
Transnational Athleticism and Identity in Fanny Bullock Workman's Cycling Narratives

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Abstract

In the late 19th century Fanny Bullock Workman and her husband decided to abandon their home city of Boston, leave their children in the care of somebody else, and travel the world. In doing so, they decided not to simply travel, but to bike across and climb mountains in several countries in Europe, Africa, and Asia. During their foray into the sporting world, Fanny Workman broke many records, fought for women's rights, and was inducted into a number of high profile societies. The couple then authored several travel narratives about their adventures, though most of the bicycling narratives were written primarily by Fanny Workman. In Workman's travel narratives, particularly the ones about her cycling adventures, her American wealth and privilege loom large. Workman cannot make sense of the native populations of the countries she cycles through, often positioning them as the inferior other. In other instances, though, she empathizes with the women she encounters on these cycling trips and speaks of them with compassion. At the same time that Fanny Bullock Workman displays her inconsistent position regarding the 'Other,' she also illustrates her own conflicted feelings about shedding her American identity. Boston newspapers at the time of Workman's adventures frequently claim her as "Boston's own" and make multiple attempts to cement her American identity, but she pushes back against those. Put another way, Workman sneers at non-Americans in many instances, but simultaneously attempts to assume a transnational identity, rather than a strictly American one. My intervention in this conference paper will be to think about the role sport, in this case cycling, plays in Workman's transnational identification, as well as how it facilitates her movement amongst non-Americans. Discussing sport and gender in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries helps us to understand the socio-political landscape during the time period, as well as to see how women use sport to navigate that landscape. Athletic women and their writings are shaped by their political and cultural context and respond to it in ways unique to them. Workman's political and cultural context is unique because of her multiple identifications across borders and the tensions present in her cycling narratives about her perception of others. None of those tensions would have been explored had she not had access to the interior of countries like Spain and India via bicycle. Workman's mobility and wealth allow her access to people and places that would have otherwise been inaccessible. In other words, sport is a means for Workman to access and explore a transnational identity, and all of the complications that accompany that, during a time when women had little mobility.

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