9 WOMEN WHO CHANGED ANTHROPOLOGY

Alice Cunningham Fletcher, 1838-1923

Born into an elite family but enduring a "tough fight for life" early on, Alice Fletcher had grown into an active feminist and suffragist by the 1870s. Through her archaeology training (informal because gender) and work, Fletcher became acquainted with American Indians, eventually living with the Omaha people for a while. Combining her advocacy work and interest in Native American cultures, Fletcher made the now-controversial move to push for allotment, or the breaking up of tribal lands into individual plots. She argued that collective land owning blocked Native Americans' progress and civilization (patronizing) and kept white people from respecting native peoples' rights to the land (slightly more valid).

When she wasn't busy advocating for a terrible land-ownership policy, she did work to preserve aspects of the cultures she was observing. Together with music scholar John Comfort Fillmore, Fletcher collected the music of the Omaha, writing it down in standard musical notation rather than recording it (she didn't trust the ol' cylinder phonograph). As one of the country's first women anthropologists, she served as Vice President of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and President of the American Folklore Association, in addition to helping launch the American Anthropological Association.

Elsie Clews Parsons, 1875-1941

Elsie Clews Parsons was another high-society anthropologist and congressman's wife, but, thankfully, she didn't advocate for any policies that might take land away from American Indians. Instead, against her mother's wishes, she graduated from Barnard in 1896 and earned a doctorate in education from Columbia in 1899. Seven years later, this rabble-rouser published a "radical" book advocating for straightforward sex ed and discussions of premarital sex and "trial marriages." In 1912, Parsons penned an ethnographic investigation of New York's upper-crust women and their sex roles, called "The Old-Fashioned Woman." In it, she asserted that "woman" itself was an outdated category kept alive by equally outdated rituals.

For the next several years, she traveled, studied, stirred up adventure -- and wound up shaping the field of anthropology. She wrote articles about cultures of Arizona and New Mexico, collected folklore in the Caribbean, funded students' research, took and discarded lovers, and loudly opposed restrictions on men and women working together. Buds with famed anthropologist Franz Boas, Parsons taught Ruth Benedict and was a predecessor of the supremely influential Margaret Mead, so it makes sense that she was concerned with gender roles and society's effect on people. She focused heavily, too, on American Indian culture. In 1939, she published "Pueblo Indian Religion," a two-volume work comprising a vast amount of research. She was the first woman president of the American Anthropological Association, but she died before she could deliver what would've been an amazing inaugural address highlighting anthropology's use as a tool of racism.

Maria Czaplicka, 1884-1921

But she wasn't tied to a life at a desk or behind a lectern. In May 1914, after a few years of working as a writer and an assistant to wealthy women, Czaplicka organized the mostly lady-run Yenisei Expedition to Siberia to conduct fieldwork and study the native cultures. Her meta-analysis of literature on the region, "Aboriginal Siberia: A Study in Social Anthropology," was published before the journey and served as the foundation for her research. She and
her team spent more than a year gathering information about native Siberians’ religious beliefs, photographing them and collecting artifacts for the Pitt River Museum back home in England.

Upon her return to England, she wrote her personal take on her journey, "My Siberian Year," but she never published her fieldwork beyond a few articles. After leaving her post at Oxford in 1919, Czaplicka faced a bleak financial situation. She couldn't secure another academic appointment, nor could she find a scholarship for travel. In 1921, at just 36, Czaplicka took her own life.

**Ruth Benedict, 1887-1948**

Anthropologist/poet Ruth Benedict followed in her mother's footsteps to earn her undergrad degree at Vassar in 1909, but it wasn't until she studied under ol' Elsie Clews Parsons at the New School for Social Research that she was introduced to anthropology. Thanks to the influence of Parsons and Alexander Goldenweiser, Benedict studied under Franz Boas at Columbia, earning her PhD in 1923. Her thesis zeroed in on North American Indian cultures.

Benedict brought a fresh perspective to the field. She viewed the cultures she studied as the sum of many elements, including intellectual, religious and aesthetic. The prolific and curious writer studied folklore, examined how the personality of a culture defines its members (culture is "personality writ large") and rejected racist theories that propagated inequality. Continuing her focus on American Indians, Benedict studied the Serrano, Zuni, Pima and Apache peoples, in addition to tribes in the Plains region.

While working as Boas's research assistant, Benedict met student Margaret Mead, and the two formed a bond that would last a lifetime. Despite her aversion to public speaking, the fascinating and brilliant Benedict would go on to work as a lecturer at Columbia, earning a full professorship shortly before her death.

**Zora Neale Hurston, 1891-1960**

Perhaps most widely known as a deeply talented Harlem Renaissance writer, Zora Neale Hurston also trained under Franz Boas as an anthropologist. Studying at Barnard in the 1920s, she was the only black student at the school, and in 1928, she became the first to graduate. When she pursued a graduate degree at Columbia, Boas encouraged her interest in African-American folklore. It was this research that informed her fiction, particularly her use of dialect and "folk speech" in works like "Their Eyes Were Watching God." Hurston grew up in the town of Eatonville, Florida, an all-black community established in the wake of the Civil War, and she returned home to chronicle the folklore, sermons and music she'd grown up hearing.

She didn't stay stateside, however. In addition to her work in the Southeast, Hurston traveled to the Caribbean to study voodoo practices. Her major 1935 anthropological work "Mules and Men" was the first collection of black folklore by an African-American, male or female, and "Tell My Horse" captured her experiences in Jamaica and Haiti. She also pioneered anthropological theories and methods through her study of the African diaspora, tracing cultural links between black people in Africa and those in Europe and the Americas.

