

Gender & Colonialism in the American West

Margaret D. Jacobs
University of Nebraska, Lincoln

Presentation for the International Federation for Research in Women's History
Conference

*Women's History Revisited:
Historiographical Reflections on Women and Gender in a Global Contest*
at the 20th International Congress of Historical Sciences

University of New South Wales

8 July 2005

For several decades, the study of women and gender in the American (that is, the U.S.) West has plodded along much like the ubiquitous covered wagons that seem to enthrall so many North Americans. While the field of western American history in general has undergone a thorough revisioning since the 1980s, perhaps most pointedly through the publication of Patricia Nelson Limerick's *Legacy of Conquest*, the majority of research on women and gender in the American West has remained oblivious to such challenges.¹ While many historians of Asian American, Mexican American, and American Indian women have lobbed some sharp arrows at the field, and while a few other historians of women and gender in the West have veered off the trail, the field in general has remained largely impervious to new and significant scholarship that might budge it out of its well-worn rut.²

As I have embarked upon my own journeys into researching the history of women and gender in the North American West, I have learned much through engaging in comparative work on Australia and by drawing upon the work of scholars in the field of gender and colonialism in the English, Dutch, and French empires. Studying women's and gender history in the North American West in a comparative, international context offers an opportunity for recasting this history as part of a larger story of gender and settler colonialism across the globe. The potential

value of such comparative history, is that it may, in the words of George Fredrickson, “jolt historians out of accustomed ways of thinking about their original areas of specialization and enable them to look at the familiar in a new way.”³

A new emphasis on white women as potential agents of colonial control in the North American West may indeed be jolting in a field that has been dominated by chronicling westering white women’s triumphs and tribulations. Such narratives have served to invest colonizing women with a sense of entitlement to western lands and to effaced the ongoing colonial relationships that have permeated the region. Yet jarring as it may be to jettison cherished notions of long-suffering pioneer women, a comparative and transnational focus may move the field in a new and enlivening direction. As the wagon of western women’s history lumbers off its trail, it may find useful the navigational aids developed by scholars of gender and colonialism.

One of these navigational aids, I believe, is the increased focus on the domain of the intimate, what Ann Laura Stoler has called the “intimacies of empire” and Albert Hurtado has dubbed “intimate frontiers.” In recent decades scholars of gender and colonialism have demonstrated that colonialism did not just take place on battlegrounds, within political structures, or on plantations and in factories, but also in the most intimate spaces of private homes, whether the homes of the colonizers or the colonized. Thus the colonial project involved more than taking land and extracting labor from colonized peoples. As Stoler puts it, “Critical colonial studies, or the ‘new imperial history,’ starts from the premise that colonizing bodies and minds was a sustained, systemic, and incomplete political project.”⁴ Applying this deeper and more nuanced understanding of “the intimacies of empire” to the North American West may yield fresh insights

to both fields and build connections between scholarly areas that are too often working in isolation from one another.

There are several fruitful areas of inquiry into these “intimate frontiers” of the North American West that may bring the field into dialogue with historians of gender and colonialism around the globe. For example, we might focus our attention on any one of the following intimate interventions:

- exploring the role of reform organizations, church groups, and the federal government in trying to alter American Indian sexual and marriage practices, housing structures, clothing, foodways, health care, birthing, burial, and the socialization of children;
- examining the design and implementation of a program for removing American Indian children from their families and communities to be taken to institutions;
- looking at the creation of elite colonizing households and their employment of indigenous girls and young women as domestic servants.

