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Imperial Domesticity: Native American Gender Ideology and Conformity in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

Christina Moehrle

2010 American Studies Senior Seminar
“Savage and Civilized life cannot live
And prosper on the same ground.
One of the two must die.”
–Hiram Price,
October 24, 1881, Annual Report to the Commission of Indian Affairs

This project is informed by the history of Native American removal across Western lands, and the sociological and economic strategies that forced the assimilation of distinct native tribes into a mass, dominant white culture. Considering this assimilation through the imposition of domesticity and European gender ideology, this project aims to explore the political over and undertones of the cult of domesticity, and to analyze how domesticity and domestication were used to construct gender, social, and economic conformity. Post-bellum American politics regarded the women’s experience and domestic ideals as prototypes for national values. The importance of home production for the survival of the society was ingrained in political thought and discourse during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Women were viewed as beacons of morality and virtue that continually guided the men who guided our nation. Without them as arbiters of virtue, men were susceptible to corruption and could potentially run astray. For women, serving as a proper mother and wife was to perform the female civic duty during this

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1 It is necessary to note that throughout this essay, I use the term “Native American” to refer to indigenous, non-European inhabitants of what is now the United States of America. However, it is vital both to the project itself as well as to the dignity of the subjects of this project to acknowledge that this grouping of Native Americans refers to a wide range of indigenous tribes and nations, each with its own history, social composition, politics, and customs. Though not discrediting the validity of each nation’s own identity, I bracket the range of tribes under the title of Native Americans based on the shared experience of Euro-American conquest, land allotment, and removal. Though these experiences were processed in a different way based on the unique characteristics of a tribe or people, the treatment of America’s native indigenous people by the United States government was equally appalling across all tribes and nations. For this reason, I will only differentiate between nations when necessary and appropriate.

2 The cult of domesticity expresses an attitude about the role of the sexes and the social relationship of the sexes that culminates in the belief that the natural sphere of women and women's activities was the home and the family.
time period. Domesticity assigned a specific kind of value to a specific space (a private space), but glorified it at the expense of access to public space and political power. In this way, public and private values were intermingled rather than being dichotomized. As Americans moved westward, this fusion of the public and private sphere found new value and served even greater political and economic motivation.

The famous and inspirational words, “Go West, young Man, and grow up with the country,” have come to characterize the American period of Western Expansionism. These words carry both gender and economic implications. Not only does the author exclude the female gender from the Expansionist discourse, but he also insinuates that the West is there for the taking, thereby simultaneously disregarding Native sentiments. In various contexts, this period altered and solidified the American Identity—putting to the test traditional ideals and practices that had to survive a new terrain; new social, political, and economic institutions; as well as various new nations of neighbors. Despite these changes, one aspect of American life and identity remained salient: the domestic sphere. Through my research, I have discovered that the cult of domesticity not only followed the trails to the West, but it also seemed to gain strength as a tool of conformity and imperialism. In this context, racial, religious, and class normativity manifested itself beyond the confines of traditional home and society, yet used the concept of the home to effectively Americanize the West.

Though research has been conducted on the ways in which Native American gender ideology shifted as a result of Euro-American contact, few scholars have focused on this shift through the lens of domesticity. Through the study of land allotment to Native Americans and the boarding schools constructed specifically for indigenous students, this project will explore domesticity as a tool of imperialism, and in this context compare and contrast the ideas of
“domesticity” and “domestication.” Additionally, this thesis will consider the ways in which American capitalist values defined the home, and in turn, the ways in which the home redefined Native American gender ideology.

**Domesticity Defined**

Domesticity described the America way of living. It can be defined as all that pertains to the home and the private sphere. It emphasizes the value of the individual and his family over the individual and his community. Domesticity functioned as a way to set a standardized norm across America for a familial, political, and economic structure. It clearly defined gender roles, and drew on many European traditions of family life and household composition. It was prescriptive in that it comprised standards of republicanism, capitalism, and gender stratification, and prevented deviation from these standards. Domestication, on the other hand, referred more to the attempt to cultivate among an uncivilized group—or in other words, teach savage people how to live. The difference between these two terms that is essential to this project is the assumption regarding the subject of these two words, domesticity and domestication. In the former, it can be assumed that the subject is a willing participant of the republic, and a consenting member of the free market capitalist economy. The subject also most likely has some previous experience and upbringing in European tradition. The latter subject represents a group of uncivilized people unfamiliar with Euro-American conceptions of private space. These people, in the eyes of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, are unfit and unable to contribute productively to the American social and economic systems.

