

## The Inconsistencies Of “Oscillating Pendulum”: A Study Of Federal Indian Policies Through Gendered Lens

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### Abstract:

Native historian Donald Fixico has referred to federal Indian policy as an “oscillating pendulum”, constantly moving between policies of assimilation and sovereignty. This paper is an ethno-historical study of political and cultural change among Native American communities and explains why this metaphor helps us understand Native American history from the 1890s to the 1940s and provide specific examples that demonstrate how these periods differ from one another. The paper in the latter part also analyses federal Indian policies through a gendered lens and argues how Fixico’s oscillating pendulum swings differently for Native American men and women, as they experience these policies differently. It focusses on how settler colonial modalities have impacted traditional gender roles.

**Keywords:** Settler Colonial Modalities, Federal Indian Policies, Oscillating pendulum, Gender roles

### Introduction

The history of Native Americans cannot be understood in isolation from that of the United States as it is “a shared story” (Calloway, 11). The relationship of United States federal government to the Native American nations has always been tumultuous, confusing and ambiguous as the former takes up a position of convenience, sometimes “guardian” to its wards and sometimes a “conqueror”. This is best understood through the changing Federal Indian Policies. Fixico asserts that many scholars view this ambiguity of Indian policies as “an oscillating pendulum with policy swinging between opposite poles: accommodation and dispossession, assimilation and segregation, acculturation and cultural pluralism” (Fixico, 21). The time period of 1890s -1940s brought two policy changes – Allotment/ Assimilation and Indian Reorganization. But how far does this metaphor of oscillating pendulum become instrumental in understanding native history?

### Tracing the swings of Federal Indian Policies

With the Westward expansion coming to an end, America’s Manifest Destiny and closing of Western frontier by the 1890s, policymakers now turned to solve the “Indian Problem”: the refusal or the inability of the Indians to assimilate into mainstream American ideas and ideals. After the Indian Removal Act of 1830 and resultant reservation life, Indians found themselves regimented to violence of different kinds. The United States decided to destroy their culture, ideals and values; everything that marked their identity as an Indigenous community. The “friends of the Indians” as they call themselves discovered that the best way to “Americanize the American Indian” (Calloway, 378) was to break up the reservation which kept their tribal ties alive, the biggest obstacle to “civilization”.

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Assimilation found expression in distinct stages primarily the spatial and social organization through Dawes Allotment Act of 1887 and education of indigenous children in boarding schools. Calloway in *First People* reasons out the allotment of lands to individuals as a foundation from which Indians could raise themselves, a necessary step to “eradicate all vestiges of tribal life” (380) Dawes Act marked the beginning of shift from who they are (tribal sovereignty) to change them into “white people” (assimilation) This forced shift in the positions of America Indians is further illustrated through Adam’s rendition of Boarding schools, where he dives into different models of “Education for Extinction”. He elicits that the policy makers in search of an adequate plan for assimilation through education undergoes various trial and errors: the reservation day school, the reservation boarding school and finally the off reservation schools. Adams brings forth the accounts of Indian agents to state the flaws of reservation day and boarding schools as their proximity with the communities did not “withdraw the children from influences and habits” (30) and “failed to exert sufficient influence on children’s mind” (31) to shred native values and culture. Calloway, Adams and Troutman assert the importance of Richard Henry Pratt in the assimilation through education. Assimilation for Pratt was to “Kill the Indian and Save the Man. *First People* gives a comprehensive view of how the Indian children were brought to Carlisle, Hampton and other boarding schools by force, cleaned off their “dirt” literally and metaphorically. On arrival, they were given English names, long hairs were chopped off and they were restricted from using their tongue. Physical transformation and linguistic limitation was indeed the first step towards decimating American Indian identity. Troutman at lengths elaborates on Pratt’s vision of shredding the children off their indigenous identity by introducing formal music education. This was another form of assimilation that Pratt undertook after the Wounded Knee Massacre, which saw the participation of some Carlisle graduates. But Troutman also states that boys and girls found themselves engrossed in this new found interest in Western form of music. While for the boys, it gave them a sense of acceptance when they travelled outside the communities to play for bands and girls found it as an “opportunity to socialize with band members, an antidote to monotony and isolation [of schools]” (137) Richard Henry Pratt’s vision of assimilation through boarding schools thus stroke the Pendulum to the end of “assimilation”, where United States took the position of a “conqueror”

