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Kwame Anthony Appiah: The Defender of Differences

Franz Boas: The Emergence of the Anthropologist by Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt, University of Nebraska Press, 417 pp., $34.95
Gods of the Upper Air: How a Circle of Renegade Anthropologists Reinvented Race, Sex, and Gender in the Twentieth Century. by Charles King; Doubleday, 431 pp., $30.00
From Boas to Black Power: Racism, Liberalism, and American Anthropology, by Mark Anderson. Stanford University Press, 262 pp., $90.00; $28.00 (paper)

Franz Boas fought his first duel in 1877, when he was nineteen. He was freshly arrived at the University of Heidelberg, where saber fencing over slights, known as Mensur, was ingrained in undergraduate culture. And the slight in question was, indeed, slight: Boas shared the rental payments on his piano with a classmate, who banged away for hours at a time. The students downstairs protested, Boas took offense. Words were exchanged, satisfaction demanded. Three weeks later, he and another student drew swords. The Mensur had its rules and conventions, which involved a stopwatch, a surgeon, an umpire, and, for the combatants, goggles and padded garments. You saved face by slashing at another's.

"A piece four cm. long and one and one-half cm. wide was cut out of my scalp but I gave my opponent three cuts from ear to nose that required eight stitches," Boas wrote to a friend, with a precision that presaged the anthropometric skills he would soon acquire. In the course of his college years, which brought him from Heidelberg to Bonn and then to Kiel, more duels ensued; every time he came home on vacation, his family noticed, he bore new scars. When the sculptor Jacob Epstein, visiting New York in 1927, went to work on a bust of Boas, he found his visage to be "scarred and criss-crossed with mementos of the many duels of his student days…but what was still left whole in his face was as spirited as a fighting cock."

Boas was, by then, renowned as the father of American cultural anthropology and the scholar who taught generations how to think about human diversity without hierarchy. "Culture" was once regarded as something that one group might have more of than another. Boas and his students demonstrated how to use the word in the plural: different peoples had different cultures, and while the idiosyncrasies of a foreign culture were patent to us, we'd do well to recognize the arbitrary aspects of our own. For Boas, the contingencies of culture were written on his face. When, two decades after his dueling days, he detailed the techniques of face painting among Indian villagers in British Columbia, he must have been conscious that his own features bore the marks of similarly community-bound customs.

Perhaps his keen sense of these contingencies was bolstered, too, by the fact that his family was (in a manner) engaged in the fashion business. He grew up in Minden, Westphalia, where his father, having inherited a country store, came to specialize in lace, finery, and upscale merchandise, importing and exporting them in partnership with a brother-in-law based in Lower Manhattan. Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt's Franz Boas: The Emergence of the Anthropologist, which follows her subject to 1906 (a sequel is to take him to his death in 1942), speaks of a "family network of trade in fashionable goods that connected relatives throughout Europe and across the Atlantic."

They were the sort of assimilated German Jews who celebrated Christmas; the sort of Bildungsbürgertum for whom "the ideals of…1848 were a living force," as Boas later wrote, referring to that year of high-hearted if unsuccessful liberal revolutions. In intellectual matters especially, Dr. Abraham Jacobi, a friend of Karl Marx's and a brother-in-law of Boas's mother, served as a second paterfamilias—albeit remotely. Exiled after the 1848 uprisings in Prussia, he had forged a brilliant medical career in New York, where he was a pioneer in pediatrics and public health. The Minden–New York correspondence

was profuse; Boas never made an important decision without consulting “Uncle Jacobi.”

Rather mystifyingly, after one semester at Heidelberg and four at Bonn, he switched to the less distinguished university at Kiel, where he studied with its sole, not very eminent, physicist. He was assigned a dissertation on the optical attributes of water (what made a lake azure, say, when its water was seemingly transparent?), found the work of conducting light measurements to be beyond tedious, and doubted the value of his findings. On the side, though, he wrote a more promising paper on “psychophysics,” in which he argued that our thresholds of sensory perception were affected by how distracted we were—mental energy was required to make these discriminations.

