

A Response to the 2021 AAA Presidential Address by Professor Akhil Gupta
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I must start by noting that the University of Wisconsin in Madison occupies ancestral land of the Ho-Chunk people, a place they call Day-Jope. In 1832 the Ho-Chunk were forced to cede this territory. Despite decades of ethnic cleansing the Ho-Chunk are still here. The University of Wisconsin respects the sovereignty of the twelve Indian nations of Wisconsin.

I must add that applied anthropologist and Commissioner of Indian Affairs Philleo Nash assigned trust land to the Ho-Chunk, over-ruling the Solicitor General of the United States, in order gain that Nation their desired status under the Indian Reorganization Act, granted in 1963. Furthermore, action anthropologist Nancy Lurie worked with Menominee social work professor Ada Deer to successfully overturn Menominee termination and restore the reservation to its people in 1973.

I realize there is great variation within the American anthropology community today as well as in the past. There were then, and are now, major differences in outlook and interest based on many concatenations of individual background, personality, ideology, motivation, training, and experience. Nevertheless, it is possible to speak of two distinctly different anthropologies—an earlier one (call it “modern” or “classical”?) and the one of the 2020s.

The earlier anthropology, into which the most senior of us were enculturated, was an optimistic and ambitious field whose members believed that our endeavor to view all human groups, all over the world, from pre-human origins through the earliest manifestations of culture and human social behavior until today, was special and important. It was a strategy for understanding what makes us human -- what makes us all alike despite the remarkable range of cultural behaviors, ideas, and social arrangements humans are capable of. “The encompassing human science, the comparative study of the human condition,” Marshall Sahlins called it. Our field grew out of lively curiosity about the world’s peoples, as well as a belief in the scientific method.

We thought that our intimate first-hand engagement with members of other communities, where they live, gave us deep appreciation for different ways of being and doing things. We did research with as many different peoples as possible, usually with ones whose cultures were

thriving, though changing, but also trying to get information about ways that were already past, known only through archeology. In early days, American ethnographers and linguists worked with groups whose distinctive languages, beliefs, and ways of life were in imminent danger of dying with their carriers. They believed it was their duty to save this knowledge for the future of their descendants as well as for humanity in general.

American anthropology was not restricted to a “savage slot.” Franz Boas made clear, from his earliest days at Columbia, that the aim of anthropology was to study ALL peoples of whatever type of culture. We did research in communities of every size, from cities to tiny communities among remote populations that no other disciplines cared about. Indeed, no one else cared about these peoples except missionaries who wanted to change them and government officials who tried to control them. We just wanted to know them.

As a result of our fieldwork experiences and training in four-field anthropology, we wrote and taught against racial determinism. Anthropology was the primary—really the only—field to strive to disprove notions of inherited biological inequality and to fight racism.

As Lee Baker put it, “Boas and several of his students at Columbia joined activists in an effort to liberate African Americans from the grip of claims of inferiority and to establish a more rigorous academic discourse to explain race and culture. The change in the social sciences followed, and sometimes lead, slow changes and arduous political and social struggles that would eventually topple Plessy in 1954...” (1998:167). Thurgood Marshall and Kenneth Clark used Boasian anthropology as critical elements in their arguments in “Brown vs. Board of Education.”

Our other great challenge was to caution against ethnocentrism, to preach understanding of ways that were different from our own, and to teach that one’s own way is not necessarily the best.

In the words of Sidney Mintz, “Our predecessors not only told the world but also showed the world that all peoples are equally human, equal in what they are, equal in what they have done for humankind. Nobody else at that time had said it and demonstrated it; anthropologists did.”

Today’s American anthropology is very different. Not everyone and everywhere, but at the center, at the commanding heights of the field, It has changed in the most profound ways from

what it was in the middle of the last century. The hegemony of the new anthropology is manifest in the direction and organization of the AAA annual meetings; the editors, editorial boards, and contents of the association's publications; the election statements of candidates for offices in the association and its sections. The dominant vision is evident in the course offerings at the leading departments of anthropology and in the presidential address that brings us here today.

Current cultural/social anthropology is increasingly focused on what Sherry Ortner called "dark anthropology." She describes it as "anthropology that focuses on the harsh dimensions of social life (power, domination, inequality, and oppression), as well as on the subjective experience of these dimensions in the form of depression and hopelessness." Joel Robbins labeled this a predisposition toward "the suffering subject." Today's courses and publications are based on violence, victimization, immiseration, and misery. The field that saw itself primarily as the study of human diversity, the humanistic science of the human, has been transformed into the recorder, if not the righter, of wrongs.