Although Native history from 1880s to 1920s elicits the acculturation of Indians into American civil society and decimating from theirs, Calloway in *First People* also points out the Euro American means of education used by American Indians to their advantage. Carlisle and Hampton boarding proved to be well springs of leadership and Pan Indianism that later brought out native intellectuals like Charles Eastman, Montezuma which eventually led to the Society of American Indians. On the other hand, Troutman elicits through analogies students who used formal music education to “possibilities of Native expressive cultures”. (Santhosh 10246). Even though Brenda Child argues that “Indian boarding schools were key components in cultural genocide against Native cultures” (19), she also presents a native perspective and proclaims their variegated reasons for attending the boarding schools.

But, by the 1900s, policy makers saw the failure of allotments and natives inability to sustain themselves with agriculture and American ways of living. This time, John Collier took up the role of a “guardian” in order to protect the Indians from their impending doom. With the Merriam Annual Report of the Board of Indian Commissioners (1885) that gave further insight into impoverished conditions of reservation and doom of the Great Depression, United States under President Roosevelt decided to bend federal Indian policy according to the specific needs of time. The Pendulum loosened from assimilation back to tribal sovereignty and United States took the position of “guardian” to its wards.

John Collier’s Indian Reorganization Act was the new federal policy of 1932. According to the Annual Report of Commissioner of Indian Affairs (1935) Indian Reorganization Act gave back native nations authority over their land and resources. It helped them to build local self-governments and exercise control on tribal matters with own tribal council. However, Robert Brunette, a Sioux on the Rosebud Reservation returned home after serving in the second World War only to find not

Collier's dream, but a different reality of corrupt tribal officers, poverty and land loss. Lawrence C Kelly in "The Indian Reorganization Act: The Dream and Reality" critiques Indian Reorganization Act for the trust relation between Indians and United States Federal government. The same regulations to protect Indian lands gave them ultimate power and restricted the tribal council to benefit people. To a great extent, Collier's New Deal restored tribal sovereignty with greater control over their lives, land and resources, but it also brought with it imposed American government structures and greater infiltration of Secretary of Interior in tribal councils. Collier's dream to revitalize tribal sovereignty ironically, gave the United States enormous powers.

Thus, the federal Indian policy is "an analogy of colonial ambivalence" (Gopi, 518). According to "Friends of Indians", they considered themselves "federal fathers and mothers" sympathetic to the cause of American Indians. They found themselves doing a favour or charity, as the other option was extermination. The metaphor of oscillating pendulum only helps in understanding policies and government but is not sufficient to acknowledge native experiences of struggle and survival during these policy changes, as it does not reveal much about native people or nation. The pendulum from "native eye" helps in analyzing the "guardian /conqueror relationship to its ward" and considers sovereignty or Indian Reorganization Act as "guardian" and assimilation and allotment as "conqueror". Hence, understanding the history of survival and endurance of Native America with the metaphor of an oscillating pendulum obscures the complexity of history.

### **Gender Inconsistencies in Federal Indian Policies**

Although Federal Indian Policies were rolled out for the assimilation of Native Americans into mainstream culture, it created a distinction between Native American men and women. The ripple effects of these policies weren't the same for both genders. It can be traced in the nuances of these policies, which introduced female subjugation in Native American world view as they were irked by fluid gender roles in existing Native epistemology. The following section deciphers the policies of assimilation particularly to showcase the introduction of patriarchal norms of male superiority into Native worldview.