In this paper, I would like to briefly examine how a number of these interventions converged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As in many other colonial settings, white women in the United States proved integral to civilization and assimilation programs that were proposed and carried out by missionary groups, reform organizations, and the federal government. All three entities by the late nineteenth century deemed it white women’s proper role to carry out what they called “women’s work for women.” Missionary societies sent white women to convert Indian women and teach them new domestic skills; reform organizations such as the Women’s National Indian Association, founded in 1879, raised money to hire matrons to instill middle-class, white domestic roles among Indian women; and the federal government later adopted a similar field matron program. All three entities also envisioned white women as the proper

teachers of Indian children within mission schools as well as government day and boarding schools. In short, white women were charged with a maternalistic role in reaching Indian women and children on these intimate frontiers.⁵

As missionaries, matrons, and schoolteachers living on Indian reservations but corresponding regularly with one another through journals such as the *Home Mission Monthly* and *The Indian's Friend* (the organ of the WNIA), white women generated a powerful discourse regarding indigenous women, children, and families. Central to this discourse, as it was to other colonial narratives, was the image of the downtrodden Indian woman. In the words of Helen Gibson Stockdell, a missionary for the Trinity Mission at Lemhi Indian Agency in Idaho, Indian women “make slaves of themselves for the men.”⁶ These white women embellished this underlying theme with a representation of sexual and marriage practices among Indian groups as particularly degrading. Helen Tyler Griswold, for example, claimed with alarm that among the Utes, “Polygamy is common The men marry at 18 and the women at from 13 to 16. A Ute squaw who remains unmarried at 20 is a pariah in the tribe, and is well on the way toward being condemned to death as a witch ere she is 40 years old.”⁷ Bound to their own middle-class and racial standards, white women also routinely characterized Indian women as promiscuous and as incompetent housekeepers and unfit mothers. The following passage may give us the flavor of this ubiquitous imagery. Loulie Taylor, described her experiences at Fort Hall Reservation in Idaho:

we had . . . the advantage of seeing just how the Indian lives in his tepee, and what had been the life of these children before coming to the mission.

What a contrast! The smoking fire in the centre of the tepee, and on it the pot of soup stirred by the not over-clean squaw, whose black hair fell in as she stirred; men, women, and children lolling on the ground, a few blankets the only furnishing of the tepee; and then to think of the neat, comfortable home at the mission, with the uplifting of its daily prayer offered to their Great Spirit, our Heavenly Father. We realized what a blessed

work these faithful missionaries . . . were doing in giving to these poor, neglected children . . . some of the light and blessing that had been given to them.⁸

As Taylor's comment suggests, how indigenous women behaved within their own intimate spaces was of enormous concern to white women. Yet white women did not merely create unjust stereotypes out of such concerns; nor did they simply try to teach Indian women their own standards of domesticity. Ultimately, white women's discourse also contributed to policies and practices that involved physically removing Indian children from their homes to missions and schools. As Amelia Quinton, the WNIA's president, put it, within the Navajo community "good morals are next to impossible. For children from such homes, the day school can do far less than the boarding school."⁹ Estelle Reel, who held the influential position of Superintendent of Indian Education from 1898-1910, asserted that "the Indian child must be placed in school before the habits of barbarous life have become fixed, and there he must be kept until contact with our life has taught him to abandon his savage ways and walk in the path of Christian civilization."¹⁰

White women such as Reel, Quinton, and the reformer/anthropologist Alice Cunningham Fletcher came to play major roles in removing Indian children from their families and communities to institutions, where they were to be raised by other white women. White women comprised the majority of boarding school employees who acted as the primary day-to-day contacts with indigenous children who had been removed and institutionalized.¹¹ Although many white women saw their positions as teachers and matrons in the schools as simply a job, and a poorly paid one at that, other white women invested their positions with a deeper significance. Eleanor E. Bryan, for example, a matron at the boarding school in Grand Junction, Colorado, asserted: I would raise the dignity of matronhood and compare it favorably with that of motherhood. . . . [the matron] of our Indian Government schools . . . must try to accomplish

the same for her Indian girls and boys as the sweet and noble mothers of our land achieve for their children.”¹² In essence, such white women sought to create alternative spheres of intimacy that were designed to undermine and replace Indian children’s previous intimacies within their own families and communities. Within institutions, they sought to introduce Indian girls and boys to new standards of clothing, housing, and food and to instill in them new standards of conduct within their intimate relations.

