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Summary

Title: Hortense Powdermaker Papers

Dates: Circa 1929 to 1966

Extent: Approximately 2 linear feet (3 flat document boxes, 1 large flat document box)

Creator: Powdermaker, Hortense, 1903-1970

Language: English

Abstract: Hortense Powdermaker (1896-1970) was a noted anthropologist, writer and educator (professor of Anthropology at Queens College, New York, from 1937 to 1968). The collection comprises materials on her research and field work in the late 1920s, early 1930s and early 1950s in Lesu, New Ireland (Papua New Guinea), Indianola, Mississippi, and Luanshya, Zambia, respectively and includes field notes, interviews, survey results, correspondence, and unpublished manuscripts of writings. The collection also includes the typescript manuscript and proofs of her final book, Stranger and Friend.

Source: Donated to Queens College by Hortense Powdermaker in 1966 and reprocessed by the Department of Special Collections and Archives in 2013.

Access: Collection is open for research; contact Special Collections for access. Staff may restrict access at its discretion on the basis of physical condition. Due to the fragile nature of some originals, preservation copies are available for researcher use.

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Preferred Citation: Item, date (if known), box, folder, Hortense Powdermaker Papers, Department of Special Collections and Archives, Queens College, City University of New York.

Controlled Access Terms

People: Powdermaker, Hortense, 1903-1970

Places: Lesu, New Ireland (Papua New Guinea)
        Luanshya (Zambia)

Subjects: Ethnology – Papua New Guinea – New Ireland
        Lesu, New Ireland (Papua New Guinea) – Social Conditions
        African Americans – Social conditions
        African Americans -- Mississippi – Social conditions
        Race Relations – Southern States
        Luanshya (Zambia) – Social conditions
        Urbanization – Zambia – Luanshya

Related Collections: Queens College Photo Archive, Queens College, NY

The Queens College Institutional Archives – Anthropology Department, Queens College, NY

Bronislaw Malinowski Papers, Yale University

Institute of Human Relations, Yale University, Records

Department of Sociology, Yale University, Records

The A.L. Kroeber Papers, U.C. Berkeley

The Theodora Kroeber Papers, U.C. Berkeley

The George A. De Vos Papers, U.C. Berkeley

The Oakley C. Johnson Collection, Stony Brook University

The Dorothy Eggan Papers, University of Chicago
Biographical Note

Hortense Powdermaker was born into a middle-class, German-Jewish family on December 24, 1896 in Philadelphia, the second of four children of Louis and Minnie (Jacoby) Powdermaker. The family later moved to Baltimore where Powdermaker attended high school and Goucher College, receiving her B.A. in history in 1919.

At Goucher, Powdermaker became interested in socialism and the labor movement. After graduation, she joined the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, first as an assistant at its New York headquarters and then as a union organizer in Cleveland and Rochester. The 1920s, however, were a difficult period for the labor movement; in 1925, Powdermaker resigned her union position and traveled to England.

At the London School of Economics, Powdermaker registered for a course in social anthropology taught by Bronislaw Malinowski, a dynamic teacher and founder of the functional school of anthropology whose ideas about the psychological aspects of anthropology would profoundly influence her. In 1928, Powdermaker earned her Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of London for a study of leadership in primitive societies.

In 1929, Powdermaker obtained a grant from the Australian National Research Council to conduct her own field work and became the first woman anthropologist to live alone among the Melanesians of New Ireland (Papua New Guinea). Her ten months of field work in a small isolated village, Lesu, provided the material for her first book, Life in Lesu, a classic ethnological study of a Stone Age society published in 1933.

Returning to the United States in 1930, Powdermaker began her association with the Institute of Human Relations at Yale University where she met Edward Sapir, a respected anthropologist who also encouraged her psychological approach to anthropology. In 1932, Powdermaker secured a fellowship from the Social Science Research Council to conduct an anthropological study of a small southern town, becoming the first anthropologist to study a contemporary community in the United States. For nine months in 1932-1933 and the summer of 1934, Powdermaker lived in Indianola, Mississippi, examining its black and white communities and their interactions. Her book, After Freedom, published in 1939, is still notable for its insightful analysis of race relations and of the impact of psychological adaptations to segregation.

In 1937, Powdermaker joined the faculty of newly founded Queens College, New York City, as an instructor in Social Sciences; she rose to full professor and established its Department of Anthropology-Sociology. For the next thirty years, she was an enthusiastic and popular teacher; many of her students would themselves enjoy notable careers as anthropologists. In 1965, the Alumni
Association of Queens College publicly recognized her many accomplishments as a teacher and scholar, presenting Powdermaker with the Distinguished Teacher Award.

In addition to teaching, Powdermaker continued to pursue her research interests, conduct field work and publish. In 1943, she published an influential article “The Channeling of Negro Aggression by the Cultural Process” in the American Journal of Sociology and, in 1944, authored a book for high school students, Probing Our Prejudices, exploring the causes of racism and prejudice. During her sabbatical in 1946-1947, Powdermaker went to Hollywood to study how its social structure and processes influenced the content and meaning of movies. Although criticized by some, including Powdermaker, Hollywood, the Dream Factory, published in 1950, is among her best known books and it remains the only serious anthropological study of Hollywood.

In 1953-1954, a Guggenheim fellowship allowed Powdermaker to study the effects of Western mass media and urbanization on African tribal life in Luanshya, a mining town in the Copperbelt region of Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia); Copper Town, published in 1962, utilizes both anthropological and psychological theory to analyze societal change.

