

Review of Magdalena Zlocka-Dabrowska's *Generative Anthropology in Contexts and Texts*

Adam Katz

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[Generative Anthropology in Contexts and Texts \(uksw.edu.pl\)](http://uksw.edu.pl)

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Magdalena Zlocka-Dabrowska's *Generative Anthropology in Contexts and Texts* (Warsaw, UKSW, 2022) is informed throughout by the firm conviction that Generative Anthropology, the mode of thought predicated upon Eric Gans's originary hypothesis of human and language origin, is capable of, obliged, and even destined to engage with all discourses in all disciplines engaging in inquiries touching upon the human. It is written with the conviction that once we are talking about the originary hypothesis, all other discussions must be transformed so as to provide a space to continue talking about it. This does not detract from the meticulousness and penetrating nature of the conversations Zlocka-Dabrowska stages between Gans's thinking and fields as far apart as the study of ancient Hindu mythology and contemporary neuroscience, but it does raise the interesting question of what kind of discourse GA is and must be. GA is certainly a powerful theory of religion, aesthetics and the social, but it can never quite be one of the "human" or "social" sciences because its insistence on this one question that those sciences must bracket (why is there the human in the first place) due to its "religious" overtones means it must transform those sciences or overstay its welcome in any discussion. GA is not a "religion," even though it presupposes, if not "belief," then affirmation of an event whose occurrence can never be "proven" according to existing epistemological protocols: after all, it can point back to no public event of revelation. What is GA to be, then?

Zlocka-Dabrowska begins in her introduction by pointing to the paradox of humans approaching the solution to artificial intelligence while the origin of language, which is to say the specifically human form of intelligence, is still a mystery. Such paradoxes of language, as exemplified in the *ouroboros* that has served as a symbol of GA, characterize the writing throughout. In the introduction, Zlocka-Dabrowska, in asserting the need to situate GA in various fields so as to engage with and mediate between various positions in them, also acknowledges that for this very reason, deciding to choose one field over another

is essentially arbitrary:

This book is written as an exposition of a single interpretive viewpoint rather than as an overview of the field, with an awareness of the wide range of GA's potential and the multiplicity of contexts in which it can be grasped, up to the level of *embarras de choix*. To use Charles Goodwin's and Alessandro Duranti's formulation, context is here understood as a "frame" that informs our understanding of the theory under consideration and of what is not explicitly said prior to the analysis undertaken. The outcome of the analysis that coincides with the assumptions of GA becomes the resource of a newly created interpretation because context is "being evoked to interpret." The objective is to exemplify and explain the core idea of GA in reference to some chosen contexts as a demonstration of GA's differentiated applicability and its pertinence to many discourses, where the choice of context itself becomes the first interpretation (12-13).

In this hermeneutic, where you begin is really irrelevant; the point is to begin, because in beginning you will enact an interpretive gesture that recalls the gesture founding humanity. "What is not said prior to the analysis undertaken" we can assume to be "always already" informed by the originary hypothesis that is simultaneously the frame of analysis. GA is therefore an "anthropology" (even if not one quite recognizable by the discipline going under that name), but it is also a human-making activity of the kind studied by anthropology and GA itself: "the selected contexts in which GA finds its references here become interactive with GA itself and are interwoven into the discourse of GA... and the contexts surround the events that build GA" (13).

The implication here, it seems to me, is that one should read texts as if they are already "interwoven into the discourse of GA" and are participating in the humanly constitutive project of creating new ways of deferring violence. Consistent with this implication is Zlocka-Dabrowska's insistent emphasis on GA as an open system, always taking on new questions and entering new discourses. There is a welcome sense of ongoing discovery to Zlocka-Dabrowska's sustained discussion, in Chapter 1, "GA's Scene of Origin in the Context of Anthropological Study," of Gans's originary hypothesis and its implications for the relations between the social sciences and the humanities, between anthropology and the question of language, and the possibility of overcoming dualisms modeled on the subject/object binary. It's as if GA naturally propels itself through a series of what can now be seen as unfinished intellectual projects, all aimed at presenting the human. Once one encounters GA, it appears, one's previous knowledge, extensive in Zlocka-Dabrowska's case, must be reconsidered and reframed. So, for example, she refers to a "micro-anthropological" argument made by Claude Levi-Strauss in 1950 "referring to GA," in which Levi-Strauss insisted that language must have come into being all at once, rather than through gradual stages—an intuition that can now be given a determinate meaning with widespread implications for our understanding of the human. Similarly, Bronislaw Malinowski's understanding of the centrality of language to any anthropological

understanding can now be continued on firmer ground.

