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Disability, Spirituality, and Settler Colonialism: The Story of Joseph La Flesche's Artificial Leg

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ABSTRACT: This article is a microhistorical examination of a settler medical technology in an Indigenous community: Umoⁿhoⁿ leader Joseph La Flesche's artificial leg, which he wore from the early 1860s until his death in 1888. This case study illustrates how La Flesche's disability and prosthesis were deeply entangled with Euro-American challenges to Umoⁿhoⁿ ways of life, including relational care, land use, and spiritual practices. Although the artificial limb, from a Euro-American perspective, was a medical technology to resolve disability, from the perspective of some Umoⁿhoⁿ the limb represented unwanted changes to their land and culture, changes that also compromised crucial community rituals and engendered new forms of "spiritual disablement." The medical technology's significance cannot be removed from a larger context of settler colonialism and its ableist assessment of Indigenous bodyminds, lands, beliefs, and ways of life.

KEYWORDS: disability technologies, settler colonialism, artificial limbs, Indigenous history, spirituality

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Over the past several decades, a growing historiography has examined intersections of colonialism and health. Colonial histories of specific medical technologies, however, remain relatively rare, and this is particularly true in the context of nineteenth-century American Indigenous communities. How did Indigenous peoples negotiate new medical objects in the midst of settler colonialism's violence and displacement?

This article approaches this question through a microhistorical examination of one settler medical technology in an Indigenous community: Umo^{n}ho^{n} (Omaha) leader Joseph La Flesche's artificial leg, which he wore from the early 1860s until his death in 1888. La Flesche, also known as Iron Eye (I^{n}shta Mo^{n}ze), was and remains a controversial figure in Umo^{n}ho^{n} history, in part because of his attempts to push his community toward assimilation.[1] He became one of his nation's leaders in the mid-nineteenth century, and he was a major player in treaty negotiations that in 1854 assigned the Umo^{n}ho^{n} to a northeastern Nebraska reservation of some 300,000 acres. Only a few years after this transaction, he experienced an amputation under the care of Presbyterian missionaries, and he wore an artificial leg manufactured by a leading East Coast prosthetist.

La Flesche's story certainly intersects with the more familiar history of American artificial limbs. Positioned by manufacturers and commentators as the epitome of modernity, nineteenth-century prostheses promised to restore individuals—and especially men—to productive wholeness. New materials, including rubber and aluminum, as well as novel

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[1] I have deferred to the spelling favored by the Omaha Tribal Historical Research Project. Some sources also translate his name as "Iron Eyes" rather than "Iron Eye."

approaches to limb design and construction seemed to exemplify the best of both modern manufacturing and handcrafted attention to detail, and developments in prosthesis technology featured in leading magazines like *Scientific American* and the *Atlantic.*[2]

Yet this idealized and decidedly metropolitan story does not capture how Indigenous peoples might understand and experience such prostheses. Analysis of La Flesche's artificial limb thus moves beyond this traditional historiography of American disability and prostheses to demonstrate how this medical technology acted as an instrument of settler colonialism. Drawing on correspondence and reports from missionaries and government officials, as well as advertising materials and early Umoⁿhoⁿ ethnographies, this essay documents La Flesche's—and, of course, Euro-Americans'—apparent eagerness to position the artificial leg as an object lesson in the superiority of American ways and the ineluctable changes that would transform Umoⁿhoⁿ life. But La Flesche's leg is also an important corrective to any simplistic attempt to universalize Indigenous attitudes and experiences. Like other forms of Euro-American power, the technology and its attendant meanings also met with Indigenous ambivalence and even resistance, which we can trace through the archive's concerned letters and sometimes sardonic narratives. To some other members of his nation, La Flesche's prosthesis was freighted with a

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[2] See, for example, David D. Yuan, "Disfigurement and Reconstruction in Oliver Wendell Holmes's 'The Human Wheel, Its Spokes and Felloes,'" in *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability*, ed. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 71–88; Erin O'Connor, *Raw Material: Producing Pathology in Victorian Culture* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000); Lisa Herschbach, "Prosthetic Reconstructions: Making the Industry, Re-Making the Body, Modelling the Nation," *Hist. Workshop J.* 44 (Autumn 1997): 22–57; Stephen Mihm, "'A Limb Which Shall Be Presentable in Polite Society': Prosthetic Technologies in the Nineteenth Century," in *Artificial Parts, Practical Lives: Modern Histories of Prosthetics*, ed. Katherine Ott, David Serlin, and Stephen Mihm (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 282–99.

growing set of interrelated concerns and distresses stemming from Euro-American encroachment: the loss of the buffalo, the growing impossibility of traditional practices, and the ways that settlers were attempting to plough under their landscapes and collective ways of life.

Moreover, this article contends that Euro-American ableism permeated settler-colonial perceptions and practices, and it shows how the artificial limb's status as a technology to remedy disability made it a particularly apt synecdoche for the larger Euro-American project of discrimination and disqualification that was so dramatically reshaping Indigenous people's lives. Ableism and disability, to be sure, are unstable categories, but their very ambiguity and flexibility also gave them distinct power in undergirding settler colonialism. In his study of the Philippines, Sony Coráñez Bolton argues for the "analysis of disability and colonialism as a unified ideological structure" and points out that "the discrepancy between colonizer and colonized is one reasonably understood as a difference of imagined capacity—ability requisite for the material conditions of robust political existence, subjectivity, and independence."[3] In the Hawaiian context, Adria Imada similarly notes how "settler colonialism relied on the representation of disability, incapacity, and incompetency in order to socially and legally exclude putatively weak, irrational, deficient Hawaiians . . . in favor of stronger, able-bodied, reasonable, morally and physically superior Euro-American settlers."[4] In emerging sciences like craniology and ethnology, nineteenth-century Euro-Americans formulated interlocking physical, cognitive,

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[3] Sony Coráñez Bolton, *Crip Colony: Mestizaje, US Imperialism, and the Queer Politics of Disability in the Philippines* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2023), 6, 15.
[4] Adria L. Imada, *An Archive of Skin, an Archive of Kin: Disability and Life-Making during Medical Incarceration* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022), 21.

and racial assessments of Indigenous communities that conveniently established a clear hierarchy of presumed ability and thereby justified Euro-American authority and power.[5]

Following Jessica Cowing, Susan Burch has referred to this overlap of ableism and settler-colonial structures of discrimination as "settler ableism," a "self-affirming mechanism," where "ableist rationales reinforce settler aspirations and further actions."[6] Similarly, Coráñez Bolton points out how "disabling discourses . . . rationalize the expansion of territory, influence, and capitalist extraction."[7] He terms this process "colonial ableism" and points to the Progressivist discourse of "benevolent rehabilitation" that relied "on the image of a crip Indian to be rehabilitated by and as a technology of colonial ableism."[8] The example of La Flesche's limb shows that such technology could, in some cases, be quite literal.

In addition to highlighting the prosthesis as a material manifestation of settler ableism or colonial ableism, this essay elaborates these concepts in two ways. First, it demonstrates how these terms can encompass not only ableist assessments of Indigenous bodyminds,[9] but also ableist assessments of Indigenous lands and, by extension, ways of life. Many Euro-Americans

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[5] See Sony Coráñez Bolton, "Manifest Disablement: Cripping the Frontier Thesis of American History," *Crit. Ethnic Stud.* 8, no. 1 (2023); Ellen Samuels, *Fantasies of Identification: Disability, Gender, Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 178.

[6] Susan Burch, *Committed: Remembering Native Kinship in and beyond Institutions* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 10; Jessica Cowing, "Settler States of Ability: Assimilation, Incarceration, and Native Women's Crip Interventions" (Ph.D. diss., William & Mary, 2020).

[7] Sony Coráñez Bolton, "Filipina Supercrip: On the Crip Poetics of Colonial Ablenationalism," in *Crip Genealogies*, ed. Mel Y. Chen, Alison Kafer, Eunjung Kim, and Julie Avril Minich (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2023), 278–96, quotation on 279.

[8] Coráñez Bolton, *Crip Colony* (n. 3), 30, 21.

[9] Margaret Price, "The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain," *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015): 268–84.

distinguished "civilized" people from "savage" in part by how they controlled and profited from the natural environment, and they leveled ableist suspicion at Indigenous territories, like Indigenous bodies, minds, and cultures, because of their supposed nonproductivity. "God has given this earth to those who will subdue and cultivate it," wrote Horace Greeley after a trip west in 1859, eager to take the vast prairie lands from peoples whom he thought of as incapable "children."[10] As a technology designed to obviate disability, the artificial limb could thus also be wielded against the "disabilities" of Indigenous land use and even Indigeneity itself in a way that scholars of Indigenous history—let alone Umoⁿhoⁿ history—have not fully explored. Different members of the Umoⁿhoⁿ nation, as well as Euro-American commentators, used the prosthesis as an argument for what might happen if the Umoⁿhoⁿ should sever their traditionally mobile, communal ways of life and remake themselves and their territory along more static, atomized, and ostensibly productive Euro-American lines. This technology of personal mobility that so impressively enabled Euro-American mannerisms, masculinity, and work could also, ironically, be a technology of *immobility*, symbolizing and promoting the larger settler-colonial project of forcing Indigenous people to give up their customs and settle as family farmers, turning their homelands into homesteads.