Other forms of discrimination were at a high pitch at Kiel, especially among members of the nationalistic (and vigorously anti-Semitic) Union of German Students, whom Boas nicknamed “die Führer.” The duels became darker. “Unfortunately I am bringing this time for the last time again a few cuts, one even on the nose!” he wrote home. “I hope you will not say too much about it, because with the damned Jew baiters this winter one could not survive without quarrel and fighting.”

On vacation, he met and fell in love with Marie Krackowizer, whose parents, affluent émigrés in New York, were friends of Uncle Jacobi’s. But in the eyes of Marie’s mother, he wouldn’t be marriage material until he secured a proper career. Boas, who had been captivated as a child by the travel chronicles of the great naturalist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt, decided that his vocation was to study remote and little-known places. To prepare, he made his way to Berlin’s Society for Anthropology, Ethnology, and Prehistory, led by Rudolf Virchow, Germany’s foremost physical anthropologist, and Adolph Bastian, its leading ethnologist. (In those days, “anthropology” chiefly referred to the anatomical study of human diversity, with “ethnology” its cultural counterpart.)

The two luminaries were generous with advice and assistance. Boas, a budding geographer, decided to travel to the American Arctic—a German ship would be stopping at Baffin Island—and study the terrain, the fauna, and the inhabitants. To defray the costs, he contracted with the Berliner Tageblatt to write a series of articles about his voyages, on the model of Henry Morton Stanley’s wildly popular dispatches from Africa. (“Dr. Livingstone, I presume.”) Boas promised to write “with the color laid on thick,” and the newspaper took up his offer—after his father agreed to reimburse the paper if the results weren’t satisfactory.

The expedition to Baffin Island would serve triple duty for Boas. It would make his name. It would fulfill his childhood dreams of travel. And it would provide the basis for a Habilitation—the research that would qualify him for an academic career. His doting, anxious father had one stipulation: if his son insisted on visiting this inhospitable region, he must take one of the household servants with him. In 1883 Franz set sail, and his father had his first heart attack.

Boas’s time in Baffin Island calls to mind Dickens’s account of Martin Chuzzlewit’s braving the American wilds with his own level-headed servant. Boas’s helpmeet, Wilhelm Weike, kept his own notes, and Zumwalt is respectful of Weike’s plainspoken but exact journal entries, not to mention his ability to make a meal out of seal meat or caribou tongues. For Boas, a crucial discovery was that he preferred studying people to studying things. “I am now truly just like an Eskimo,” he wrote to his fiancée. “I live like them, hunt with them, and count myself among the men of Anarnitung.” He ascribed to this expedition “the strengthening of the viewpoint of the relativity of all cultivation and that the evil as well as the value of a person lies in the cultivation of the heart.” As the sentence shows, Boas’s putative relativism—what he called “relativity”—wasn’t at odds with objectivity; it was a means to it. He

believed in moral universals and prized “the ice-cold flame of the passion for seeking the truth for truth’s sake.”

The newspaper dispatches were a success. Back in Berlin, Boas cataloged artifacts at the Royal Ethnological Museum, returned to the orbit of Virchow and Bastian, and received his Habilitation from the University of Berlin. But academic prospects in Germany were grim. When he sailed to the United States in July 1886, he was not only rejoining Marie but arriving at what thereafter was to be his adopted homeland.

His ethnographic expeditions continued on that continent, with some financial assistance from Uncle Jacobi. He spent time among indigenous settlements along the coast of British Columbia, mainly Vancouver Island, recording customs, taking anatomical measurements, and collecting folklore. He landed an editorial post at Science; he married Marie. But as children started to arrive, he worried about securing his finances, and some of his “salvage ethnography” in British Columbia involved less savory forms of collection.

“It is most unpleasant work to steal bones from a grave, but what is the use, someone has to do it,” he wrote in his diary, in June 1888. He had asked museum curators “whether they would consider buying skulls this winter for $600; if they will, I shall collect assiduously.” He did so, making stealthy forays into old burial grounds, and employing ruses to get the Indians out of the way while he robbed their graves. (The windfall came half a dozen years later, when he sold his poorly labeled collection of bones for the lavish sum of $2,800.)