Powdermaker’s influential final book, Stranger and Friend: The Way of an Anthropologist, was published in 1966. Stranger and Friend is a candid examination of her field work experiences, the participant-observation method, and the appropriate role of the anthropologist and social scientist. Powdermaker was asked to contribute the section on “Field Work” in the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences in 1968, an acknowledgement of her expertise in this area.

In 1968, Powdermaker retired from Queens College and moved to Berkeley, California. As a Research Associate at the University of California at Berkeley, she was undertaking a study of youth culture until her sudden death from a heart attack at age 73 on June 16, 1970. In 1977, the Social Sciences Building at Queens College was renamed Powdermaker Hall to honor her distinguished career as an educator and anthropologist.

Powdermaker was a member of numerous professional organizations, serving as vice president and chairman of the New York Academy of Sciences, Anthropology Section (1944-1946), and as vice president (1945-1946) and president (1946-1947) of the American Ethnological Society. She was also a member of the American Sociological Society and a fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland. Goucher College awarded her an honorary doctorate in 1957.
Sources Consulted


Chronology

1896 Born December 24 in Philadelphia
1919 Bachelor of Arts, Goucher College
Early 1920s Labor organizer for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America
1925 First course in anthropology, London School of Economics
1928 Ph.D. in Anthropology, University of London
1929-1930 Field work in Lesu, New Ireland, Papua New Guinea
1930-1937 Affiliation with the Institute of Human Relations, Yale University
1932-1934 Field work in Indianola, Mississippi
1933 Publication of *Life in Lesu*
1937 Joined faculty of newly founded Queens College, New York City
1939 Publication of *After Freedom*
1944 Publication of *Probing Our Prejudices*, a book for high school students
1946-1947 Field work in Hollywood
1950 Publication of *Hollywood, the Dream Factory*
1953-1954 Field work in Luanshya, Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia)
1957 Honorary Doctor of Science degree, Goucher College
1962 Publication of *Copper Town*
1965 Distinguished Teacher Award, Queens College Alumni Association
1966 Publication of *Stranger and Friend*
1968 Retirement from Queens College; Move to Berkeley, California
1970 Died suddenly June 16 from a heart attack in Berkeley
1977 Powdermaker Hall at Queens College established
Selected Works

Books


Articles and essays


Scope & Content Note

The collection contains personal papers of Hortense Powdermaker related to her anthropological research and field work in Lesu, New Ireland (Papua New Guinea) in 1929, in Indianola, Mississippi in 1932-1934, and in Luanshya, Zambia (formerly Northern Rhodesia) in 1953-1954. The materials include: for Lesu - a general research outline and English-Melanesian vocabulary lists; for Indianola - an unpublished typed manuscript of a book based on her field work and field notes on religion; and for Luanshya - unpublished survey results on African attitudes towards the media, survey-related correspondence, interview field notes and conversation transcripts. The collection also includes the typed manuscript, galley proofs and page proofs of her final book, *Stranger and Friend: The Way of An Anthropologist*.

Arrangement Note

The collection is arranged by subject and chronologically in two series:

**Series I: Research and Field Work Materials, circa 1929-1954**

- Subseries A: Lesu (New Ireland, Papua New Guinea), c 1929-1930
- Subseries B: Indianola, Mississippi, circa 1932-1938
- Subseries C: Luanshya, Zambia (Northern Rhodesia), 1953-1954

**Series II: Stranger and Friend, 1965-1966**
Series Description & Container List

Series I: Research and Field Work Materials, circa 1929-1954
This series comprises materials related to Powdermaker’s research and field work in Melanesia (Lesu), the American South (Indianola) and Zambia (Luanshya).

Subseries A: Lesu (New Ireland, Papua New Guinea), circa 1929-1930
This series includes a typescript outline of research topics (titled "General Plan") with annotations related to Powdermaker's fieldwork in Lesu (New Ireland, Papua New Guinea) and holograph tables of English-Melanesian language vocabulary and pronunciation guide.

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<td>English-Melanesian vocabulary and pronunciation guide</td>
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Subseries B: Indianola, Mississippi, circa 1932-1938
This series contains field notes on religion taken by Powdermaker in Indianola, Mississippi and a typescript manuscript of a book based on her Indianola field work (a holograph note reads "Tentative title: Black and White, The Study of a Mississippi Community") that differs from the work ultimately published, After Freedom, A Cultural Study of the Deep South.

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Subseries C: Luanshya, Zambia (Northern Rhodesia), 1953-1954
This series includes an unpublished typescript manuscript with holograph annotations summarizing survey results on the preferences and attitudes of Africans in Luanshya, Zambia (formerly Northern Rhodesia) towards reading, cinema and radio; transcripts of interviews regarding the cinema and radio; transcripts of conversations relating to religion and church, marriage and family; and correspondence regarding the survey results between Powdermaker and Zambian-based European broadcast and colonial officials.

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2       2  Cinema (Bioscope) Interviews
2       3  Radio Interviews
2       4  Religion and Church Transcripts
2       5  Marriage and Family Transcripts
2       6  Correspondence

Series II:  Stranger and Friend, 1965-1966
This series contains a typescript manuscript of Stranger and Friend: The Way of an Anthropologist with annotations, editor's notes, and design layout of title pages; galley proofs with corrections and additions; and subsequent page proofs.

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