

# H-Diplo ROUNDTABLE XXI-53

Charles King. *Gods of the Upper Air: How a Circle of Renegade Anthropologists Reinvented Race, Sex, and Gender in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Doubleday, 2019. ISBN: 9780385542197 (hardcover, \$30.00).

17 July 2020 | <https://hdiplo.org/to/RT21-53>

Roundtable Editor: Diane Labrosse | Production Editor: George Fujii

## Contents

---

Introduction by Rebecca Tinio McKenna, University of Notre Dame.....	2
Review by Kevin Y. Kim, University of California, Los Angeles .....	5
Review by Masami Kimura, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies .....	10
Review by Julie McBrien, University of Amsterdam.....	14
Response by Charles King, Georgetown University.....	19

---

 INTRODUCTION BY REBECCA TINIO MCKENNA, UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME
 

---

The production of knowledge, especially understandings of social difference, has been of particular concern to many, like me, who study the history of imperialism and colonialism. The design of ethnographic exhibits for museums and worlds fairs, travel writing, and photography through the early twentieth century, for example, have served as sources for understanding how imperial actors perceived human variation and the meaning they made of it. More often than not, these men and women saw a fundamental otherness in colonial or would-be colonial subjects, and their “science” supported this view. Human types, which were believed to be cast by nature, justified one’s spot on a civilizational hierarchy and could make colonial dispossession seem an act of benevolence. Charles King’s *Gods of the Upper Air: How a Circle of Renegade Anthropologists Reinvented Race, Sex, and Gender in the Twentieth Century* is a story about how a group of researchers undertook fieldwork around the world that gave lie to such supposed truths.

In his book, King, a scholar of international affairs and government whose books include riveting histories of Istanbul and Odessa,<sup>1</sup> turns from cosmopolitan cities to a set of ostensibly cosmopolitan men and women who forged cultural anthropology. He narrates how scholars Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, Zora Neale Hurston, Ella Cara Deloria and their teacher Franz Boas employed the scientific method to show that the social categories people perceived and used to govern and rule were not universal and natural, but “the products of human artifice, residing in the mental frameworks and unconscious habits of a given society” (7). They were the products of “culture,” not stages on a singular path of human development.

In explaining how this perspective came to challenge existing paradigms, King applies one of his historical subjects’ central convictions—that the lives they studied ought to be viewed “through an empathetic lens” (8-9). He approaches the beginnings of cultural anthropology, then, through a rich “plural biography,” narrating how understandings of science and culture emerged at the confluence of global events, domestic politics, academic affairs, and the idiosyncrasies of personal lives. This book, I believed, would make for a lively H-Diplo discussion. And the reviewers, who approach *Gods of the Upper Air* from the vantages of Anthropology and History, and King’s own response, do not disappoint.

All three reviewers offer praise for King’s book, a study that Kevin Y. Kim reads as a “global history of science” and that Julie McBrien regards as a step in “decolonizing the discipline’s histories.” They note the author’s gifted storytelling, describing his narrative as “suspenseful” and likening it to a “cinematic journey” (Kim). McBrien observes how effectively King relates complicated social theories without compromising nuance. The commentators also remark on King’s choice to approach cultural anthropology’s history through group biography, or what Kim calls an “intergenerational and intersectional *bildungsroman*.” This method, Kim asserts, yields “a humanized conceptual and spatial map of Boasian knowledge production,” and it distinguishes King’s book from the substantial work that exists on the subject. Notably, it is also an account that gives due attention to women anthropologists. To these reviewers, King’s move to make “life-writing” the way through the complexity of the past and historical change reads as a success.

While the reviewers make no quarrel with his account of cultural anthropology’s formation and applaud King’s approach to historicizing the dispositions and ideas that issued from “Papa Franz” and his students, they register ambivalence about King’s tone through *Gods of the Upper Air*—how he accents, or not, his subjects’ successes and failings and the gloss on cultural anthropology that results. The “celebratory” story of anthropology and the “mostly sunny, hagiographic narrative” that McBrien and Kim hear, respectively, flatten nuance, underplay the faults and contradictions of several of the anthropologists, and risk minimizing the malign, if unintended, effects of promoting cultural explanations over those that center the problem of race.

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles King, *Midnight at the Pera Palace* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014); King, *Odessa* (New York, W.W. Norton, 2011),

McBrien criticizes King for not voicing a more full-throated critique of figures like Lewis Henry Morgan and John Wesley Powell, whose careers were built on the dispossession of American Indians. She faults King for underplaying Mead's and Boas's complicity "in displaying, exoticizing, reifying and overly simplifying the 'other' for a popular American audience." Masami Kimura points out that the Boasians' "progressive view of history," expressed in their use of terms like 'modern' and 'primitive,' marked the limits of their worldview. Kim perhaps goes the furthest, looking for King to dwell more substantially on the privilege that shaped the lives and careers of Boas, Mead, and Benedict; how their careers and research projects challenged yet also shored up social hierarchies and powerful institutions; and how the cultural reductionism that followed "the Boasian turn" yielded "a flawed sociopolitical project." All this, he argues, should lead toward a "far less unambiguous and triumphant" assessment.

In questioning King's estimation of the Boasians' challenge to the status quo, two reviewers also raise the issue of the social scientists' relationship to the U.S. state and imperial power. Kimura points to this as a persistent problem for academics. Kim goes further, observing that King might have cast a fiercer light on the tension between his subjects' rejection of social evolutionary thinking, which undergirded war and U.S. imperial power through this period, and "their morally compromising relationships with the U.S. state." The reviewers thus seek a far more critical account of these cultural anthropologists (and others in their field) and the legacies of their work. They note that the kind of racism and sexism that these "renegades" challenged in some shape or form persist in the world at large, in the domain of science, and in the rarefied world of the academy.

In his response, Charles King clarifies that his argument is not that Boasians triumphed. His aim, he writes, was to show how a worldview based on a theory of cultural relativity came to challenge one that insisted on a ranking of human difference. If there was a triumph, perhaps, it is not in the hegemony of the Boasians' worldview now or in the past, but that the pseudo-science of the likes of eugenicist Madison Grant met an able, energetic, and public opponent in the first half of the twentieth century. King also pushes against the criticism that he avoids the less flattering aspects of his subjects' lives and careers. Yet he also makes a point of suggesting that "having a critical stance has to mean more than showing how unenlightened our intellectual forebears were." Balancing an appreciation of historical actors within the horizon of thought and possibility of their times and places (when and where Mead, Boas, et al., may indeed appear as progressive), with the aspiration of relating that past to our present (when their limitations can appear in high relief) is a perennial challenge of doing history. That we view the past and the present through a time and place that is shared, yet also highly particular and even intensely fractured now, makes this job seemingly all the more fraught. By what or whose measures does one choose to mark historical actors' successes and failures?

This relates to a final point raised by the roundtable: how professional scholars write for and imagine their audiences. Two reviewers, Kimura and Kim, attribute what they read as King's limited criticism of the Boas school (Kimura) and his "simplified view" of its work and legacy (Kim) to the book's status as a trade publication. King makes no concession that an imagined general reader blunted his critical edge. He writes that his inclination as a scholar has been "to try to take complex ideas and make them accessible to as many people as possible," and to do so by learning the craft of "narrative nonfiction." Does a scholar's wish to connect with a broad audience necessarily constrain critique and entail a simplification of complicated stories? Might narrative histories intended for "general" readers encourage particular forms of complexity, perhaps in causal explanation or moral circumstance? That King and our reviewers raise these fundamental questions about the role of scholars, their writing, and their relationship to the public, is testament to how captivating *Gods of the Upper Air* is, and, I think, to the sense of political urgency linking our times to those of Boas and his circle.

