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"From the Sense of Justice and Human Sympathy": Alice Fletcher, Native Americans, and the Gendering of Victorian Anthropology

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Alice Cunningham Fletcher

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FOOTNOTES TO THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

"From the sense of justice and human sympathy:"

Alice Fletcher, Native Americans, and the Gendering of Victorian Anthropology.

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The last quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed increased anthropological activity in the United States, and with it, the burgeoning interest of women in science. Women's involvement in anthropology coincided with the move to professionalize American science. To assert the legitimacy of scientific pursuits and restrict access to specialized forms of scientific knowledge, scientists created a model of scientific investigation that was rigorous, rational and impersonal. Philadelphia anthropologist Daniel Garrison Brinton explained that scientific truth "deals with the actual world about us, its objective realities and present activities... The only conditions which it enjoins are that the imperfections of the senses shall be corrected... and that their observations shall be interpreted by the laws of logical induction (Brinton 1895: 3). Consequently, the sciences became incompatible with the Victorian cultural construction of female identity, which dictated that women were the opposite of science: delicate, irrational and emotional. A woman could be a dilettante at best, for her mental constitution instilled her with characteristics that could only contaminate her attempts at objective observation and reduce her conclusions to unreliable musings (cf. Rossiter 1982).

In the face of such *de facto* sex-exclusion from scientific pursuits, a few female ethnologists, and Alice Cunningham Fletcher in particular, rose to prominence in the anthropological community. Fletcher's successes, in part, were due to her manipulation of gendered and scientific identities, which allowed her to forge investigational niches in the realm of ethnological study. Fletcher utilized the rhetoric of Victorian femininity – which conflated the female character with religiosity, sympathy, emotionality and moral authority – to create a small space for herself in the anthropological community. Already forty when she commenced ethnographic work, Fletcher's labors were an easy outgrowth of her previous involvement in women's clubs and benevolent reform. The following documents provide examples of the unique way in which Fletcher forged a scientific identity that granted her access to Native American cultural institutions and thereby to the burgeoning science of anthropology. They trace the evolution of her anthropological investigations from the "woman question" to the "Indian question" and from explicitly feminine topics to more nebulous gendered realms of moral reform coupled with scientific investigation.¹

¹ Although Fletcher's representation of Native Americans and her vision of their future--as embodied in the Dawes Act, which she played a role in framing--are today politically and ideologically questionable, her writings reflect attitudes common in the late nineteenth century, when many sympathetic reformers felt that the only way to "save" the Native American from extermination by civilization was to "Americanize" them.

Setting out in 1881 for the Plains reservations, Fletcher argued that her femininity equipped her with special skills for particular kinds of investigative work. Her sex granted her access to studies that men, by the very nature of Victorian sexual spheres, could not broach.

Maj. J. W. Powell [Director, Bureau of Ethnology],

[BAE 8/10/81]

Dear Sir,

I am about [to travel] for the far West to devote myself to the investigation of the life of Indian women. ...

I wish to get at Indian women's lives from the inside, and as the segregation of the sexes is marked among barbarous people, I trust that being a woman I may be able to observe and record facts and conditions that are unknown or obscure owing to the separateness of the male and female life.

The following excerpts from Alice Fletcher's field journals trace her changing interest from Native American women to the assimilation of Native Americans into white, Christian civilization. Through her experiences and encounters, Fletcher turned increasingly to her feminine sympathy in an effort to understand the "thoughts" and "aspirations" of her travel companions. Her sympathy, in turn, led her to adopt a maternalistic posture in which Native Americans became children in need of socialization by their white mother. Thus the field, for Fletcher, became a space of Victorian domesticity.

September 24, 1881

The talk about the campfire was serious, the future struggles of the Indians. Five years ago the Omahas lived in a village, mud lodges. Now Wajapa, [Omaha Indian, informant and travel companion] has a fine farm. Two years he since changed to citizen's dress, has sent daughter east to Miss Read's school. Indians think him hard hearted to send away a little girl. He says "No, I look to the future. I shall sleep easy when I die if my children are prepared to meet the struggle that is coming when they must cope with the white settlers." His mind is alert and of a statesmen-like character, tho he is rather restless, made so by the uncertainty of Indian tenure of land. Indians love their land as no white man realizes, and will not part from it for any cause if possible to prevent it. ...