In 1889 he finally landed an academic position, when the freshly founded Clark University, in Worcester, Massachusetts, appointed him to head a department of anthropology. He also had a taste of local notoriety when he decided to take measurements of the local schoolchildren, in the hopes of conducting a longitudinal study of their growth. (He may have been inspired by a vast study of German schoolchildren that Virchow had launched in the 1870s.) The Worcester Daily Telegraph conjured a macabre image of the man—“his scalp scarred with saber cuts, and slashes over his eye, on his nose, and on one cheek”—who was setting his craniometer to the town’s youngsters.

When Boas was hired away by the archaeologist and anthropologist Frederic Ward Putnam to help put together the ethnology and archaeology gallery at Chicago’s Columbian Exposition in 1893, he had high hopes of sharing his preoccupations more widely. In fact, his work brought neither crowds nor permanent employment in Chicago. Then Putnam was hired as a curator at the American Museum of Natural History, and in 1895 he brought Boas with him. The next year, Boas started teaching at Columbia. Finally, in 1899, the university offered him a professorship in the new department of anthropology and put him in charge of its Ph.D. program. (Uncle Jacobi quietly arranged to underwrite his salary; you may notice a pattern here.) Boas was now poised, institutionally, to create a distinctly American school of anthropology.

That school is most easily defined by what it wasn’t, the way a clan may be defined by its taboos. Boas favored induction, by which he meant an attention to particulars that wouldn’t be deformed by grand theories. He was skeptical, in particular, about doctrines of racial superiority. He had, more slowly, become a skeptic of social evolutionism: the notion that peoples progress through stages (in one crude formulation, from savagery to barbarism to civilization), each of which could be distinguished by certain shared characteristics. He was vigilant, too, concerning ethnocentrism. “Courtesy, modesty, good manners, conformity to definite ethical standards are universal, but what constitutes courtesy, modesty,

good manners, and ethical standards is not universal," he later wrote.
Franz Boas and George Hunt behind a Kwakwaka'wakw woman demonstrating how to spin thread from cedar bark as she rocks her baby's cradle with a string attached to her toe
Oregon Columbus Hastings/American Museum of Natural History
Franz Boas, left, and his research partner George Hunt behind an unnamed Kwakwaka'wakw woman demonstrating how to spin thread from cedar bark as she rocks her baby's cradle with a string attached to her toe, Fort Rupert Reserve, British Columbia, circa 1894

These tenets, in combination, made him a potent leveler in an age of racialized hierarchy. In 1906 W.E.B. Du Bois invited him to give a commencement speech at the black institution where he taught, Atlanta University. Boas told the students of Africa's contributions to civilization. "I wish you could see the scepters of African kings, carved of hard wood and representing artistic forms," he said, assuring them that the bronzes of Benin "have so far excelled in technique any European work, that they are even now almost inimitable." Du Bois, a decade his junior, later recalled his own reaction: "I was too astonished to speak. All of this I had never heard and I came then and afterwards to realize how the silence and neglect of science can let truth utterly disappear."

Zumwalt's biography—like an earlier one by Douglas Cole—ends in this year, which was when Boas, leaving behind his museum duties, turned full time to the task of building a new discipline at Columbia. Hers is a stolid, scholarly account, and it has its rewards, especially in its generous use of correspondence. A professor emerita of anthropology at Agnes Scott College in Georgia, she is able to draw on Cole's excellent account (Cole died before completing it) as well as her own research, although she is not in perfect control of the material; she sometimes tells you things too early or too late or too often. She also rather scants the intellectual terrain from which her subject emerged. A work that tells you the name of Boas's sister's English tutor might have found space to say something about the ideas of the ethnologists and anthropologists young Boas consulted and consorted with. How was it that this scrimshawed scholar arrived on these shores and helped overturn so many baleful preconceptions?

Boas himself paid tribute to the pioneering German anthropologist Theodor Waitz (1821–1864), who insisted that human types were shaped by the environment and were far from permanent and stable; and to Bastian, who shared Waitz's wariness about race and emphasized the "psychic unity of mankind." And what of the influence of Boas's mentor Virchow, Germany's preeminent anatomist, pathologist, and public-health expert, as well as a progenitor of cellular biology.