#### Participants:

**Charles King** is Professor of International Affairs and Government at Georgetown University. His books include *Gods of the Upper Air*, which received the Anisfield-Wolf Prize and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award,

*Midnight at the Pera Palace* (W. W. Norton, 2014), *Odessa* (W. W. Norton, 2011), and other works at the intersection of history and the social sciences.

**Rebecca Tinio McKenna** is an Associate Professor of History at the University of Notre Dame. Her first book *American Imperial Pastoral: The Architecture of US Colonialism in the Philippines* (Chicago, 2017) won the Myrna F. Bernath Book Award by the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations. She is now researching a social and cultural history of the piano with the support of a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship.

**Kevin Y. Kim** is an assistant professor of history at the University of California, Los Angeles. His work has appeared in *Pacific Historical Review*, *Diplomatic History*, *Modern American History* and a state-of-the-field volume on Korean American studies. In addition, he has written widely on history, popular culture, and public and international affairs for *The Nation*, *The Progressive*, *The Village Voice*, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, *South China Morning Post*, and other publications. Currently, he is completing a book project, tentatively titled *Worlds Unseen: Henry Wallace, Herbert Hoover, and the Making of Cold War America*, which has been supported by the American Historical Association, Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, and other organizations. In 2018-2019, he was a faculty fellow at the Charles Warren Center for American History at Harvard University.

**Masami Kimura** is Assistant Professor at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. She got her Ph.D. in history from the University of Arizona in 2013 and has published “American Asia Experts, Liberal Internationalism, and the Occupation of Japan: Transcending Cold War Politics and Historiography” in the *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* (October 2014) and “How Is the Allied Occupation of Japan Taught in American Universities?: History Textbooks and Occupation Scholarship” in *Mathesis Universalis* (March 2016). She has recently begun to rework her dissertation “Cultures of Modernity in the Making of the United States-Japan Cold War Alliance” into a book manuscript. She is also currently working on an article “Beyond National Historiographies in East Asia: Promotion of Cultural Relations through Multinational History Education” (tentative title).

**Julie McBrien** is Associate Professor of Anthropology, University of Amsterdam. She is author of *From Belonging to Belief: Modern Secularisms and the Construction of Religion in Kyrgyzstan* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017). She directs the research program group *Globalizing Cultures* at the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research and co-directs the Amsterdam Research Center for Gender and Sexuality.

## REVIEW BY KEVIN Y. KIM, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

Charles King's *Gods of the Upper Air* is a gripping, well-told narrative. Few works, particularly in social science history, combine academic heft and accessible storytelling with such panache. Providing an intergenerational and intersectional *bildungsroman* of Franz Boas and several prominent women who studied with him—particularly public intellectual Margaret Mead and African American novelist Zora Neale Hurston—King vividly portrays cultural anthropology's twentieth-century rise as the outgrowth of interpersonal relationships, intellectual developments, and sociopolitical tensions in a world wracked by domestic and international conflict. While largely successful as a popular narrative depicting the Boas circle's expanding social and cultural *milieu*, *Gods of the Upper Air* is less successful in making its author's principal historiographical claim. Boas and his students, King argues too simply, were cosmopolitan “globalists” whose cultural relativism worked against Western chauvinism and birthed the “modern and open-minded” view that “humanity is one undivided thing” (4).

In one page-turning chapter after another, *Gods of the Upper Air* offers a suspenseful account of Boas and his followers' intertwined lives, charting how their everyday and geopolitical aspects collided and helped produce the field of cultural anthropology. Drawing on biographies and archival research, particularly personal letters and ethnographic materials from the Library of Congress's Margaret Mead collection, King takes the reader on a fast-paced, cinematic journey. The book effortlessly pans between epic events such as Europe's 1848 revolutions and U.S. Westward expansion, on the one hand, and the petty personal and academic battles, on the other hand, which Boasians waged in their families, workplaces, and U.S. and global societies. As a global history of science, *Gods of the Upper Air* skillfully traverses the personal (from Boas's tragic family life to Mead's turbulent polyamory), the intellectual (from anthropology's hoary academic debates to its gritty field work), and the public levels (from museums to the U.S. government) of its subjects' frantic lives. Connecting Boasians to legendary and obscure people and events—from U.S. naturalist John Wesley Powell and Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud to transatlantic eugenics and the Jim Crow South's often anonymous antiblack violence—this study successfully transcends intellectual biography. Rather, it provides a humanized conceptual and spatial map of Boasian knowledge production spanning local villages and academic institutions across the West and colonial world. That map, the author implicitly seems to be arguing, arose out of what sociologist Andrew Abbott elsewhere has called the “fractal” interdisciplinary landscape of social science.<sup>2</sup> At its best, *Gods of the Upper Air* provides such a bird's eye view of Boasian anthropologists and practitioners of related disciplines scurrying about the globe pursuing locally distinct projects, which shared worldwide patterns of human choices and structural constraints.

Following the work of Desley Deacon, Rosalind Rosenberg, and other scholars, King ambitiously applies this approach across multiple generations and social identities, especially women.<sup>3</sup> “I have had a curious experience in graduate work during the last few years,” Boas told a colleague in 1920, an oft-cited quotation which propels *Gods of the Upper Air*. “All my best students are women” (119). Driven by a shared moral commitment to “culture” as the engine of human difference, Boas and his women protégés—particularly Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, Ella Deloria (née Anpétu Wašté Wiŋ or “Beautiful Day Woman” in Dakota Sioux), and Zora Neale Hurston—used ethnography, philology, and literary writing to smash race, sexuality, and gender in favor of “an ever more capacious view of humanity.” They did so, the author writes, so every social group and individual was treated “as full, purposive, and dignified human beings” (344–345).

Already, a substantial literature exists on this significant paradigm shift in twentieth-century social science from biological, hierarchical notions of human difference to egalitarian social and cultural notions, particularly after the Second World

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Abbott, *Chaos of Disciplines* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Desley Deacon, *Elsie Clews Parsons: Inventing Modern Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Rosalind Rosenberg, “The Daughters of ‘Papa Franz’: Benedict, Mead, and Hurston,” in *Living Legacies at Columbia*, ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

War.<sup>4</sup> *Gods of the Upper Air*'s chief strength is its depiction of this shift as an intimate human drama among Boas's "renegade anthropologists." That strength, however, results in important weaknesses. First, the book does not fulfill its multigenerational, intersectional promise. King demonstrates that Boas's Jewish German American expatriate personality—a potent brew of personal tragedy, professional ambition, contrarianism, and sociocultural diversity—drove his relentless empiricism and liberal moral compass as well as his students, who had strikingly similar personal and professional trajectories. Though King notes that Boasian "ideas were often ahead of . . . practice" (219), his study understates how serious this gap became. More than King's account suggests, intersecting axes of class, gender, sexuality, and ethnoracial identity shaped Boasians, both positively and negatively. From Boas's privileged status as an upper middle-class German American male (which resulted in research funding and academic employment) to his female students' comparably strenuous careers (including Benedict's and Mead's battles with academic patriarchy and Hurston's and Deloria's basic struggles for professional recognition and livelihood), King portrays a spectrum of anthropological and moral possibility. But he does so while underemphasizing a crucial point: Boas's "renegades," in their self-aggrandizing relations with one another and the native colonial populations they studied, challenged but also reinforced the racist and sexist myths—and the broader hierarchical notions of power and agency underlying them—they ironically had set out to dismantle.