The schools claimed that they were training Indian girls to transform their own homes, but ultimately they prepared the girls to take up residence in another intimate setting -- that of white women’s households. As several historians of the Indian boarding schools have pointed out, the schools ultimately did not train Indian girls to learn domestic skills for the purpose of implementing them within their own homes, but in order to hire them out for domestic service through what was called “outing,” a program that placed Indian children with white families for part of each school day or during their summer vacations.¹³ One white woman corresponded with Alice Fletcher and Carlisle Institute (a boarding school) founder Richard Henry Pratt about obtaining an Indian girl as a domestic:

I was seriously thinking it was my duty to take one of the Indian girls – to train for usefulness

There is only one thing that I do require, that is, an honest girl. . . . She is but a child and needs play as well as work. And several years more experience before I would expect her to bear any responsibility.

I do not keep servants, my family is small. . . . I can teach the Indian girl all the lessons she will want. And I will teach her all kinds of house work by having her assist me, also dress-making.¹⁴

Although this woman cloaked her request in the rhetoric of maternalism, her suggestion that she would “train [the girl] for usefulness,” her remark that she would eventually expect the girl to bear some responsibility in the household, and her admission that she does not keep servants, all point to this woman’s intention to employ the girl as a servant, for little or no pay.

Thus many Indian girls and young women were channeled into yet another intimate setting, as servants within the colonizers' households. And hence, historians of women and gender in the North American West are offered another opportunity for probing into the intimacies of empire. As geographer Janet Henshall Momsen explains, "Domestic service, by its location within the private domestic space of the employer, transgresses the boundaries of the public/private, production/reproduction dichotomies. . . . Domestic space can be seen as a contact zone, within which, negotiations over 'otherness' and identity, based on race, class, religion, age, education, sophistication and citizenship are constantly underway."¹⁵ Moreover, this topic is particularly conducive to studying women and colonialism because as Judith Rollins puts it, domestic service was "unique because in no other labor arrangement is it typical for both employer and employee to be female."¹⁶

Although Indian women performing domestic service seems to have been widespread in the American West in the early twentieth century, it has not been studied at all, to my knowledge. Acquiring a domestic servant enabled privileged women in the North American West -- primarily white women -- to maintain middle-class standards of purity and cleanliness while escaping the drudgery that such standards required. As Phyllis Palmer puts it, "Maintaining high standards of cleaning and laundering enabled the family's appearance to exemplify its inner state of purity and 'godliness.'"¹⁷ Indian women would have been in demand as domestic servants in that part of the United States in the first decades of the 20th century. African American women, who worked extensively as domestic servants in the East, did not make up a sizable pool of laborers in western locations. Mexican women immigrants and Chinese and Japanese immigrant men had served as domestic servants. Yet during the era in question, when at least 500,000 Mexicans were repatriated during the Depression, and immigration from Asia had been curtailed

due to the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and the 1924 Immigration Act, there would have been a scarcity of domestic servants in many western areas.¹⁸

If the conquest and colonization of the American West created a demand for domestic servants, it also created the conditions whereby American Indian women became available for such service. By dispossessing Indian communities of their land and means of sustaining themselves, Indians were then faced with the necessity of participating within the dominant economic system. Recent theoretical works on domestic service point out that the globalization of the economy has created inequities that lead to the migration of impoverished women from a rural to an urban setting or across international boundaries, from their impoverished nations to take up employment in privileged homes within rich countries, a practice that Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo calls the “New World Domestic Order.”¹⁹ This phenomenon can be seen to be in operation within the boundaries of the United States in the first decades of the 20th century.

Yet, white policymakers and authorities did not characterize Indian girls’ domestic service as merely a job to earn money or as a means of filling a shortage of domestic labor, but as a necessary part of their curriculum in being “uplifted” from savagery to civilization. As Estelle Reel, superintendent of Indian education from 1898 to 1910, put it, the outing system “places the student under the influence of the daily life of a good home, where his inherited weaknesses and tendencies are overcome by the civilized habits which he forms -- habits of order, of personal cleanliness and neatness, and of industry and thrift, which displace the old habits of aimless living, unambition, and shiftlessness.”²⁰ Thus, white women ennobled domestic service and invested white women employers with an important role to play in “civilizing” Indian girls and young women. The colonizer’s household became imbued with myriad meanings -- to the employer a home to her family but also a place to uplift an Indian girl; to the domestic servant a

workplace; to the matron, a key site in assimilating the Indian girl and woman. The household, seemingly a private, intimate space, became yet another site of colonial relations.

