

THEIR OWN FRONTIER

Women Intellectuals Re-Visioning the American West

Edited and with an introduction by Shirley A. Leckie and Nancy J. Parezo

Their Own Frontier

Women in the West

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To Bill — SAL

*For my mother, Georgia,
whose strength and wisdom
guided me on my life's
journey — NJP*

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A multifaceted undertaking such as this volume is indebted to more individuals than we can possibly ever thank. First and foremost, our profound appreciation must go to the women whom we celebrate in this volume for their dedication and scholarship, their activism and insight. It is because of them that we are here today, assessing their contribution to our understanding of the American West and their quests to ensure that Native peoples were not forgotten by the academy or America in general. These committed, intelligent, and determined women have been overlooked or taken for granted, a situation which, we feel, should not continue. Each deserves to be recognized and honored by critical assessments of their scholarship contextualized by their lives and their times. But this volume is also intended to fill larger disciplinary needs. With each essay we have sought to show how two disciplines, history and anthropology, went their own way in 1900 but increasingly with time worked together, learning from the perspectives of the other, experiencing the same growing pains and prejudices as they professionalized. This volume should be seen as an example of the interdisciplinary collaboration that we believe should be the foundation of future scholarship.

Our thanks to Gary Dunham, Director of the University of Nebraska Press, for introducing us and encouraging us to coedit a volume on women intellectuals in the twentieth century and their contribution to the re-visioning of the American West and its Native peoples. For an undertaking of this magnitude we needed imaginative and insightful colleagues to help us. We extend our heartfelt thanks to the nine scholars who answered our call and submitted the essays that have made this volume a reality. Each has added immensely to our own understandings of the women portrayed in this volume, the contexts out of which their work grew, the issues with which they struggled, and the contributions they made to history, anthropology, and the story of indigenous peoples in the American West. We would also like to extend our thanks to the many individuals who helped each contributor complete his or her chapter.

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As all who write scholarly books and articles know, no scholar completes any work without substantial help and feedback from numerous others or without assistance when such is needed. As always, my colleagues in the Department of History at the University of Central Florida listened to my ideas, encouraged me to keep on researching and writing, and proved good friends over the past years. I want to especially thank Richard and Patricia Crepeau, José and Mimi Fernández, Rose Beiler, Carole Gonzalez, Nancy Rauscher, Edith MacDonald, Patricia Farless, and Jonathan Scott Perry. I wish also to thank fellow historian Charles Robinson. As always, I am immeasurably grateful to the interlibrary loan staff at the University of Central Florida, who always managed to locate the books and articles, often long out of print or only available in small and obscure publications, for my research. Special thanks should also go to an individual who passed away. As director of Special Collections at Oklahoma State University, Heather Lloyd provided unfailing and invaluable help in researching my biography of Angie Debo, a work that spawned my interest in the larger question of women historians and the American West and its Native peoples. Finally, in 2006 and 2007 I had the opportunity to teach at Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas, and appreciated the support of history colleagues Everett Dague and Susan Snyder there.

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As always, my children and grandchildren have been a source of

support and pleasure and, above all, laughter and good times. Finally, I am grateful to my husband, Bill Leckie, who is with me now in spirit and who, as a fierce supporter of women intellectuals, wanted me and my coeditor to complete this volume and make certain that the story of these ten women intellectuals and their contribution to new developments in both western history and American Indian history could be recognized at long last.

Shirley A. Leckie

I have long been interested in the professionalization of anthropology, including honoring the men and women whose lives of scholarship have made my own studies possible. In particular, this work is part of my long-term quest to provide a comprehensive survey and critical assessment of the men and women who have contributed to our understanding of the American Southwest and to comprehending the nature of disciplinary professionalization and how its processes have affected the theories and methodologies of the discipline. In this sense, my contributions to this volume are an extension of my previous work with a wealth of other fine scholars that resulted in the books *Daughters of the Desert* and *Hidden Scholars*. In fact, many of the anthropologists honored in this volume were women who I felt had not been honored enough in my earlier work.

I would like to thank again, therefore, the many hundreds of people who have helped with my work, including Sydel Silverman and the late Lita Osmundsen of the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research for funding the interviews and archival retrieval project, the women who were interviewed, the fine scholars who contributed to our joint projects, and the numerous archival and library personnel who helped us amass data over a twenty-five-year period. In addition, I would like to thank new friends and colleagues who have helped me with my tasks for the current volume, such as Karen Underhill, head of Special Collections, Cline Library, Northern Arizona University; Sara Heitshu, reference librarian at the University of Arizona; and old friends like Don and Kay Fowler, Richard and Nathalie Woodbury, Raymond Thompson, and a host of others who have been adding to my

knowledge for a quarter of a century. In addition, I would like to thank the fine men and women who have begun to write their own assessments of the women who have worked in the American Southwest and who have shared their insights and new readings of their work. I look forward to many more.

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Second, I would like to thank my coeditor, Shirley Leckie, from whom I have learned a great deal about the production of history over time and who keeps introducing me to new women scholars. It has been a delight to work with her. And, of course, I want to thank my husband, Richard Ahlstrom, for always being there and supporting me on my multi-year projects and making my life meaningful.

Nancy J. Parezo

Their Own Frontier

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.”¹

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.”² Indian women were portrayed as beasts of burden, downtrodden “squaws,” or princesses, and Hispanas or Mexicanas as “fiery señoritas.”³

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.⁴

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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹ 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