3.10: Feminist Anthropology

**Feminist anthropology** is a four-field approach to anthropology (archaeological, biological, cultural, linguistic) that seeks to reduce male bias in research findings, anthropological hiring practices, and the scholarly production of knowledge.[1] Simultaneously, feminist anthropology challenges essentialist feminist theories developed in Europe and America. While feminists practiced cultural anthropology since its inception as an American discipline? (see Margaret Mead and Hortense Powdermaker), it was not until the 1970s that feminist anthropology was formally recognized as a subdiscipline of anthropology. Since then, it has developed its own subsection of the American Anthropological Association – the Association for Feminist Anthropology – and its own publication, *Voices*.

**History**

Feminist anthropology has unfolded through three historical phases beginning in the 1970s: the anthropology of women, the anthropology of gender, and finally feminist anthropology.[2]

Prior to these historical phases, feminist anthropologists trace their genealogy to the late 19th century.[3] Erminnie Platt Smith, Alice Cunningham Fletcher, Matilda Coxe Stevenson, Frances Densmore—many of these women were self-taught anthropologists and their accomplishments faded and heritage erased by the professionalization of the discipline at the turn of the 20th century.[4] Prominent among early women anthropologists were the wives of ‘professional’ men anthropologists, some of whom facilitated their husbands research as translators and transcriptionists. Margery Wolf, for example, wrote her classic ethnography “The House of Lim” from experiences she encountered following her husband to northern Taiwan during his own fieldwork.[5]

While anthropologists like Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict are canonical representatives of the next stage in the history of feminist anthropology, the true theoretical pioneers of the field were women of color and ethnic women.
anthropologists. Hortense Powdermaker, for example, a contemporary of Mead’s who studied with British anthropological pioneer Bronislaw Malinowski conducted political research projects in a number of then atypical settings: reproduction and women in Melanesia (Powdermaker 1933), race in the American South (Powdermaker 1939), gender and production in Hollywood (1950), and class-gender-race intersectionality in the African Copper Belt (Powdermaker 1962). Similarly, Zora Neale Hurston, a student of Franz Boas, the father of American anthropology, experimented with narrative forms beyond the objective ethnography that characterized the proto/pseudo- scientific writings of the time. Other African American women made similar moves at the junctions of ethnography and creativity, namely Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus, both of whom studied dance in the 1940s. Also important to the later spread of Feminist anthropology within other subfields beyond cultural anthropology was physical anthropologist Caroline Bond Day and archaeologist Mary Leakey.

References