To King's credit, these contradictions appear throughout *Gods of the Upper Air*. The book spares few details in its dramatization of interpersonal conflicts, along stubborn divides of race, class, gender, and sexuality, between Boas, his students, and the field's transatlantic elites in the United States and Western Europe. But instead of harnessing these contradictions to complicate the book's overarching defense of Boasian cosmopolitanism, the author treats them as sidelights, or cloudy bits of dramatic contrast, in its mostly sunny, hagiographic narrative. At one point, King concedes—in the context of anthropologists' callous treatment of indigenous collaborators and physical remains—that the entire field of cultural anthropology had the "great failing" of treating non-Western peoples as mere "words, belongings, and bodies" on "a long continuum of exploitation" (220, 223). But such admissions are the exception to the rule driving this study: Boas and his students were heroic public intellectuals, the book maintains, who viewed and elevated non-Western "others" through "an empathetic lens" (8–9).

Given the book's popular audience, this simplified view is understandable. Nonetheless, *Gods of the Upper Air* cannot evade the pressing public questions at its core: can one discuss Boasian "empathy" without critically examining the cross-cutting institutional, political, and social realities which not only compromised from the margins, but produced Boasian anthropology, at its very disciplinary center, as a flawed sociopolitical project? Can one discuss culture without addressing issues of power which made Boasians not simply "renegades," but contrarian, creative servants of the powerful institutions and dominant social groups to which they belonged? Despite, or, as some argue, precisely because of, cultural anthropology, biologically hardened myths of race, sex, and gender troublingly persist among scientists, policymakers, and citizens today. This is especially so in the new, exploding field of human genetics, which King too rosily projects as a utopian space where Boasian social constructionism now exercises "gene-level impact" (343). Far from that, many scholars point out, human genetics remains a problematic arena of inequality and unethical practice masked behind a veneer of liberal universality. Race, gender, and other biological markers, which were built atop culturally reconstituted Boasian categories, continue to elide and mask institutional racism, neo-colonialism, corporate and academic power, social inequality, and other undemocratic structures.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> See, among many works, Ashley Montagu, *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942); George W. Stocking, Jr., *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1968); Walter A. Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America's Conscience* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Elazar Barkan, *Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States Between the World Wars* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Lee D. Baker, *From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race, 1896–1954* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> On the ongoing, conflicted relationship between human genetics and imperial and racial power structures, see Kim TallBear, *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013);

Closely related are two other issues raised by *Gods of the Upper Air*: Boasian anthropology's cultural reductionism and its problematic relationship with the U.S. state. It is true, as the author asserts, that cultural relativism was Boas's signature contribution to anthropology and public discourse. It is also true that the Boasian emphasis on "culture" helped unlock a broader liberal environmentalist mindset which promoted social and political reforms worldwide, especially after World War II officially discredited racism, sexism, and other forms of social discrimination. But King overstates the Boasian turn's revolutionary nature. Where King argues that Boasians saw social identity as radically fluid ("mixing is the natural state of the world," he sums it up, 9), and pursued a liberatory social politics, much scholarly work has painfully shown cultural anthropology's paradoxical limits. Culture for Boasians was not only, as the author brilliantly conveys, a vehicle for "respectful conversations with the real human beings whose worlds you were straining . . . to comprehend" (228). Rather than truly liberating individuals as self-determining agents among intermixing cultures, Boasian culture thawed race and other social identities' biological cages only to refreeze them as monolithic, impermeable cultural barriers. (Social identity was hardly the sole victim of Boasian essentialism; as King notes, Boas's students, particularly prominent male ones like Alfred Kroeber and Edward Sapir, pushed sweeping theories and laws rather than Boas's corrosively skeptical empiricism.) Precisely for such reasons, King acknowledges, Boas's circle neglected African American culture as culturally inferior, and even "a degraded form of whiteness" (204). Similarly, they underappreciated, as some of the book's most fascinating, powerful passages reveal, the novel, penetrating nature of Hurston's and Deloria's lesser-known studies on African and Native Americans. "[A]rmchair anthropology," huffed Deloria, Boas's Dakota Sioux collaborator, as she justifiably criticized her white collaborators' often arrogant, inaccurate fieldwork on Native Americans and other non-Western peoples (241).<sup>6</sup>

Seeing like a state, as James C. Scott famously argued, was a high modernist fallacy committed not only by authoritarian states, but democratic liberal elites, such as Boas's school of anthropologists.<sup>7</sup> *Gods of the Upper Air*'s success as a narrative on a biographical scale hinges on this final weakness: ignoring its geopolitical scale. The problem of U.S. global power awkwardly intrudes, like an unwanted guest, at crucial intervals. At the book's outset, the reader meets a young Margaret Mead eager to "make her mark as an anthropologist" in American Samoa in 1925; repelled by the sight of U.S. navy ships, airplanes, Ford motor cars, and native Samoans happily mingling with their U.S. conquerors, Mead, the author writes, "vowed to get as far away" as possible from the U.S. imperial power enveloping native islanders' lives. Instead, Mead set out to find, somewhere in Samoa's remote reaches, its natives' supposedly purer, authentic "primitive society" which, as Boas urged her on, would spark "a new era of methodological investigation" (1–2). *Gods of the Upper Air* shares its characters' ambivalence toward U.S. and Western military power and empire—even as it traces their steps across the Austro-Hungarian

---

Alondra Nelson, *The Social Life of DNA: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation After the Genome* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016); Jessica Bardill, Alyssa C. Bader, Nanibaa' A. Garrison et al., "Advancing the Ethics of Paleogenomics," *Science* 360 (27 April 2018): 384–385. On racism, imperialism, and geopolitical conflict as central to social science, especially anthropology, see also Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015); Peter Mandler, "Deconstructing 'Cold War Anthropology,'" in *Uncertain Empire: American History and the Idea of the Cold War*, ed. Joel Isaac and Duncan Bell (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 245–266.

<sup>6</sup> On race, gender and other social categories' cultural reconstitution, see, besides previous works, Carl N. Degler, *In Search of Human Nature: The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Andrew J. Rotter, *Comrades at Odds: The United States and India, 1947–1964* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). As historian Peter Mandler has argued, Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict (frustrated, in part, by academic sexism) also tired of Boas's intellectual purism. Mead and Benedict developed a public, applied anthropology which they pursued with great academic and commercial success—and moral and political compromises—in the World War II and Cold War eras. See Peter Mandler, *Return from the Natives: How Margaret Mead Won the Second World War and Lost the Cold War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

Empire, the U.S. West, and Anglo-American possessions in the North Atlantic, Caribbean, and Pacific islands. Misleadingly, it papers over the deepening involvements of Boas, Mead, Benedict, and others in the U.S. warfare state. Yet, U.S. global power provided Boasian anthropology with its material access and intellectual authority over “primitive” populations across Native American reservations and occupied U.S. territories worldwide. By indulging in its characters’ aversion to empire and their morally compromising relationships with the U.S. state, this study, intentionally or not, thus often uncritically reproduces the politics of war and empire which also underwrote cultural anthropology. “Lives depended on how well people understood the places they were being asked to bomb, liberate, and patrol,” King rather unironically writes about Ruth Benedict’s much-criticized work on Japan for the U.S. Office of War Information during World War II (319). “There were better and worse ways of being a victor power” (326), King later describes Benedict’s famed 1946 work on Occupied Japan, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*,<sup>8</sup> without mentioning, as many have noted, how Benedict essentialized Japanese society and culture in ways that plainly served U.S. interests. By naturalizing cultural anthropology’s relationship with the U.S. state, King’s otherwise well-done study marks a missed opportunity for advancing our understanding of the complex, contradictory tensions between social science and U.S. foreign policy—including native, non-Western actors’ creative, equally conflicted responses, far beyond the limits of Boasian frameworks, to the ethnographic expansion of U.S. global power and culture.<sup>9</sup>