September 30, 1881

... After dinner a council held. ... Each speaker shook hands with all before he spoke. I spoke after the general talk.

... They seem glad a Christian woman has come. The tales of oppression were pitiful. They showed us bills sent in by traders to swindle them out of money. They are children as faced toward us, know nothing of the power of law and organization. Their implicit faith in a white man they think friendly is very plaintive. ...

Oct. 5, 1881

... [Buffalo-chip has] a queer childish consciousness. He wears the scalp lock. This morning he took a stick and with queer mumblings, he raised it to and fro. This was to gain better weather. It is a strange thing to sit opposite and witness veritable, heathen performances. One realizes the power and gift of spiritual life by the blessed Lord. I needed to see all this to realize the verity of "I am the way, the truth and the life." The darkness and paucity of their mental life is pitiful. ...

This A. M. I have been teaching Wajapa more arithmetic, addition by object lessons in plums, trying to make the figures a verity to him. One feels so sorry for them, so longs to broaden and deepen and brighten their life. ...

Oct. 18, 1881. [At Rosebud Agency, Dakota Territory]

... Nothing can describe the lack of cleanliness and order of Rosebud Agency. Cattle are slaughtered on the hills here, and then the bones left here to bleach – bones and debris are about every house and one must be careful not to step into worse filth. ... It is too bad that no one can help them or will try persistently. The Missionary is hampered by the agent and others are too busy making money. No one tells them how to place their houses...

... Now how can Indians do better, hemmed in as they are at the agency deprived of their native life--poor enough but having its compensation--and not fully introduced to our ways, they are stranded between two modes of life. ...

Fletcher's sympathy for the plight of Native Americans was potentially a severe bar to her scientific objectivity according to the professionalized model of scientific investigation. Yet she embraced this emotional capacity as a boon – a principally feminine skill that provided her with an understanding of Native American thoughts and emotions unavailable to less sympathetic male peers. After J. W. Powell failed to respond to her first request for information, Fletcher attempted to demonstrate that her sex provided anthropology with hitherto unavailable information.

Maj. J. W. Powell

[ACF 11/16/81]

Sir:

It was quite a disappointment not to receive the promised letter indicating points you would think it well for me to particularly observe in Indian home life. ...

For nearly three months I have been living, nearly all the time, with Indians, in their teepees, or log-houses. I have been introduced into Indian homes by Indians and have conformed as far as possible to Indian life. The inside view has been open to me and I have tried to see it from the Indian standpoint, to get at the Indian way of thinking. Much valuable information I have already secured, but my work is still of course in its beginning. I have been looking at the various Societies among the Indian women

Within only a few months of her first trip, Fletcher began utilizing ethnographic information for the moral uplift of Native Americans. In December, Fletcher implored her staunchly Christian friend to raise funds for the education of Omaha children. She combined her sympathy, Christianity and scientific pursuits to bolster her authority regarding contemporary Native American issues.

My Dear Mrs. Happ [?],

[ACF 12/1/81]

Is it not odd that the long silence between us should be broken by my speaking to you from among the Indians? Here I am far away in miles and farther still in circumstances. My study of the life, customs and words [and] thoughts of Indian women is full of interest and instruction. ... Living among a people who are still to a considerable degree in the practice of primitive habits, one begins to realize something of the slow growth of civilization and of the life giving power of Christianity. These can not be so clearly apprehended in the midst of the stir of mind and spirit in the East.

I have been visiting and living among the Indians for some time past. I was introduced by Indians, have traveled with them, Indian fashion, and, as far as possible, accepting for myself their life. I need not dilate on the difficulties and hardships I have encountered. It was needful that I should do this in order to accomplish my scientific work. Their life and customs have thus been opened to me, and as I have formed many friends among them, much of their thought and aspiration has been revealed. The present needs of the Indians appealed strongly to me... If you will tell your church of the story in this letter and beg of them some help, you will win many grateful prayers and thoughts with in the Western wilds.

