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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is part of my ongoing education on colonialism. Predictably, this all started with a great teacher, Rita Napier at the University of Kansas. Up until my enrollment in her “History of the Plains Indians” course, I thought I was a relatively well-educated person. Rita’s teaching, and that of assisting Indigenous graduate students, disproved everything I thought I knew. Now I know that the denial of colonization and genocide have been central to American history and identity from the founding to the present. For settler colonizers (like the United States) in particular, this conquest continues to structure society—for Natives and non-Natives alike. Hence, this text is an inquiry into the logics of settler colonialism, how it was experienced, and how it was resisted in the context of gender.¹

I am exceedingly grateful to the librarians, archivists, scholars, and museum staff who kindly shared their time and expertise. Enormous thanks to the Osage Nation Museum’s former director Kathryn Red Corn, as well as Rhonda Kohnle and Lou Brock, for all of their insight and assistance. Thanks to the University of Kansas and Johnson County Community College (JCCC) libraries, with special appreciation for Jan Brooks at JCCC interlibrary loan. Thanks to David Miros and the Midwest Jesuit Archives; Faye Hubbard and John Waide of the Pius XII Memorial Library at St. Louis University; Dennis Northcott and the Missouri History Museum Library and Research Center; Bob Knecht, Nancy Sherbert, Teresa Coble, and the Kansas State Historical Society; Jacquelyn Slater Reese and the University of Oklahoma Libraries; Riche Sorensen and the Smithsonian American Art Museum; the Kenneth Spencer Research Library; and the Denver Public Library. Thanks also to J. Frederick Fausz, Tanis Thorne, Theda Perdue, Rose Stremlau, and Alessandra Tamulevich. A big, big thanks to everyone at Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains, especially Virgil Dean. And Bill Nelson makes incredible maps!

Thank you to my mentors and colleagues. George Mason University’s (GMU) legendary Robert T. Hawkes Jr. and the University of Kansas’s (KU) Rita Napier were both transformative to my education and career. Perhaps more importantly, I am grateful for their friendship, and I miss them both.
Paul Kelton is perhaps the best PhD adviser ever! His sustained commitment to his graduate students’ education, research, and career is really astonishing and directly aided the completion of this book. Thank you to all of the other faculty members who contributed to my education and research at the following: KU—Kim Warren, Don Worster, Greg Cushman, Ann Schofield, Jennifer Weber, Jonathan Earle, and Leslie Tuttle; GMU—Paula Petrik, T. Mills Kelly, Jane Turner Censer, and Zach Schrag. Thanks as well to the Hall Center for the Humanities. Thank you to my graduate student colleagues Stephanie Russell, Lon Strauss, Eric Anderson, Brady DeSanti, Kyle and Becca Anthony, Shelly Cline, Mary McMurray, Chikako Mochizuki, Amanda Schlumpberger, James Quinn, Karl Rubis, Jeremy Byers, John Rosenberg, and Jason Emerson. At my PhD graduation, I walked the hill with Kristen Epps, and we have metaphorically continued walking together as professional historians; I am so fortunate to have her as a friend and colleague. And a special thanks to Ethan Schmidt for his mentoring and collaboration; losing him has been deeply felt by many. I am fortunate to work with some of the most supportive colleagues at JCCC, especially in the history department, specifically, James Leiker (who has worked tirelessly to mentor me as a teacher and scholar), Sarah Boyle, Jay Antle, Jim Lane, Sean Daley, Ed Smith, Sam Bell, Farrell Jenab, Andrea Broomfield, Vince Miller, and Allison Smith. Thank you to the University Press of Kansas and especially Kim Hogeland, Kelly Chrisman Jacques, and Michael Kehoe for all of their work in seeing this through to publication.

I am also fortunate to have a uniquely supportive group of friends and neighbors. I am particularly grateful to the network of women who are central to my life in every way.