Akhil Gupta listed high priority topics for today's anthropology as: "The study of genocides and mass killings; The study of slavery and structural violence; of legal treaties and the political systems that enable their abrogation or enforcement; of forced migration and internally displaced populations; of reparations, landback initiatives, truth and reconciliation, redistributive and restitutive justice, and the redressal of historical wrongs; and critical approaches to borders and nationalism."

The thrust, the moral center, the subject matter, the concerns of the field, have changed. Central aspects of the earlier anthropology as well as its accumulated knowledge have been forgotten and often disparaged. Today's anthropology is a new field. And so be it. It is a new day, a new discipline, and this generation should strive and thrive and do well. Whatever it can do to ameliorate the many miseries of this world—more power to them. They must do what their understandings, their research, their intellects, training, and values tell them is right and necessary.

BUT – you knew there would be a "but"! There is a central theme in this new anthropology that is unnecessary, wrong, and a waste of effort. That is the wholesale assault on earlier anthropology. Please notice that the coming annual meetings of the AAA will be dedicated to "what steps can be collectively taken to make the field accountable to its historical and current harms." It is certainly appropriate for the today's anthropologists to attend to the

field's "current harms." It is not appropriate with respect to an earlier era that they do not know. And it ill-behooves them to spend so much time denigrating a field that, as Mintz put it, "not only told the world but also showed the world that all peoples are equally human, equal in what they are, equal in what they have done for humankind."

The presidential address reports the new generation's protests regarding "the failure of U.S. anthropology to deal with questions of race and racialization, with Indigenous land dispossession and denial of Indigenous sovereignty, and with the continuing global impacts of militarism, colonialism and imperialism." By all means they should tackle these challenges. But attacking an imagined anthropology of 50 to 100 years ago is not a useful way to accomplish these important aims.

This generation is removed from the earlier anthropology by several decades. They haven't studied earlier anthropology (courses in the history of the field are hardly taught anymore), earlier works are rarely consulted, nor do the critics have the empathy, objectivity, or historical understanding of the contexts or the people of the past to do it accurately or fairly.

Professor Gupta requested that critics give him substantive criticisms regarding his address rather than generalizations. I have time for only a couple now.

The author writes, "Without diminishing the enormity of what our anthropological ancestors accomplished, we see them better as fallible humans rather than as Gods or demigods" (7). This is a disingenuous claim. It is virtually impossible to find an acknowledgement of any accomplishment whatsoever in their talk. Out of the **300** bibliographical references there are a scant handful in which earlier anthropology is presented in even a neutral light. The other 290 (give or take) have been selected for the purpose of critique and denigration.

(As an aside, I only know of one reference to earlier anthropologists as Gods, and that was by Zora Neale Hurston. Her words were taken for the title of a book favorable to Boasian anthropology—a work that does not appear among the 300.)

Akhil Gupta employs the rhetorical technique of heaping an impressive number of citations after each major claim—as though the weight of numbers proved it. An inspection of many of these indicates much less support than he would have us believe. Some works he cites refer to British anthropology and are inappropriate for the American discipline; others, upon inspection, surprisingly, do not actually say what is claimed—or even prove the opposite. William Willis' angry article of 1972 must be included but so should his deep appreciation of

Franz Boas' involvement with Black scholars in his 1975 article, and Willis' late development as a devoted student of Boas whom he deeply admired. He wrote of Boas as "so misunderstood as a person and so often misrepresented as an anthropologist" (Zumwalt and Willis 2008:26). Vine Deloria, Jr's famous satire on anthropologists must be there but the speaker could have mentioned that Bea Medicine, his cousin and a serious anthropologist, disapproved of that piece. Alfonso Ortiz' mixed review of it, as well as Nancy Lurie's sympathetic, knowledgeable, and critical writings on the subject, would have been included in a fair work. He omits any literature challenging the works he cites, falsely suggesting that they are unquestioned. (See, for example, Brokensha 1973; Lurie 1998; Lewis 2014, 2018, 2021.)

As is usual in the critical literature, Professor Gupta's talk made it seem as though there were basically two American anthropologists, Franz Boas and Margaret Mead. Actually, there were a few more of us.