One might argue that these criticisms unfairly treat *Gods of the Upper Air*, given its large public audience. Truly, no book will probably come as close to showcasing the historic feel of living and working as a cultural anthropologist during some of the twentieth century’s most momentous events. That *Gods of the Upper Air* suffers from its characters’ flaws is a testament to its admirable verisimilitude. But as an intended intervention into public and academic debates about social identity and social science, King’s study offers an incomplete impression of Boasian anthropology’s complex, mixed legacies. Boas and his “renegades” were indeed pathbreaking anthropologists who heroically helped shift anthropology and related social sciences toward cultural and social models of explanation. But they were transitional figures who unevenly transformed the hierarchical, ethnocentric attitudes and power structures of the pre-Boasian past. Others, who more boldly confronted U.S. ethnocentric attitudes and practices, not coincidentally were more severely repressed and marginalized by the U.S. state and nonstate agencies, including many leading universities and cultural institutions. Furthermore, what King calls Boas’s core values—cultural relativism, inclusiveness, anti-U.S. exceptionalism—were not as unalloyed as the former claims. Nor have these values, as a result of the latter’s work, risen to ascendancy. Even today, among many geneticists and scientists, scientific racism and other Boasian bugaboos have only been replaced by what historian Michelle Brattain has termed an intellectual “stalemate,” whereby most experts and ordinary citizens profess Boasian views while assuming race, sex, and gender’s supposedly natural, immutable qualities.<sup>10</sup> In part, this is due to dilemmas of power—whether academic, social, or geopolitical—which forced Boas and his contemporaries to narrowly confine their studies of culture along monolithic, deterministic lines of inquiry which supported U.S. state interests and the nation’s unbending social structures. Unfortunately, for many Boasians, the realities of political and social repression and the lures of professional success, which

---

<sup>8</sup> Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1946).

<sup>9</sup> On Benedict and Japanists’ widely shared flaws, see Richard H. Minear, “Cross-Cultural Perception and World War II: American Japanists of the 1940s and Their Images of Japan,” *International Studies Quarterly* 24 (December 1980): 555–580; Richard H. Minear, “Orientalism and the Study of Japan,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 39 (May 1980): 507–17; Naoko Shibusawa, *America’s Geisha Ally: Reimagining the Japanese Enemy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006). On Boasian anthropology, particularly Mead’s self-serving career, vis-à-vis the U.S. wartime and postwar state, see especially Mandler, *Return from the Natives*; Anthony Q. Hazard, *Postwar Anti-racism: The United States, UNESCO, and “Race,” 1945–1968* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Michelle Brattain, “Race, Racism, and Anti-Racism: UNESCO and the Politics of Presenting Race to the Postwar Public,” *American Historical Review* 112 (December 2007): 1390. For the Cold War repression of postwar anthropologists, see David H. Price, *Threatening Anthropology: McCarthyism and the FBI’s Surveillance of Activist Anthropologists* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

triggered the moral and conceptual traps in their own minds, made Boas's multigenerational revolution far less unambiguous and triumphant than *Gods of the Upper Air* wants us to believe.

## REVIEW BY MASAMI KIMURA, TOKYO UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN STUDIES

As carriers and creators of knowledge, academics bear a great social responsibility. They inherit the wisdom of humanity and, through teaching and research, spread their ideas. They are thus the product of the discourse of their time but, with new ideas, can challenge and recreate it. Charles King's *Gods of the Upper Air* is the story of anthropologist Franz Boas, a German émigré, and the students at his school who contested academic norms and reinvented the discipline of American anthropology at the beginning of the twentieth century. They put forth the idea that racial, sexual, and ethnic categories and hierarchies were mere socially prescribed concepts and in effect empirically unsubstantiated. They valued fieldwork and proposed a 'correct' posture to research: being open and respectful to cultural differences and empathetic to people living in other cultures in order to effectively understand their ways of thinking and behavior. Their challenge to scientific racism and the introduction of cultural relativism affected not only the field of anthropology and other disciplines in social sciences and humanities, but also society as a whole during the twentieth century. The author's wariness of the rise of social intolerance today seems to have been a motive for him to work on this book. King writes that "this is not a book about politics, ethics, or theology" but a "story about science and scientists" (4), and thus presents biographical accounts of Boas and several students of his such as Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, in which he shows their struggles in both their academic and personal lives. Putting them in historical context, the book also examines American social history from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century.

No sooner had Franz Boas immigrated to the United States in 1886 than he confronted the established theories and methodologies of anthropology and ethnology. He derived his criticisms and insights from his education at German institutions and from his own observations of the inhabitants of Baffin Island and the Canadian Pacific during his expeditions. Once taking an assistant's position at *Science* magazine, he immediately questioned the arrangements of objects at the Smithsonian's National Museum, which were put out of their distinct historical contexts so as to present a linear progression of human society. To Boas, such simplistic representation was untrue to reality and unjust to human cultures that were unique, complex, and variable in themselves. He seemed to find the "mis"representation of cultures that were categorized as "savage" or "barbaric" vis-à-vis "civilized" ones particularly problematic because he was aware of the socio-educational role that the museum played under ethnologists' supervision (55). By criticizing the Smithsonian's presentation of artifacts, Boas was in fact indicating his disapproval of the evolutionary theory and deductive reasoning that scholars had applied. Scientists, he believed, needed to theorize a phenomenon only after collecting and carefully analyzing as much data as possible. But ethnologists with social Darwinist thought made a mistake of "beginning with a set of general principles and then applying them to the case at hand ... simply fishing around until you found some evidence to confirm your prejudices, Boas felt" (56). His cautious approach was nurtured at German universities where he learned Kantian philosophy and empirical study as a physics major. Boas fully acknowledged the limits of human perceptions and the importance of observation-based research (18-20). Anthropologists' lack of skepticism of their own views and neglect of the inductive scientific method looked 'unscientific' to him, contrary to their claims.

Thus, Boas did not abandon the scientific methodologies with which he had been trained. He used anthropometric studies to negate the theory of linear human development and the belief in racial hierarchy. At the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, he had the opportunity to display items according to his principles—and this was ultimately a chance to present his narrative of human races in a public space. Boas created 'experiential' rooms in the Anthropology Building, where visitors did not simply walk through but could have their bodies measured with anthropometrical instruments. The data of the displays were meant to break the various myths of racial differences. For example, "mulatto" Americans were as tall as "white" Americans, the heights of Parisians varied, and there was no representative head shape even among the same racial or ethnic group e.g. Tyroleans and Bavarians (68-69). When Boas was assigned in 1908 to a Congressional investigation into immigrants from southern and eastern Europe—or to the detrimental effects of immigration on the American nation, he employed anthropometry to collect data again. His team studied as many as 17,800 children of immigrant parents in New York and found the changeability of the physical features of humans. Their research results, which became part of the Dillingham Commission record, showed the malleability of the human body to its surroundings and debunked the uniform and static, biological categories of race (96-99). With these efforts, Boas tried to scientifically disprove the preconceived ideas of race, though he was unfortunately unsuccessful putting his thesis through. The Anthropology Building at the Fair

did not attract many visitors, with the exception of some professionals, mostly due to its location and small budget (71-72); the Dillingham Commission, which was comprised of anti-immigrant senators, ignored Boas's findings and reconfirmed racial distinctions and ideas of the inferiority of non-Germanic recent immigrants to earlier Anglo-Saxon and other Germanic immigrants (106-07). However, Boas's academic endeavors had a great impact on his field, through publications and education, and eventually resonated in society.