Second, following from this attention to the land, the story of La Flesche's limb also demonstrates that histories of settler ableism and the medical technologies that materialized it must include deep attention to spirituality, to meanings *beyond* the material. "The people and the

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[10] Horace Greeley, *An Overland Journey, from New York to San Francisco, in the Summer of 1859* (New York: C.M. Saxton, Barker & Co., 1860), 152, "children" reference on 151; also cited in, e.g., Joan Mark, *A Stranger in Her Native Land: Alice Fletcher and the American Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 108.

land are inseparable," write Umoⁿhoⁿ historians In'aska (Dennis Hastings) and Margery Coffey (Mi'oⁿbathiⁿ), noting how Wa'konda, the life spirit of the universe, animates all motion and thought, and dwells within all forms.[11] As Euro-Americans pressed for a remaking of the Umoⁿhoⁿ relationship with the natural world, they also pressed for a remaking of Umoⁿhoⁿ spirituality. The missionaries who facilitated La Flesche's amputation tied the Umoⁿhoⁿ leader's experience of medical care to religious conversion; at the same time, many Umoⁿhoⁿ associated his amputation and prosthesis with the loss of sacred lifeways and his egregious betrayal of the community's most potent object, their Sacred Pole. In their exploration of the relationship between Indigeneity and disability, Laura Jaffee and Kelsey John argue that "the disablement of the Earth" through settler-colonial land theft and degradation "is inextricable from the disablement of Indigenous' ontology, bodies, and communities," as well as the spirituality that runs through them.[12] Changes to Indigenous lands and lifeways compromised crucial community rituals and led to what we might term "spiritual disablement." Spirituality was the foundation and the essential truth of Umoⁿhoⁿ life, and the prosthesis engaged and complicated it in equal measure, engendering new disabilities even as it ostensibly repaired a physical one.

This article begins with a brief history of the Umoⁿhoⁿ nation and their growing interactions with Euro-American settlers by the mid-nineteenth century. It then turns to examine

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[11] In'aska (Dennis Hastings) and Margery Coffey (Mi'oⁿbathiⁿ), "Grandfather Remembers: Broken Treaties/Stolen Land: The Omaha Land Theft" (Ph.D. diss., Western Institute for Social Research, 2016), 35; Robin Ridington and Dennis Hastings (In'aska), *Blessing for a Long Time: The Sacred Pole of the Omaha Tribe* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 41.

[12] Laura Jaffee and Kelsey John, "Disabling Bodies of/and Land: Reframing Disability Justice in Conversation with Indigenous Theory and Activism," *Disability and the Global South* 5, no. 2 (2018): 1407–29, quotation on 1408.

four key moments in the life of La Flesche, his prosthesis, and his community: his amputation, his acquisition of a modern artificial limb, his appearance in prosthesis advertising materials, and the weeks before his death. Describing the role of stories in Umo^{n}ho^{n} culture, Robin Ridington and In'aska write that "there is no beginning and there is no end, but there is a common center."[13] The varied understandings of La Flesche's amputation and artificial leg that this article presents, emerging from multiple perspectives over some four decades, circle around a common center. While a microhistory can never speak for all experiences, it can testify to the manifold and coexisting ways that people in settler-colonial contexts might make sense of a medical technology's promise and violence, as well as the larger processes of cultural and spiritual change, and the remaking of the land itself. La Flesche and his Euro-American allies used his disability and his prosthesis to promote the causes of assimilation and allotment, but competing Umo^{n}ho^{n} voices insisted instead on their own readings of the body and its interdependencies, and ultimately reclaimed their most important ceremonies.

"Upstream People": The Umo^{n}ho^{n} Nation

La Flesche is often described as the "last head chief" of the Umo^{n}ho^{n}, signaling his position at the brink of immense social change.[14] He was born in 1818 or 1822 to another Joseph La Flesche, a French fur trader, and a woman named Wa-tun-na; she likely belonged to the

[13] Ridington and Hastings, *Blessing for a Long Time* (n. 11), xviii.
[14] For an example of him being called "the last head-chief of the Omaha tribe," see "The Indian Legend of the Rabbit," *Critic* 2, no. 42 (August 12, 1882): 218–19, quotation on 218.

Ponca nation, who shared common ancestry with the Umo^{n}ho^{n} as well as a similar language.[15] From a young age, La Flesche moved between worlds. He accompanied his father on trading trips and spoke fluent French, but he was also close with Umo^{n}ho^{n} leader Big Elk, who adopted him and declared him his successor when his own son could not assume the role.[16] In 1853, La Flesche took over as leader of his clan and was one of the two principal leaders—perhaps even the dominant one—of the nation as a whole. Despite his avowed commitment to the Umo^{n}ho^{n}, he also forged relationships with the Indian Agents and missionaries who increasingly occupied their land and tried to reshape their lives.

The Umo^{n}ho^{n} lifeways these settlers sought to reshape were defined by a cosmology of deep belonging to the Earth and to one another. The name Umo^{n}ho^{n} means "upstream people," likely referring to the community's origins. They trace their roots to the Ohio River Valley, but they migrated westward and then, about five hundred years ago, up the Mississippi River. For several centuries the Umo^{n}ho^{n} then moved around the tangle of rivers in what is now Minnesota, Iowa, South Dakota, and Nebraska before establishing their "Big Village" in the late 1700s not

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[15] For birthdates, see R. H. Barnes, *Two Crows Denies It: A History of Controversy in Omaha Sociology* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 23. Another rendering of his mother's name is Waoowinchtcha; I use the spelling accepted by the Omaha Tribal Historical Research Project. Historians generally agree that she was Ponca (see In'aska and Coffey, "Grandfather Remembers" [n. 11], 770), but Francis La Flesche insisted she was Umo^{n}ho^{n}. See Norma Kidd Green, *Iron Eye's Family: The Children of Joseph La Flesche* (Lincoln: Johnsen, 1969), 2; Alice C. Fletcher and Francis La Flesche, "The Omaha Tribe," in *27th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1905–1906* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1911), 15–672, quotation on 631.

[16] Green, *Iron Eye's Family* (n. 15), 8; Fletcher, "Notes on Joseph La Flesche and Wajapa," notebook, Omaha Field Diaries 1900 file, box 20, MS 4558, Papers of Alice Fletcher and Francis La Flesche, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution; Barnes, *Two Crows* (n. 15), 36–49.

far from the Missouri River near present-day Homer, Nebraska. Their lives were intimately connected to the vast prairie landscape.[17] They grew corn and other foods, but they usually spent only about three months of the year in their permanent villages. They traded up and down the region's waterways, and they went on short trapping and hunting trips in the winter. Their most important activity, however, was the annual buffalo hunt, which occurred every summer. The hunt lasted weeks and ranged over hundreds of miles, and it provided enough meat to sustain the Umo^{n}ho^{n} for months. It was also a sacred event, animated by songs, dances, and prayers. After the hunt, the community offered buffalo meat and grease, mixed with red pigment, to their Sacred Pole, Umo^{n}ho^{n}ti, the Venerable Man, in a holy ceremony of thanksgiving.[18] Umo^{n}ho^{n} scholars have written clearly about the Venerable Man's significance: it was the symbol of unity and survival who provided for and protected the people, and his annual ceremony was a solemn reminder "that each person is both a complete whole and part of the larger whole that makes up the tribe. It reminded them that each living being, like each clan of the *hu'thuga* [camp circle], is part of a circle that makes up the universe."[19]

In this vein of unity and interdependence, Umo^{n}ho^{n} traditions supported the care of those who found themselves in need. The Reverend J. Owen Dorsey, who traveled the Great Plains in the nineteenth century, described how elders who were too old or infirm to participate in the hunt were provided with shelter and dried food in caches. "The Indians were afraid to abandon

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[17] Judith A. Boughter, *Betraying the Omaha Nation, 1790–1916* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 10–11; In'aska and Coffey, "Grandfather Remembers" (n. 11), chap. 3.
[18] I rely heavily here on the work of In'aska (Dennis Hastings), particularly *Blessing for a Long Time*, rather than presume true understanding of Umo^{n}ho^{n} spirituality.
[19] Ridington and Hastings, *Blessing for a Long Time* (n. 11), 139.

