Twitter Thread by Rick W. A. Smith



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This is... so bad. Like if The Onion wrote an article mocking liberal anthropology they could scarcely do better than this guy. But who needs satire when we got Wade Davis?

Wade defines 9/11 as "the biggest story of culture [anthros] or the country would ever encounter" & says anthros alone could answer the question "why do they hate us". Bro. The levels of erasure it takes to say this. @KimTallBear uses the phrase "American Dreaming".

Ah yes, and of course "the West" has "technology" while everyone else has "culture". Endless.

He argues Carleton Coon's racist science was respected at the time of his retirement. No mention of the protracted disputes over his work. No mention of Montague Cobb or Sherry Washburn of course. More erasures.

He says genome science shows that "race is a fiction". It's true that groups we call races are not genetically distinct categories. But racism and its effects are still real. & I'd be hard pressed to find a field where race science is more alive & well than genomics.

The theory of social change is.. something else. Wade argues anthropology was the root of social justice movements, as if there were not BIPOC & others resisting colonial social orders at every moment.

Just last night I re-read Frederick Douglass's 1854 repudiation of Sam Morton and co. Written 4 years before Boas was born. It articulates much anti-racist thinking about human variation decades before anthros would. As did Rudolph Virchow's work, Boas's mentor.

This is not to say that Boas was not an important (if problematic) counterpoint to voices like Ales Hrdlicka on the biology of racial difference in humans. But Boas's ideas have a history. More erasures.

"Anthropology matters because it allows us to look beneath the surface of things." Who is the "us" here that was unaware of how colonial social orders operate?

"Anthropology is the antidote to nativism, the enemy of hate, a vaccine of understanding, tolerance and compassion" - revisionist history that sees anthropology as history's antidote to colonialism and not its agent.

In 1969, Vine Deloria Jr. said "The fundamental thesis of the anthropologist is that ppl are objects for observation, people are then considered objects for experimentation, for manipulation, & for eventual extinction." This is the colonial history of the field we must face.

Wade writes that anthropology "inoculat[es] the world from the likes of the Proud Boys and Donald Trump". Y'all. If "but Trump" were an entire field ■

I won't even touch the last paragraph. It is vile.

Y'all. The task, as it has long been, is to resist and re-story Wade's and so many others' brand of anthropological dreaming that reinscribes the same diseases of colonialism for which it claims to be cure. An honest account of history is fundamental to that project.