
Tai S. Edwards. *Osage Women and Empire: Gender and Power*. University Press of Kansas, 2018. 230 pp. ISBN: 9780700626106.

<https://kansaspress.ku.edu/subjects/women-s-studies/978-0-7006-2609-0.html>

A report by the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP) found that a record 18 Native American women ran for congressional office in 2020 (“Native American Women Candidates in 2020”). This is a particularly important statistic for a number of reasons, but primarily because there were zero Native American women in Congress before Sharice Davids (Ho-Chunk) and Deb Haaland (Laguna Pueblo) were elected in Kansas and New Mexico respectively in 2018. However, this does not mean that Native American women lacked political agency or were without significant political voice prior to the twenty-first century. This crucial point forms the backbone of Tai S. Edwards’s *Osage Women and Empire: Gender and Power*.

Edwards opens *Osage Women and Empire* by quoting correspondence from Christian missionary Reverend William F. Vaill, published in 1827 by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. In this correspondence, Vaill claims that Osage women were bound to a degrading life of unceasing drudgery and servitude, whilst Osage men reclined at ease in their camps, smoking and telling stories. In response, Edwards poses a number of questions that ultimately guide her study: were nineteenth-century Osage women truly exploited and subjugated in such a manner? Can we trust the conclusions of men such as Vaill, whose judgement is likely clouded by an entrenchment in European patriarchy and female subordination?

Edwards’s study provides straightforward answers to these questions by bringing Osage gender construction and complementarity to the foreground in her work. In doing so, *Osage Women and Empire* addresses a glaring gap in the study of the Osage empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a gap Edwards attributes to a gendered scholarly bias that associates the historiography of war, diplomacy, and politics with masculinity. Edwards identifies a further gap within several decades of scholarship on Native North American women, wherein scholars have referred to women holding important roles in Osage society but largely overlooked the complementary nature of gender roles. Edwards’s intervention with *Osage Women and Empire* is an exemplary piece of work that more than addresses these gaps in both academic modes of inquiry.

An overall emphasis on the importance of gender complementarity binds Edwards’s study together across four central chapters. The core text is only 132 pages—the remaining page count is made up of detailed notes and an extensive bibliography. The

four main chapters are roughly equal in length and bookended by a fairly detailed introduction and a brief conclusion. Chapter One provides readers with the necessary tools to understand the basics of Osage cosmology and the particular way that an Osage worldview informs and necessitates complementary gender roles. Chapter Two traces the impact of European colonization on Osage expansion in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, detailing the incorporation of Europeans into systems of Osage dominance and exchange, systems that depended on gender complementarity and subsequently thrived. Chapter Three is located in the early nineteenth century, when the Osage empire declined as the US settler empire was born and began expanding westward. Edwards is explicit in her portrait of US imperialism as manipulative, exploitative, and genocidal, but such a portrait does not leave the Osage painted as helpless victims. Edwards emphasizes the continued role of Osage spirituality, the facilitation of a mobile lifestyle, and the utilisation of European missionaries to combat the encroaching US presence on their lands. Chapter Four follows the Osage to their Kansas reservation, an environment that placed new pressures on traditional gendered work. Edwards argues that the continued implementation of gender complementarity in their religious and economic structures allowed the Osage to control and direct change in specific ways.

The study draws from a variety of sources, combining traditional archival materials such as missionary records, traveller narratives, and ethnographies with works from both Osage and non-Osage historians and scholars. Edwards acknowledges the significant biases present in the vast majority of her chosen archival materials, often using that bias as a springboard for discussions of gendered prejudices, misappropriations, and misinterpretations. The text features ten black-and-white photographs interspersed throughout which provide useful reference points for the subjects discussed. Chapters Two, Three, and Four also mirror the chronology of three maps by Bill Nelson (included in text) depicting the changing boundaries of Osage territory across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The final map appears in the conclusion, depicting total land loss divided by each treaty responsible.

Osage Women and Empire is not intended to be a definitive guide on Osage spirituality or political history, and thus it functions well as a broad and accessible historical overview. The combination of historical context and analysis of gender flows well from page to page and, where it may occasionally lack depth, it excels in breadth. For the reader who requires more historical granularity, Edwards acknowledges the extensive works already written by twentieth-century Osage scholars such as John Joseph Mathews or Louis Burns.

There are places where Edwards does drill down and her analysis is given an opportunity to shine. For example, the latter half of Chapter Three features a particular focus on the relationship between Osages and Protestant missionaries. Drawing from disparaging notes made by missionaries at the time, Edwards convincingly argues that gendered domestic production and hospitality carried out by Osage women and girls visiting the missions played a significant role in maintaining diplomatic ties with Americans during the nineteenth century. This example is one of many throughout the text where Edwards draws from a source saturated in ethnocentric and colonial bias and instead manages to find and emphasize the agency of Osage women during a period, and indeed a field of scholarship, that has tried to write them out.

Edwards does leave one avenue of inquiry understudied. In Chapter One, there is a brief acknowledgement of the presence of trans* and/or Two Spirit individuals in the notes of nineteenth-century missionaries and travellers. Edwards makes the point that although gender was constructed into polarized male and female roles in Osage society, these roles were not bound by sex and included a range of gender identities. The point is all-too-brief, however, as Edwards does not acknowledge alternative gender roles nor the possibility for gender identities beyond the colonial scope in any of the subsequent chapters, leaving open the necessity for further scholarship in this area.

Osage Women and Empire functions both as an excellent and long-overdue intervention in historical scholarship on the Osage empire that emphasizes the critical role of gender complementarity and as an easily digestible overview of existing scholarship that is accessible to academic and non-academic readers alike.

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Work Cited

"Native American Women Candidates in 2020." *Center for American Women and Politics*, <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/election-analysis/native-american-women-candidates-2020>. Accessed 5 August 2020.