(waaⁿ'ça) their aged people," he explained, "lest Wakanda should punish them when they were away from home."[20] Even the Venerable Man, a tall piece of cottonwood, was equipped with an extra, angled branch, which early twentieth-century Umoⁿhoⁿ ethnographer Francis La Flesche (Joseph's son) and his collaborator Alice Fletcher noted was called i'moⁿgthe, a "staff such as old men lean upon."[21]

Yet Umoⁿhoⁿ culture, and the role of disability in it, should not be romanticized; bodily difference could have very different meanings depending on its origins and context. The Umoⁿhoⁿ people had an enduring belief, as Fletcher put it, that "the liberty of the individual must be subordinated to the welfare of the community."[22] For transgressors, this might mean punishment, either human or divine, that resulted in disability. Francis La Flesche wrote of a man who was struck by lightning and rendered blind because of his cruelty to children, for example.[23] Dorsey also documented the case of a man who, at a time when the Umoⁿhoⁿ were nearly starving, scared off a herd of buffalo and was "flogged so unmercifully" that he was left "lame and palsied in one limb."[24] Francis La Flesche and Fletcher told a similar story about overeager hunters who rushed the herd. The man "who led the people to disobey the rites was crippled for life by his horse falling on him," they wrote. "This disaster was regarded as a supernatural

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[20] J. Owen Dorsey, "Omaha Sociology," in *Third Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1881–'82* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1884), 205–370, quotation on 275.
[21] Fletcher and La Flesche, "Omaha Tribe" (n. 15), 224.
[22] Alice C. Fletcher, "A Study of Omaha Indian Music," *Archaeol. Ethnol. Papers Peabody Mus.* 1, no. 5 (1893): 237–87, quotation on 249.
[23] Francis La Flesche, *Ke-ma-ha: The Omaha Stories of Francis La Flesche*, ed. James W. Parins and Daniel F. Littlefield Jr. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 122–23.
[24] Dorsey, "Omaha Sociology" (n. 20), 288–89.

punishment of his irreverent action in interrupting the prescribed order of procedure."[25] Survival on the Plains was a risky balancing act, and violating its laws might carry lasting physical consequences.

This survival was rendered even more precarious by the nineteenth century. Smallpox outbreaks devastated the community in the early decades of the 1800s, and by the 1840s waves of Euro-American migrants strode over Umo^{n}ho^{n} territory en route to California and Oregon, while others eyed Nebraska's fertile lands. After the Sioux burned the Big Village at Omaha Creek in 1845, the Umo^{n}ho^{n} sought protection near the Indian Agency at Bellevue, where they lived in destitution, their population soon dropping to barely a thousand.[26] Presbyterians arrived in the midst of this suffering, establishing their first permanent mission to the nation in 1846.

By the 1850s, Euro-American bureaucrats and businessmen would also come to play a key role in shaping the Umo^{n}ho^{n}'s future. Senator Stephen A. Douglas called the establishment of the Territory of Nebraska "a national necessity" to secure westward expansion and facilitate the construction of a transcontinental railroad. "The tide of emigration and civilization," he declared, "must be permitted to roll onward until it rushes through the passes of the mountains, and spreads over the plains, and mingles with the waters of the Pacific."[27] Indigenous people could no longer simply be moved westward; the country's ambitions required instead that they

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[25] Fletcher and La Flesche, "Omaha Tribe" (n. 15), 281–82.
[26] Boughter, *Betraying the Omaha Nation* (n. 17), 13; David J. Wishart, *An Unspeakable Sadness: The Dispossession of the Nebraska Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 73.
[27] Letter from Stephen A. Douglas to J. H. Crane, D. M. Johnson, and L. J. Eastin, December 17, 1853, published in the *St. Joseph Gazette*, March 15, 1854, in James C. Malin, "The Motives of Stephen A. Douglas in the Organization of Nebraska Territory: A Letter Dated December 17, 1853," *Kansas Hist. Quart.* 19 (1951): 321–53, letter on 350–53, quotation on 352.

be confined, assimilated, or eliminated entirely. To accelerate the creation of the Nebraska Territory, the Indian Appropriation Act of 1853 specifically sought treaties with Indigenous peoples west of the Missouri.[28] In 1854, the Umo^{n}ho^{n} agreed to cede the territory they had known for generations and move to a reservation.[29] The Presbyterians would continue to operate a school, and the government also reserved the right to survey and divide the lands in severalty at a future date, with the idea that the Umo^{n}ho^{n} might eventually be required to live as private farmers with "permanent home[s]" rather than "rove from place to place."[30]

Article 10 of the 1854 treaty was a boilerplate clause that also stipulated that "the Omahas acknowledge their dependence on the government of the United States."[31] For the Umo^{n}ho^{n}, their lives and lands were inextricably entwined and interdependent, bound together and permeated by the spiritual existence of the whole. But settler ableism judged them lacking, seeing only incompetent people, unimproved earth, and depraved ways of life. The United States assumed authority over their lives, lands, and culture on the grounds of their supposed incapacity and inferiority, a process that the treaty reified with the language of "dependency." Euro-

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[28] "An Act Making Appropriation for the Current and Contingent Expenses of the Indian Department . . . ," March 3, 1853, 10 Stat. 238.

[29] Missionary William Hamilton apparently heard that some neighboring Otoe people were told their lands would be taken from them by force if they refused to make a treaty (letter to Walter Lowrie, January 31, 1854, 4, letter 61/62, box 5, vol. 1, American Indian Correspondence, Presbyterian Historical Society Collection of Missionaries' Letters, 1833-1893). The Umo^{n}ho^{n} had also been petitioning the government to buy their lands for over a decade, looking for a way out of their destitution (Wishart, *Unspeakable Sadness* [n. 26], 87).

[30] "Treaty with the Omahas, March 16, 1854," in *The Statutes at Large and Treaties of the United States of America, from December 1, 1815 to March 3, 1855*, ed. George Minot, vol. 10 (Boston: Little, Brown, 1855), 1043–47, quotation on 1045.

[31] Ibid., 1045.

Americans' settler-ableist formulations were predicated on exclusion and elimination, on seeking and finding evidence that Indigenous people and cultures—not to mention the acres they left as open prairie—were incompatible with modernity.

La Flesche was caught in this coil of confinement, and the transcultural position that he had known his whole life would shape his approach to his community's future. Making his living as a trader and convinced that assimilation was the Umo^{n}ho^{n}'s only choice, he drew closer to the Euro-Americans who surrounded them. He likely had some earlier exposure to Catholicism, and although he was not completely committed to Christianity, he translated for the Presbyterian missionaries' religious services, allowed them to preach in his home, and sent his children to their school.[32] He also encouraged the Umo^{n}ho^{n} to give up their formerly mobile lifestyles and commit themselves to farming, fundamentally changing their relationship to the land. As early as 1856, the Indian Agent wrote that the Umo^{n}ho^{n} had gone from a people "roaming here and there throughout the Territory . . . [and now] remained more at home, (except when on their hunts,) and the settler has been free from annoyance."[33] The Presbyterians similarly reported that they might soon "abandon their roving habits."[34] The agents attributed much of this change to La Flesche's "excellent example" and "untiring . . . efforts to advance his people in intellectual

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[32] E.g., Letter from Hamilton to Lowrie, October 14, 1856, 3,letter 27, box 4, vol. 2, American Indian Correspondence.

[33] John B. Robertson, Report No. 28, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs . . . for the Year 1856* (Washington, D.C.: A.O.P. Nicholson, 1857), 103–5, quotation on 103–4.

[34] "Omaha Mission," in *Twenty-Third Annual Report of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (New York: Board of Foreign Missions, 1860), 12–13, quotation on 12.

and industrial pursuits, and to improve their moral and social condition."[35]

But while La Flesche and his allies made up a "Young Men's Party" committed to the supposed advancement of the Umo^{n}ho^{n}, a more conservative faction consistently opposed them. When La Flesche tried to set up a settlement of Euro-American-style frame houses near the mission, many of his fellow Umo^{n}ho^{n}—who preferred earth lodges—derided it as the "village of the 'make-believe' white men."[36] Most damningly, La Flesche also discouraged the sacred and necessary hunting parties, insisting instead that the Umo^{n}ho^{n} should focus on settling down as farmers, although the government's delays in providing annuities and other support stymied his efforts. Charles Sturges, superintendent of the mission school, wrote in 1857 that "the whole tribe with the exception of Lafleshese [*sic*] female household left for the hunting grounds about 3 weeks since. . . . Lafleshe made them promise that if he went they would never ask him again to go—and they also promised never to go again themselves, but stay home + work."[37] La Flesche was evidently wrestling with the responsibilities of being both an Umo^{n}ho^{n} leader and a cultural intermediary: he was still integrated in the hunt and influential in his nation, but his anxiety in the face of Euro-American pressures was clear.

