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## Introduction

*Shirley A. Leckie and Nancy J. Parezo*

### Master Narratives of the American West

The writings of the American West have long dealt with masculine ideals. In narratives of the Euro-American westward movement, Brigitte Georgi-Findlay observes, “Women were assigned to the margins of a cultural plot in which gender played a significant role.” This occurred, she adds, because “westward expansion has been encoded as a male activity, and the American West has served as a generating force and a proving ground for the definition of American manhood.”<sup>1</sup>

Susan Armitage noted in 1987, in “Through Women’s Eyes: A New View of the West,” that the American West has long been a veritable “Hisland,” and recent scholars have not disagreed. Until the 1970s, when historians began retrieving neglected works by female authors to reinsert women into the historical record of the West, Euro-American women, when they drew notice, played stereotyped roles such as the “genteel civilizer” or “oppressed drudge.”<sup>2</sup> Indian women were portrayed as beasts of burden, downtrodden “squaws,” or princesses, and Hispanas or Mexicanas as “fiery señoritas.”<sup>3</sup>

If this bipolar portrayal prevailed for women as subjects in studies of the West, one finds that the works of early women scholars also received less attention than those of men. Two major historiographical studies published in 1991—*Writing Western History: Essays on Major Western Historians*, edited by Richard W. Etulain, and Gerald D. Nash’s *Creating the West: Historical Interpretations, 1890–1990*—gave women historians before the 1970s little more than passing attention. Neither Annie Heloise Abel nor Angie Debo, important figures in this work, was examined in either volume. Nash mentioned Nebraska historian Mari Sandoz as one who “uncovered the native lore of the Great Plains,” but the trivializing word “lore” downgraded her contribution; she needed to be mentioned, but she was not doing “real” history.<sup>4</sup>

From these two historiographical works one readily concludes that in the first seven decades of the twentieth century no female historian contributed important ideas to the historical debates concerning the American West.

R. David Edmunds's 1995 bibliographic essay on American Indian history for the centennial of the *American Historical Review* treated women scholars more fairly and presents quite an extensive list of prolific and influential contemporary women scholars. Edmunds referred to Angie Debo, Mari Sandoz, and Mary Young as contributors to the field before 1960 but failed to note Annie Heloise Abel.<sup>5</sup> Again, one is left believing that women added little to historical understanding and interpretation in the early decades of the twentieth century. Or, if women were writing, which they were, male scholars were ignoring their work, as frivolous, quaint, or unimportant.

This marginalization of women as both subjects and scholars continued well into the twentieth century. Historians of the West, following in Frederick Jackson Turner's footsteps, chose topics and themes that celebrated a male saga of conquest, expansion, and extraction of the region's resources.<sup>6</sup> Popular textbooks by Frederic Paxson, Ray Allen Billington, and Thomas D. Clark narrated the progression of male traders, trappers, soldiers, miners, cowboys, and farmers moving into "open uninhabited wilderness" or "free land" beyond Euro-American settlement. Here, according to Turner's 1893 essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," older institutions, originating in Europe, broke down and were rebuilt in a uniquely American fashion on every new frontier.

The existence of an expanse of "free land" set the United States apart from other nations, Turner and his followers maintained, and provided the context within which democracy and individualism emerged as predominant American traits and cultural values.<sup>7</sup> As for the Native peoples who lived on the "free land," the Turnerians saw them as expendable, evolutionarily backward barriers to settlement. By 1900 these historians considered American Indians properly corralled and isolated on reservations where they were being taught "to walk the white's man's road," that is, were in the process of being assimilated into the larger society.<sup>8</sup> Either way, Turnerians viewed American Indi-

ans as “disappearing” people, historically unimportant except as a foil to glorify American militaristic and technological supremacy.

Nineteenth-century anthropologists who were unilinear evolutionists reinforced Turnerian historians. These anthropologists also assumed that American Indians would disappear in the onslaught of an invincible, advancing, and “enlightened American civilization.” Indians, by definition “savages” and “barbarians” or people living in “lower stages of civilization,” would automatically advance once they met enlightened civilization.<sup>9</sup> However, these anthropologists differed from historians in an important way. They saw American Indians not as obstinate barriers to civilization’s expansion but as groups of people who deserved study in their own right.

Anthropology departed from history in another sense. The discipline’s founders—that is, first-generation anthropologists intent on professionalizing their discipline—inverted history’s invisibility of women as both subjects and researchers. This occurred because a few prominent individuals understood that if anthropology was to gain a complete understanding of Indian cultures, it needed women to gain access to “women’s spheres.” American Indian women were not meekly answering male researchers’ questions; most women actively ignored the field-workers. Unfortunately, most early male anthropologists (generally self-trained army officers and physicians, naturalists, and geologists) felt uncomfortable questioning women and avoided them. Many perceived them as unimportant background figures who cooked the food. Others saw them as individuals who knew nothing about the topics scholars were interested in—that is, religion, politics, and warfare. Many Native peoples, moreover, thought it inappropriate for Euro-American men to question women, or believed that men should not talk about matters belonging to the realm of women, or their responsibilities involving female powers and spiritual knowledge.

