey 1998). More broadly, this orientation is also well outlined in Thomas Leatherman and R. Brooke Thomas's article, "Political Ecology and Constructions of Environment in Biological Anthropology."

23. However, as Rankin-Hill and Blakey (1994) note, Cobb produced several generations of African American doctors and dentists who went on to make significant contributions to their fields.

24. This examination is timely, as less than 30 Ph.D.s in physical anthropology have been granted to African Americans since Cobb received his in 1932. There are even fewer in archaeology (Franklin 1997).

25. The 2005 documentary, *Race: The Power of an Illusion*, features Cobb's work in part 1: "The Difference between Us."

26. Cobb's later research also exemplifies his contribution to physical anthropology. Later periods of his career will be taken up in future publications. See Rankin-Hill and Blakey (1994) for an overview.

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