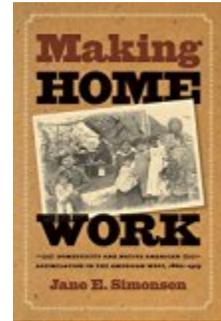


Jane E. Simonsen. *Making Home Work: Domesticity and Native American Assimilation in the American West, 1860-1919*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. 288 pp. \$22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5695-6; \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3032-1.

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## The Labor of Imperial Domesticity

Jane E. Simonsen's title carries several layers of meaning. On one level, it refers to the efforts of white, middle-class women to fashion domestic labor as a tool of imperialism; on another, it points toward the work that the home itself allegedly performed in "civilizing" indigenous peoples; on a third, it suggests her emphasis on labor. Using an American Studies model, Simonsen analyzes literature, maps, photographs, and field matron's reports to uncover the "work relationships that produced them" and the hierarchies of power that framed those relationships (p. 5). She concludes that, in asserting the power of the middle-class home to assimilate Native Americans, and by converting their efforts to administer this vision into paid employment, middle-class white women transformed domesticity "from a sign of gender subordination to a pillar of race and class privilege" (p. 6). By "uplifting" Native American women, middle-class women could assert the primacy of their version of domesticity in contrast with the alleged drudgery performed by working-class women and women of color. Simonsen further contends that examining artifacts of domestic labor reveals the tensions and contradictions inherent in domestic imperialism.

Her conclusions regarding the messages in these objects are expected: economic realities and the resistance of Native women limited the results of these endeavors. What is fresh about the book, however, is its approach to this well-worn ground. She interrogates the usual suspects (the Women's National Indian Association

[WNIA], the Field Matrons program, and Indian Schools), but weaves an analysis of labor into her inquiry, evaluating labor issues (both in rhetoric and in reality) of white women reformers and of Native American women, both those who worked for the Indian Service and those who criticized government programs. Simonsen grounds her analysis of women's assimilationist work in several contexts: the emerging industrial economy, the professionalization of women's reform work, shifting gender roles for white middle-class women, the poverty of the reservation, and failed federal policy. Although it is not always entirely clear why she chose the examples she did, her examination of a variety of cultural artifacts involved in domestic imperialism and her coverage of a broad range of literature on domesticity, labor, and cultural studies provide an insightful synthesis of this topic.

Simonsen's study of gendered work patterns in assimilation ideals begins with textual analysis: an exegesis of Caroline Soule's 1860 novel, *The Pet of Settlement*, and an exploration of articles in *The Women's Standard*, a feminist journal that began publication in Iowa in 1886. In both of these examples, Simonsen focuses on the role of Indians in the texts. She argues that *The Pet of Settlement* was "an important bridge between sentimental fiction and civilization policy" because, unlike other works in the genre, it was located in an actual West—central Iowa—rather than a mythic one (p. 18). Soule appropriated the history of the region between 1842 and 1860, when the dispossession of the Ioway, Saux, and Fox tribes took

place, reshaping it to conform to her archetype of a domesticated West. Soule's fiction tamed the macho frontier of early nineteenth-century Iowa when her protagonist, Margaret Belden, Christianized the Indian leader White Cloud, proving that white women would succeed in "civilizing" the "savage" where government agents had failed. This form of nineteenth-century fiction has been well explored, but Simonsen makes an original contribution in the way she engages the role of the Indians in the novel. Simonsen suggests that Soule's revelation of the value of women's labor in "refining" the "Wild West," was similar to Tenskwatawa's vision in that it was both prophetic and practical. Writing twenty-seven years before the Dawes Act that embodied gendered assimilationist ideals, Soule proposed a future for Native peoples as Christianized citizens who could remain on their ancestral lands by undergoing spiritual conversion. Although the ultimate outcomes of this imagined co-existence were sharply different, both the Indian prophet and the prophetess of the power of domesticity imagined a world in which Indians were not removed but regenerated.

Regeneration of the race through the women was a similar theme in *The Women's Standard*, whose masthead proclaimed its purpose "to treat of the Home, Health, Purity, Culture, Temperance, Education, and of the legal and political interests of women and of her right to the franchise" (p. 45). Unlike authors of fiction who obscured the actual labor of homemaking beneath a sheen of sentiment, Iowa feminists deliberately focused on homemaking tasks, arguing that because this labor promoted "civilization," housewives were entitled to an equitable portion of household assets. Over time, however, as the contributors to the journal engaged ideas of evolutionary theory based in race and their efforts to win property rights for married women continually failed, their emphasis shifted from the market value of women's home work to the ideologically strategic role of homemaking in sanctioning the conquest of "inferior" peoples. Again, while other scholars have interpreted homemaking ideology as a tool of imperialism, Simonsen illuminates how one group of feminists shifted their evaluation of homemaking from an economic asset to a cultural one; beliefs about Native American women, both as models of an earlier "evolutionary stage" and as objects of "uplift," were central to this discourse.