**Domesticity as a Tool of Conformity**
Domesticity also served to create a carefully constructed, normative white identity in middle-class America. Euro-Americans were given an incentive to participate in the economic system because they were exposed to and enticed by a domestic ideal that served as the essential helpmate of the American Dream. The idea of the home and a private space to provide and care for your family (in itself a civic responsibility) was intrinsic to American social policy in the late nineteenth century. Creating this dream and convincing the American populace to desire it ensured that consumers would fully participate in the free market and perpetuate capitalist ideals. Domesticity provided a link between the social and economic facets of American life. The creation of this white, middle-class dream enabled Americans to view white bourgeois culture as neutral, and the practices of this culture as formative to the American identity. Any deviation from this identity was a deviation from the norm and a failure to adhere to the status quo. The desire to fit neatly into the status quo encouraged Americans to buy private property, adopt domestic structures and norms, and participate in economics and politics in an entirely moderated and prescriptive way. This phenomenon of mass conformity had huge implications in the West when the American government began to attempt to assimilate native tribes into white, Euro-American society. In many ways, the power of the Victorian middle-class home and its domestic commodities in connecting the cult of domesticity to imperial race relations was essential in the domination of Amerindians. Domesticity was an imperial construct used by the white middle class to uphold its power in a diversifying and expansionist nation. In reality, our westward movements were inspired both by Manifest Destiny and Imperial Domesticity.

It is also dominantly the case that these impositions of conformity and normative identities were largely constructed by men. However, many women actually viewed the domestic sphere as an empowering cult. Perhaps then, that although men were promoting the
removal and assimilation of Native Americans, some women (a good number of whom were involved in gender equality, abolitionist, and other progressive affairs) thought of domestication as a means of empowering Native communities. Because Euro-American women were taught to derive their power and self-worth from their domestic roles, they did not consider the imposition of the domestic sphere as a negative construction. Rather, it was a source of female empowerment that could be shared with less civilized communities. Despite this potential sympathy and justification of imposed Euro-American social constructions, the fact remains that Euro-American—Native-American affairs were informed and guided by a cultural superiority in which Euro-Americans held some kind of information they felt was beneficial to Native Americans. Additionally, assuming that the domestic sphere and the cult of domesticity held the potential to empower simultaneously assumes that Native Americans recognized gender differences and/or stratified power along gender lines. These assumptions had no valid basis in reality. Native American gender ideology did not disempower women, and therefore the construction of the domestic sphere presented new dimensions to male-female dynamics and gender ideology. This ethnocentric and arrogant viewpoint characterized race relations and altered gender constructs on the western frontier.

Although Euro-American women spoke out publicly via print about the empowerment of Native women, it is unlikely that the general feminine attitude towards Native Americans and conquest was one of empathy and compassion. For example, in her book, *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains*, Isabella Lucy Bird describes her Native neighbors as “perfect savages, without any aptitude for even aboriginal civilization, and are altogether the most degraded of the ill-fated tribes which are dying out before the white races.”3 Here Bird does indeed distinguish between

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tribes, but nonetheless groups them together as an inferior race to the whites. Her reference to a “lack of aptitude for civilization” refers to the primitive functionality of society in the native communities that she witnessed. Ironically, through their desire to empower, Euro-American women only reinforced the importance and cultural significance of the cult of domesticity.

Not only were Native American domestic practices disparaged by Euro-American frontier people, but also their very presence on American soil was referred to as the “Indian Problem.” What to do with the millions of Native indigenous that occupied land west of the original settlements? The theory and practice of establishing reservations was much contested because sociologists and politicians alike feared a continuation of indigenous culture in America. The reservation would serve as a cultural stronghold and preserver of customs and traditions—many of which defined the antithesis to growing capitalist sentiments. The understanding of capitalism at the time necessitated a full participatory populace that engendered the same norms and values—working towards the same goal, but on individual terms. For many native tribes, economic, social, and political life was centered upon community growth, rather than feeding the monetary desires of the individual. In imperialist and expansionist nineteenth century America, these desires were insatiable, and the Indian problem stood in the way of economic growth and prosperity.