"We know that every nationality…is of a composite character," wrote Virchow, who took mutability to be a fundamental biological principle and saw no proof that one race was superior to another. "If all possessed a modesty which would allow them to see merits in neighboring people," he avowed, "much of the strife now agitating the world would disappear." A deputy of the Progress Party, Virchow won his seat in the Reichstag by running against Adolf Stoeker, a leading proponent of political anti-Semitism whose constituency adjoined Minden, and he vociferously opposed the enlistment of race for malign purposes. "I cannot restrain myself from thinking, when I look at the whole history of Mankind, that we are really brothers or sisters," he remarked.[*]

[*] One respect in which Boas distinguished himself from his main intellectual influences was in his eventual repudiation of social evolution, but Virchow's biographer Erwin H. Ackerknecht has a point when he writes, "One cannot help feeling that Boas' arguments against social evolutionism are to a large extent transcriptions of Virchow's polemics against Haeckel in the question of biological transformism"—ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, and related conjectures. See Ackerknecht, Rudolf Virchow: Doctor, Statesman, Anthropologist (University of Wisconsin Press, 1953), p. 236. The broader vistas of

Boas can be viewed, then, as having been a spectacularly effective vehicle for introducing into American academic culture (and then, in significant ways, correcting and refining) a particular German tradition of progressive anthropology. “My whole outlook,” he later wrote in a credo, “is determined by the question: how can we recognize the shackles that tradition has laid upon us?” Yet his resolve to recognize those shackles itself arose from a tradition, one that proved, in the main, rather more liberating than constraining.

The year 1906, when Zumwalt’s biography stops, is when Charles King’s Gods of the Upper Air really gets going. King, a professor of international affairs and government at Georgetown, is a terrific writer and storyteller—and a disciplined one, too, who knows how to dip into the rabbit holes along his path without getting lost in them. His is also an unabashed work of tribute: if it’s routine to reject racism, sexism, homophobia, or ethnocentrism, he maintains, “we have the ideas championed by the Boas circle to thank for it.”

Because Boas is so associated with “cultural anthropology” (a term that his students popularized), it’s easy to forget how much time he spent calculating cephalic indexes, determining who was long-headed and who short. He meant to defeat race science by turning its methods against its claims. In 1908 the Dillingham Commission—a group of senators and congressmen who worried that inferior arrivals from Italy and Eastern Europe were polluting the American stock—asked Boas to produce a report on the effects of “the immigration of different races into this country.” Under his supervision, measurements were taken of nearly 18,000 subjects. “The adaptability of the immigrant seems to be very much greater than we had a right to suppose before our investigations were instituted,” Boas’s study concluded. “While heretofore we had the right to assume that human types are stable, all the evidence is now in favor of a great plasticity of human types.”

However closely Boas followed Virchow in emphasizing mutability, mistrusting invidious racial claims, and recognizing that (as Boas later wrote of him) “it is dangerous to classify data that are imperfectly known under the point of view of general theories,” he had not yet followed Virchow in becoming publicly outspoken in defense of his convictions. As Douglas Cole put it, “Boas’s political views remained personal.”

That changed with the publication of The Mind of Primitive Man (1911), Boas’s first book addressed to a general audience. The first chapter was titled “Racial Prejudices”; another, “Influence of Environment Upon Human Types.” As for our cultural blinkers, Boas told readers, “the value which we attribute to our own civilization is due to the fact that we participate in this civilization, and that it has been controlling all our actions since the time our birth.” Later that year, Boas, who had previously addressed the first two annual meetings of the NAACP, shared a stage with Du Bois at the Universal Races Congress in London.

After the Great War broke out in Europe, Boas—aghast at what he saw as an unfounded hostility toward Germany and Germans—spoke out against American military involvement. (Here he parted company with Du Bois, who later regretted his pro-war stance.) Columbia’s president found such views borderline treasonous; Boas’s salary and research budget were cut. Yet just as fierce as Boas’s opposition to anti-German sentiment was his opposition to the sort of white supremacy he had earlier known as “Germanicism.” In January 1917 he published a withering appraisal of Madison Grant’s Passing of the

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nineteenth-century German anthropology are ably surveyed in Volksgeist as Method and Ethic, edited by George W. Stocking Jr. (University of Wisconsin Press, 1996).