Finally, I want to thank my family for their constant encouragement and interest in my work. To my husband, Ryan; my parents, Bruce and Denise Gerhart; my sister Laci Gerhart-Barley; and my sons Rockwell and Wiley: I love you.
INTRODUCTION

The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) throughout the nineteenth century spent considerable time, energy, and funds to “civilize” supposedly “savage” people, both at home and abroad. The ABCFM distributed numerous publications to educate sympathetic Christians on the challenges facing missionaries, in hopes of spurring charitable donations to support the missions. Accounts of Indigenous gender roles proved a favored topic to these ends. Independent women, engaged in manual labor and often sexually free, were labeled “primitive” and thus in need of reform and even rescue.¹ Reflecting these themes, in 1827 the ABCFM published correspondence from Reverend William F. Vaill, a missionary to the Osage.²

And [the women’s] condition is truly degraded; for while the men are reclining at their ease in their camps, smoking, or telling stories, or engaged in the sport of war, or of hunting; the females have to build their houses, plant their corn, dress the skins, transport the baggage, and wood and water, and bear many a heavy burden. Instead of one day of rest in seven, they have not one from their marriage until death. It is one unceasing round of servitude and drudgery. And shall it be always thus? Shall their daughters be trained to servitude only? No—is the response of every female breast. Let us send them the Gospel, that they too may become respected, and useful, and happy.³

Such accounts prompt many questions. Were Osage women truly exploited and subjugated in their society? Can we trust Vaill’s conclusions about men or women? Depending on how far back you want to go, female subordination had a long tradition in European (and later, American) history. Ancient philosophers and medieval theologians, referencing the biblical story of Eve’s creation from Adam’s rib in Genesis, helped entrench European patriarchy. Under this hierarchical organization, men wielded power over dependent women and children. Correspondingly, the work of men conducted outside the home in the “public sphere” held greater importance than that of women.
Osage Woman and Child (detail, used with permission of the Denver Public Library, Western History Collection, call number X-32588). This photograph, believed to have been taken sometime after 1880, shows an Osage woman with her child in a cradleboard. Though less richly dressed than Wáh-chee-te in George Catlin’s famous portrait from 1834, this woman’s dress is nearly identical to her kinswoman’s from at least half a century earlier. (George Catlin, Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians, vol. 2, 3rd ed. [New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1844], 40–44; Denver Public Library, Digital Collections, accessed July 19, 2017, http://digital.denverlibrary.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p15330c01122/id/35253/rec/112.)
conducted inside the home in the “private sphere.” In other words, as historian Carol Devens has argued, European colonizers came from “political and socio-economic systems shaped by an earlier feudal patriarchy, a social order rooted in a tradition of masculine authority and activity that presupposed feminine passivity and domesticity.” By the nineteenth century, a respectable Euro-American woman was considered “naturally” frail and weak, requiring protection from a laborious, lower-class, less evolved life. This social construction biased Europeans and Americans in their interactions with Indigenous people, producing misunderstandings. Women’s labor was just one piece of evidence, not only of their alleged degraded condition, but also of an entire Indigenous society’s lack of civilization.4

Unfortunately, for some time, many scholars shared this gendered bias and took sources like Vaill’s at face value, believing Native women endured an existence scarcely better than slaves. Theories of universal female subjugation seemed to reinforce this view. Scholars today read sources like Vaill’s with a much more critical eye. Gunlög Fur argued that a scholar’s awareness of source-material bias can be “a useful and fruitful methodological tool” because one must critically examine what is both present and absent in a particular source in order to draw historical conclusions. To understand cultural systems like gender and the significance of behaviors in that context, ethnohistorians (including me) employ an interdisciplinary approach—involving archaeology, anthropology, ethnography, linguistics, and oral history—combined with a judicious use of documentary evidence. Certainly Vaill illuminated his own patriarchal, missionizing bias; yet even so, information can be gleaned from such material to learn about the lives of women and their roles in Indigenous societies. Studying women adds their story to the overarching history, while placing gender construction at the center of historical inquiry, complicating our existing historical knowledge and potentially creating an entirely new history.5

Gender is a useful method of analyzing Native life during colonization because gender served as a dominant feature of Native North American cultures. Through gender roles, every society constructs what behaviors are appropriate for each sex, while simultaneously defining relative status and power.6 Unlike Euro-American society, many Indigenous societies, including the Osage, operated under a system of gender complementarity, where men and women performed typically separate but equally valued tasks. Individual autonomy, rather than a gender hierarchy and dependency, served as the
basis for social relationships. Clan or extended family kinship and reciprocity bound people together in communities. Men and women both held status and power in their societies, which manifested in various forms for each gender, all sanctioned and reiterated by ritual. Though seemingly rigid, gender roles involved flexibility and variability, so men and women could help one another and make choices addressing material or spiritual circumstances. Accordingly, Osage society included more than two genders, which was the norm across Native North America.7