**Domesticity and the Implications of Capitalism**

As previously alluded to, capitalism informs both the domestic sphere and the American identity. How are these three (capitalism, domesticity, and American identity) concepts related? In the discourse of individuality versus community, Lockean theories of private property were an intrinsic part of American values at the time. Lockean language within our Declaration of
Independence exalted private property as the cornerstone of the free market. At a time when industry and big business were becoming a stronghold in the American economy, the vision of the American Dream and the self-made man appeared. Self-made, not community-strengthened, was a key distinction between the quintessential Euro-American and his Native counterpart.

In addition to the social interest the American government had in assimilating Native tribes, politicians of the time were equally, if not more interested in the economic opportunities bursting forth from Indian Territory. The conquest over Native Americans was just as much a result of assumed cultural superiority as it was a desire for expansion of the market and capitalist ideals. The prolific land shared between egalitarian native communities held rich opportunities yet to be exploited for profit. Native Americans were an “inherent part of the landscape to be marveled at, then mapped, contained, possessed, and removed by the expanding nation.”

Additionally, capitalism necessitated a division in society whereby some members profited from the system and some members were subjugated within the system. Members who profit establish a domestic space to dominate. In order to function properly, capitalism and domesticity must coexist. Without a private, home space, capitalism and the free market cannot thrive and cannot induce private investment and incentives. The domestic sphere and the idea of private property are what distinguish capitalist societies from socialist societies. Because these two economic systems cannot coexist, the dominant American capitalist society began to take over communal, quasi-socialist Native societies throughout the period of Western expansion and development. For this reason, individuality and the creation of the private sphere were essential.

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4 Bernardin, Graulich, MacFarlane, and Tonkovich, Trading Gazes, p. 6
5 I attribute this classification of economy to Native American systems hesitantly, reluctant to associate a highly charged word in contemporary discourse to a people who knew nothing of the
The onset of capitalism disrupted egalitarian relations. For example, in the West, the new commercial fur trade devalued women’s labor and undercut values of cooperation, reciprocity, and respect for individual autonomy. In a society where there is equal access to the means of production—land, resources, tools, and skills—individuals enjoy economic independence and egalitarian social relations. As material conditions shift, however, some people are denied access to the means of production. Economic autonomy diminishes, and new social relations based on inequality and hierarchy emerge. Domesticity is a necessary ingredient within the capitalist system, because of the emphasis on private property and the incentive for private entities to invest their funds into the means of production. In Native American nations, the American social and political structure was not recognized, and many communities valued a more socialist system of economic production rather than a capitalist system.

With the fusion of democracy, economics, and home life, “Republican Motherhood” emerged as an political, economic, and social phenomenon. The republican ideology of early America included, albeit reluctantly, a political role for women. As Kerber analyzes, it “provided an apparent integration of domestic and political behavior in a formula that masked political purpose by promise of domestic service.” Asserting political importance to women, even in a relatively unimportant way, promoted republicanism, and in turn, adherence to capitalist norms and values. The Republican Mother was essential to the composition of the domestic sphere. As I alluded to previously, women were virtuous arbiters of morality and the structure around which American society was formed. Though they did not carry much political

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7 Ibid., p. 43
or social weight, their role as the educators of the young men who would eventually lead the
country made them invaluable members of society. Republican Motherhood also ties together in
yet another way the realm of domesticity with the practices associated with capitalism. For
example, as women and mothers spent more time focused on the education and republican
upbringing of their children—especially their sons—they prescribed more heavily to the
capitalist identity to perform other household tasks more quickly and with more ease. As Paul
Gilje states in his essay about the rise of capitalism in the early republic, “as more Americans ate
off plates instead of wood platters, sat on chairs instead of stools, sought the comfort and
illumination of a lantern instead of candles or the fireplace at night, bought ready-to-wear clothes
instead of donning homespun, and purchased any one of hundreds of items that they perceived
would ease their lives, they not only altered their own daily world but contributed to a great
transformation of the American economy.”

The rise of capitalism and the republican identity
was strongly supported within the confines of the home, which shows the crucial role of
domesticity in creating the American identity both within the original thirteen colonies as well as
on the Western frontier.

