



**Name:** R. Alexander Bentley (Alex)

**Department/College:** Comparative Cultural Studies

**Research Area:** History and Culture, Literature

**Biography:**

My research has explored cultural change in different environments, from prehistoric societies to contemporary communities. Part of my research involves geochemical analysis of prehistoric skeletons, and I am already collaborating with Alan Brandon of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences in a collaborative effort to acquire major analytical equipment (mass spectrometer). Another of my research interests is the study of decision-making and the spread of behaviors, both historically and in the online age. As an active researcher in a field known as human behavioral ecology, I am also looking forward to meeting with people in the U.H. Biology of Behavior Institute. My recent work focuses on the dynamics of collective decisions by using discrete choice theory and social influence to model statistical patterns in big data. I have used similar analyses to understand cultural evolution across longer time scales in historical data. My recent book was *I'll Have What She's Having: Mapping Social Behavior* (MIT Press). I also have a history of interdisciplinary research and grant proposals. In looking at certain social phenomena in very long chronological context, one particular idea I had for UH was to focus a grant proposal on a particular agricultural product – sugar. I think there may be large, interdisciplinary grant proposal we could put together at UH on “How sugar changed the world.” Sugarcane is the world’s seventh most prevalent crop in terms of arable land area, and yet it underlies a public health crisis, including the obesity epidemic and co-related diseases including heart disease and diabetes. We could look at the issue of sugar from a contemporary perspective, in terms of modern-day “food deserts” and geo-located social media discourse through big data (I chatted briefly with Dr. Daphne Hernandez about this on my visit in April). In the same project, we could also work with UH social scientists that study community diversity in dietary choices. Going further back, the project could involve historians and archaeologists who study how the economy of sugar cane facilitated the transatlantic slave trade after 1500. I therefore could see a “big-themed” grant project involving the Department of Comparative Cultural Studies, the Texas Obesity Research Center, the Texas Institute for Measurement Evaluation and Statistics, and Health and Human Performance. This is just an idea I hope to explore with my new colleagues. In any case, I am looking forward to meeting many different researchers at UH.