These relations, of course, never developed along the lines envisioned by government administrators, reformers, or missionaries. As Ann Laura Stoler puts it, it was on these intimate frontiers, that “racial classifications were defined and defied, where relations between colonizer and colonized could powerfully confound or confirm the strictures of governance and the categories of rule.”²¹ As in other colonial settings, many white women developed an ambivalence toward their nation’s colonial projects. While they enjoyed racial and colonial privilege, they also endured gender exclusion; their uneven status enabled them to simultaneously collaborate with and confound colonial aims.²² For their part, Indian women did not passively accept or absorb their assigned role in the colonial script. Instead, their small acts of defiance and assertions of independence were part of ongoing efforts by colonized indigenous peoples to make sense of and gain a modicum of control over their destinies.

A series of interventions by white women into the intimate spaces of Indian communities and then the creation of new intimate spaces brought white and Indian women into close in the North American West. The issues such interactions raise -- the role of white women in the colonial project, the dialectic between the intimacies of empire and its more public facets, and the potential for subversion and resistance along such intimate frontiers -- resonate deeply with issues of gender and colonialism that have been explored in other contexts across the globe and offer several important new directions in the history of the north American West.

¹ Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: Norton, 1987).

-
- ² Antonia Castañeda's article, "Women of Color and the Rewriting of Western History: The Discourse, Politicization, and Decolonization of History," reprinted in *Western Women's Lives: Continuity and Change in the 20th Century*, ed. Sandra Schackel (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003), offered a much-needed critique of the field of western American women's history. See also Elizabeth Jameson and Susan Armitage, "Introduction," and Marian Perales, "Empowering 'The Welder': A Historical Survey of Women of Color in the West," both in *Writing the Range: Race, Class, and Culture in the Women's West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 3-16 and 21-41. Peggy Pascoe's *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874-1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) and Linda Gordon's *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) represent two recent works that do examine white women's roles in shaping racial ideologies and enacting colonial power relations in the American West.
- ³ George M. Fredrickson, *The Comparative Imagination: On the History of Racism, Nationalism, and Social Movements* (Berkeley, CA, 1997), 67.
- ⁴ Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 10.
- ⁵ Valerie Mathes, "Nineteenth-Century Women and Reform: The Women's National Indian Association," *American Indian Quarterly* 14 (1990): 1-18; Valerie Mathes, *Helen Hunt Jackson and Her Indian Reform Legacy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990); Helen Wanken, "'Woman's Sphere' and Indian Reform: The Women's National Indian Association, 1879-1901" (Ph.D. diss., Marquette University, 1981); Helen M. Bannan, "'True Womanhood' on the Reservation: Field Matrons in the U.S. Indian Service, Southwest Institute for Research on Women, working paper no. 18 (Tucson: Women's Studies, 1984); Lisa Emmerich, "'To respect and love and seek the ways of white women': Field Matrons, the Office of Indian Affairs, and Civilization Policy, 1890-1938," (Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland, 1987); Margaret Jacobs, "Resistance to Rescue: The Indians of Bahapki and Mrs. Annie E.K. Bidwell," in *Writing the Range: Race, Class, and Culture in the Women's West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 230-251; Margaret Jacobs, *Engendered Encounters: Feminism and Pueblo Cultures, 1879-1934* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999). For more on maternalism in this context see Margaret Jacobs, "The Great White Mother: Maternalism and American Indian Child Removal in the American West, 1880-1940," in *One Step Over the Line: Toward an Inclusive History of Women in the North American Wests*, ed. Elizabeth Jameson and Sheila McManus (Calgary, Canada: University of Calgary Press, forthcoming); Margaret Jacobs, "Maternal Colonialism: White Women and Indigenous Child Removal in the American West and Australia, 1880-1940," *Western Historical Quarterly*, forthcoming.
- ⁶ Helen Gibson Stockdell, "Woman's Work for Women on the Lemhi Reservation," *The Woman's Auxiliary* 67, no. 1 (January 1902): 53-54. In Box 64, Archives of the Episcopal Diocese of Idaho, MSS 91, Special Collections, Boise State University, Idaho.
- ⁷ Helen Tyler Griswold, "Utes of Colorado," *Los Angeles Sunday Times*, 26 January 1902, Box 1, Folder 41, newspaper clippings, Papers of Estelle Reel, Eastern Washington State Historical Society.
- ⁸ Loulie Taylor, "What A Diocesan Officer Saw on an Indian Reservation," *The Woman's Auxiliary* 67, no. 3 (March 1902): 208-09. In Box 64, Archives of the Episcopal Diocese of Idaho.
- ⁹ *The Indian's Friend* 3, no. 10 (June 1891): 4.
- ¹⁰ "Her Work for the Indians: Miss Estelle Reel, Genl Supt of Indian Schools, talks interestingly regarding Indian matters, Favours compulsory education and industrial training," n.d., Estelle Reel papers, H6-110, Box 1, "Articles" folder, Wyoming State Archives, Cheyenne.
- ¹¹ David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* (Lawrence, KS, 1995), 82, 83. See also Jacobs, "The Great White Mother," and "Maternal Colonialism."
- ¹² Report of the Supt of Indian Schools for 1898 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1899), 33. In Box 2, Folder 70; Papers of Estelle Reel, MS 120, Eastern Washington State Historical Society, Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture (formerly Cheney-Cowles Museum), Spokane, Washington.
- ¹³ Adams, *Education for Extinction*, 54, 155-163.
- ¹⁴ Mrs. Young to Pratt, 12 May 1883, Box 1, Fletcher papers.
- ¹⁵ Janet Henshall Momsen, "Maids on the Move: Victim or Victor," in *Gender, Migration and Domestic Service*, ed. Janet Henshall Momsen (New York: Routledge, 1999), 11.
- ¹⁶ Judith Rollins, *Between Women: Domesticity and their Employers* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985), 6-7.
- ¹⁷ Phyllis Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt: Housewives and Domestic Servants in the United States, 1920-1945* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 53.