**Domesticity and the Practice of Allotment**

As an alternative to the reservation system, and as an attempt to form capitalist constructs within
native communities, Congress generated the idea of land allotment. In 1887, the General
Allotment Act—also, and rather ironically, referred to as the Indian Emancipation Act, but better
known as the Dawes Act after its sponsor, Senator Henry Dawes of Massachusetts—was
enacted. Rather than condemning native tribes to isolating reservations, this legislation

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determined that each Native family would receive a plot of land. The Act granted 160 acres to each family head, 80 acres to single persons and orphans over eighteen years, and 40 acres to single persons under eighteen.\(^9\) Citizenship status was conferred upon all allottees whereupon they would become subject to the criminal and civil laws of the state or territory where they resided. After all tribal members had received allotment, all surplus land might be sold to white settlers. The proceeds gained from these sales would be held by the government for the tribe’s “education and civilization.”\(^10\)

White responses to this Act can be deemed ignorant, at best. Alice Fletcher, an Allotment Agent under the Bureau of Indian Affairs, described the benefits of the enactment: “The Indian may now become a free man; free from the thralldom of the tribe; freed from the domination of the reservation system; free to enter into the body of our citizens. This bill may therefore be considered as the Magna Carta of the Indians of our country.”\(^11\) Firstly, it is unclear how the native tribes were not free. Many indigenous cultures rejected the idea of land ownership, and thus each member of the community was free to reign over the land and prosper from joint efforts of cultivation. The idea of property does not inherently equate liberty, nor are they mutually exclusive ideas. Secondly, the Bureau of Indian Affairs—at least through the words of Fletcher—posed allotment as a solution to a problem that it created. The reservation system was not a native construct, nor did native tribes and groups wholly support it. It was a system imposed on the Natives by the whites—later criticized by whites—and subsequently rejected. However, to suggest that American Indians should be grateful for the system of land

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\(^10\) Ibid., p. 62
allotment as an alternative to the reservation system is an absurd interpretation of events and a blatant example of Euro-Americans’ paternalistic attitude toward native populations. In an anonymous letter to the editor of the Cherokee Advocate in 1893, a resident of Oklahoma defined allotment as “a betterment of condition, in a financial way,” and concluded that, “there should not be a full blood within the bounds of the Nation without a comfortable home.” This Oklahoman groups together domesticity and financial betterment in a culturally superior analysis of the value of land and domesticity. Having a “comfortable home” is indicative of security, success, and civilization. Furthermore, Native peoples themselves were not consulted during this period of allotment and attempted assimilation. To view the allotment system as a vehicle by which indigenous peoples could become “free to enter into the body of our citizens,” is an arrogant assumption made on the part of whites that Natives had any desire at all to be immersed in white society. It situates Native culture as not only a deviant from normative white culture, but also as a moral and social failing on the part of Native tribes—each of whom had their own distinct traditions and identities. The allotment system and the attitude it carried generalized all Native practices and ideologies under one category of failure and savagery. The system placed indigenous peoples as both subjects of “domesticity”—whereby they were trained to cultivate home and individuality, as well as “domestication”—whereby they were civilized and freed from savagery.

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Furthermore, it was thought that assimilation of Native Americans could be achieved by “turning Native American hearts and minds to the virtues of Euro-American domesticity.” A cohesive and stable home—upheld by social and gender constructs—was the perfect framework around which to structure newly assimilated Americans. E. Jane Gay, the cook and housekeeper who accompanied Alice Fletcher throughout her time spent with the Nez Perce tribe of Idaho kept a journal of the interactions with the tribe. She also kept a record of photographs, which explicitly frame Native Americans in situations of domestic adaptation. Many of the images show domestic scenes that depict allotment work and its outcome: Fletcher and the surveying party at work at a campsite; towns, schools, Nez Perces posed in cabin doorways, and young Nez Perce girls at play. Fletcher’s matronly body, a central figure in the survey photographs, seems to legitimate allotment as a benevolent, domestic project, while photographs of Nez Perce homes, farms, and families suggest the ease with which the Nez Perces could take on the new roles that the government pressed upon them. Though ostensibly innocent, Gay’s chronicle of allotment invokes non-benevolent, imperialist feelings. The domestic scene pictured below, entitled Reservation Chairs, features an abstract image of three chairs grouped together. The chairs’ grouping whimsically situates the grandiose ideologies of imperialism, evolution, and nationalism in what appear to be the most benign and broken-down of domestic objects.

