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Jane H. Hill

(27 October 1939–2 November 2018)

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A foundational and emblematic figure in linguistic anthropology, Jane H. Hill—born Frances Jane Hassler—died on November 2, 2018, after a distinguished career that had earned her international renown. Unsurpassed in the scope, depth, and relevance of her research, Jane embodied an especially vibrant and omnivorous form of linguistic anthropology not only within a four-field vision of anthropology but also as a source of social justice. She invited students (and colleagues) to join her on what she described as an intellectual tightrope: “I attempt a precarious balancing act among diverse commitments: to the detailed documentation of languages and cultures and specialized expertise in technical tools such comparative linguistic analysis, to the understanding of the scope and diversity of human history that is the glory of anthropology, and to using what I learn to advance social justice and mutual respect among human beings.”¹

Named Frances after her grandmother, Frances Jane Hassler was born in Berkeley, California, in 1939 to parents who had both earned their doctorates. Gerald Hassler, her father, was a physicist with a Cal Tech PhD and her mother, Mildred Mathias, a botanist with a PhD from Washington University in St. Louis, and later a professor at UCLA (K. Hill 2013). After high school, Jane spent two years at Reed College (Portland OR) and then two years at University of California, Berkeley, where she graduated. She then attended graduate school near her parents’ home at UCLA. She studied with Harry Hoijer and William Bright, completing her anthropology PhD in 1966. Her dissertation project was on the Cupeño language which she studied on the Pala Reservation, working in collaboration with Roscinda Nolasquez and other tribal elders. While a graduate student, she met and later married Kenneth C. Hill, also a graduate student in anthropology at UCLA, in 1961. In the late 1960s, the Hills moved to Michigan, where Kenneth took a position in linguistics at the University of Michigan and Jane took a faculty position in anthropology at Wayne State University. During coordinated sabbaticals, the Hills began their research on Mexicano (Aztec) communities residing in the Malinche Volcano area that would lead to many individual and joint publications, such as *Speaking Mexicano*. In 1983 Jane Hill moved permanently to the University of Arizona in Tucson, where she made a commitment to work on the linguistic anthropology of the US Southwest and eventually became a Regents Professor and a professor of both anthropology and linguistics.

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Jane H. Hill, March 2013 (photo by and courtesy of Judith T. Irvine)

Though Jane Hill was keenly aware of her privileged upbringing—she described herself as someone who was fortunate to be “born on third base” (Hill 2014:3)—she was also especially generous and inclusive in her attempts to share data, support her colleagues, and to inspire and mentor her graduate students, including many first-generation advisees. She engaged linguistic projects that often sought to effect social justice, whether this was the documentation and repatriation of Native American heritage language resources—from archives or from her own original research—the exposure of both patterns of appropriation and erasure of Native American placenames by the dominant society, or the disclosure of the covert linguistic racism associated with the register of Mock Spanish as used by non-Latinos.

A leading figure in a linguistic anthropology that came of age in the last third of the twentieth century, Jane Hill began with the descriptive and historical linguistics that was the mainstay of the post-Boasian Americanist tradition. But in addition to more collaborative research with indigenous communities such as the Cupeño, she expanded and developed this tradition by embracing new developments in sociolinguistics, the ethnography of communication, translinguistics (Bakhtin and Voloshinov), and a neo-Marxist emphasis on political economy that prefigured the development of the language ideologies movement. In the Americanist tradition, Jane Hill was supremely interested in the descriptive linguistics of Uto-Aztecan and other Native American languages. She delighted in the linguistic analysis of narrative texts and the historical linguistics of the Uto-Aztecan family as evidence for the origins of maize cultivation and the possible prehistoric contact between Proto-U-A and Proto-Kiowa-Tanoan

language communities. But in addition to celebrating these traditional interests, Jane's research also set new standards through the incorporation of sociolinguistic and ethnographic methods—especially in the Mexicano research she performed with Ken Hill. Her Bakhtin-inspired analysis of Don Gabriel's deathbed narrative of his son's murder is unsurpassed as a deep exploration of a multilingual narrator's use of multiple linguistically displayed "voices" utilized in the performance of a powerful and cathartic narrative (Hill 1995). In other ways, Jane also expanded the academic traditions she inherited by insisting on analyses that sought to understand linguistic data and research activities within a larger political economic context. Understanding Mexicano data, whether as forms of linguistic syncretism or ideologies of purism, required an understanding of economic marginalization, state policies, and the penetration of capitalism (Hill 1985, 1998). Similarly, the analysis of covert linguistic racism regarding the structure and use of Mock Spanish needed to be related to Western European and Euro-American language ideologies of referentialism and intentionality to truly appreciate both their comparative hiddenness and their racializing consequences (Hill 2008). In an equally path-breaking way, Jane's critical examination of the "expert rhetorics" associated with the language endangerment literature introduced a much-needed critical perspective that obligated scholars to rethink the wisdom of conventional, representational tropes such as "universal ownership" and "hyperbolic valorization" (Hill 2002).

During her career, Jane Hill won many honors, including being named a fellow in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. She won the Viking Fund Medal in Anthropology from the Wenner-Gren Foundation and the Franz Boas Award from the American Anthropological Association. In other service, she chaired the Departments of Anthropology at both Wayne State University and the University of Arizona, where she also chaired the Linguistics Department. In addition, she provided national leadership as the elected president of three academic associations: the Society for Linguistic Anthropology, the Linguistic Society of America, and the American Anthropological Association.

At the time of her death, Jane was working through the Serrano stories of the late Dorothy Ramon and considering the various ways the linguistic structures of Southern Californian languages illuminated the larger understanding of Uto-Aztecan prehistory. Though we may never see these projects completed, we will surely continue to benefit from Jane's oeuvre of pathbreaking scholarship for many years to come.

NOTE

1. Quoted from her webpage, still accessible (as of February 14, 2019) at <https://anthropology.arizona.edu/user/jane-h-hill>.

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