European and American colonization impacted gender in different ways over time in every community. Native women and men creatively confronted change by incorporating new technologies, political systems, and religious forms into established belief systems. Eventually Europeans, and later, Americans, colonized the entire continent, assaulting every aspect of Native life. Social constructions, including gender, being primarily housed and transmitted through ritual, were especially vulnerable to colonization. When a community, for a variety of reasons, abandoned all or part of a ceremony, the values such ritual supported likewise waned. Disturbance to the economy also rapidly altered gender systems. Yet numerous examples indicate across centuries that Native people, especially women, sought alternatives to marginality, recreating their social roles in new contexts. Gender then functioned to maintain societal order and served as a central site for experiencing, adapting to, and resisting the monumental change brought on by colonization.8

Even with several decades of scholarship on Native North American women and gender complementarity, significant gaps remain in the literature.9 The Osage historiography emphasizes—for good reason—their hegemony in the western Mississippi valley in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Once the French built trading posts along the periphery of Osage territory in the 1720s, they became middlemen in the exchanges between the French and more western and southern Indigenous communities. French traders attempted to initiate trade relations with western and southern Native groups; however, the Osage prevented, violently if necessary, any threats (both Native and European) to their position as middlemen. Taking advantage of their large population (estimates range from 10,000 to 18,000) and resource-rich location between the Mississippi River and the prairie plains, the Osage became the primary economic and military power in western Louisiana. As historian Kathleen DuVal put it, the Osage “proved far more successful than either France or Spain at building a mid-continental empire.”10
Scholars agree the Osage held preeminent regional power during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but not everyone uses the term “empire.”11 Because all North American Indigenous people eventually experienced European or neo-European imperial marginalization, exploitation, and repeated efforts to exterminate culture and people that continue in many ways to the present, it is important to define and differentiate Indigenous imperialism. For Osage historian Louis Burns, his ancestors’ dominance is empowering. During French and Spanish colonization, Burns stated that the “Osages conquered an area about the same size as that conquered by Bonaparte in roughly the same amount of time . . . [and through] blockade of the Missouri and Arkansas Rivers [they] denied Europeans any significant access to the heart of North America for one hundred fifty years,” creating “the Osage empire.” Based on Burns’s analysis, the primary differences between the Osage and European or American empires were land claims and subjugation. Europeans and Americans often “claimed” Indigenous land over which they had no real authority. In contrast, the Osage actually used their land—for settlements, farming, or hunting—and patrolled all of their territory. Most notably, though, the Osage did not rule over subjugated Native groups in their empire.12

Pekka Hämäläinen made similar arguments in The Comanche Empire. The Comanches “never attempted to build a European-style imperial system” with a single central authority, settlement colonies, or direct rule over subject peoples. Instead, they built an empire using a more fluid, “creative blending of violence, diplomacy, extortion, trade, and kinship politics.” Even so, Comanchería certainly resembled European empires in various ways: they conquered neighboring peoples, and exploited resources—creating a Comanche-dominated society tied together through a vast trade and alliance network. According to Hämäläinen, “Comanches exercised power on an imperial scale, but they did so without adopting an imperial ideology and without building a rigid, European-style empire.” Though the Comanche would not have identified themselves as an “imperial power” at the time, Hämäläinen said, “It does not mean that we should not recognize them as one.”13

The same could be said of the Osage: they used violence (and sometimes creative diplomacy) to control territory and people; they raided rivals for valuable goods; and they exploited natural resources. The decentralizing nature of Osage communities and politics meant power did not radiate out from a unified center in their territory or even among their own people. They too
lacked an imperial ideology—nothing like the “savagery” and “civilization” dichotomy employed by Europeans and Americans ever informed Osage actions or justified their conquest. They expanded because they had the desire and ability to do so. Even though Europeans and Americans complained about (and even envied) Osage power, no one called them an empire at the time.\textsuperscript{14} Though scholars might not agree on calling this dominance an Osage “empire” even today, the general consensus that imperial domination derived from some combination of political, economic, or military control certainly applied to the Osage in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. At the same time, the lack of ideological and internal subjugation presented a marked difference from European and American imperial ventures in North America. As the Osage established their empire, other people definitely lost their lives, their property, and sometimes their family members. But cultural sovereignty was never under attack.