La Flesche's opposition to the hunt was not simply a practical matter for the Umo^{n}ho^{n}. The Sacred Pole, whose ceremonies were intimately tied to the buffalo, was fundamental to the community's unity and way of life. Already tested by sickness, enemy nations, failed crops, and

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[35] O. H. Irish, Report No. 20, *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs . . . for the Year 1861* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1861), 63–5, quotation on 63.
[36] Fletcher and La Flesche, "Omaha Tribe" (n. 15), 633.
[37] Letter from Charles Sturges to Lowrie, March 2, 1857, 2, letter 50, box 4, vol. 2, American Indian Correspondence.

dwindling game, the Venerable Man was struck yet another blow, probably in the fall of 1858 or 1859, when La Flesche refused to support the sacred offering of meat and grease after the hunt. This was unconscionable: the Umo^{n}ho^{n}, Fletcher later explained, believed that "should any one refuse to make this offering to the pole he would be struck by lightning, be wounded in battle, or lose a limb by a splinter running into his foot."[38] The interdependency at the heart of Umo^{n}ho^{n} culture would not countenance such a grave rejection of the community's holiest and most defining symbol of unity, a rejection that also pointed to La Flesche's attempts to remake the Umo^{n}ho^{n}'s relationship with the natural world. He would face the consequences of his decision, and his body would soon be inseparable from his betrayal of the ceremony, and from the creeping force of settler colonialism.

"Laflesch Is Very Sick"

On October 3, 1859, Sturges wrote to Walter Lowrie, the Corresponding Secretary for the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions,

> Laflesche is very sick. Having injured his foot by stepping on a nail + neglecting it. . . . Several physicians + surgeons have been called, and it appears, notwithstanding all the efforts made, that amputation will be necessary to save life. . . . His mind is somewhat interested in the [matter?] of religion and his views in relation to the sovereignty of God. His dealings with his [creatures?], would do credit to many brot up in a Xstian community. You already know him from personal interviews. His peculiar position excites much interest in our little mission family.[39]

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[38] Alice C. Fletcher, "The Sacred Pole of the Omaha Tribe," *Amer. Antiquarian* 17, no. 5 (1895): 257–68, quotation on 264.

[39] Letter from Sturges to Lowrie, October 3, 1859, 2, letter 113, box 4, vol. 2, American Indian Correspondence.

Sturges was trained as a medical doctor, but his interest in La Flesche's condition was less about health than it was about faith. The Umo^{n}ho^{n} man's Christian inclinations seemed to be deepening as he grew more desperately ill. This became even more apparent in Sturges's next letter, written less than three weeks later:

> Laflesche is doing well. His leg was amputated about 12 days since. His mind is much exercised upon the truths of the Gospel. In one of our interviews which are mostly daily he wished me to pray with him. Upon asking him for what specially, he wished me to pray, he replied, "that if God saw fit to take him out of this world, if he was to die, that God would be his friend, and that if he was to get well again that God would help him to live in the good road." In all his sickness he has manifested a spirit of resignation. He says often, ["]that God has afflicted him, that God is good, that he loves God and desires to do what God tells him in his book." Should we look to human means alone, none could be selected better qualified to carry forward the cause of our Blessed Redeemer among this people + a number of other tribes than Joseph Laflesche. His influence is great among them all, and it is our privilege to pray, that God would make use of him, as his chosen vessel, to carry + urge upon the hearts of his benighted race, the good news of the Gospel.[40]

La Flesche had been sick for six weeks before the surgery, and it is unclear whether he first sought Indigenous treatment for his infected foot.[41] But given his history with Euro-American traders and missionaries, it is perhaps unsurprising that he would turn to the Presbyterians for help. This decision, however, had consequences far beyond the loss of a leg. Through his illness, amputation, and recovery, the leader—and his missing limb—became a symbol and a proponent for his people's movement toward Euro-American progress, and Euro-American faith.

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[40] Letter from Sturges to Lowrie, October 21, 1859, 2-3, letter 114, box 4, vol. 2, American Indian Correspondence.

[41] Dorothy Clarke Wilson, *Bright Eyes*: *The Story of Susette La Flesche, an Omaha Indian* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), 45–46, suggests that La Flesche received Indigenous care for his infection, but I do not have archival evidence to confirm this.

This was a familiar formula in missionary discourse. As Esme Cleall explains, medical missionaries "hoped that medical work would ingratiate people to Christianity who were otherwise suspicious of it, expose those to Christian teachings when they were at their most vulnerable, use scientific 'miracles' to awe indigenous people into adopting 'western' ways and provide an 'object lesson' of Christian benevolence that would be welcomed and appreciated."[42] In an echo of the persuasive spiritual power of Jesus's healing miracles, the missionary project was animated by overlap between cure and conversion, in both practical and discursive terms. "Fluidity between body and soul," Cleall notes, "was an important part of missionary thinking; difference would always be read through the body and soul together," and "accepting western medicine . . . made the body a crucial signifier of theological belief."[43] As among the Umoⁿhoⁿ, illness and disability had clear spiritual implications for Christian observers, and La Flesche's dramatic story spread quickly. J. R. Rolph, studying at the seminary at Princeton, celebrated the Indigenous leader's conversion.[44] He wrote about La Flesche in a letter to the mission farmer: "Poor fellow—I hope + pray that he may be saved—his life for the good for the tribe—and his soul for the glory of God among his tribe and his own final salvation at last. If he still lives, tell him I have much sorrow for his sickness and the loss of his foot—and that I hope God will spare his life and that yet he will be a Christian man and teach his children to be so, and as far as he can all the Omaha to become Christians." To Rolph, La Flesche's survival was less valuable for

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[42] Esme Cleall, *Missionary Discourses of Difference: Negotiating Otherness in the British Empire, 1840–1900* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 94.
[43] Ibid., 96
[44] Letter from J. R. Rolph to Lowrie, November 1, 1859, letter 115, box 4, vol. 2, American Indian Correspondence.

its own sake than for that of his people. Tying conversion to ableist assessments of Indigenous land use, he also expressed his desire that the Umo^{n}ho^{n} would finally give up buffalo hunting in favor of farming and raising cattle.[45] La Flesche's body was an injunction to cultural change and the shedding of Indigenous ways of life.

La Flesche had first turned away from the ceremonies of the Venerable Man, and now he was committing to those of the missionaries. As Sturges put it, La Flesche had become a "patient + attentive learner of Divine truth. As the light dawns upon his mind, he appears to feel + appreciate its blessed influences."[46] While missionaries often depicted disability, especially among Indigenous peoples, as an index of heathenism or sin, La Flesche's missing leg would instead be a constant reminder of God's grace and his emerging Christian virtue.[47] It was a testament to having survived a terrible illness, and to the curative power of the mission. Even as his body became disabled, his changed spirituality and drive toward assimilation qualified him for ability, for membership in the Euro-American body politic. While it was fraught with ableism, nineteenth-century Euro-American society accommodated disabled people whose bodies carried the "right" kinds of implications. Disabled Civil War veterans, for example, were granted a kind of "martial citizenship" that entitled them to a space in the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers, if needed; the home also advertised "the modern state in its most

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[45] Letter from Rolph to Mr. and Mrs. [David] Jones, November 5, 1859, Miscellaneous Correspondence file, box 2, RG 2026 AM, La Flesche Family Papers, Nebraska Historical Society Archives.
[46] Letter from Sturges to Lowrie, December 21, 1859, 4, letter 116, box 4, vol. 2, American Indian Correspondence.
[47] Cleall, *Missionary Discourses* (n. 42), 82.

compassionate and nurturing form."[48] For the missionaries, La Flesche's intertwined conversion and amputation signaled the rightness of their ways, and thus afforded him their respect. He would advocate even more intensely for the Umo^{n}ho^{n} to take on a settled life, with more breaking of soil, farming of grain, and raising of cattle in place of the long buffalo drives. The tight grasp of ableism, in which assessments of bodyminds, beliefs, lands, and ways of life twisted and roiled, determined how the missionaries and indeed La Flesche himself would perceive his missing limb and its larger significance.

"The White Man's Medicine"

Despite the missionaries' enthusiasm, La Flesche's amputation had not been a complete success. By early 1861, he was, according to one missionary, "very anxious to go Eastward on account of his leg, which is troubling him very much of late." It had become infected again, and he needed a second surgery. La Flesche planned to head to Washington to advocate for the payment of annuities and other benefits for the Umo^{n}ho^{n}, and while on the East Coast, he also received the operation. Although the journey and the procedure would no doubt be difficult, La Flesche reportedly told the missionary that "all that he desires to live for is to see his people on the road of improvement, their money matters all made straight, and the mission full + in favor."[49] Once

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[48] Patrick J. Kelly, *Creating a National Home: Building the Veterans' Welfare State, 1860–1900* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 2, 8.