Great Race in The New Republic. A year later, the head of the Immigration Restriction League asked Grant for the names of notable anthropologists who would defend racial inequality and complained, "I am up against the Jews all the time in the equality argument."

He was certainly up against Boas, who was flexing his muscles as a public intellectual. In 1925, after the passage of the Johnson-Reed Act, which restricted non-Nordic immigration, Boas and his students—including Melville Herskovits and Edward Sapir—published a powerful series of essays in The Nation, decrying and debunking scientific racism. Such interventions affected the intellectual climate. Thomas F. Gossett, in his classic study Race: The History of an Idea in America (1963), wasn't drastically overstating the case when he wrote, "What chiefly happened in the 1920s to stem the tide of racism was that one man…quietly asked for proof that race determines mentality and temperament."

Except, of course, it wasn't just one man. King's book vividly conjures four brilliant disciples of "Papa Franz." Zora Neale Hurston had come north to complete her education; Boas sent her back south, "poking and prying with a purpose," as she put it, with a clear understanding that the southern black mores and folklore she took for granted might be worth recording and discussing—as she did in Mules and Men (1935). Ella Cara Deloria, who grew up on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, was recruited by Boas when she was studying at Columbia Teachers College; the two collaborated on a linguistic study of Dakota. And it was Boas who, with some trepidation, sent Margaret Mead to the South Pacific, resulting in a best-selling book, Coming of Age in Samoa, that promoted a more tolerant attitude toward sexuality, although its specific ethnographic claims would be debated for decades.

Another student, Ruth Benedict, who was a lover of Mead's, played a particularly prominent part in the Boasian crusade against racial pseudoscience and superstition. Her Race: Science and Politics (1940) helped give currency to the term "racism." Boas himself spent much of his final decade preoccupied with its evils, as he watched the tendencies he'd spent a career denouncing come to a pustular head in his country of origin.

He was not granted the comfort of knowing that the Third Reich would be defeated. At a luncheon at the Columbia Faculty House in December 1942, surrounded by a dozen or so colleagues and talking about the monstrous error that was racism, he suffered a fatal heart attack. (Claude Lévi-Strauss, who was in attendance, later claimed that Boas more or less died in his arms. King is dubious about this tidy passing-of-the-torch tableau; the scene was undoubtedly chaotic, and, he notes, Boas didn't know Lévi-Strauss very well.) Boas was eighty-four, but with his program having trained more than sixty doctoral students, nearly half of them women, he knew his mission would outlast him. In an obituary, Benedict captured that mission with marvelous succinctness: "He believed the world must be made safe for differences."

The world—at least the academic world—is no longer safe for Franz Boas. Perhaps that should be no surprise. What we all want, and cannot have, is the ideological equivalent of a Forever stamp, the assurance that our version of enlightenment will withstand the passage of years, without requiring ungainly supplementation. Precisely because the main tenets that Boas and his protégés fought to establish are part of our common sense, we're alert to the ways in which time has not been kind to them. Yet the fiercer revisionists don't simply argue that the Boas circle made mistakes; they hold that the "liberal antiracism" it inaugurated ultimately sustains white supremacy—that Boas, in the end, must be seen as a wolf in sheep's clothing.

From Boas to Black Power, by the UC Santa Cruz anthropologist Mark Anderson, gives a sympathetic

hearing to these revisionists and advances kindred criticisms. Taking an ethnographical approach to his discipline, Anderson does not exempt himself from scrutiny. There's an air of apology about the account he gives of himself in the introduction as "a white, middle-aging, heterosexual man." (Apology accepted, Professor Anderson!) And the issue arises because he wants to amplify efforts from what he describes as a "Black Studies perspective" to interrogate anthropology's progressive image.

Here the gravamen is that the Boasians, in their liberal reformism, discouraged real social change. They didn't say enough about the exploitation of subject peoples. By pushing race out of social science, as an explanatory concept, they left cultural anthropologists unable to come to grips with race as a structuring principle of society, and, in Anderson's gloss, helped "minimize racism as a social reality." Indeed, separating race from culture, we're told, had the ironic effect of invigorating the ideology of scientific racism.