Studies of the Osage empire’s rise and fall have almost entirely emphasized the lives of men as hunters, warriors, traders, and political leaders.\textsuperscript{15} This is a common bias in the historiography of war, diplomacy, and politics—topics often associated with the masculine “sphere” in Euro-American and Native societies. Scholarship examining the adaptability, creativity, and skill with which Indigenous people built such empires has typically also concentrated on men, implying that women had little to do with men or tribal hegemony—especially if expanded power resulted from increased war or trade.\textsuperscript{16} Kathleen DuVal argued that in Osage society, “Valued men were successful warriors and plains hunters . . . [so] expanding their hunting and trading and violently excluding other Indian hunters from French trade increased Osage men’s opportunities to prove their manhood.” Through warfare in particular, she stated, men could gain “influence and prestige.” Historian Willard Rollings likewise contended the Osage culture “had always placed great value on economic and military success . . . [and] Osage men acquired status as a result of their hunting prowess and their courage in battle . . . [so] increased hunting and raiding fit well within the older social framework,” resulting in their regional hegemony. Unfortunately, without more in-depth knowledge of the Osage gender construction, one could misinterpret their imperial growth as elevating men’s status and correspondingly reducing that of women. As DuVal concluded, “Men’s valor had changed Osage history. While women’s economic importance remained strong . . . their place probably became less
central than in the past.” In sum, the Osage empire ostensibly resulted from men’s hunting and warrior success, undermining gender complementarity.17

Certainly, hunting and war prowess directly related to a man’s status but, in this society, hunting and war success, like everything else, involved women and men. Cosmology defined Osage men and women as necessary pairs; consequently, to understand either gender, or the power of the group as a whole, they must be studied together.18 In order to provide for and protect their communities, men had to kill animals and enemies. Conversely, women, as creators and life channels, did not physically associate with death. This lack of physical association has obscured women’s direct spiritual and economic relationship with hunting. While men hunted—a coordinated physical and ritual endeavor—women simultaneously prayed to Wa-kon’-da (Mysterious Power) for animal reproduction, hunter success, and community perpetuation through the birth of children. And when men returned with animal products, women commenced the laborious meat preservation and hide manufacturing that facilitated the entire community’s subsistence and trade wealth. Processing the proceeds of the hunt into something useful (food, clothing, trade goods, etc.) was considered a creative act, under the purview of women. Scholars often passingly, like DuVal above, acknowledge the economic significance of women’s work in the Osage empire.19 But women’s central economic role reflected their equal status with men.

The US settler empire eventually destroyed the Osage empire. All levels of government and settlers intended to eliminate Indigenous people so that Americans in particular, and the nation in general, could benefit from the wealth of Native land. By the early nineteenth century, the United States “claimed” the Louisiana Purchase (including the Osage homeland), which was intended to be the new residence of eastern Native groups who were pressured, and eventually forced, to leave and thus open their land for American development. These eastern Native nations, serving as “proxy invaders” for the United States, increasingly encroached on Osage territory, competing for land and game. Then, Euro-American settlers invaded, further compromising Osage dominance. Americans justified acquisitioning Native land by claiming that the “savage” Native lifestyle was unsustainable in the modern world, and it was the duty of “civilized” people—supposedly Americans—to remake Natives into Christian yeoman farmers and save them from what Americans asserted was inevitable extinction. Assimilation programs then
served as the final elimination effort to rid the United States of the rightful owners of the land.20