[49] Letter from R. J. Burtt to Lowrie, March 22, 1861, 3, letter 93/103, box 4, vol. 1, American Indian Correspondence. The trip probably occurred in 1861 (see Green, *Iron Eye's Family* [n. 15], 28), which also suggests that he received the amputation and limb in New York under Lowrie's guidance. Wilson, however, states that it was in the summer of 1863 (*Bright Eyes* [n. 41], 76). There may have been multiple trips.

again, his missing leg was tightly bound to his wish to see the Umo^{n}ho^{n} into a different future.

In addition to receiving the surgery, La Flesche also acquired a new artificial limb. Prior to this he apparently used an "old-fashioned substitute"—perhaps a simple peg leg made locally.[50] His new limb, however, may have been made by Philadelphia-based manufacturer B. Frank Palmer, one of the most famous prosthetists in the nation. Palmer had filed the first patent for an artificial limb in the United States in 1846, and he had effectively created a new advertising genre, associating prostheses with elegant consumerism, masculine citizenship, and technological advancement. With an amputation below the knee, La Flesche would likely have worn a model made from a light wood like willow, covered in parchment and painted.[51] It would have been articulated at the ankle and toes, with the joints hidden beneath the limb's smooth curves.

La Flesche's choice to purchase the epitome of a modern settler medical technology probably had pragmatic foundations. Business, building construction, farming, and family life kept him active, and articulated artificial limbs promised easy motion, even if they did not always achieve it. Such pragmatism was not unique. In his study of smallpox vaccination in nineteenth-century Indigenous communities, for example, Seth Archer shows how some Native Americans "actively sought vaccine from the nation that had invaded their homelands and was orchestrating their dispossession," rebutting the stereotype of "Indigenous medicine as

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[50] Fannie Reed Giffen, *Oo-Mah-Ha Ta-Wa-Tha (Omaha City), 1854–1898* (Lincoln: Giffen and Tibbles, 1898), 31.
[51] "Artificial Limbs," *New York Daily Times*, March 26, 1855, 1.

determined solely by local culture, policed by tradition and adverse to change."[52] Indigenous people could be astute navigators of medical pluralism,[53] and although La Flesche had a unique position among the Umo^{n}ho^{n}, his interest in acquiring a cutting-edge prosthesis complicates any simple narrative of settler medicine being met exclusively with Indigenous resentment or rejection. In fact, an Indigenous man wearing a settler limb, as this section shows, could signify very different things to different members of the Umo^{n}ho^{n} nation, not to mention to Euro-Americans.

Discerning these multiple significations is a challenge; they were often mediated through Euro-American observers or recorded only after the passage of years. The events that followed La Flesche's return to the reservation emerge through a record nearly four decades later, in a small book about Omaha's history published to coincide with the city's 1898 Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition, which celebrated the triumph of continental empire building and heralded its new, transcontinental phase.[54] Written by Fannie Reed Giffen and illustrated by La Flesche's daughter Susette, the self-published book contained nostalgic biographies of notable Umo^{n}ho^{n} leaders, praising those who had signed the 1854 treaty and converted to Christianity and positioning them as heroes in a kind of inevitable civilizing and modernizing process. La Flesche's biography included a long anecdote about how he had used his amputation and prosthesis to shore up his position in the community. The story apparently came via the

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[52] Seth Archer, "Vaccination, Dispossession, and the Indigenous Interior," *Bull. Hist. Med.* 97, no. 2 (2023): 255–93, quotations on 256, 258.
[53] See David Carey Jr., *Health in the Highlands: Indigenous Healing and Scientific Medicine in Guatemala and Ecuador* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2023).
[54] Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876–1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), chap. 4.

Presbyterian missionary William Hamilton, who never ceased to promote the supposed rightness of his work. Hamilton is certainly an unreliable source, but the story says much about how he, Euro-American readers, and perhaps La Flesche himself might have made sense of the Umo^{n}ho^{n} man's body and used it for their various strategic ends.[55]

The anecdote begins with La Flesche complicating the role of spiritual guide as envisioned by the missionaries. Rather than a purely benevolent leader, he is on a more calculating plane, weaponizing Indigenous beliefs in order to discredit his more conservative rivals. La Flesche, the book notes, "did not believe in Indian superstitions; but he used them to aid him . . . for he thoroughly believed that upon the success of the principles he advocated depended the future existence of his people. He often said to them: 'It is either civilization or extermination.'"

La Flesche had returned from the east with his new artificial leg as well as a large electric battery. Before revealing the items, he reportedly prepared a feast and gathered his nation's elders for a speech. Provocatively, he told them that the power of the Umo^{n}ho^{n} medicine men was "nothing" compared with that of the Euro-Americans. "You cannot resist them; it is useless to try," he declared, then began a demonstration of their technologies. First, La Flesche had the men join hands in a circle and take hold of the battery handles. In his own version of a popular nineteenth-century party game, he turned on the device and watched them contort from the electric current. As the Umo^{n}ho^{n} leaders "recovered their dignity," he stepped out of the room,

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[55] See also Caroline Lieffers, "Imperial Mobilities: Disability, Indigeneity, and the United States West, 1850–1920," in *Global Histories of Disability, 1700–2015: Power, Place and People*, ed. Esme Cleall (London: Routledge, 2023), 110–28, for a more limited analysis of this source.

put on his artificial limb, and returned to astonish them by showing how he could cross his legs, flex his new ankle joint, and walk around the room. At the peak of their confusion and even fear, La Flesche supposedly commanded the men to listen. He calmly explained the inner workings of his two new items, "told them there was no such thing as 'big medicine,' either among the Indians or the whites, and impressed upon them the fact that the whites were not great and powerful because of any magic power, but because they all worked and sent their children to school." The message to the Umo^{n}ho^{n} was clear: work and education along Euro-American lines offered the only path forward.[56]

This story should of course be read with caution. It was told secondhand and nearly forty years after the fact to reinforce a popular myth of La Flesche as a prescient leader who would wisely strive to lead his people into productive assimilation, thus validating Euro-American superiority and the still-expanding American empire. The book, in fact, opened with a preface by the Nebraskan civic leader John L. Webster, who celebrated it as "a souvenir of . . . the wonderful progress made by the white people" and hoped it would also "perpetuate a kindly feeling for the remnant of the Indian people still remaining, and who are slowly struggling upward toward a higher civilization"; it ended with conspicuous support for the American presence in Cuba.[57] But if La Flesche's theatrical event did indeed occur, it suggests that for the Umo^{n}ho^{n} leader, this dramatic new physical reconfiguration was an opportunity for equally dramatic reconfiguration of the Umo^{n}ho^{n} themselves. Among both Euro-Americans and Indigenous peoples, the artificial limb could be a symbol of settler colonialism's inevitable

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[56] Giffen, *Oo-Mah-Ha Ta-Wa-Tha* (n. 50), 31–32.
[57] John L. Webster, preface to *Oo-Mah-Ha Ta-Wa-Tha* (n. 50), i–ii, quotation on ii.

power, a power that would remake bodies, cultures, and landscapes alike. This new science would trump sacred tradition.

The last line of the story about La Flesche's performance, however, testifies to a still more complex history. It hints at his ambivalent place as a community leader and a cultural intermediary, and the coexistence of multiple Indigenous positions and perspectives: "While one or two were converted, the result of the performance was that the opposition chiefs and medicine men hated him worse than ever."[58] La Flesche had tried to leverage Indigenous fears and, to use the book's language, "superstitions," to convince his already beleaguered nation that they had no choice but to assimilate to new "progressive" ways for the sake of survival in a Euro-American future. But there were limits to his new artificial limb's power to impress such profound cultural and spiritual changes, especially as many Umo^{n}ho^{n} may have found it impossible to forget how La Flesche had lost his leg in the first place. Dorsey's ethnographic research in the 1870s explained that "when Joseph La Flèche lost his leg, the old men told the people that this was a punishment which he suffered because he had opposed the greasing of the sacred pole."[59] It may have seemed more than a coincidence, moreover, that La Flesche's injury came from a nail—unknown in the people's traditional earth lodges—and might even have occurred during the construction of the controversial "Village of the 'Make-Believe' White Men." For these members of the nation, the repair of La Flesche's injury was not necessarily a rousing symbol of transformation and progress. Instead, his missing limb was a visible reminder of how, in an act of untold spiritual hurt, he had betrayed the community's most powerful and unifying ceremony,

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[58] Giffen, *Oo-Mah-Ha Ta-Wa-Tha* (n. 50), 32–33.
[59] Dorsey, "Omaha Sociology" (n. 20), 235.

and his glib attempt to elide the bodily consequence of that betrayal with a settler technology may have made matters only worse.

