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Domesticity and the Practice of Anthropology:

Cara David's 'Ethnographic' Collections from the Funafuti Coral Reef Boring Expedition of the Royal Society, 1897

Histories of 'ethnographic' collecting often focus on the transactional relationship between collector and subject, ignoring gender and how it shapes knowledge-making projects. In June 1897, Cara (Caroline) David accompanied her husband Tannatt William Edgeworth David, Professor of geology at the University of Sydney, on the second of three ambitious geological expeditions to the atoll of Funafuti, Tuvalu (formerly the Ellice Islands) in the Pacific Ocean. The primary aim of the Royal Society's Coral Reef Boring Expeditions (1896-98) was to "investigate—by means of boring—the depth and structure of a coral reef."[1] While Cara was on the expedition, she acted in domestic capabilities expected of a wife and enforced by a nineteenth-century separation of 'spheres'. However, she also participated in botanical and ethnographic collecting. By focusing on Cara's actions in the domestic realm and by clarifying the unequal power relationships that facilitated collaboration and storytelling across the frontier, we can reflect on the gendered nature of ethnographic collecting and the development of anthropology in the late nineteenth century.



Caroline David and others of the Funafuti expedition, 1897. Cara is sitting next to her husband, Tannatt William Edgeworth David. Photographer

unknown.

In Funafuti, inasmuch as a framework of "research methodologies, technologies, related literature, knowledge of local languages [and] personal relationships with informants" constructed her 'ethnographic' field, Cara was in a 'field' that was predominantly female and dominated by the domestic.[2] Her collection of artefacts was not detached from her identity as a mother, wife, teacher, suffragist, or her domestic setting. Cara David's diary from the Funafuti Coral Reef Boring Expedition is primarily concerned with the collection of travel artefacts. These 'artefacts' were both immaterial and ephemeral; in the form of recipes, ceremonies and oral traditions, and more permanent; in the form of 'curios', local gifts, herbarium specimens, photographs and of course, her diary and logbooks. Where she collected them was site specific, based mostly around the home or hut, and what she learnt about them occurred in a context of two-way exchange embedded in local trade networks. Unbeknownst to Cara and her male contemporaries, she was what I have termed a 'domestic anthropologist', practicing techniques that in many ways preceded the institutionalisation of 'participant observation' in anthropology in the 1920s.[3]

In *Masters and servants: Cultures of empire in the tropics* (2016), Claire Lowrie argues that the intimate relationships between 'masters' of the colonial home and indigenous 'servants' of domestic service had the potential to affirm, but also destabilize, colonial power hierarchies because they could undermine the strict separation between coloniser and colonised, superior and inferior.[4] Because Cara was the only white female on the island during the period of the expedition, and because she was left to her own devices to maintain a semblance of domestic order, she developed working relationships with a number of Funafutian women, men and children within the intimacies of the 'contact zone' elicited by the domestic service relationship. These relationships were performed and consolidated as transactions

of labour and through local networks of kinship and trade.

This was the departure point of Cara's 'anthropological' collections and insight. Cara's relations with her 'research subjects' were not purely instrumental and abstract and they were not remote. As Angela Woollacott astutely observes in *Gender and Empire* (2006), "[t]he quotidian interactions and power relations of domestic service were a site of intensive cultural learning in both directions, and gave colonisers ample opportunity to observe, instruct, criticize and ridicule."[5] This is demonstrated well by one of Cara's most significant collections, recipes. Cara was interested in traditional recipes from an ethnographic perspective, but she was also looking for ways to add fresh local produce to the otherwise monotonous rations of the expedition. She recorded over 20 recipes in detail in her journal, assessing their results to varying degrees of appreciation.

On one day, Tufaina, an older woman and the local healer or *tufuga*, showed her how to make *Puleleti*, a sweet coconut toffee. Tufaina had also demonstrated this recipe to zoologist Charles Hedley, who had participated in the first Geological Boring Expedition to Funafuti the year before. Cara's documentation of the cooking method is far more detailed than Hedley's description in *The Atoll of Funafuti*, which is more concerned with overviewing the various ecologies and economics of the "vegetable monarch of the atoll world", coconut palm.[6] Unlike Hedley, Cara gives the recipe context, describing that, "A whole family will sit around assisting at the preparation, flies and piccaninnies swarming, the children to lick the sticks and tongs (both made of palm petiole) whenever they can get a chance, or to grab pieces that fly out of the *kumete* – just like white children in the kitchen."[7] On another occasion, five young children between the ages of 6 and 10 — Pole, Semanua, So-So, Taatava, and Nemei — taught Cara how to cook lolo-bread and lolo-pudding with taro, *ikalaoi* (swamp taro root), flour and *lolo* (coconut cream). Cara recorded the processes in detail, discerning that although the lolo-pudding was "pleasant to the taste" the lolo-bread

was cooked to "a solid, uncompromising slab of misery – one would eat it rather than starve… I ate a piece of the slab for manners because 4 piccaninnies stayed to *kaikai* with me and I wanted to experiment on their digestive capabilities; they didn't seem overjoyed…"[8]

This moment of 'ethnographic' exchange is a fragment of detail from ongoing and complex processes of exchange that constituted the geological expedition. However, it demonstrates powerfully how gender, both of the 'ethnographer' and the 'informant', can shape colonial knowledge making projects. Cara's domestic role, dictated by her gender, and her identification with the imperial civilising mission, facilitated specific moments of exchange with Funafutians based around the home and according to domestic routine. These were moments inaccessible to her scientific male companions, and they produced ephemeral 'ethnographic' information that did not fit neatly into institutionalised frameworks of anthropological understanding.