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14 Ibid., p. 111.
As historian Jane Simonsen points out, the titles that Gay bestowed on these chairs—“Seat of War,” “Survival of the Fittest,” and “Arch of Triumph,”—rely heavily on potent nineteenth century terminologies of power, difference, and hierarchical ordering that were used to legitimate the Dawes Act. Yet as household objects, the chairs evoke domesticity and familial parity. Gay’s ironic equation of domesticity with imperialism intimates that the gendered power structures inherent in Victorian domesticity were crucial to the formation of empire.15 Anne McClintock, who coined the term “imperial domesticity,” stated that imperialism was imagined as “coming into being through domesticity,” a theory well embodied by the practice of land allotment. The practice of allotment was, for the most part, ill received by many American Indians. One testimonial written by Luther Standing Bear, of the Oglala Sioux, lamented the fact

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15 Jane E. Simonsen, Making Home Work, ed. Thadious M. Davis and Linda K. Kerber (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), p. 113
that he and his people were “to be given a piece of land, fenced in like the white man.”

In this sense, domesticity shifted from a form of gender subordination to a pillar of race and class privilege. Domesticity was an imperial construct used by the white middle class to uphold its power in a diversifying and expansionist nation. Creating the illusion of a coherent national identity in this era was a crucial aspect of the work that allotment agents and Indian reformers did. The efforts of writers and reformers to define domesticity as a white, middle-class trait were attempts to assert power over the lives and bodies of those whom they deemed savage, and in this context, lack of home and bad housekeeping became a marker of racial inferiority, which in turn seemed to justify the ongoing imperialism. Despite these attempts, many native hearts and minds remained impermeable to the effects of assimilation.

To focus more on both the intended and actual effects of the period of allotment in American history, many politicians hoped it would serve to produce holistic American citizens out of the native savages and instill in them the values of individualism and economic ambition. Inarguably, acculturation to and assimilation into the dominant white society was the explicit goal of policy and practice. During and after the period of allotment, Native American tribes experienced a shift from a holistic community approach to economics to a competitive and individualistic approach to the free market. An intrinsic value in both the American identity as well as the idea of property is the concept of the home. The idea of the home did not really exist in many American Indian tribes specifically because of the focus on community. However, capitalist values do not sync well within community-based societies, and thus a huge part of “civilizing” and assimilating native peoples was the creation of home. To return to the work

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17 Hough, Walter. *Alice Cunningham Fletcher*. 
published by E. Jane Gay in the field, Gay insinuates that the underlying idea of allotment was
the cult of domesticity.\textsuperscript{18} Giving each Amerindian family their own land was instilling the
capitalist values of property in them and divorcing them from the idea of a shared, communal
economy.

We can see here a huge clash in cultures between what Native gender and economic
ideologies used to be versus what they became after contact with Euro-Americans. In a
community in which everyone equally contributed to the well being of the tribe as a whole, there
was no economic stratification, nor were there stratified gender roles. Many tribes, such as the
Iroquois, functioned on a social system of “complementary yet equal” gender roles. The concept
of home as we know it today did not exist, because to confine women and families to a private
space would have been destructive to the functionality of the community.

\textbf{Domesticity through Education}

Another institution through which domestic ideals shaped the conquest and assimilation of
American Indians were boarding schools. On March 3, 1819, Congress passed an act to provide
education for the purpose of providing against further decline and final extinction of the Indian
tribes. The act authorized appropriations in 1819 of $10,000. By 1842, $214,000 in federal
funds had been directed to missionary organizations maintaining 37 schools, employing 85
teachers and serving 1,283 students. The appropriation was commonly known as the

\textsuperscript{18} E. Jane Gay, \textit{With the Nez Perces: Alice Fletcher in the Field,}
“Civilization Fund.”¹⁹ There has been a great amount of work done on the topic of American Indian boarding schools, but few scholars focus on the way the domestic ideals of Euro-Americans influenced the schooling and assimilation of indigenous youth. Boarding schools instructed students in the industrial and domestic skills appropriate to European-American gender roles.²⁰ Essential to the task of assimilating and domesticating Amerindians was introducing them into a Western philosophical academic tradition. Education at a young age was a perfect method of integrating Native children into mainstream American society and inculcating the morals and values of the American republican identity. Boarding schools were established specifically for the purpose of educating Native populations, and were designed to instill in students a desire to reject their Native roots and to take on the customs and values inherent in the Euro-American identity. The institution was designed to separate children from all that was familiar to them— their families, tribes, languages, traditions, their very identities. Carefully controlled education was the perfect way to ensure that young generations of Native Americans identified more with the impeding culture of the Euro-Americans than with their respective traditional tribal customs and practices. For many students, the boarding school experience was one of sincere hardship and victimization. School administrators cut children’s hair; changed their dress, their diets, and their names; introduced them to unfamiliar conceptions