By the end of nineteenth century, reformers had come to the consensus that Federal Indian Policy could solve the inability of Indians to assimilate into American society. Reformers discovered ways to combat the communalism, a hindrance to acculturation through policies like Dawes General Allotment Act and further assimilation through education in off reservation boarding schools. These policies not only proved detrimental to native population and culture, but resulted in different experiences for Native men and women. While the intent of the policy makers was to introduce "Civilization" to the heathens, but it brought along colonial concepts of Patriarchy and Gender division, to native cultures that believed in balance of men and women. Assimilation process steered to build a native society that mimics the colonial model of civilization, where men and women have different stereotyped roles to play.

The Dawes Act introduced in 1887 aimed to dismantle spatial and social organization of Indians to colonial ways of a civilized society. The "Friends of the Indians" believed that division of reservations to smaller fragments as private property would nurture ideas of individualism within Indians. According to them, kinship was the basis for gender roles and Indian policies was an effective way to destroy the communities and break the multifamily households to nuclear families of Anglo-American model. In *First Peoples*, Calloway traces the efforts of federal government to implant gender segregation in reservations in order to transform Indian societies to "civilized" Americans where, wives and mothers remain politically and economically subordinate to men. He brings in the idea of "intimate colonialism" (383), which employed matrons on the reservations who supervised and altered personal choices like child rearing and sexual practices. Stremlau in "To Domesticate and Civilize Wild Indians" elicits the differences in native and Anglo-American societies as the reason behind enforced gender segregation. She explains that in native societies, both men and women lived in mutual obligation and reciprocity. Reformers disliked how Indian women worked tirelessly, had economic, political powers and sexual autonomy which contradicted the Victorian model of decency while men went for hunting which was considered as a pastime according to Euro American standards, therefore termed "lazy". These assumptions about native societies led the policy

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makers to assimilate Indian women into the idea of subservience, in order to make them “loyal Americans”. The Dawes Act churned the beginning of ripping away the epistemologies of natives and burdened them with ideas of male dominance and gender divide: it gave land to the male head of the family that fostered dependency on their male counterparts for subsistence.

These dominant ideas of patriarchy slowly began to infiltrate the boarding schools system. Gender segregation and hegemony was embedded in the working of boarding schools. Different approaches were formulated for girls and boys to provide skills set that America called “appropriate” in turn remake native societies rooted in patriarchy. While boys “worked in farms, tried their hands in stock raising and acquired skills like blacksmithing and carpentry” (Adams, 30), girls were restricted to “sewing, washing, iron and housekeeping” (Lomawaima, 231) in compliance to Anglo Americans position of woman. Girls were considered fit for employment such as domestic labour and spent half of the day in “vocational” labour. Through such instances, Lomawaima drives us to the point that assimilation for native girls meant realising their weakness and inferior positions as women in a civilized, patriarchal society.

The experience of girls in boarding schools also explains the idea of Intimate colonialism. Lomawaima explains how sexuality and shame, an extension of intimate colonialism was taught by moulding bodies in boarding schools. Girls were regimented to wear uniforms and bloomers in order to emphasis obedience, proper dressing sense and became a part of “domesticity training”. (228) Bloomers, a garment to cover lower body of a female became a contesting space for native girls and authorities. Intermittent inspection of the bloomers by head matrons alarmed them of being a subordinate sex and introduced the protestant idea of shame, which was unknown to native societies. Lomawaima asserts the Native efforts of resistance against forms of patriarchy through the girl’s reluctance in wearing bloomers. Several accounts of girls ripping off their bloomers after inspections into the bushes counts as a resistance to assimilate into a society of female subservience and inferiority.

### Conclusion

Gender enforcement through different tactics of assimilation is colonizer’s thoughtful move to instil patriarchy in native societies that was previously devoid of such distinctions. Existence of any system other than that of colonizers is a threat to the colonial powers. Here, the division of powers between Native men and women jeopardizes the Anglo-American ideology of patriarchy and male domination. Hence, the reformers subtly injected sexual segregation through Indian policies in order to install colonial models of civilization. The insinuation of this idea, not only trained native woman in accordance with Victorian cult of “domesticity”, but in the process “killed ideas and ideals of balance between Native men and women”. Colonialism that propagated civilization, through gender segregation retorted to the actions of “savages” and not that of “civilized men”.

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