La Flesche's amputation and artificial limb were also a challenge to Umo^{n}ho^{n} customs of relational care. Many Umo^{n}ho^{n} in fact disapproved strongly of Euro-American physicians' eagerness to intervene on the body. Instead, people with special skills treated the sick and injured, often refusing to isolate them or surrender them to treatment by outsiders. Joseph's ethnographer son Francis, for example, made extensive notes on injured Umo^{n}ho^{n} who survived through Indigenous healing, often having to resist interference by Euro-American doctors. One was a boy shot in the face, who lived even though settler doctors pronounced that he would surely die. In another case, an "Indian doctor" stood firm, telling the Euro-American physician that "it may be customary for white doctors to take patients away from each other but no Indian would demean himself by such practice."[60] Umo^{n}ho^{n} families often removed their sick children from school, much to the chagrin of the Presbyterians. In 1861, for example, one missionary wrote to his supervisor about an "apparently dangerous illness of one of our girls. I sent for Dr. Graff (U.S. Agent) to come + see her, which he did + prescribed for her. With care she seemed to promise to do very well; but nothing could prevent her friends, from carrying her away to be treated by their Indian Doctors."[61]

Journalist Thomas Henry Tibbles—who married La Flesche's daughter, Susette—

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[60] "In the fall of 1846 . . ." (untitled document, 1922), 1–2, Omaha—General Papers, La Flesche 1919–1922 n.d. file, box 22, MS 4558.

[61] Burtt to Lowrie, March 22, 1861, 2. The contrast between the two models of care probably became more acute in the 1870s and 1880s. Only half of Indian agencies had doctors in 1875; in 1882 each one generally had a doctor (David S. Jones, *Rationalizing Epidemics: Meanings and Uses of American Indian Mortality since 1600* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004], 146–47).

recounted an 1881 conversation he had with several Umo^{n}ho^{n}, including Joseph La Flesche, about medical care and amputation:

> "If a person is shot in the leg or arm," Kaga Amba [another leader] commented, "the white doctors always want to cut it off. There was Enumaha, who was shot in the arm up here above the elbow. We took out a long piece of the bone. When we reached camp, the white doctor wanted to cut that arm off. When her relatives wouldn't let him, he said she was sure to die. But she didn't die. She's alive and well, and she can cut wood—and yet there's a place in her arm where there's no bone at all."
>
> Each visitor then took his turn in telling a story about how the Indians had healed some desperate wound.[62]

Kaga Amba's comment about the rush to amputate puts La Flesche's theatrics in a different light. Some Umo^{n}ho^{n} may have viewed not only the artificial limb but even the amputation itself as a capitulation to Euro-American beliefs and expertise, yet another betrayal of his people's ways. Far from impressive, La Flesche's performance was simply a reminder of how far their own leader had strayed, and how his own body had now taken on the consequences of the white man's impatience—impatience to resolve the problem of the injured body by violently dismembering it, and impatience to resolve the challenge of national expansion by forcing the Umo^{n}ho^{n}'s so-called progress and spiritual destabilization. The medical technology could not be disentangled from Euro-Americans' claims to medical authority, their dissatisfaction with Indigenous ways of life, and the dangers they posed to Umo^{n}ho^{n} belief and culture.

"The Useful Arts of Civilization and Peace"

The Umo^{n}ho^{n}, however, were not the only audience for La Flesche and his limb. Prosthesis

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[62] Thomas Henry Tibbles, *Buckskin and Blanket Days: Memoirs of a Friend of the Indians* (1905; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1957), 238.

manufacturers and their advertisements made their own sense of this juxtaposition of the Indigenous and the modern, disability and its cure, to demonstrate the rightness of settler ableism. In the mid-1870s, Palmer released his first advertising book in a decade. *Steps* retreaded the well-worn ground of masculine social and occupational wholeness through prosthetic technology. It also emphasized improvements to Palmer's original limb design, improvements that he protected with a new patent in 1873. This updated model was, in Palmer's words, "lighter, stronger, more elastic, and lifelike in its motions," with a new heel cord of leather and silk that would perform more reliably in different weather conditions.[63] New wires helped ensure better synchronization of the toe flexion as well as more distribution of force, and a design with two support points on the bottom of the foot made the leg more stable for walking. The limb also, importantly, included a new, rounded leather "Safety-Socket" with rubber tubing around the rim that allowed the wearer to put more weight on the stump.[64]

Steps was predictably stuffed with glowing descriptions of the appliance as well as hundreds of testimonials. One account, however, stood out from the others: a full page dedicated to Joseph La Flesche (Figure 1). What had been the Scylla and Charybdis of "civilization or extermination" in La Flesche's life were instead presented in the glowing terms of inevitable progress, with the Indigenous man positioned at a safely interesting distance for white observers. "This brave Chief relinquished his power as the ruler of his people, to learn the useful arts of Civilization and Peace," the description opened. "Once in a year he goes on the great hunt with

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[63] B. Frank Palmer, "Improvement in Artificial Legs," U.S. Patent No. 137,711 (April 8, 1873).
[64] "Artificial Limbs," in *United States Centennial Commission, International Exhibition, 1876, Reports and Awards*, vol. 7, ed. Francis A. Walker (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880), 258–74, quotation on 273.

his people, when he assumes some of the costume of a Chief of his tribe." This short introduction, immediately situating La Flesche as a progressive reformer who affirmed the pillars of Euro-American superiority, was followed by a testimonial letter, written by the Reverend Hamilton and dated October 8, 1873. The Umo^{n}ho^{n} leader, Hamilton declared, was faithfully committed to his Palmer limb and needed a new one in order to hunt for "skins for moccasins and robes." The missionaries were again key mediators in La Flesche's experience of Euro-American medicine; his ability to access a new medical technology was closely entwined with his new spiritual loyalties. A second letter from November neatly tied up the story for Palmer's readers. It announced that La Flesche was delighted with the new and improved "Safety-Socket Leg" and would be leaving for the hunt immediately.[65]

[65] B. Frank Palmer, *Steps* (Philadelphia: Palmer, ca. 1874), 42.

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Figure 1. Joseph La Flesche. From B. Frank Palmer, *Steps* (Philadelphia: Palmer, ca. 1874), 42. Courtesy of the National Library of Medicine.

Figure 2. Studio Portrait of Louis Sansouci, No Knife, and Joe La Flesche, 1866. Courtesy of the Nebraska State Historical Society, RG1289.PH.

As depicted in Palmer's promotional book, La Flesche seems literally to have had a foot in each world. While other photographs from the period show him in Euro-American clothes, his artificial leg hidden beneath trousers (Figure 2), the advertisement depicts him in supposedly traditional clothing, appealing to an audience that might wish to imagine Indigeneity at once safely ensconced in an exotic past and assimilated neatly into the modern present. Given La Flesche's focus on farming, the reference to the annual hunt was probably mostly fiction, an evocation of a kind of noble savagery and primitive male strength that may have appealed to artificial limb wearers worried about their compromised masculinity, or to Euro-Americans' emerging cultural anxiety about their own "overcivilization."[66] The winter trip Hamilton was describing could not be compared to the sacred event La Flesche had betrayed some fifteen years earlier. If the aging leader hunted at all, it was to gather small animals, which the Umo^{n}ho^{n} now sought as much for cash as for any greater purpose. In the illustration, La Flesche's clothing lacks any of the typical Umo^{n}ho^{n} decoration, flattened into an anodyne blandness.[67] The prominent nose and slim physique, too, bear little resemblance to the real La Flesche, and he leans awkwardly against a rock, holding an anachronistic spear rather than a potentially threatening gun. He is positioned out of time, safely mythologized; this man was the product of an artist's imagination, made for intrigue and consumption by curious Euro-Americans. His right leg completes the story: barely visible against his uncolored leggings, the prosthesis quietly corrects the problem of the missing leg and interpellates the hunter into modernity's mechanical

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[66] Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
[67] In'aska (Dennis Hastings), personal communication, November 30, 2017.

ideals. Advertising Euro-American superiority as much as the prosthesis itself, Palmer's booklet fashioned a rehabilitated Indian whose modern, mobile body might now "play Indian" through the primeval masculine hunt, even as he guided his people toward civilization and the "settled life."[68]

In contrast to the Umo^{n}ho^{n} understandings of relationality that surrounded La Flesche's missing leg, the artificial limb advertisement depicted his condition as a matter of individual repair, resolved through medical expertise and consumer purchasing. A Euro-American medical technology allowed a supposedly savage man to defer to the exciting offerings of the machine age, invoking the broader ableist and settler-colonial projects. Following disability studies scholars David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, Coráñez Bolton identifies a phenomenon he terms "colonial ablenationalism," where "certain privileged colonized subjects refashion themselves as able-bodied and able-minded," but ultimately leave colonial power and its ableism intact.[69] Indeed, in their desire to conform to colonial norms, they may actually reinforce them. To a Euro-American observer, La Flesche and his artificial leg could be comfortable evidence of settler-colonial ableism's prerogative and capacity to erase the real disabled body and the real Indigenous body alike. To fix the odd body was to prepare a person for civilization's inevitable demands and to demonstrate the rightness of that civilization in the first place.