of space and time; and subjected them to militaristic regimentation and discipline. Educators suppressed tribal languages and cultural practices and sought to replace them with virtues associated with white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture and patriotic citizenship. They instructed students in the industrial and domestic skills appropriate to European American gender roles and taught them manual labor. For many Indian children, this cultural assault led to confusion and alienation, homesickness and resentment. Furthermore, the idea of civilization of Native communities was very much prescriptive. It told philanthropists and Indian rights reformers what Indians must become, and to what end they should be educated. It created a neat box into which Native Americans, in the eyes of Euro-Americans, were destined to fit into.

It can be taken as axiomatic that the majority—if not the whole of—American schools at this time were, as I termed them, “assimilation factories,” in the universal sense of gender identity and norms. Boys and girls were not educated together as their divided coursework reflected the gendered expectations they would carry throughout adulthood. However, the ideals of domesticity were even more heavily stressed and coercive in Native American boarding schools where students were “fresh subjects” in the school of American conformity. Never having been exposed to mainstream American society, and strangers to the American identity, domesticity and domestication were the foregrounding forces in the transformation of Native students into American citizens. For this reason, most boarding schools were run with military-like regime and discipline. The history of the Indian boarding school began in the late nineteenth century after the Arapaho, Cheyenne, Comanche, and Kiowa prisoners who were incarcerated in St. Augustine, Florida became subject to a lieutenant’s newly devised “civilization program.” The Native prisoners were introduced to reading and arithmetic in a classroom setting and

21 Ibid, p. 12
worked part time at odd jobs in St. Augustine.\textsuperscript{22} The militaristic management and treatment of students as prisoners carried through the succeeding Indian boarding school experiment of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this way, students in Indian boarding schools differed greatly from students in white schools, although they were all subject to the forces of domestication. One Navajo man, Tom Torleno, discusses the reaction of his tribe’s chief after Torleno returned from three years at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. The chief said to Torleno’s father, “Your son has lived with the white men. He has been far away from the pueblo. He has not spent time in the kiva\textsuperscript{23} or learned things that Indian boys should learn. He has no hair. He has no blankets. He cannot even speak our language and he has a strange smell. He is not one of us.”\textsuperscript{24} Native students were kept isolated from their families for 3-4 years to break down the ties they had to their communities. Over the course of their time spent at boarding school, they would learn to become individuals within the gender-specific curriculum. In order for them to adopt Eurocentric ideas of domestic and private life, they had to be divorced from the community-based traditions that informed their private behavior. Though some testimonials from Indian students seem to indicate failure, these institutions attempted to create a new kind of home for Natives outside of their reservations. Disassociating the idea of home with the place from which students actually came, and associating home with Eurocentric ideas and practices, sought to instill in Native students a desire for domesticity, as well as forces of domestication.

The boarding school reinforced domestic ideals by adopting a very gendered pedagogy. As Adams describes, “Teaching the Indian boy to till the soil, shove the plane, strike the anvil, 

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\textsuperscript{22} Child, Brenda. \textit{Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families, 1900-1940}, p. 5
\textsuperscript{23} The sacred, ceremonial chamber of the Navajo tribe.
\textsuperscript{24} Nabokov, p. 223.
\end{footnotesize}
drive the peg, and the Indian girl to do the work of the good and skillful housewife.”(22) would encourage the adoption of white middle-class values and the normative American identity. It was common for agricultural skills for boys and domestic skills for girls to be emphasized over academic training. In reality, these were not academic institutions. They were assimilation factories—children would enter breathing the stories of their native ancestors and exit as prescribed products of white, normative culture. Under the pretense of instruction, Native American female students found themselves indoctrinated into white Protestant gender and domestic ideals. Gender assimilation assisted the creation of the Native American domestic worker, trained in Euro-American homemaking and prime for employment in white, middle-class homes.25 Initially, the government included a domestic curriculum for female children in order to decrease operational costs. The early domestic curriculum focused on day-to-day operations, such as dusting furniture or darning socks. As times and curriculum progressed, schools engaged more deeply in gendered cultural assimilation of the female student body, interfusing major academic instruction, vocational training, and private social programs, all while staying true to Victorian domestic ethos.