If foundational anthropologists had continued to base their choice of field respondents on Victorian assumptions about women and their cultural roles, ignoring what they saw with their own eyes, anthropological studies of the American West would have quickly become a sterile undertaking with no real cross-cultural understanding. But, as the foremost British anthropologist of his day, Edward B. Tylor of

Oxford University, remarked in addressing the Anthropological Society of Washington in 1884 after having visited the Bureau of Ethnology-sponsored research team of James and Matilda Coxe Stevenson at Zuni, "One thing I particularly noticed was this, that to get at the confidence of a tribe, the man of the house, though he can do a great deal, cannot do it all. If his wife sympathizes with his work, and is able to do it," he added, "really half the work of investigation seems to me to fall to her, so much is to be learned through the women of the tribe, which the men will not readily disclose." Tylor further warned the new profession not to exclude women, nor to "warn the ladies off from their proceedings, but rather to avail themselves thankfully of their help."<sup>10</sup>

Anthropology needed women, but their help was still seen as ancillary. The men shaping the new discipline in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, like those in other budding sciences, commonly viewed women as poor material for conducting scientific research. Hence men, with their purportedly more "objective," "rational" natures, would control theory and grand syntheses, while women, with their supposedly "subjective," "irrational," and "emotional" natures, would conduct interviews and collect the necessary observational and material culture data for them. In other words, women would serve as men's helpmates and research assistants.<sup>11</sup>

But scholars like Alice Fletcher, Matilda Stevenson, Sara Yorke Stevenson, Zelia Nuttall, Lucy Wilson, Anita McGee, and a host of others would not be ignored, erased, or marginalized. When these strong women realized that they would be excluded from public forums that would validate their scholarly status—publishing outlets, professional association memberships, and presentation venues—they quickly fought back. On June 8, 1885, ten women founded the Women's Anthropological Society of America (WASA) to provide a place for all women "clear in thought, logical in mental processes, exact in expression, and earnest in the search for truth" who would contribute to anthropology and raise the status of women in science.<sup>12</sup>

In November 1898 the WASA members, now forty-nine strong, were invited to join the Anthropological Society of Washington, which became the American Anthropological Association in 1903. The association's flagship journal, the *American Anthropologist*, welcomed their

manuscripts, and immediately after the merger it published Matilda Stevenson's "Zuñi Ancestral Gods and Masks," followed the next year by Alice Fletcher's "A Pawnee Ritual."<sup>13</sup>

Women, however, were not completely successful. As extensively documented in *Hidden Scholars: Women Anthropologists and the Native American Southwest* and a wealth of fine biographies on individual female scholars written over the last twenty years, many women fell by the wayside. Others turned to popularizing rather than trying to penetrate the world of academia, while still others dropped out and moved to the gendered professions of education or librarianship. But many fought for and gained a foothold in anthropology and expanded significantly the existing knowledge about the American West. Unfortunately, most standard histories of anthropology, instead of giving them centrality of place in the main text, have ignored them or condemned them to footnote status as data collectors rather than analysts or synthesizers or theoreticians, or have treated them as anomalies. The women who had to be mentioned (Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict) became exceptional mavericks who could be explained away or treated as charismatic rebels.

Unlike history, there were many studies by women and an unofficial recognition of women's disciplinary spaces and roles. From their places in the discipline's center and on its margins, women experimented with narrative style and humanistic perspectives to gain recognition, even though some forms of tenacious editorial demands, such as the use of the default pronoun "he" before 1980, were battles yet to be won. Still, it was a difficult road to disciplinary acknowledgment. Whatever their achievements, women had to demonstrate time and again that they were as objective and scientific as men. The stereotypes were simply too entrenched.<sup>14</sup>

While American Indian women had gained a firm if circumscribed place in anthropological narratives before the 1960s, they, like all women, were largely ignored as subjects for historical inquiry unless they occupied positions of power when men were unavailable or were related or married to noted men. Since most women were consigned to domestic roles, seen as unworthy of historical examination, they were outside the purview of history, often defined as involving the "impor-

tant” events—those having to do with statecraft, diplomacy, and warfare. Although Turner was among those who broadened the cast of historical characters by including common people as subjects, those he selected were men. As T. A. Larson noted in a 1974 essay and John R. Wunder reiterates in this volume, the only woman Turner mentioned in his famous 1893 essay was “Kit Carson’s mother.” Noteworthy only because of her relationship to her son, she was naturally bounded and labeled by kinship relations and required no individualizing first name.<sup>15</sup>