Anderson is intent on showing that Boas sought to attenuate black social difference, and he offers a quote from a 1910 address to the NAACP:

> The less Negro society represents a party with its own aims and its own interest distinct from those of the members of the white race, the more satisfactory will be the relation between the races.

What Anderson doesn't note is that Du Bois made similar pronouncements: "The race pride of Negroes is not the antidote to the race pride of white people; it is simply the other side of a hateful thing." This convergence of views doesn't validate the argument, but it does situate it in a history that Anderson's study presents only patchily.

Benedict joins Boas in the dock. She cannot easily be accused of having minimized racism as a social reality: the first chapter of her Race: Science and Politics was headed "Racism: The 'Ism' of the Modern World." But, Anderson stresses, her discursive "we" was a white we; her implied audience a white audience. (As when, in a 1942 magazine piece, she exhorted, "America must prove that we are not backing our own version of a master race.") And so, Anderson says, her "effort to promote liberal anti-racism through an appeal to the nation reproduced the whiteness of the nation."

Scouring Benedict's government-commissioned wartime work, Anderson discovers moments of patriotic rhetoric. Even making allowances for the fact that America was in the midst of battle, he says, "we must nonetheless confront the power of nationalist discourse in shaping her public intervention." (One wonders how Frederick Douglass's celebrated Fourth of July oration, which extolled the principles of the Declaration of Independence and even the greatness of its signatories, would fare under such an analysis.)

These slashing criticisms have the feel of academic Mensur. How deep do they cut? As Anderson at times seems to acknowledge, you're better able to explore racial identities as the product of social forces when, as the Boasians did, you clear away the myths of biological determinism. And if white supremacy is principally something that white people create and sustain, why shouldn't a critique of it be directed to a white audience? At a time when Americans were being shipped out by the millions to fight the armies of fascism, was Benedict wrong to depict the fight against prejudice as a feature of an evolving American identity, as a duty of citizenship?

Given Anderson's concern for what does and doesn't support white supremacy, such strategic considerations are hardly secondary. They weren't for Du Bois, who knew his allies from his adversaries.

Writing in 1946 to a young black woman who had encountered a screed about the bestial nature of her people, he concluded with a simple line of advice: “You should read Ruth Benedict on Race.”

Anderson, intent that we confront the ways Boasian antiracism ultimately supported racism, winds up his account with a consideration of the 2016 election. “Juxtaposing the election of Trump with the institutional life of anthropology may seem like a stretch,” he acknowledges, “but the provocation here is to refuse denial.” His book is an engaging tour d’horizon of some fascinating intradisciplinary ferment, and liberalism needs its radical critics if it is to avoid complacency. But one can wonder whether their interpretive niceties have the real-world bite they affect, even when advanced with snarling ferocity—or whether Boas’s academic adversaries are, in the end, sheep in wolf’s clothing.

“I must confess I often am annoyed with the young people who forget what they owe to us seniors,” Boas wrote to his son Ernst in 1918, “and then I get still more angry at myself that I am upset by it, for it is quite natural, and they should feel that they think and work for themselves.” It’s equally natural that Anderson and other critics, beneficiaries of an intellectual climate that the Boasians helped produce, don’t see that their perception of urgent, real-world stakes in the subtlest movements of intellectual history—the skein of dotted lines connecting Papa Franz to President Trump—might simply be an ingrained feature of a particular academic genre. As the anthropologist had known from his days in Kiel, it’s hard to see the water in which we swim.

Ideas matter, but they are not the only things that matter, and one way they matter is through their ability to reshape institutions and, indeed, identities. Knock-down arguments don’t knock down social evils. But to assess the extraordinary thesis that Boasian antiracism was an ideology that ultimately propped up a system of subordination, you’d have to engage in the sort of social history that finds no place in this volume. Yes, Trump is president, and yes, all our venerated crusaders against racism failed to finish the job. But in the cut and thrust of his fateful era, Boas fought harder, and failed less, than most.