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[68] See also Lieffers, "Imperial Mobilities" (n. 55), 99. For "playing Indian," see Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998).

[69] Coráñez Bolton, "Filipina Supercrip" (n. 7), 279; David T. Mitchell with Sharon L. Snyder, *The Biopolitics of Disability: Neoliberalism, Ablenationalism, and Peripheral Embodiment* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015).

"The Fear of the Pole Was Strengthened"

In the 1870s and 1880s, radical changes to the Umo^{n}ho^{n}'s environment—and, by extension, their way of life—engendered new spiritual disabilities. They had lost about a third of their reservation lands, having agreed in 1865 to deed them to the relocated Winnebago people. Even more crucially, the last of the Umo^{n}ho^{n}'s great buffalo hunts took place in late fall of 1876, not long after Palmer's advertising book was published. Fletcher wrote that "the bewilderment of the Indian resulting from the destruction of the buffalo will probably never be fully appreciated. His social and religious customs, the outgrowth of centuries, were destroyed almost as with a single blow. The past may have witnessed similar tragedies but of them we have no record."[70] The impacts ranged from quotidian to cosmic, but the greatest loss may have been to the ceremony of the Sacred Pole, which required buffalo meat and grease. In desperation, a few Umo^{n}ho^{n} tried to use beef, hoping that it might restore the lost herds, but they were not successful.[71]

Starting in April 1883, ethnographer Alice Fletcher, along with Francis La Flesche, also oversaw the allotment of the Umo^{n}ho^{n} reservation into private parcels. Every head of family received 160 acres, every unmarried adult 80 acres, and every child 40 acres, all held in trust for twenty-five years. Some land was also reserved for future allotments, while an area in the western part of the reservation was sold.[72] The 1882 act that authorized the Umo^{n}ho^{n} allotment was a prelude to the 1887 Dawes Act, which would institute a similar policy on a national scale.

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[70] Fletcher and La Flesche, "Omaha Tribe" (n. 15), 309.
[71] Fletcher, "Sacred Pole" (n. 38), 261.
[72] "An Act to Provide for the Sale of a Part of the Reservation of the Omaha Tribe of Indians . . . ," August 7, 1882, 22 Stat. 341. While some allotments had already been granted in 1869 and 1870, these were legally shaky and had to be reaffirmed.

The project of allotment was founded on ableist principles, as the progressive civic leaders who promoted it saw it as a solution to troublingly unproductive Indigenous lands and troublingly incompetent Indigenous peoples. In advocating for the Dawes Act in 1885, writer Lyman Abbott, for example, argued that Americans owed Indigenous people the duty that "the strong owe to the weak"; at the same time, Indigenous people did not have the right to "hold forever the land . . . which they were not making fruitful for themselves or others."[73] Francis Leupp, Commissioner of Indian Affairs from 1905 to 1909, viewed this supposed failure to develop the land as a failure of "intelligence, resourcefulness and initiative."[74] Allotment was meant to force fruitfulness onto the land, making Indigenous people into farmers and then opening what acres remained to Euro-American settlers, who were also supposed to act as a further "civilizing" influence.

As allotment remade the landscape, it was also meant to remake its inhabitants, weaning Indigenous people from a communal life that ostensibly fostered "idleness, inefficiency, and dependency," to use the ableist words from one government report.[75] They were to take on a new social arrangement based on individual family economies, conforming to the ideal of the "heteronormative homestead."[76] Showing each Indigenous person the "corners" of his surveyed plot was, Fletcher later commented, "showing him his corners in another sense. These are the

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[73] "Dr. Lyman Abbott's Remarks," in *Proceedings of the Third Annual Meeting of the Lake Mohonk Conference of Friends of the Indian* (Philadelphia: Sherman and Co., 1886), 50–68, quotation on 51–52.
[74] Francis E. Leupp, *The Indian and His Problem* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), 93.
[75] A. M. Scales et al., "Lands in Severalty to Indians," Report to Accompany Bill H.R. 5038, 46th Congress, 2nd Session, House of Representatives Report no. 1576 (May 28, 1880), 2.
[76] Coráñez Bolton, "Manifest Disablement" (n. 5).

corners he must know if he is going to be a man."[77] Steeped in a model of agrarian masculine citizenship, Fletcher expressed her belief that allotment would change both Indigenous community relations and individual Indigenous character, with the ultimate goal of disappearing atavistic Indigeneity altogether. Having responsibility for a private farm, she wrote, was meant to be "the great school of self-government and experience," where "young and old may realize that each one must rise or fall according to his own efforts." As their lands were broken up, Indigenous people would shake the "stagnation of mind and labor caused by barren, profitless acres" and learn that "the past is irretrievably gone, and that the tribe is lost in the State."[78] Unsurprisingly, many Umo^{n}ho^{n} resisted. Fletcher estimated that more than two-thirds originally opposed allotment, but "the work must be done for them, whether they approve or not."[79] Along with her colleagues in Indian Affairs, she placed particular emphasis on making Indigenous people more individualistic and possessive, urging them to give up the "unlimited hospitality which has been religiously inculcated in the tribe for centuries." The ways that their "life and property" were "at the service of kindred" were, she commented, "grave obstacles."[80] The

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[77] Alice C. Fletcher, "Experiences in Allotting Land," in *Proceedings of the Tenth Annual Meeting of the Lake Mohonk Conference of Friends of the Indian, 1892* (Lake Mohonk, N.Y.: Lake Mohonk Conference, 1892), 24–30, quotation on 27.

[78] "Appendix: Extracts from Letter from Alice C. Fletcher," September 1890, in *Proceedings of the Eighth Annual Meeting of the Lake Mohonk Conference of Friends of the Indian, 1890* (Lake Mohonk, N.Y.: Lake Mohonk Conference, 1890), 152.

[79] "Indian Citizenship," in *Second Annual Address to the Public of the Lake Mohonk Conference . . . September 1884* (Philadelphia: Executive Committee of the Indian Rights Association, 1884), 24–26, quotation on 26, also quoted in Joanna C. Scherer and Raymond J. DeMallie, introduction to Alice C. Fletcher, *Life among the Indians: First Fieldwork among the Sioux and Omahas* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 47.

[80] Alice C. Fletcher, "The Allotted Indian's Difficulties," *Outlook*, April 11, 1896, 660–61, quotation on 660.

interdependency that had sustained the people for generations was to be replaced with an unforgiving, ableist mandate to individual labor.

The end of the buffalo and the disruptiveness of allotment resulted in profound spiritual change for the Umo^{n}ho^{n}. In the late 1880s, Susette La Flesche explained that "it is more than ten years since we went on our last hunt. The poles of the holy tent remain. There is no one who remembers the sacred words which were said at the feast preparatory to the start."[81] Believing that their old ways of life would never return, the nation's elders decided in great sadness that when Shu'denazi (Yellow Smoke), the Keeper of the Sacred Pole, died, the Pole would be buried with him.[82] A different future lay ahead. But Fletcher and Francis La Flesche were concerned—not that the Venerable Man would be lost to the community, but rather that it would be lost to researchers. Working on behalf of Harvard University, where they were supported by Peabody Museum director Frederic Putnam, as well as the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of American Ethnology, the two sought to record what they could of Umo^{n}ho^{n} culture. Fletcher firmly believed that Indigenous peoples should be focused on joining the ranks of the civilized; they were too easily distracted to be entrusted with their own history, and they needed to relinquish their sacred objects for scientific study. Francis La Flesche agreed to help, taking up his own version of the cultural brokering that his father had practiced for so many decades.[83] In his case, the work was also an effort to preserve the richness of the Umo^{n}ho^{n} traditions he had known and

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[81] Bright Eyes, "Social Life among the North American Indians," iv, in folder 2, box 3, NMAI.AC.066, Thomas Henry Tibbles Papers, National Museum of the American Indian Archives.
[82] Most of the ceremonies appear to have been discontinued around 1870. See Affidavit from Wa-kamon-ne, August 30, 1900, file "Theft of Sacred Buffalo Hide, 1898–1904," box 5A, MS 4558.
[83] See Ridington and Hastings, *Blessing for a Long Time* (n. 11); Katie Graber, **"**Francis La Flesche and Ethnography: Writing, Power, Critique," *Ethnomusicology* 61, no. 1 (2017): 115–39.

to dispel the prejudiced belief that "the Indian . . . [was] a simple child of nature with mental faculties dwarfed and shriveled," to use the words from one Board of Indian Commissioners' report.[84] Ableism—or the fear of it—was at the heart of their science.