*Making Home Work* then turns to visual displays of domesticity and assimilation produced by institutions such as the WNIA, the Hampton Institute, and the Carlisle Indian School. Simonsen's analysis of the mate-

rial culture of assimilation emphasizes the messages that these artifacts broadcast about work. Simonsen considers several presentations of the glories of the "civilized home": Ho-Chunk ethnologist Alice Fletcher's Omaha cottages at the Hampton Institute and her exhibitions at the 1885 New Orleans Cotton and Industrial Exposition; the museum shows at Hampton; and the model home that Arikara Field Matron Anna Dawson Wilde constructed on the Fort Berthold reservation. Not surprisingly, Simonsen interprets these displays, which juxtapose the "savage" past with a "civilized" future, as examples of the idea that women's homemaking labors "mediated between premodern and industrial cultures" (p. 166). Nonetheless, Simonsen also concludes that many reformers believed that Indian women could "advance" in homemaking skills, but would never really perform these tasks as anything more than "rote labor devoid of its higher function as a marker of civilization" (p. 67). This fits with her analysis of domestic production instituted on reservations by field matrons such as Sibylk Carter, who established a lace-making industry in Minnesota. While some women who promoted wage work for Indian homemakers recognized the importance of wages for women's "self-improvement," they were also part of the general trend to make low-wage laborers of Native Americans. This economic imperialism was not lost on the critics of the Field Matron's Program. Simonsen discusses several Indian women, such as Jemima Wheelock (Oneida), Susan La Flesche (Omaha), and Mrs. Ella Ripley (Mandan), who criticized the Office of Indian Affairs for underfunding, and thus devaluing, women's work, and who contrasted the daily labor of Indigenous women, which was crucial to their tribal survival, with the matrons program that "stood as an empty display to people who badly needed medicine, land, and economic justice" (p. 176). Including an Indigenous critique of the Field Matron's program adds an important perspective to Simonsen's synthesis.

The richest chapters of the book, however, are Simonsen's imaginative analysis of the photographs of Jane Gay and the artwork of Angel De Cora (Ho-Chunk), both of whom offered substantive criticisms of the domestic imperial enterprise. Gay was Alice Fletcher's companion in their home in Washington, D.C. and accompanied her on four summer excursions to the Nez Perce reservation to institute allotment. By analyzing the composition of Gay's photographs of the allotment process, Simonsen uncovers Gay's critique of both domesticity and empire. For example, Gay presents herself in her self-portraits and letters as a hermaphrodite: the female Cook and

the male Photographer, which Simonsen takes to mean that she “simultaneously questioned both allotment and the gender conventions that undergirded imperialism” (p. 119). Other explications of Gay’s photos show a similar creative reading.

Likewise, Simonsen unpacks the messages in Alice De Cora’s artwork. De Cora was an artist, an illustrator, and an art teacher at Carlisle who conceived of artistic work as a means of criticizing the imperial culture and creating a blended identity. De Cora is best known for illustrating Zitkala-Sa’s *Old Indian Legends* published in 1901 and for providing the beautiful lettering for Natalie Curtis’s *The Indian’s Book* (1905), which incorporated indigenous designs into the letters. Simonsen deduces that De Cora’s insertion of Native designs into the imperial language undermined its authority by replacing “Euro-American forms of representation with indigenous ones” and “making them look foreign to Euro-American readers” (p. 196). Moreover, she posits, “the letters work against the ethnographic impulse to order artifacts through descriptions and categories printed in English by rendering those descriptions themselves as elements of design” (p. 196). In De Cora’s work at Carlisle, she urged her students to create viable cottage industries dedicated to producing artistic commodities that asserted indigenous identities while also appealing to white con-

sumers; the market realities of the Indian crafts trade, however, curtailed this initiative. Simonsen’s conclusions regarding De Cora summarize the broader themes of her study: “In attempting to fuse domestic production with cultural practice, however, De Cora had tried to bind domestic identity and industrial production together and to put this forth as a new Native American identity, one in which work at home and in the marketplace produced not only value but a sense of Native American community invested in a shared set of practices” (p. 214). Domesticity is, in the end, both labor and cultural identity and is constrained by economic practices and ideologies that devalue both women and people of color.

*Making Home Work* provides an absorbing study of the material culture of domestic imperialism and a cogent synthesis of the literature on several important topics. Simonsen assembles an impressive body of ideas on many facets of these gendered cultural encounters and offers intriguing suggestions for how to think about women’s work at the turn of the century. Ironically, it is her range of ideas that sometimes muddle her prose with excessive abstractions and sociological jargon, which obscure rather than clarify her ideas. Nonetheless, the work is an impressive accomplishment and should be relevant to anyone interested in domestic imperialism.

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