Boas was offered a professorship at Columbia University in 1897, and while there he reorganized the Anthropology Department by combining the disciplines of linguistics, ethnology, and anthropometry. Out of that reordered department emerged a number of influential anthropologists. With their training in the new anthropology program and personal interests, Boas's students produced works that closely looked at the lived experience of indigenous peoples through empathetic lenses, departing from the traditions of pseudo-scientific, essentially racist studies. What they learned from Boas was the importance of field research and an objective yet sensitive approach to different cultures. One of his students, Ruth Benedict, who is well known as the author of *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*,<sup>11</sup> a wartime study of Japanese culture and mentality, started her career as a scholar of indigenous peoples in the American Southwest. She learned from Boas to repudiate the simple classification of cultures into existing types and not to apply a researcher's values to them. At Zuni, she put herself in the shoes of the natives and, seeing social practices that were deemed "abnormal" in American society such as the matrilineal family system and "gender-crossing," discovered a truth that social norms were a cultural construction (124-26). This cultural relativist stance was inherited by Margaret Mead, another student of the Boasian school, who conducted field work in American Samoa and observed people's daily lives first hand. In her research results, published as *Coming of Age in Samoa*,<sup>12</sup> she described the social and family structures and norms under which Samoan youth grew up, including their sexual lives. By contrasting them with their American counterparts, Mead not only illuminated their differences but, by portraying the former's life as in some regards freer than the latter's, challenged the inherent superiority of "modern" society (153-56, 161-67).

Students from ethnic minorities, such as Zora Neale Hurston, who was of African American ancestry, and Ella Deloria, who was of Dakota origin, also worked with Boas, and with their literary and linguistic abilities, they went deeper into the social and mental worlds of local peoples. Hurston introduced black folklore and religion in Florida and Louisiana that she collected "not as an observer but as a kind of participant," as she used the first person in her *Mules and Men* (212). As a Dakota member, Deloria knew better how to communicate with local informants and to interpret the Dakota language, which was a process "to peer into a community's unique ways of corraling experience, of parsing it into understandable, communicative units" (243). What all these people of the Boas circle did was to go into 'underdeveloped' cultures, experience them, and understand them on their own terms rather than view them from a theoretical perspective.

King's book thus interweaves a story of the birth of twentieth-century American anthropology and the biographical accounts of Boas and his students and puts them in the context of American history from the Progressive era. He shows how they contributed to the paradigm shift in American society as well as academia toward a more liberal one. As the creator of modern American anthropology and as an objector to scientific racism and a proponent of cultural relativism and empiricism, Boas's contributions are incomparable. Indeed, the author sheds light on the value of Boas's challenge to biological racism by revealing how the ideology justified injustice and violence and was responsible for a range of policies from segregation to immigration restriction to sterilization; war and genocide were also the results of nationalism mixed with the idea of racial superiority (332). Boas nurtured the careers of many eminent scholars who were influenced by his ideas, but after his death, it was "through Mead that Boas's core ideas lived on and spread to a broader audience than Papa Franz could ever have dreamed" (338). Active as a public intellectual, Mead continued to propagate her views of race, sex,

---

<sup>11</sup> Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1946).

<sup>12</sup> Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilisation* (New York: W. Morrow & Company, 1928).

and gender issues while society was in the throes of the civil rights movement and the sexual revolution, rendering support to these social changes (338-41). All of this stemmed from the work of Boas. His theses helped change the mindset and approaches of researchers, which gradually made possible changes in both academic and societal discourse. It is now common wisdom that our values are socially constructed, but this discovery itself was revolutionary in Boas's time, and, in the decades since, has allowed us to explore other possibilities and to become tolerant of differences, recreating a society where we can recognize human beings just as they are regardless of biological and cultural differences better than before.

As King writes, the book is not about a 'success' story—though it turned out that way—but a story of "struggles" (342). It is easy for us to empathize with Boas and his students because many of us experience tortuous career paths and try to challenge orthodoxies with new ideas. Although King does not delve very far into the criticisms of the Boas school, which is fair given the style and focus of the book, I would like to comment on a couple of issues that they confronted and are still relevant to us. One is the idea of progress or the progressive view of history in Boasian works. The Boas group of anthropologists was not free from this discourse, which is manifest in their use of language like 'modern' and 'primitive,' and, in hindsight, this is one of the causes of the limits of their scholarly work. In a dominant discourse of racism and Euro-centrism, their culturally determinist explanation of other societies likely accentuated their 'peculiarities' and 'backwardness' of those societies to both academic and general audiences. In a postmodern present, many of the disciplines of the social sciences and humanities have gone beyond this paradigm and have become sensitive to cultural diversities. Still, the binary of West and non-West is used, and 'national' characteristics are discussed in some fields, which, I am afraid, has the risk of reproducing stereotypes. Moreover, even in today's more liberal society, a division between an educated and a non-educated readership exists. However sophisticated academic research may have become, chauvinism and simplistic, biased characterization of others have the power to influence the general public.

Related to the resilience of the idea of progress and biases against others, the dilemma of Boas's disciples in choosing between case studies and theorization is also worth reconsidering. It was contradictory for them to try to find a general rule while denying the generalization of a society, and theorization must have been responsible for simplifying complexities and creating stereotypes. But many social scientists are drawn to discovering a grand theory to make sense of the world out of particular studies, and thus they might be as guilty as the Boas circle of making and perpetuating prejudices even now.

Last, the cases of the Boas circle's involvement with government projects cause us to rethink the relationship between academics and the state. If Boas's report on immigrant children's acculturation was a failed attempt to influence government policy in the 1910s, Benedict's analysis of Japanese culture and behaviors during World War II, which was also commissioned by the government, is introduced as her conscientious and modestly successful effort to teach American officials and the public how to understand their enemy nation. Her book is full of the problems mentioned above—othering vis-à-vis the West, generalization, and stereotyping. Yet, despite the fact she was not a Japan specialist, Benedict did her best to treat the Japanese people and their culture with respect and, as King notes, called for Americans to take a restrained attitude to the defeated nation (330-31). We do not know how influential her advice was in determining U.S. occupation policy, for there were those who took a similar stance in policy-making circles. However, since specialists' research, if seriously taken, can affect the government's decisions, it is important for us to question ourselves on why we might cooperate with the government, whether this would serve the common good, and whether our studies are sound.

As a final comment, I personally have difficulty reading a 'general' book like this. Those who are used to reading more structured academic works and have little historiographical knowledge of American anthropology would find it a little hard to follow the stories. Also, the endnotes' numbers do not appear in the main text, making notes hard to identify—so much so that I did stop flipping back and forth in the pages to check the sources. Each note puts the page number and the first several words of the sentence to help us locate where the note refers, but this unconventional citation style is unfriendly to a critical academic reader.

As mentioned, the author aims to shed light on the achievements of the anthropologists of the Boas school rather than presenting a thorough analyses of their works and the academic debates about them. For the past century, the insights and findings of Boas and his students have changed our way of looking at concepts like race, sex, and culture. For us who are

expected to live in an increasingly multicultural society, global or local, they provide tips: not taking our values as absolute and acknowledging other possibilities. King's book has appeared at the perfect time, when the language of hate and intolerance is uttered by the president of the United States, attracting support among certain groups of Americans. For this purpose, his main argument is strongly conveyed, and the decision to write a general book seems to have been the right one if these ideas are to reach a wider public.

**G***ods of the Upper Air*, which charts the growth of American anthropology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through biographies of some of its pioneers, revolves around one central claim—that a specific early troupe of anthropologists fought, and won, “the greatest moral battle of our time” (3). As King spends ample time in his book demonstrating, reigning theories of cultural difference in the United States at the time sorted humans into immutable races which could be measured, observed, and classified. Proponents of these theories, King explains, combined them with ideas of social evolution and civilizational progress, allowing a ranking of these races on a ladder of hierarchy with white Europeans and Americans on top.