With their lives under siege, Osage leaders had little choice when, in 1825, federal officials demanded land cessions to expel the Osage from Missouri and Arkansas.21 Now confined to a small fraction of their western territories in present-day Kansas, variable weather, repeated disease outbreaks, and settler invasion further challenged Osage survival.22 They adapted to these changing circumstances, becoming increasingly mobile while depending more and more on hunting and trade for subsistence. While missionaries unsuccessfully tried to convert them to Christianity and Euro-American culture, American settlers built houses, began farming, stole Osage crops, and allowed their livestock to graze in Osage fields.23 Finally, in July 1870, Congress simply added provisions to an Indian appropriation bill to buy Osage land, eliminate their presence in Kansas, and provide for their final confinement in Indian Territory where they settled in 1872.24

Colonization brought significant change, but it did not fundamentally alter the Osage economy or spiritual practices until the late nineteenth century. This study examines that period of continuity. Osage complementary gender roles manifested in virtually every aspect of their lives. Women and men who had long collaborated in subsistence and Native trade expanded these roles to incorporate new people, technologies, and exchange networks after European contact. The scale and location of Osage hunting and warfare notably increased during the French and Spanish colonial period, which some have viewed as bolstering male status, leading to declensionist assumptions about the role of Osage women.25 However, the Osage viewed warrior success as the product of both men’s physical and spiritual, and women’s spiritual efforts. And a man’s hunting success only became valuable when the women in his family processed those hides into desirable goods, making women as vital as men to the hide trade. At the same time, Osage women did not abandon their role as producers, and continued farming, with particularly large bounties while they remained in self-selected town sites. Once confined to Kansas, where climate and settler invasion made subsistence more difficult, Osage men and women increasingly focused on hunting and trade as the best way to reduce disease virulence and avoid those who wanted to change their culture. While they continued to practice their combination agriculture-hunting-trading economy—a system that predated European contact—the social structures that underlay this economy, including gender construction, endured.
By focusing on gender, this study argues that men and women were the critical actors in the period when the Osage rose to power in the western Mississippi valley and when that power later declined on their Kansas reservation. Clearly, colonization changed Osage life, especially in terms of regional power structures, but they repeatedly adapted to this in ways that guaranteed their survival in both the spiritual and physical realms, which required men and women working together. Gender, in addition to other factors, contributed to Osage resistance to colonization.

The following chapters examine how the first century and a half of colonization impacted the Osage gender construction. It is not the intention of this book to serve as a definitive guide to the Osage ceremonial complex or their imperial and political history—that has been done with great skill by other scholars. Instead this book brings gender construction to the fore in the context of Osage history through the nineteenth century. In terms of sources, this study utilizes many traditional archival materials, including ethnographies, government documents, missionary records, and traveler narratives. As noted earlier, the creators of these sources harbored significant biases; hence, critical analysis was essential to using such material. Some of the most significant sources for this project, though, came directly from Osage scholars. Osage men and women—John Joseph Mathews, Louis Burns, George Tinker, Robert Warrior, Andrea Hunter, Jean Dennison, and Alice Anne Callahan, among many others—have produced decolonizing scholarship that “removes colonial interests from central positions in the narrative and shifts the focus to Indigenous people.”26 As Warrior has demonstrated, this scholarship is part of an often overlooked, centuries-long intellectual tradition that has asserted Indigenous sovereignty, and resisted colonization and assimilation.27 These powerful sources are referenced throughout this text and prove invaluable to studying Osage gender.

Chapter 1 explores the cosmological foundation of Osage gender complementarity. A significant amount of Osage spiritual, ritual, and historical knowledge was recorded in early twentieth-century ethnographies compiled by Francis La Flesche, an Omaha man and Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE) employee. As two Dhegian-Siouan nations, the Omaha and Osage had a shared history—mutually intelligible languages—in addition to ritual and organizational similarity. Justifiably, scholars often criticize ethnographies as biased sources in documenting gender constructions because men were often excluded from women’s ceremonial or even daily activities; however,
La Flesche interviewed several women and added their insights to his work. Female informant Mon’-ci-tse-xi (Julia Lookout, whom La Flesche referred to as “Mrs. Fred Lookout”) provided information used throughout La Flesche’s Osage dictionary, including the traditional uses of corn. Another, Hon-be’-do-ka (called Wakon’dahionbe in another La Flesche text) dictated chants and songs associated with her role as a ceremonial weaver. And Mrs. Btho’-ga-ih-ge provided a ceremonial loom. With his cultural knowledge, language skills, and diverse informants, including women, La Flesche produced important cosmological resources.²⁸