In this context, the writings of female Euro-American or African American participants in the westward movement received little attention until scholars, influenced by the second-wave feminism beginning in the 1960s, started resurrecting the diaries, journals, and publications pioneer women had written largely from a Euro-American, middle-class, and often agrarian perspective. Annette Kolodny argues in *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience on the American Frontier* (1984) that Euro-American women saw western lands as gardens or future homes rather than a “virginal paradise” for development, as was true of male writers.<sup>16</sup> Brigitte Georgi-Findlay suggests a more complicated legacy. Her 1996 survey of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century writings of women migrating to or working in the West discovered that most women seldom challenged the prevailing stereotypes of themselves as helpmates who brought “civilization” to the West or of Indians as barbarians.<sup>17</sup>

Most nineteenth-century women writers, Georgi-Findlay continues, wrote not as authorities on the West, as did male explorers, traders, or soldiers, but rather as onlookers sharing their travel, domestic, or familial experiences. Many left behind overland trail diaries never intended for publication. A few sought a paying readership, but middle-class women, whom the established ideology of domesticity relegated to the private sphere of the home, had to justify assuming the public role of author. They did so by convincing themselves and their readers that their works were not intended for self-aggrandizement.<sup>18</sup> Rather, they offered a service for other women, especially those interested in family life in regions newly opened to settlement. Often they emphasized their endurance in surviving in less developed areas, where com-

mon goods, services, and a female culture were lacking or minimal. By chronicling their growing self-mastery as they faced difficulties and deprivations, these women conveyed the message that their sacrifices in opening the West were paving the way for future settlement.<sup>19</sup>

Even while sympathizing with the struggles Native peoples waged to retain their homeland, and despite the friendships they sometimes formed with Indian women who occasionally visited their homes, nineteenth-century Euro-American women writers usually considered them “savages.”<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Bacon Custer justified her publications about her life at frontier forts with her husband, George Armstrong Custer, as a way of honoring the sacrifices of soldiers and their families on lonely army posts. Subtly but unmistakably, she emphasized the “superiority” of Euro-American family life and presented army officers as unfailingly chivalrous toward women because of their roles as wives and mothers.

In her works, Custer invariably depicted Indian family life as demeaning to female members, identified as “squaws” and beasts of burden. This was a propagandistic perspective established through tenacious stereotypical images designed to assuage potential American guilt. Since Victorian Americans judged the level of civilization by the public honor accorded womanhood (whatever the private realities in an Anglo-American system of law that stripped wives of property and voting rights, leaving them vulnerable to domestic violence), Custer’s writings both rationalized and justified Indian removal to isolated and confining reservations. American Indians could escape their fate only if they relinquished their cultures, ceased being Indians, and assimilated into the larger American society, but only on the margins as rural, semi-skilled vocational workers or farmers.<sup>21</sup>

In the nineteenth-century Victorian climate that extended into the next century, some remarkable women saw that the convergence of American Indian and non-Indian populations required justice for Native peoples. These intrepid individuals placed themselves, figuratively speaking, on the other side of advancing settlement and viewed the westward movement as conquest—the subjugation of Native peoples and the taking of their land by force. Moreover, they expressed fear that the act of conquest and colonialism exacted a toll not only on American

Indians but also on the purported ideals of their own country. Seeing value in American Indian societies and culture, especially holistic worldviews that respected environmental stewardship rather than raw exploitation and resource extraction, women scholars struggled to comprehend events from Native points of view.

To varying degrees, these early female rebels (like their male counterparts) anticipated ideas that have since become a part of the New Western history, the New Indian history, ethnohistory, and modern anthropological studies of the West. These women, who included strong Native women activist-orators like Sara Winnemucca Hopkins and reformers such as abolitionist and Indian rights activist Lydia Maria Child and Indian rights activist Helen Hunt Jackson, were not academically trained historians or ethnologists.<sup>22</sup>

But at the time no one was academically trained in anthropology, neither men nor women. One learned by doing, and women made their own opportunities by defying Victorian conventions and becoming tenacious peripatetic travelers and close observers. Their observational fieldwork and documentary research, their writings and activities, cannot be denied. It just takes a close reading and the will to re-acknowledge their accomplishments, to see them in the contexts of their time. As has proven the case when reassessing the work of many scholarly pioneers, the process of remembering and critically assessing knowledge production as a corpus of works produced over a lifetime shows that women scholars were actually the individuals who made many theoretical, methodological, and informational advances for which men later received credit.

### Toward Alternative Narratives of the American West

Before we turn to the pioneering women historians and anthropologists honored in this volume, a discussion of more recent scholarly developments they foreshadowed will contextualize our analyses.<sup>23</sup> The practitioners of the New Western history take issue with Turner and his followers. They see the West primarily as place and view the movement of Euro-Americans into the region as conquest rather than settlement.<sup>24</sup> Equally important, Turner saw the trans-Mississippi West

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