But then, King narrates, along came the man who would become the father of American anthropology, Franz Boas, and his students, with a new mode of empirical research to challenge these paradigms. They argued, and in King’s opinion, proved, that culture was created, and was not manifest from inherent biological differences. There was an essential unity to humankind, they asserted, and variations in culture or custom were a result of differences in historical and environmental circumstances, not innate immutable racial qualities. They fought against the reigning evolutionary interpretation of social development which gained popular strength as the decades progressed and fueled some of the most violent and horrendous political movements of the twentieth century- Nazism in Germany and Jim Crow in the United States. Fortunately, King argues, the anthropologist eventually won this battle. As he states

If it is now unremarkable for a gay couple to kiss goodbye on a train platform, for a college student to read the *Bhagavad Gita* in a Great Books class, for racism to be rejected as both morally bankrupt and self-evidently stupid, and for anyone, regardless of their gender expression, to claim workplaces and boardrooms as fully theirs—if all of these things are not innovations or aspirations but the regular, taken-for-granted way of organizing a society, then we have the ideas championed by the Boas circle to thank for it (10).

King spends the first third of his book laying out Boas’s life, his development of anthropology, and the leading paradigms against which he fought. Boas was a vociferous critic of the social evolutionary philosophies being touted both in and outside the academy, including those of early anthropologists Lewis Henry Morgan<sup>13</sup> and John Wesley Powell.<sup>14</sup> As King carefully explains, Morgan and Powell’s ideas varied somewhat from the more popular theories of racial difference and eugenics. Morgan and Powell similarly ranked peoples on a ladder of more or less civilized, using a schema developed by Morgan, the basic breakdown of which consisted of savage, barbarian, and civilized groups. Nevertheless, they asserted a unity to humankind and argued that despite differences between groups, all humans had the innate capacity to scale the ladder and reach full civilization. They were just on different time paths. Nevertheless, their theories entailed observing and ranking humans in a strict hierarchy that often resembled those used by racial theorists.

Boas not only took issue with what these anthropologists were arguing, King demonstrates, but with *how* they built their case. The science of *ethnology* in the United States that was prominent prior to the ascendance of Boas’s *anthropology*, had sprung primarily from the discussion and comparison of texts, like those analyzed by Edward Burnett Tylor<sup>15</sup> and James

---

<sup>13</sup> Lewis H. Morgan, *Ancient Society: Or, Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery, through Barbarism to Civilization* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1877).

<sup>14</sup> John Wesley Powell, “From Barbarism to Civilization,” *American Anthropologist* 1:2 (1888): 97-123.

<sup>15</sup> Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom* (London: J. Murray, 1871).

Frazer<sup>16</sup>. While Morgan, and, importantly, Powell drew on their own empirical material, they continued to rely heavily on textual sources; moreover, they let theory lead the interpretation and sorting of this data, rather than the other way around. What was innovative about Boas's work, King notes, is that he asserted that data must come first. Empirical research was so important to him, King argues that "when given a choice between presenting data and drawing grand lessons from it, he tended to prefer the former" (70). This started a revolution in the discipline and led to the growth of empirical fieldwork as its foundational underpinning.

It was also essential, King demonstrates, in how Boas countered theories of racial difference and social evolution. Based on the fieldwork they carried out across the world, Boas and his students relentlessly challenged the leading theory. On the basis of physical anthropological research that Boas, his students, and other research associates carried out in New York City, Boas argued that there was as much variance within a so-called race as there was between them; In other words, "races were unstable" (98). Going even further, in a 1917 review of the eugenicist Madison Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race*<sup>17</sup>, Boas challenged the very existence of race itself and labelled the belief in it as racism. Boas argued that "Racism wasn't only the idea that some races were higher or lower than others. Racism was at base the belief in the inheritable reality of race itself – an idea trussed up in the language of science and, as such, every bit as much a product of Western culture, as say, a painted mask was the product of the Kwakiutl" (111).

Unfortunately, despite his lectures and articles in both academic, political, and popular forums, Boas's findings did not change the political tides – he watched with dismay the racist march to both World Wars. He won over few adherents to his theories and his new form of anthropology. Those who were convinced by Boas's new science were primarily students, and the majority were women. In a detail which is often left out of other histories of the discipline, King explains just how it came to be that anthropology was, from such an early stage, full of women. This was in part due to Boas's post-World War I marginalization at Columbia University. He was left with the students no one else wanted to teach – the women of Barnard College. King charts how, from these women, and the few men who took to his new science of anthropology, Boas built a cohort of researchers that undertook novel empirical investigations across the world and began proving, and advancing, his methods and his theory of cultural relativism – "that our ideas and conceptions are true only so far as our civilization goes" (56).

King traces Boas as academic, public intellectual, and somewhat hapless, if beloved, teacher—Papa Franz as he was called by his students. The chapters that follow are dedicated to some of Boas's most influential, and in the case of two, most oft-forgotten students – Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, Zora Neale Hurston, and Ella Cara Deloria. King describes the lives and work of these women, from their initial interest in anthropology to their groundbreaking research as well as their academic and romantic relationships with the men and women of the burgeoning discipline. Benedict and Mead became public intellectuals in their own right, and, some would argue, eventually eclipsing their teacher. Mead, using Boasian techniques, opened up the field to studies of gender and sexuality. Hurston went on not only to produce ground-breaking studies of the American South, Jamaica, and Haiti, but also put the question of class on the table within anthropology and the Harlem Renaissance. If this was not enough, she became a novelist, producing several books including, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*<sup>18</sup>, the recognition and praise of which would eventually surpass the anthropological work of the whole generation of scholars, though Hurston died without knowing this. Ella Cara Deloria, who was of mixed European and Native American, predominately Dakota, descent, never gained the public fame of the other three, but her brilliant and

---

<sup>16</sup> James Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1890).

<sup>17</sup> Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race; or, The Racial Basis of European History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916).

<sup>18</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2013 [1937]).

beautiful discussion of the Dakota Language in *Dakota Grammar*<sup>19</sup>, co-written with Boas, left its mark for generations. She was the only student whom Boas ever credited as co-author in their collaborative work.

King's book nearly sings with an air of adventure and triumph. He celebrates these early anthropologists and argues persuasively for their positive influence on American political and social life. As an anthropologist who is partial to her discipline, I wanted to love King's book. In some ways I did. King gets many things right. He skillfully explains complex social theories in an accessible, yet nuanced manner. Having recently taught the history and theory of anthropology to second-year undergraduate students, I was impressed with the elegance and simplicity of King's presentation of these concepts. King's book also goes farther in decolonizing the discipline's histories than most other works do. He is to be praised for this. In King's narration, women are featured as the pioneers and founders of the discipline and not just white women, but also the African American and Native American women who broke new ground in the early days of anthropology. He reveals the brilliance of their work, and the fullness of their characters. He discusses the precarious nature of their careers and how they failed to receive the stable positions in the academy that their male counterparts did. He also shows the racism within the discipline that afforded more to Benedict and Mead, the white women, than it did to Hurston, an African American and Deloria, a Native American, who faced opposition and battled prejudice and disadvantage at every turn.

Yet in his attempt to celebrate a discipline that challenged the status quo, King rather unfortunately overly romanticizes it and its founders. This sentimentalizing starts with King's use of language and tone, both of which are effusive and overly prone to hyperbole. This could be overlooked. What is considerably more troublesome is the book's excessively celebratory treatment of anthropology, and its failure to discuss the worrisome actions of anthropologists or to critique on them, even when King himself describes morally troubling events. Moreover, he does not acknowledge the way that anthropology was part and parcel of the very same deplorable racial theories, movements, and in some cases, government programs, which King largely attributes to others.