Some few weeks since, I was up among the Yanktons. Their Reservation is on the East side of the Missouri river... The tribe numbers some 2000. To the efforts of the Missionaries is due much of the advancement they have made. Many of the Indians are now living in houses, cultivating the land, attending church regularly, and sending their children to school. ...

Within only a few years, Fletcher was actively and eloquently combining ethnography and benevolent reform. Victorian gender distinctions held that women could serve as the moral bastions of the household, and indirectly, of society. By overtly conflating her femininity with morality, Fletcher portrayed herself as a humble protector and bearer of civilized morality in the face of the degenerate barbarism of the Native American reservation. In this way, Fletcher combined feminine reform efforts with scientific knowledge gathered in the field, camouflaging her entrance into scientific discourse behind the rhetoric of the expansion of Christian civilization into the untamed West.

Dr. J. E. Rhoads,
President, Indian Rights Association.

[ACF 4/7/1887]

Dear Sir:

... I began a paper which was to set forth as succinctly as possible the history of the allotment of lands to the Omahas, and to present a picture of the people at the time this work took place. It was also my intention to show the difficulties that must attend to the reconstructive period in a tribe...

I met men whom five years ago I feared must live and die Indians, but who were now pushing out into better modes of living and thinking. Although I saw thriftlessness in places yet, manliness was astir; the old reservation stagnation was gone. Men talked of their future as if it were in their power to make it prosperous. Plans of building new houses, improving farms, and questions of how to make the law effective on the reservation were discussed with me by many Indians during my short stay. The disintegrating process at work all over the reservation has made the incoming of new life possible, and education was telling as never before. Even the feast and dance where the non-progressive Omahas met and resolved that they be and remain Indians, show the movement of ideas in their very midst. Troublous as were the times, hope was in the air. Many Indians were setting an example of good order and individual enterprise to men who knew far more than these Aborigines.

...

I was at work on the paper, setting forth this sociological picture when vague rumors and strange stories came to me, and I began to discern that it was not so much the consideration of the Omaha tribe and their struggles into civil life that is occupying the minds of some persons, as an estimate of my character and motives in working for this people. When I apprehended this state of affairs, I ceased to write. I do not care to take the time and thought of people for any self vindication. What I have done for the Omaha Indians, I have done from the sense of justice and human sympathy. I did not work for any public recognition or approbation, I never thought I was doing anything remarkable, or of any particular importance, except to those little ones whom I found in need of a friend, and when by God's grace I was able to help. That which I did in the solitude of my own heart, has found its way to the public ear. I never sought any man's recognition or endorsement. My work for the Indians has rested between my Maker and myself, and there I am content to let it stand

These documents, of course, serve primarily to raise a number of further questions. To what extent did Fletcher consciously manipulate her scientific identity? Or, in other words, did she internalize the Victorian conception of science as a primarily masculine pursuit? Some of her statements indicate that she indeed felt that her work was necessarily inferior to that of men. Fletcher wrote to F. W. Putnam,

director of Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, "I am sometimes tempted when I think of the Museum and of what I could possibly do there, to wish that I never did wish, to be a man? I am aware that being a woman I am debarred from helping you as I otherwise could – but the bar is a fact" (in Mark 1988: 243). And in what ways did Fletcher's overtly "feminine" scientific self-identity bar her from other, more traditionally "masculine" areas of anthropology? Perhaps less speculative, what role did F. W. Putnam, Fletcher's informal teacher, long-time mentor and friend, play in her scientific successes? Judith Modell has noted the importance of male mentorial relationships for women students in Franz Boas' Columbia department in the 1920s (Modell 1974). Does Fletcher's experience indicate that this may represent continuity with the late nineteenth century?