Chapter 2, "GA in Reference to Cassirer's and Heidegger's Visions of the Human," places GA on the scene of philosophy. Zlocka-Dabrowska notes that Gans has not himself engaged with Cassirer's thought, but has referred to Heidegger numerous times, in ways that have revealed a debt to him in formulating the originary hypothesis. The relevance to Cassirer seems to be the centrality Cassirer confers upon symbolic form, which would seem to open up productive avenues of dialogue with GA. Perhaps the pairing of Cassirer and Heidegger is inspired by their famous dispute at Davos, which Zlocka-Dabrowska mentions briefly but only to point to the significance of both thinkers to early 20th century philosophy. Pushing the question further might lead us into (unwelcome?) political territory, as that debate is generally seen as representing the eclipse of Cassirer's thinking and the kind of rationalist idealism he represented and the rise of an "irrationalist" existentialism. I found the discussion of Cassirer and Gans, despite its thoroughness regarding both thinkers, less engaging than the previous chapter's discussion of anthropology because, as Zlocka-Dabrowska points out, Cassirer is no originary thinker, which means that more than a dialogue would be required to bring the philosophy of symbolic forms onto the GA scene. Perhaps too much reverence is given to these prominent thinkers; what seems to me missing here is a discussion of Gans's discussions not of any particular philosopher but of philosophy itself. A polemic between GA and metaphysics and philosophy can be traced through Gans's work, and this might undergird the encounter between Gans and Heidegger that Zlocka-Dabrowska stages. While the series of parallels Zlocka-Dabrowska points out between their respective thinking are certainly fertile starting points for future inquiry, if Heidegger and Gans are not merely similar but on the same scene, would they not be confronting similar antagonists? We might, as Zlocka-Dabrowska suggests in her conclusion to the chapter, imagine a synthesis wherein

Gans's human can account for Cassirer's comprehension of cognitive properties of the human as the product of his active participation in the Heideggerian worldly universe. Moreover, Gans's language, meaning representation, corresponds to Cassirer's concept of a symbolic system questioned by Heidegger. One might also notice that Cassirer's sign serves not only to communicate a complete and given thought content but is also an instrument by means of which this content develops, fully defines itself, and through its existence, as Gans helps us to say, enables humans to defer potential violence, to which Heidegger devotes a lot of attention and which is complemented by his concept of anxiety and fear. To sum up, Gans's scene needs both Cassirer's and Heidegger's approaches to enable the human to surmount the perennial intra-human crisis. (64)

It's that last sentence that I would take some issue with, as "Gans's scene," like any scene, is not comprised of components that complement each other (one could always list more things the scene "needs") but, as Zlocka-Dabrowska has herself pointed out, is born in a

unique event irreducible to its participants and their characteristics. Does even Heidegger's ontology of being point to a philosophical *scene*? That question would have to be addressed if we are to speak of GA on such a scene.

Chapter 3, "GA in Cognitive Contexts in Mythological Narratives," meanwhile, shows Zlocka-Dabrowska's approach at its strongest, tying together figures of mimesis, resentment, and violence, various layers of cognition, and the historicization of mythological narratives (with an acute awareness of their linguistic dimension) in a single revelation of the power of GA. Zlocka-Dabrowska here focuses on the Greek mythological figure of "Cratos," as a sustained mode of cultural and cognitive reflection on violence. The role of violence and domination in human orders is a much neglected question in GA, and focusing on Cratos brings this question to the fore. Gans has discussed rhetoric as originary, and part of the scene, while tending to see power as essentially silent, and perhaps therefore of secondary importance. Zlocka-Dabrowska brings Cratos onto the GA scene through a discussion of rhetoric as Cratos, the rhetoric of domination, as also a rhetoric of deferral. Focusing on Cratos's dialogue with Hephaestus in Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, Zlocka-Dabrowska advances a subtle argument for viewing Cratos as a means of cognizing the dangerous potential of intra-human violence, overlaying very carefully Gans's scene of origin with the mythological material. The ever-present threat of human violence is cognized with such imminence that only a corresponding figure of violence, yet one capable of being transformed and redeemed, can allow for it to be thought. Whether this helps us to account for the centralized violence of organized state systems would be an interesting follow-up question.