His varying treatment of Lewis Henry Morgan and Madison Grant is a prime example. King gives clear explanations of Morgan's theories and Grant's work, showing just how racist they were but being careful to draw out the important differences between them. He also discusses the way both Morgan's and Grant's theories influenced other thinkers of the time. Grant, and his theories are, however, discussed as driving the racism and eugenics that fueled science and politics in early twentieth-century America. And this is rightly done so.

Morgan, however, is not similarly treated. The language King uses to describe him, and his theories, is uncritical and he situates Morgan as somehow only an academic. We never sense critique of Morgan in King's work. Moreover, King does not discuss the influence Morgan had in American social and political life. Yet we know of many instances. For example, in his capacity as a scientific expert, Morgan gave the following advice to Senator William Seward as he deliberated the compromise of 1850:

It is time to fix some limits to the reproduction of this black race among us [...] It is too thin a race intellectually to be fit to propagate and I am perfectly satisfied from reflection that the feeling toward this race is one of hostility in the north. We have no respect for them whatever.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Franz Boas and Ella Cara Deloria, *Dakota Grammar*, Memoirs of the National Academy of Sciences (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1941).

<sup>20</sup> Lewis Henry Morgan, in Lee D. Baker, *From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race 1896–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 45.

Yet it is Grant and others who take on the role of villains in King's tale and the very troubling sway Morgan had on policy, agendas, and sentiment outside universities at the time is absent from King's account.

Morgan was not the only anthropologist to receive the kids-glove treatment. John Wesley Powell, whom King discusses extensively, is likewise portrayed as primarily an academic whose theories of civilizational superiority were either confined to the ivory tower or used by other, non-anthropologists, for malign ends. Powell, however, held sway outside of the academy and his work in the Bureau of Ethnology was a part of one of the most heinous acts in American history. King discusses Powell's role as head of the Bureau of Ethnology, noting that

buttressed by the full power and budget of the U.S government, [the bureau] was to delineate and catalog the origins, languages, and customs of the various groups that had inhabited the American landscape before the arrival of the Europeans. It was also a route toward making sense of their living remnants [...] This was all the more important since the government was now charged with managing them (40).

What is hidden in these sentences is the dispossession and massacre of Native Americans and their forceful settlement on reservations by the American Government. King skirts around this issue and uses neutral language like "now charged with managing [Native Americans]" (40), phrases that mask the savage violence that was taking place. Powell, to whatever degree, was a part of this. The ideas Morgan had developed, for example, underpinned the advice Powell provided to the U.S. government about how reservations should be set up and how the Native Americans should be "managed," even if we do not know the actual extent of his influence on the subsequent policies and programs and even if his advice was understood as offered to the help the Native Americas against others who moved to ignore or totally eliminate them.<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, Ota Benga, a Mbuti from colonial Congo, is only mentioned by King in passing, in a section that examines the treatment of those who worked with or assisted career anthropologists, including members of the Kwakiutl tribe whom Boas used as a part of the Kwakiutl Village Exhibit at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. While King writes critically in these passages of the career anthropologists and points out their lack of recognition, care, and payment to those who worked with or assisted them in their research, he does not interrogate the way these anthropologists figuratively and literally displayed Native Americans as objects in an exhibit. King does not reflect on the fact that anthropologists, including Boas, were setting up *exhibitions of humans*.

The enclosure of Ota Benga in the Bronx Zoo was one of the most egregious examples. Benga was taken from Colonial Congo and brought to the U.S. by Samuel Phillips Verner, a missionary and anthropologist, at the request of William John McGee, then head of the American Anthropological Association, who was looking for 'pygmies' to illustrate the lowest rung of human development at the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis. As King skillfully shows, it was exactly this kind of theory of human evolution that Boas indeed argued against. But McGee, Morgan, and Powell were anthropologists. They were part and parcel of the broader social and political movements of white supremacy. Moreover, Boas and many others who criticized and fought against these theories and practices of racial superiority, were nonetheless complex figures. Boas also staged a 'Kwakiutl village' with 17 Native Americans, including two children, for mostly white Americans to gawk at the Chicago World's Fair. He, and others, like Mead or Benedict for example, challenged some dominant wisdom, but they also participated in displaying, exoticizing, reifying and overly simplifying the 'other' for a popular American audience. The messy lives of Boas and other anthropologists need to be rendered with more nuance, and criticism of acts like these needs to be voice. Anthropology was entangled with the racial politics of the time and it was not solely or purely on the right side.

As a final example, in a book dedicated to American anthropology, King understandably rarely mentions anthropologists of other origins. Yet we do briefly hear of Branislow Malinowski and Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, the leading British anthropologists of the time. Malinowski is lauded by King as working in a way that was very reminiscent of Boas. Yet we do

---

<sup>21</sup> William Culp Darrah, *Powell of the Colorado* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 201.

not hear about he and Radcliffe-Brown were tangled up with the British Colonial Empire. The racism found in Malinowski's diaries rocked anthropology when they were discovered in the 1960s<sup>22</sup>; he, and Radcliffe-Brown, are today considered at least partly complicit in the colonial mission. For example, in a book he thought would help colonial administrators better govern the colonies, Radcliffe-Brown opens his work with a citation from Arthur de Gobineau, an influential proponent of racial hierarchies and evolutionary views of social development<sup>23</sup>. King explains that this same Gobineau influenced Grant, one of the main antagonists in the book.

To be clear, I am not equating Radcliffe-Brown with Grant, nor am I arguing that there are not differences between the ideas and influence of Grant on the one hand and Morgan and Powell on the other. There are, and they, along with similarities, deserved to be treated and teased out with nuance. Nevertheless, this is not a feature of the book, which fails to throw a critical eye at the anthropologists who are the heroes of King's story.

I am also moved by the work that Boas and his students did. They fought inside the discipline for a radical shift in thinking that, to my mind, was the right one. They were also public intellectuals who had a profoundly positive impact on American life. However, the story of anthropology cannot leave out the abhorrent things that people like McGee or Morgan did. Moreover, the stories of people like Boas or Mead need to be told with more nuance. The dark, dingy side of the discipline cannot be left out of its history.

King works to convince his readers that the pioneers of the discipline not only launched a new social science, but a new way of understanding, appreciating, and defending human difference. Yet under all of King's triumphant assertions that the anthropologists won, one cannot help but sense fear and urgency in his words. King's book feels like a plea for Americans to turn back from the frightening racism that has marked the country for the last four years and to remember that empirical research proved theories of racial superiority wrong. I share the desire to intervene in the horrific racism that marks contemporary America. Yet as an anthropologist, the history I tell of my discipline, must be a nuanced one in which we recognize how anthropology contests, but also reproduces, the social inequalities of our times.

---

<sup>22</sup> Branislow Malinowski, *A Diary in the Strictest Sense of the Term* (London: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>23</sup> See Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory: A History of Theories of Culture* (Lanham, MD: Alta Mira Press, 1968), 516-517, and Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown and Cyril Daryll Forde, *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage* (London: Routledge, 1959).

RESPONSE BY CHARLES KING, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

---

I am sincerely grateful to Kevin Y. Kim, Masami Kimura, and Julie McBrien for their serious, informed, and searching reviews of my book. Their critical engagement with my narrative line and my overall arguments is very welcome, and I am honored that H-Diplo would convene this forum to discuss the work.

I appreciate their pointing to aspects of the book that they agreed with or found resonated with their own work and experiences. It is gratifying when accomplished colleagues in different fields find something to like in one's own work. But I would like to concentrate here on four areas in which I think my own views differ from theirs. These include some clarification about an argument that I do not make in the book; a discussion of how we treat the evolution of ideas; thoughts on the relationship between biography and history-writing; and some concluding remarks on public scholarship.