Additionally, did other prominent women anthropologists utilize such tools to gain access to anthropological investigation? By way of contrast, Matilda Coxe Stevenson, the only female ethnologist at the Bureau of American Ethnology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, reacted quite differently to the Victorian sex-exclusion of female scientists and strove to observe exaggerated professional standards of research and publication. In 1914, she informed an interested journalist of her method of investigation:

... I would be glad to have my process of work published for the benefit of future students, and the collection of anthropologic truth. Every word recorded by me is vouched for by at least three well informed men or women or both, neither one knowing that I have studied with another. When my information comes through three who agree that the matter is correct, I feel that the material may be recorded for publication with perfect safety. This is a very slow way of study but it is the only sure way with not only an unlettered people but people who are cunning and prone to deceive rather than have the truth of their lives go out to the world. I regret to say that there is much hurried work done in the field. ... Such truth is to be learned only through the most intimate relations with the Indians after one has one their entire confidence. Make an Indian man or woman attached to you, believe in your superiority, and you can do what you will with him. There must be an exchange of confidences... (MCS to Watkins: 6/15/14).

In 1900, as Stevenson strove to complete her seminal work on the Zuni Indians, she outlined her attitudes toward anthropological publication to J. W. Powell:

...My desire that the work should be thorough and classic must be my excuse and apology. I think you, who have a far deeper knowledge of American aboriginal life than most men, must agree with me that preparing a number of separate or isolated papers is one thing and writing a comparatively complete and connected history of an aboriginal people whose thoughts are not our thoughts, weaving all the threads into an intelligent and satisfactory whole for the civilized student, is quite another. There are two schools of authors – those whose aim is to so present facts that their work will be classic, who labor with facts, and others eager to publish something, anything that they may be ahead of others, or see their work in print, being satisfied with a superficial exposition of a subject so that it brings praise or notoriety even though the bubble bursts after a time and vanishes into nothing... It is my wish to erect a foundation upon which students may build. I feel that I can do the most for science in this way. I make no claim that my paper on Zuni will exhaust the subject. On the contrary, it but opens the subject but I think and hope it may open wide the gates for other students to pass the more rapidly over the many, many parts which I have left unexplored (MCS 9/15/00).

In contrast to Fletcher, Stevenson approached Victorian sex restrictions more aggressively. She eschewed feminine entrapments such as benevolent reform and sought scientific access and recognition strictly on the basis of her labors. An in-depth comparison of these divergent methods of female access to

accepted Victorian definitions of scientific identity, and the successes and failures of such methods – warrants further investigation.

References

Research for this note was conducted for an essay examining the Women's Anthropological Society of America and the place of women ethnologists in the midst of scientific professionalization. The essay will appear in volume nine of History of Anthropology series: Excluded ancestors, inventible traditions: Essays toward a more inclusive history of anthropology. Excerpts of Alice Fletcher's field notes were generated from an upcoming National Anthropological Archives internet exhibit. The exhibit, now in progress, will feature the entirety of Fletcher's field journals, including sketches, from her 1881 journey. The selections from Fletcher's letters and diary and from Stevenson's letters are reproduced with the permission of the National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

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RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

Sergei Kan (Dartmouth College) has been carrying on research on the career of the Russian ethnographer Lev Shternberg (1861-1927) in the context of the Russian revolutionary movement, the development of the Jewish liberal political movement, and Russian/Soviet academic politics.

Esteban Krotz (Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán/Mexico; kheberle@tunku.uady.mx) has initiated a comparative research project about the life and work of three Mexican anthropologists: G. Aguirre Beltrán, G. Bonfil and Á. Palerm.

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I. Recent Dissertations (Ph.D. unless otherwise indicated)

Wilder, Gary (Anthropology, University of Chicago, 1999) "Greater France Between the Wars: Negritude, Colonial Humanism, and the Imperial Nation-State"

II. Recent Work by Subscribers

[Except in the case of new subscribers, for whom we will include one or two orienting items, "recent" is taken to mean within the last two years. Please note that we do not list "forthcoming" items. To be certain of dates and page numbers, please wait until your works have actually appeared before sending offprints (preferably) or citations in the style used in History of Anthropology and most anthropological journals]