Additionally, women were typically hired as teachers because the classroom was believed to be another extension of the home. Thus, the classroom became yet another female space. This delineation between male and female, public and private spheres indoctrinated domestic values in students. Republican motherhood and the idea of civic virtue heavily influenced the pedagogy of Indian boarding schools. Native children witnessed for the first time gender

stratification in effect. Along the lines of complementary yet equal gender roles, women were not traditionally confined to a singular, private space because of their gender. Immersed in these new traditions, Native American female students adapted these norms, and worked in fields such as education, childcare, and textile manufacturing.

**Conclusion**

Gender ideology and the economic systems of Euro-American and Native American life were thrown into conflict when contact zones emerged on the Western frontier in the nineteenth century. The domestic sphere, which encapsulated both gender and economic ideologies, perpetuated these ideologies among Euro-Americans, and forcibly imposed them upon Native Americans. Because of the heavy reliance of capitalism on the domestic and private space, it was imperative that in the act of training Native Americans to be a part of the advanced economic system of Eastern America, they construct the home and the values associated with it. The project and process of Americanization encompassed more than the solitary goal of turning savage, indigenous people into white, normative Americans. It also aimed to expand the economy westward and develop the market within both new prolific territory and among new consumers. The growth of the republic demanded that Indians be dispossessed of the land. According to prevailing Lockean theory, only a society built upon the broad foundation of private property could guarantee public morality, political independence, and social stability. The matter was an especially delicate one, for although the divestiture of Indian land was essential to the extension of American ideals, that divestiture must also be ultimately justified by those same ideals.
The practice of allotment allowed for this transformation to occur. American Indians were forcibly transformed from collective members of a community into independent, individual consumers and owners of property. Disbanding the practice of collective contribution and assigning individual land titles would ensure that American Indians would begin to look towards the Euro-American domestic sphere for what home and privatized economy should look like. Although there was an element of sociological benevolence on the part of some Indian Reformers and allotment agents, their intentions were overshadowed by the greedy endeavors of the investors and capital giants of the East. Additionally, the real empowerment of American Indians was never truly considered in a humanistic context. Even Alice Fletcher, who was sent on assignment foremost as a reformer and Indian Rights activist, went about her work in a paternalistic and ethnocentric manner. Assuming that the ways of life of American Indians were inferior to the social structures and systems of Euro-American life, inhibited her ability to see indigenous culture as valuable as it was. I think Anne McClintock appropriately deemed the phenomenon as “Imperial Domesticity,” because through the process of allotment, a seemingly innocent construct such as the home carried various implications of paternalism, cultural superiority, and power differences.

Likewise, the establishment of Indian Boarding schools sought not to improve the education standards for indigenous students, but rather, to impose upon the young and impressionable subjects the values that threatened the very heart of their own culture. By introducing them to domestic norms and practices within boarding school, and ingraining in them gendered power distinctions, the schools effectively propagated the unjust gender ideology of Euro-American culture. To place male and female students into a bifurcated curriculum was to place them into strange and unfamiliar spheres that did not reflect the talents and values they
grew up nurturing. Furthermore, these schools and their gendered curriculum imposed the
Victorian idea of domesticity and gender values in order to make useful the students within the
white Euro-American economy. Making these students prime for employment within white,
middle-class homes also solidified their continued subjectivity and subordination to the white
culture. The domestic institution was crucial to achieving this goal of social and economic
assimilation.

Additionally, forcing so many distinct tribes onto the same land and onto reservations
that featured parallel structures of home and communal life had a very disbanding effect.
Devaluing and generalizing native cultures effectively threatened the indigenous identity of each
tribe. In boarding schools, students who came from completely different backgrounds and
histories were grouped together under the term “savage,” and relegated to a very specific and
very negative identity.

Through imperial domesticity, the wide-open lands of the West were broken down into
cultivated plots of land; the people who inhabited them domesticated into a neat, white box.
Though the assimilation of Native Americans is not a new area of study, the use of the domestic
sphere and Victorian domestic ethos to transform indigenous people of the land into white,
normative people of the home presents a new angle to the study. The domestic sphere as a tool
of assimilation is a concept that can be translated into many periods of United States history,
including our own in the twenty-first century.