¹⁸ Some important works on domestic service generally include Faye Dudden, Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth-Century America (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University press, 1983); Judith Rollins, Between Women: Domestic and their Employers (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985); Daniel E. Sutherland, Americans and their Servants: Domestic Service in the United States from 1800 to 1920 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981); Phyllis Palmer, Domesticity and Dirt: Housewives and Domestic Servants in the United States, 1920-1945 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989); Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, Rollins and Clark-Lewis deal exclusively with black women servants. Palmer estimates that between 1920 and 1930, 11-15% of employed American Indian women were working as domestics (12, 67). She cites Sophonisba Breckenridge, *Women in the 20th Century* (1933), 114, table 6. See also Grace Robinson, "My Maid-- Impossible Female: A Search for the Perfect Servant," *Liberty* 71 (March 22, 1930): 52-53 & "The Servant in the Home," *Fortune* 4 (December 1931): 46 for more on Indian women servants. For domestic service in the San Francisco Bay Area, see Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Issei, Nisei, War Bride: Three Generations of Japanese American Women in Domestic Service (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 105-109.

¹⁹ Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration and Domestic Work (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2001); . Janet Henshall Momsen, ed., Gender, Migration and Domestic Service, (New York: Routledge, 1999); Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, Doméstica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadows of Affluence (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

²⁰ Course of Study of the Indian Schools of the United States, Industrial and Literary (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1901), 189; Box 1, Folder 13, MS 120 Papers of Estelle Reel, Eastern Washington State Historical Society, Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture (formerly Cheney-Cowles Museum), Spokane, Washington.

²¹ Ann Laura Stoler, "Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies," *Journal of American History* 88 (2001): 830.

²² See Fiona Paisley, "Introduction, White Settler Colonialisms and the Colonial Turn: An Australian Perspective," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 4 (2003): 10; Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel, eds., *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance* (Bloomington, IN, 1992); Kumari Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia During British Colonial Rule* (New York, 1995).