According to the *Fifth International Directory of Anthropologists* of 1975 (edited by action anthropologist Sol Tax) there were at least 2,700 anthropologists in the USA and Canada. By far the largest number of these individuals were cultural ("social") anthropologists. And they did research in every part of the world.

The *Yearbook* lists 90 different topics of interest for Cultural Anthropology. These include: colonialism and colonization, imperialism and imperial organization! (more than 70 people listed these in 1975!); action anthropology [Sol Tax, Nancy Lurie], complex organizations and institutions (including total institutions like asylums and prisons); drugs & drug usage (it was after the '60s); ethics in anthropology (Fates of Indigenous Peoples); gerontology; labor relations; marginality and deviance; medical anthropology, ethnomedicine, and public health; migrants, migration, and migrant labor); Messianic and Revitalization movements; ethnicity and race relations; poverty; sex roles and sexual relations; revolutionary and national liberation movements.

Anthropologists half a century ago were more concerned about these issues than current discourse recognizes. In fact, as an intellectual community, we were decidedly closer in our political and moral outlook to the current generation than they want to believe.

The author writes of how significant it would have been for Margaret Mead to do, in 1925, what he, 96 years later, imagines she should have done. What she did, however, in shaking up American society's ideas of child-rearing, sex, and the relativity of cultures, he sees as

insignificant or worse. He believes Mead meant her message for a “white middle-class self,” people presumably not worth impressing with the idea that there are other ways to live, or that other people might have more satisfactory approaches to life. Professor Gupta has a similar problem with Horace Miner’s “Nacirema,” a humorous demonstration of “cultural relativism as an antidote to the malady of ethnocentrism” (Burde). He considers this piece “a project of cultural critique and self-estrangement” directed only at the same white audience as Mead’s. It seems as though he thinks that Black Folks and other people of color don’t use bathrooms, comb their hair, brush their teeth, take medicines, or go to doctors—or have a sense of humor.

After favorably mentioning Boas’ published letter protesting “anthropologists as spies” in World War I, the author says, “Many anthropologists, most famously Cora Du Bois and Ruth Benedict, joined the war effort during the Second World War. And after that War, many of those who had served in theaters of war around the world became anthropologists, and joined the rapidly growing higher education system in the 1950s and 1960s. This generation did its fieldwork at the very moment when U.S. military and imperial power was at its pinnacle, and when nationalism and militarism were inextricably intertwined.”

An audience primed to believe the worst about nationalism, the US military, and the Cold War, will naturally assume a nefarious relationship between that generation and the U.S. military and imperial power. It automatically taints those people without any evidence of actual connection. Furthermore, the association of Cora Du Bois and Ruth Benedict with war puts them under a cloud as well, before an audience that might not realize the context. It would be helpful to explain that Japan had invaded and was brutalizing the populations of Manchuria, China, Taiwan, Korea, the Philippines, Burma, Malaya, Indochina, Indonesia, New Guinea, Pacific Islands—and more. (They had a bad defeat in India.) Aside from the purposeful and industrial scale murder of well over six million people whom they deemed inferior and useless, Germans under Hitler invaded and brutalized Poland, Czechoslovakia, Norway, France, Belgium, The Netherlands, Lithuania, Ukraine, and the USSR. Would today’s principles call for neutrality?

Despite the horrors of that war, Ruth Benedict’s book, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, was her attempt to make the Japanese understandably human, only culturally different, to a people that had been at war against them and subjected to racist propaganda for years. “In around three hundred pages, she had demonstrated the Boasian technique of turning otherness into difference—an idea that, only a few years after the war, was its own kind of revelation”

(Charles King 2019:330). In fact, the Japanese anthropologist Takao Sofue, commenting on the article by Diane K. Lewis cited by the authors, wrote, “Ruth Benedict’s *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*...is well accepted and widely read among the Japanese general public even today because it points out many basic traits of the national culture and personality which the Japanese themselves had never been aware of.”

Charles King writes admiringly of Ruth Benedict, as well as Margaret Mead, Ella Deloria, and Zora Neale Hurston in his recent, widely-reviewed book *Gods of the Upper Air: How a Circle of Renegade Anthropologists Reinvented Race, Sex, and Gender in the Twentieth Century*.

Why couldn’t this book have been included among Professor Gupta’s many references?

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