**Margaret Mead, 1901-1978**

She built upon the work of her predecessors, particularly Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict and Elsie Clews Parsons, but Margaret Mead's influence cannot be overstated. Her research into Polynesian cultures -- among other things, uncovering a more relaxed approach to premarital sex -- helped jump start America's sexual revolution and second-wave feminism. Lest you think her sole focus was sex and gender, allow us to fill you in: This woman was also well-versed in education, personality, nutrition, mental health (and so much more) as they applied to culture and relationships.
Born to progressive Quaker parents and educated primarily by her grandmother, Mead was encouraged from a young age to not only observe the world around her, but also to take detailed, extensive notes. By the time the curious student was at Barnard and taking a class under Boas (she'd later get her master's and PhD at Columbia under him), there was no stopping her; she was born to be an anthropologist.

In "Sex & Temperament," she explored the roles of nature and nurture among cultures in Papua New Guinea and asserted that, yes, sex and gender are two different forces. In "Coming of Age in Samoa," her first and arguably most important work, she pointed to relaxed attitudes toward sexual exploration and sex/gender roles as playing a beneficial role in adolescent girls' development.

Through it all -- a career of travel and discovery, three marriages and endless controversy -- she maintained a lifelong romance with her teacher, friend and mentor Ruth Benedict. *You can read their love letters*, but be forewarned: You might have something in your eye by the end of it.

**Phyllis Kaberry, 1910-1977**

Born in San Francisco and raised in Australia, Phyllis Kaberry was *adventurous from the start*. Her early years spent exploring with her brothers prepared her well for a career as a social anthropologist. After graduating from the University of Sydney, Kaberry wrote her 1934 master's thesis on the aboriginal people of the islands off Australia, including New Guinea, Fiji and the Solomon Islands. She followed that up by spending more than a year conducting field research among the Aborigines in Western Australia, an experience that would shape her most influential work, "Aboriginal Woman: Sacred and Profane," written during her time studying in London with Bronislaw Malinowski. It was a badly needed re-examination (or, you know, viewing-as-human) of native women that strove to portray them as actual human people with actual feelings. Thirty years after its publications, fellow scholars would hail it as the only "pioneering study of the social position of women" in Australia.

Not one to rest on one groundbreaking event, Kaberry went on to receive grant after fellowship after warm invitation to conduct field work and lecture at universities abroad. Some of her happiest days were spent investigating malnutrition among the people of the British Cameroons (now parts of Nigeria and Cameroon), where she became BFFs with the local women, many of whom complained about neighboring tribesmen's cattle ruining their farms. Kaberry apparently helped them drive the interfering bovines from the land, earning her the name "Queen Mother" from the women. Her time in the region inspired her book "Women of the Grassfields," which examined women's social and economic positions, in addition to shining a light on issues of infant mortality and malnutrition.

Oh, and in addition to serving as vice president of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland and joining the University College, London staff, she also had a quick wit and a great sense of humor. She'd get a kick out of relaying her African friends' complaints about the lazy men of their village when chatting with her own male colleagues.

**Mary Leakey, 1913-1996**

A fossil hunter extraordinaire, Mary Leakey was interested in art and archaeology *from the get-go*. Her father (rad dad alert!) took her to see ancient cave paintings in France, in addition to museums where she participated in archaeological digs (Caroline is jealous). When her dad died and her mom moved her back to London, Leakey, sick of Catholic school, started taking university classes in archaeology, prehistory and geology. Three years later, Leakey (nee Nicol) was already a master of flint points and scientific illustration, which worked out perfectly for future husband (and the married-at-the-time) Louis Leakey; he invited her to come to Africa to draw the tools he'd found (smooth).
She didn’t give a hoot about pursuing a formal education, which worked out just fine; over the course of her career, Leakey earned numerous honorary degrees thanks to the incredible work she (and husband Louis) performed (although her son Richard credits his mother for Louis’s success too). In Africa, she discovered *Proconsul africanus* (found an intact skull in 1948), *Zinjanthropus boisei* (aka *Australopithecus boisei* [the discovery of which, in 1959, earned her and Louis funding from the National Geographic Society]), *Homo habilis* (1960) and a fossilized trail of early human footprints stretching 89 feet long (1979).

One thing the trailblazing archaeologist didn’t like? Questions about her sex, which she told a Scientific American reporter had no bearing on her work. "I was never conscious of it," Leakey told her. "I never felt disadvantaged."

**Pearl Primus, 1919-1994**

Pearl Primus was a dancer, choreographer, activist, teacher and lecturer who helped bring African and Caribbean dance to American audiences. But first, she was a scientist. The Trinidadian, who moved with her family to New York at age 2, earned her undergraduate degree in biology and pre-med from Hunter College -- but when no lab jobs would take black applicants, she applied to the National Youth Council, a New Deal agency that installed her in the New Dance Group.

She'd found a passion, even if it meant putting science on hold. Primus quickly became a teacher and performed her own work. She used dance to tell painful stories of African-American lives; performances in 1943 included "Strange Fruit" (about lynching) and "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (depicting the lives of black people along the Mississippi). After touring and founding her own company, Primus received a scholarship to study dance in Africa, married a fellow dancer and became the director of a performing arts center in Liberia. It was a busy time, but in 1978, she earned a PhD in anthropology (*African and Caribbean studies*) from New York University.

Her passions combined. In addition to sharing African-American stories through performance, she drew on her research in the Caribbean and in Nigeria, Ghana, Zaire and Rwanda. Her right brain and left brain both in full effect, she was the perfect candidate to participate in "The Black Tradition in American Dance," a program that sought to preserve and revive black dance.

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