First, Kim and McBrien criticize the tone of parts of my book, which McBrien finds “effusive and overly prone to hyperbole.” Both reviewers worry that my language reinforces a narrative line meant to show how a Boasian way of seeing the world has won out over its competitors. However, I do not in fact make this triumphalist claim. Indeed, it would be hard to know how any book could make such an argument, given recent political trends in Europe, the United States, Brazil, India, and elsewhere. Rather, my core concern is to narrate the struggle for, not the victory of, a particular way of seeing the world. This worldview, mode of analysis, or approach to human difference is marked by a recognition that, first, one is situated inside a thing called a society—or a ‘culture,’ to use the older language employed by Franz Boas and his students—and, second, that there is no *prima facie* reason for believing that the obsessions of one particular society, the here-and-now version we might be most familiar with, are superior to all others.

Boas and his circle did not invent that view whole cloth, of course. As Kimura notes, and as I try to show in the book, Boas was the inheritor of an entire set of ideas from the German Enlightenment, refracted through his own research and field experience (not to mention his own life, on which more below). What he and his students were able to do was to reinforce these claims through clear-eyed observation, not *a priori* philosophizing. That, to me, is their principal contribution. Their morality, to the degree that they were concerned with it, sprang out of empirical research in how other societies made sense of the world. The book aims to chart this unfinished revolution in ‘Western’ thought: the move away from a hierarchical understanding of human otherness in favor of an understanding of, even an embrace of, human difference. To my mind, the emergence of this newer way of thinking depended on the signature academic—and popularizing—contributions of Boas and his circle.

Second, some of the reviewers are concerned that I am not hard enough on Boas and other thinkers, or that I overlook their own small-mindedness, short-sightedness, or indeed their racism, sexism, or other qualities we now find wrong or grotesque. McBrien writes that the book “does not acknowledge the way that anthropology was part and parcel of the very same deplorable racial theories, movements, and in some cases, government programs, which King largely attributes to others.” One could differ on matters of emphasis, but it is not really accurate to say the book ignores what McBrien calls the “dark, dingy side of the discipline.” From the history of racial science in universities and museums to the treatment of indigenous research partners by Boas and his associates, from the struggles of female academics among the more prominent men in the discipline to the influence of segregation on the writing and careers of African American scholars, the narrative is very much engaged with the issues that McBrien and I agree are vital to the telling.

Nevertheless, as much as we might reasonably criticize Boas, Margaret Mead, and Ruth Benedict, it would be ahistorical to view them as unwitting accomplices of people such as anti-immigration campaigner Madison Grant or eugenicist Henry H. Goddard. Boas and his students consciously and publicly arrayed themselves against the chauvinisms of their day, often at great cost. The central theme of the book is how and why they managed to do so, as well as the meaning of their work in our present moment.

There is also a broader question at stake: How should we treat thinkers who fail to come up to our own time-situated understanding of rectitude, clear-headedness, and scholarly obviousness? On these scales, the Boas circle would be found wanting. Boas had some views on race that were retrograde by today's standards—even if they were progressive in his own moment. No one now does anthropology the way Mead or Benedict did. Ella Cara Deloria was inventive, even exploitative, in her transformation of indigenous ritual into tourist pageantry. Zora Neale Hurston set herself against people she termed, derisively, the “Race Leaders” and “Race Men” of her time.<sup>24</sup> (“I do not have much of a herd instinct,” she wrote in her autobiography.<sup>25</sup>) All of them used words and concepts in ways that can appear to us insulting or alien.

But having a critical stance has to mean more than showing how unenlightened our intellectual forebears were. One benefit of situating thinkers in their own time and place is to model how some future historian might do the same for us. What in our own worldview will seem, in only a few decades, shockingly faulty or just beside the point? Boas, Mead, and others saw more clearly than those they were surrounded by. They believed in observation and data, which they tried to free, as far as possible, from their own preconceptions. That we have the ability to be critical—rightly—of their methods and conclusions is itself a product of the intellectual leaps that they made, unknowingly, on our behalf.

Third, one method of empathizing with the past is to populate it with human beings, especially those whose intellectual and political predicaments might seem familiar to us. In my last several books, I have moved closer toward using biography as my trailhead. I have taken life-writing as a point of departure for exploring bigger themes of macrosocial change and the manufacture of essential human difference: the fall of empires, the origins of genocide, and allure of nationalism, among other topics.

That is why it was important to me to spend large segments of *Gods of the Upper Air* on the complicated lives of Boas, Mead, Benedict, Hurston, and others. Early on, I knew I wanted to write the book as a kind of plural biography, with pauses here and there for more thematic excursions. Their ideas were shaped by their lived experience. They struggled to live up to the worldview they had created, and frequently failed to do so. They had love affairs and breakups, professional triumphs and tragedies. They were petty and generous. They helped out friends and did grievous harm to them. They displayed astonishing cowardice and coldness in the face of suffering. They had good ideas and batty ones. They were glorious and brave and towering at moments when one might have least expected it. In all these ways, they were like us.

Finally, there are many ways of being a scholar, but the one that has made the most sense to me is to try to take complex ideas and make them accessible to as many people as possible, an approach that is today often labeled public scholarship. One thing I wanted to do in this book was to bring some of the excitement, frustration, misfires, and exhilaration of scholarship to several different audiences—to try to remind my colleagues of why grappling with ideas can be both tortuous and beautiful, and to try to demonstrate to readers outside the academy what it means to dedicate one's life to discovery.

Scholarly writers are accustomed to telling, but we are poorly trained at showing. This is why I have learned so much from the work of journalists, biographers, popular and public historians, and writers of narrative nonfiction such as T. J. Stiles, Patrick Radden Keefe, Sarah Bakewell, David Oshinsky, George Packer, Jill Lepore, Caroline Fraser, Edmund Morris, David Grann, Siddhartha Mukherjee, Nancy Milford, and Stacy Schiff.<sup>26</sup> They are masters of form as well as content: how to

---

<sup>24</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006 [1942]), 248.

<sup>25</sup> Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, 262-263.

<sup>26</sup> T. J. Stiles, *Jesse James: Last Rebel of the Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2002); Patrick Radden Keefe, *Say Nothing: A True Story of Murder and Memory in Northern Ireland* (New York: Doubleday, 2019); Sarah Bakewell, *At the Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being, and Apricot Cocktails with Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Others* (New York: Other Press, 2016); David Oshinsky, *Bellevue: Three Centuries of Medicine and Mayhem at America's Most Storied Hospital* (New York: Doubleday, 2016); George Packer, *Our Man: Richard Holbrooke and the End of the American Century* (New York: Knopf, 2019); Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018); Caroline Fraser, *Prairie Fires: The American Dreams of Wyoming* (New York: Knopf, 2017).

structure a narrative, how to write from scene to scene rather than from concept to concept, how to reveal the stakes involved in the story you are telling. These aren't skills normally taught in graduate school, but we would do our students a service by talking about them more explicitly. After all, the thing that most of us produce is not a building, sculpture, or patent. It is words on a page. We could learn a great deal from the craftspeople in the neighboring village who are making the same thing.

---

*The American Dreams of Laura Ingalls Wilder* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2017); Edmund Morris, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Random House, 2010); David Grann, *Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI* (New York: Doubleday, 2017); Siddhartha Mukherjee, *The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer* (New York: Scribner, 2010); Nancy Milford, *Savage Beauty: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001); Stacy Schiff, *Véra (Mrs. Vladimir Nabokov)* (New York: Random House, 1999).