Yellow Smoke had serious misgivings about sharing the Pole and its rituals outside of their appropriate context, so "influences," the two ethnographers wrote, "were brought to bear on the chiefs and their keepers to prevent the carrying out of the plan for burial."[85] Joseph La Flesche was a key go-between. Francis wrote several letters to his colleagues at Harvard indicating his efforts to secure the Pole. "I will ask my father to secure the sacred articles I desire so much to see safe in the Museum. The old people who have these things in charge are so superstitious about them that it will take a great deal of coaxing and work to get their consent to part with the pole and other things," he wrote in 1886. "I do not think it is yet time for the money," he added, suggesting a willingness to buy the item if needed.[86]

Finally, Yellow Smoke acquiesced, and the object was relinquished. But he had misgivings about sharing the story of the Sacred Pole and the details of its rituals with Fletcher and Francis La Flesche. He was finally convinced when, as they later reported, "his former principal chief [Joseph La Flesche] said that he would 'cheerfully accept for himself any penalty that might follow the revealing of these sacred traditions,' an act formerly held to be a

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[84] Ridington and Hastings, *Blessing for a Long Time* (n. 11), 141, quoting Clinton B. Fisk et al., *Twelfth Annual Report of the Board of Indian Commissioners for the Year 1880* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1881), 7.

[85] Fletcher and La Flesche, "Omaha Tribe" (n. 15), 222.

[86] Letter from Francis La Flesche to Frederic Putnam, August 19, 1886, 1–2, file 1886 L-N, box 7, Frederic Ward Putnam Papers (UAV 677.38), Harvard University Archives. In another letter, Fletcher said, "It cost us $45, and it is cheap." Letter from Fletcher to Putnam, September 26, 1888, file 1888 F-K, box 8, Frederic Ward Putnam Papers.

profanation and punishable by the supernatural." In September 1888, the Keeper came to Joseph La Flesche's home to tell the legend of the Pole. To speak these words outside of ceremonial occasions "would have been in old times a sacrilege," wrote Fletcher, but she and Francis, along with Joseph, were there to witness and record them.[87] The Keeper's eyes were downcast as he recited the Pole's traditions in quiet reverence. Fletcher described the conclusion of the process: "It was a memorable day. The harvest was ended, and tall sheafs of wheat cast their shadows over the stubble fields that were once covered with buffalo grass. The past was irrevocably gone. . . . The scene in that little room where sat the four actors in this human drama was solemn, as at the obsequies of a past once so full of human activity and hope."[88] Fletcher resorted to a third-person perspective to convey the moment's gravity, and to imagery of nature—the harvest, the sheaves of wheat—to convey its inevitability. The land, now allotted, had changed. There were no more buffalo to hunt, only cattle in fenced-in fields to slaughter. And the Pole now would supposedly shift from a potent, sacred, living object into a museum piece. Fletcher believed that relinquishing such artifacts "marks a firmness in stepping forth toward an unknown + inevitable future, wherein the Indian must be merged in the American." This commitment, she continued, "indicates a people of more than ordinary gifts of character," and elsewhere she described the Umo^{n}ho^{n} as making an ethnological sacrifice "without historic parallel."[89] The

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[87] Fletcher, "The Legends of the Sacred Pole," 2, in Omaha—General Papers, Fletcher, n.d. file, box 21, MS 4558.
[88] Fletcher and La Flesche, "Omaha Tribe" (n. 15), 224. This section was almost certainly written by Fletcher.
[89] Letter from Fletcher to Putnam, June 6, 1884, 2, file 1884 C-F, box 5, Frederic Ward Putnam Papers; Fletcher, "Sacred Pole" (n. 38), 257.

Umo^{n}ho^{n} proved their ability, it seems, by accepting disablement of a deeper, more essential, spiritual sort, as they lost the ability to carry out the ceremonies that bound them together.

Joseph La Flesche's actions, once again, would not go unnoticed by his people. This moment of Indigenous surrender, which Fletcher saw as a sign of the Umo^{n}ho^{n}'s movement into a modern spiritual and cultural landscape could also, like La Flesche's artificial limb, bear the opposite meaning: "The fear inspired by the Pole was strengthened in its passing away," she acknowledged, "for by a singular coincidence the touch of fatal disease fell upon Joseph La Flesche almost at the close of this interview, which lasted three days, and in a fortnight he lay dead in the very room in which had been revealed the Sacred Legend connected with the Pole." Among the many "still under the influence of the traditions of the tribe . . . the Sanctity of the faith of their fathers had thus been attested afresh."[90] Even more vexingly, Fletcher and Francis La Flesche had not yet recorded all of the ceremonies of the Pole, and Francis would explain the challenge of gathering this last data in a letter to the Peabody:

> The question of securing the full ritual and songs of that sacred article has become a serious and a puzzling one since the death of my father shortly after the passage of that relic out of the tribe. The people are yet in the shades of superstition, and it will be hard to make them believe that my father's death was in no way the result of the taking away of the pole. Father once met with an accident which crippled him for the rest of his life. It happened soon after he refused to regard certain of the ceremonies connected with this very article and the Indians said that it was from his disregard for the sacred pole.[91]

The leader's amputation and conversion some thirty years earlier had set in motion a catastrophic spiritual selling-off, ending in a death that many saw as the culmination of his spiritual betrayal.

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[90] Fletcher and La Flesche, "Omaha Tribe" (n. 15), 224; Fletcher, "Legends of the Sacred Pole" (n. 87), 2.
[91] Letter from Francis La Flesche to Putnam, December 3, 1888, 1–2, in file 1888 F-K, box 8, Frederic Ward Putnam Papers.

Although these final accounts from Fletcher and Francis La Flesche did not explicitly mention his limb, the price that Joseph La Flesche's body had paid for his disregard for his people's spiritual needs had evidently not been forgotten. His artificial leg could never be separated from the broader set of changes—physical, environmental, cultural, and spiritual—that his people had endured.

Conclusion

In the Euro-American plan, artificial limbs, religious conversion, and productive farms were meant to repair perceived shortcomings of physical, spiritual, cultural, and even environmental ability. These forms of discrimination were entwined, creating a context of terrifyingly rapid transformation. The artificial leg's meaning in this cultural space cannot be removed from a larger project of settler colonialism and its ableist assessment of Indigenous bodyminds and lives, its intolerance for relational care, kinship with the land, and sacred rituals. In both material and discursive ways, La Flesche's body and its prosthesis bore settler ableism's idealized promise, and its violence. Settlers and the Umo^{n}ho^{n} alike used and understood the artificial limb self-consciously as a material piece of a larger process to hold Indigenous peoples to new standards of comportment and belief. Their conformity would be judged as evidence of their intelligence, competence, progress, and worth.

La Flesche's and his people's stories carry essential lessons for historians of medicine and colonialism, and these stories are echoed in later nineteenth-century artificial limb advertisers' depictions of Indigenous people. The A. A. Marks catalogue, for example, famously celebrated how the company's artificial legs convinced a Sioux man, Ceca Yamni, of "what the

'White Medicine Men' can do for his people."[92] And not unlike Palmer, the George R. Fuller Company remarked how one of its limbs made a Spokane man "the proudest Indian in the Territory."[93] Indigenous bodies were being repaired by American technology, a curative emblem of the larger settler-colonial project. But La Flesche's story—and its aftermath—also testifies to individuals' interaction, collusion, negotiation, and even resistance in the face of this ideology, and to the sustained power of Umo^{n}ho^{n} beliefs. Many relatives deliberately selected allotments close to one another so that they could continue to live in community. Some simply returned to their old village sites near the river rather than try to break the sod on their new farms.[94] And on the banks and bluffs of the Missouri, contrary to Fletcher's prediction of a slow dying away, sacred traditions persisted; in 1889, the Indian Agent expressed his disdain about the "feasts and dancing" that continued among the Umo^{n}ho^{n}.[95]

The people could be forced onto a reservation. Their landscapes could be reconfigured into allotments. The buffalo could perish. But the sacred could not be made temporal. In 1989, after much Umo^{n}ho^{n} advocacy, the Peabody Museum returned the Venerable Man to the community, among whom it remains immeasurably powerful, bearing witness to the survival of

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[92] Letter from Z. T. Daniel to A. A. Marks, December 19, 1895, in *A Treatise on Artificial Limbs with Rubber Hands and Feet* (New York City: A. A. Marks, 1896), 494–95, quotation on 495.
[93] George R. Fuller, *Illustrated and Descriptive Catalogue of Artificial Legs*, 7th ed. (Rochester, N.Y.: George R. Fuller, 1893), 79. See also Lieffers, "Imperial Mobilities" (n. 55).
[94] Mark J. Swetland, "'Make-Believe White Men' and the Omaha Land Allotments of 1871–1900,'" *Great Plains Res.* 4, no. 2 (1994): 201–36.
[95] Jesse F. Warner, "Report of Omaha and Winnebago Agency," in *Fifty-Eighth Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior, 1889* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1889), 238–40, quotation on 238.

land, culture, and people.[96] Joseph La Flesche's limb, for its part, was probably buried with the elderly man in his grave.

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[96] See Ridington and Hastings, *Blessing for a Long Time* (n. 11) for a detailed analysis.