

Weekly Writing Assignment #9: Science and Bias

-- Due in Section, week of 11/08 - 11/10 --

Throughout the course we have tried to be sympathetic towards our sources. Past doctors had strange ideas about disease and therapeutics. Instead of comparing these ideas to modern science, and determining what was right or wrong, I have emphasized understanding where these ideas came from and how they functioned. The readings this week present some particularly challenging examples. Nineteenth century writings about race and gender are full of beliefs and arguments that seem appalling today. It is easy to dismiss the authors as misanthropic bigots. But even the most extremely racist tracts (by our modern standards) were often quite mainstream in their time (e.g. Clarke's book sold very well in the 1870s). This creates a different opportunity for historians: can we understand where these ideas came from, why they were popular, how they functioned, what needs they satisfied?

The goal for this assignment is to try to understand where some of these theories came from. The readings describe the theories of Clarke about women, of government officials and doctors about the Sioux, and of public health officials of blacks in Alabama. In each case, the writers grounded their ideas in mainstream scientific theories. Did the writers reach their conclusions by reasonable application of scientific ideas to available data? Did they fabricate data to fit their pre-existing prejudices? Most people probably operated between these two extremes. Be both careful and creative as you think about these questions. We cannot know exactly what the researchers were thinking, but there is enough specific evidence in their writings for you to make credible guesses.

This assignment is just an initial attempt to answer this question. Keep your answers short (200 words). There are no right or wrong answers. When you mention specific material from the texts or use quotations, provide adequate citations (author, page number).