I won't follow the complexity of Zlocka-Dabrowska's fascinating discussion of George Dumézil's work on Indo-European mythology in Gansian terms (which further leads into Hindu mythology and a discussion of collective memory), bringing out a range of semantic and metaphoric implications of Cratos (this chapter is the longest by far, and clearly the heart of book, and presumably of Zlocka-Dabrowska's own interests), but I will point out her generative suggestion, mid-chapter, that "cultural attempts to liberate humans from the power of Cratos may be said to be the focus of Gans's theory of the deferral of violence" (95) which, given her analysis of the profound roots of Cratos in human order, language and culture, would be an immense project to attribute to GA.

Zlocka-Dabrowska's study of "generative cognition" and "figures of cognition" in Chapter 3 is then "transferred" to the ongoing and prospective fields of cognitive and neuroscience in Chapter 4, "From Cognitive to Neurocognitive: The Potentials of Gans's Scene of Origin." It seems to me that Zlocka-Dabrowska's insistence that GA must be everywhere, in all fields of knowledge and, indeed, in a real sense is already everywhere, leads her into discussions of cognition today. One might say that the implication is that Generative Anthropologists must become polymaths, while eventually "contracting" all forms of humanistic and social scientific knowledge into an enlarged discipline of the human. Zlocka-Dabrowska plants the

fundamental premises of GA right in the middle of the vocabulary of the cognitive sciences:

The signing gesture forms the *scene of origin*, then language, and both are products of the human mind and human brain. They perform many functions, the most important of which are perception (the recognition and interpretation of sensory information), attention (maintaining concentration on a specific object, action or thought), memory (e.g. short-term and long-term), motor skills (mobilizing muscles and body), visual-spatial processing (e.g. processing spatial relationships between objects) and executive (e.g. problem-solving, decision-making, self-regulation of emotions) as well as language and auditory processing (discriminating and understanding sounds, producing verbal signals). Due to the sign gesture, the language might be understood as a form of bodily representation. (153)

All of these “functions,” that is, are also language, and Zlocka-Dabrowska follows the thread of language in foregrounding those evolutionary and neuro-cognitive scientists that see language as central to human being. Of course there must be biological preconditions, presumably including the structure and operations of the brain, enabling the emergence of language and the human, but Zlocka-Dabrowska never forgets that these preconditions are always embedded in forms of interaction and interdependence with the species, and since they can never be abstracted away from these forms of interaction and independence, they situate GA within any conversation, even on the physiological level. For example, the “the thousands of nerve fibers that register muscle contraction and relaxation” [160], while nevertheless depending on perception, which in turn depends upon consciousness, which in turn depends upon the scene. Zlocka-Dabrowska argues very convincingly that GA would make formative, indispensable contributions to cognitive and neuro-cognitive sciences even and perhaps especially where it seems possible to bracket the distinctly human element. The complexity of the object of these sciences is the complexity of the consequences of the scene of origin: even the struggles between networks in the brain, studied by David Eagleman, reflect the problem of deferral.

Zlocka-Dabrowska’s book is an inspiring call to pursue the “many dimensions in which traces of Gans’s *originary thinking* can be found” (168). The spirit of endless creation and questioning which Zlocka-Dabrowska locates in the human and best accounted for by the originary hypothesis is further a call to put the hypothesis to work: wherever there is the human, there you will find traces of the originary scene. It is the kind of “faith” essential to any exploration, and yet there is a certainty to it. Each of us can start where we are, assured of contributing to the broader project of human survival and flourishing. Zlocka-Dabrowska’s book models a kind of persistence in inquiry—keep putting descriptions of the originary scene next to descriptions of, really, whatever—ancient myths, continental philosophy, neuroscience—and the results are guaranteed to be generative. The language of GA, derived from the scene, will enter these other scenes, as long as we keep searching for openings and hinges. Nor will these other disciplinary scenes thereby be reduced; on the

contrary, their own “destiny” will be fulfilled in being taken up in the unfolding of the originary event.