A letter from Robert Etheridge, curator of the Australian Museum, reveals that in October of 1914 Cara donated 33 'specimens' from her time in the Pacific, including a *tourouma* (lidded box) and two *kumiti* (food bowls) from Funafuti. Cara did not think to donate her diaries or logbooks from the expedition, seeing them as distinctly personal and probably un-scientific and un-anthropological. The Australian Museum's donation letter of thanks is pre-scripted as masculine. Set in a standardised template, but adorned by the flourishing signature of curator Etheridge, a type-written 'C.M. David' sits under a normalised 'Sir'. The museum's failure to acknowledge Cara's correct honorific in their letter of thanks could be dismissed as an administrative error. However, it does represent in many ways the functionality of colonial natural history museum archives and collections in the nineteenth century. Having power over information in the museum required a movement away from the individual to the political realm of bureaucracy. The archival system of the museum, designed to stabilise content by giving it a

classificatory box to sit in and a relational context inside the museum, could not account for the gendered circumstances of an object's accrual or the unequal nature of colonial exchange. Thus, the gendered nature of Cara's Funafuti collection, and the contexts of exchange relevant to it's accrual, were subsumed inside the imperial, masculine frameworks of the colonial natural history museum.

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About the DCNtR Debate #1: It has long been accepted that colonialism had a distinctive epistemic dimension, which was upheld by disciplines such as social anthropology and other knowledge-making projects. Under this colonial episteme, people and human experiences were hierarchically classified according to racial categories and ethnography and ethnographic collecting were key components in these processes. However, the colonial regime did not only rely on race as an organising category, but also on gender. The first debate in the DCNtR Debates series tackles this question with seven contributions from around the world which explore the relationship between the gender of the collector, the gender of those collected from and consequences of these gendered practices of collecting for the epistemic practices of display in today's museums.

Footnotes

[1] Quote from, T.G. Bonney, "Preface," in *The Atoll of Funafuti: Borings into a Coral Reef and the Results* (Royal Society of London: Harrison & Sons, 1904), vii–xiv quoted in; K.A. Rodgers & Carol Cantrell, "Charles Hedley and the 1896 Royal Society Expedition to Funafuti," *Archives of Natural History* 15, no. 3 (1988): 270.

[2] Philip Batty, 'Chapter 1. Assembling the Ethnographic Field: The 1901–02 Expedition of Baldwin Spencer and Francis Gillen', in , Erin L. Hasinoff and Joshua A. Bell, eds., *The Anthropology of Expeditions: Travel, Visualities, Afterlives* (NY, UNITED STATES: Bard Graduate Center, 2015), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/usyd/detail.action?docID=4504089.

[3] Participant observation, advocated for by Bronislaw Malinowski in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), was the foundation of a significant methodological turn in British anthropology in the 1920s. Taking inspiration from the fieldwork of the 1898 Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres Straits, organised by A.C. Haddon, Malinowski advocated for an approach to anthropological fieldwork that was immersive and focused on everyday life. The objective was for the anthropologist to enter the mindset of the people they studied. Thus, participant observation had standardised procedures but was also intensely personal. See, Henrika Kuklick, "Science as Adventure", Erin L. Hasinoff and Joshua A. Bell, eds., *The Anthropology of Expeditions: Travel, Visualities, Afterlives* (NY, UNITED STATES: Bard Graduate Center, 2015), 33–60, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/usyd/detail.action?docID=4504089; Jude Philp, "'Everything As It Used To Be:' Re-Creating Torres Strait Islander History in 1898," *Cambridge Anthropology* 21, no. 1 (1999): 58–78; Martin Thomas and Amanda Harris, *Expeditionary Anthropology: Teamwork, Travel and the "Science of Man"* (New York, NY, UNITED STATES: Berghahn Books, Incorporated, 2018), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/usyd/detail.action?docID=5246999.

[4] Introduction, in, Claire Lowrie, *Domestic Service and Colonial Mastery in the Tropics*, *Masters and Servants* (Manchester University Press), 2, accessed May 4, 2020, http://www.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.7228/manchester/9780719095337.001.0001/upso-9780719095337-chapter-1.

[5] Angela Woollacott, *Gender and Empire*, Gender and History. (Basingstoke [England]□; Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 98.

[6] Charles Hedley, *The Atoll of Funafuti, Ellice Group□: Its Zoology, Botany, Ethnology and General Structure Based on Collections Made by Charles Hedley of the Australian Museum, Sydney*, N.S.W., Memoir / Australian Museum, Sydney□; 3. (Sydney: Published by order of the Trustees, Australian Museum, 1896), 22.

[7] Friday 27 August, Caroline David, "Funafuti Diary" (Manuscript, Canberra, ACT, 1897), Australian National Library.

[8] Saturday 4 September, David.

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