These ethnographies and other primary sources are used as the basis for understanding gender roles in earlier times. This methodology, known as up-streaming, allows ethnohistorians to specifically explore continuity within a culture and relies on the assumption that “major patterns of culture remain stable over long periods of time, producing repeated uniformities.” Thus, scholars can follow cultural constructions from the known ethnological present, such as the Osage rituals La Flesche recorded in the early twentieth century, to the less well-known past, in this case, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Upstreaming demonstrates cultural continuity when source material from the earlier centuries (discussed in subsequent chapters) bears out the findings La Flesche recorded much later.²⁹

The Non’-hon-zhin-ga (Osage priesthood) organized Osage life based on the dual masculine and feminine forces they observed in celestial and seasonal cycles. Rituals required both male and female participation and defined a sexual division of labor without hierarchical difference. Spiritually, two things were necessary for continued national existence: (1) women creating, and (2) men protecting and providing. This meant women created future citizens (bearing children), food (cultivating crops, gathering wild foods, curing meat), trade goods (tanned hides, food), and all the domestic items (clothing, lodges, utensils, etc.). Men killed game animals (providing raw materials for food and trade), and enemies in warfare (to protect homes and families). Therefore, men and women worked together to guarantee the nation’s future. Because of their different roles, each gender achieved status and power in distinct ways: women were born with it and men had to earn it. But life was not as strictly divided as one might think. In order for hunting to produce anything, men had to kill, and women had to process. Warfare required male valor, but women ritually combined their courage with men’s, and both were credited in victories. Men held political leadership positions as chiefs, but their
authority was subordinate to the priesthood, which incorporated women in a variety of ways. In other words, men and women collaborated in virtually everything, and very little could be strictly divided into “separate spheres.”

Chapter 2 examines how the advent of European colonization impacted gender construction, as the Osage built an empire through expanded hunting and trade while using violence toward Europeans and Natives to maintain their hegemony. This chapter disputes that the era of expanded hunting, warfare, and exchange disrupted gender complementarity or diminished female status, because all of these things, physically or spiritually, required women and men. In the eighteenth century, the Osage incorporated Europeans into Native systems of dominance and exchange while preserving their cosmology. Once the Osage claimed exclusive French trade, they altered their social organization to facilitate commercial hunting, while maintaining significant agricultural production. Women continued to play a central spiritual role in Osage warfare and corresponding military victories. In the hide trade, both men’s and women’s work in procuring and processing hides gained additional economic importance. The Osage responded to frequent male absence and mortality in their empire by adopting matrilocality and polygyny. Women’s sexual freedom and availability for divorce precluded female subjugation in this context. With greater trade competition and the end of New France in the late eighteenth century, the Osage, especially prominent clans, eventually embraced intermarriage with European and American traders, where women served as an economic tie between two communities that relied on each other for power and wealth. Osage dominance during this period resulted from the combined physical and spiritual roles of men and women.

Chapter 3 describes life in the early nineteenth century, when the Osage empire declined as the US settler empire expelled eastern Indigenous groups into Louisiana territory, closely followed by Euro-American missionaries and settlers. Warfare with these “proxy invaders,” particularly the Cherokee, severely disrupted Osage exchange and subsistence. Of course that was the point, and federal officials leveraged it to force Osage land cessions. Missionization had long served as the ideological justification for imperial manipulation, exploitation, and even genocide. Indigenous people’s alleged “savagery” negated their right to their resources, which “civilized” people—Europeans and Americans—could rightfully acquisition while working to convert Natives into “civilized” people. The Osage resisted any efforts to change their spiritual beliefs and instead used Protestant missionaries as mediators in...
confronting the mounting American presence in the region. Federal Indian policy’s contradictions also undermined the civilization program. US trade relations with the Osage encouraged commercial hunting, which facilitated a mobile lifestyle that kept the Osage away from missionary influence during much of the year. Throughout the 1820s the Osage continued much of their established subsistence, trade, and ritual activities. However, the US settler empire intended to eliminate Indigenous people, and when it came to the Osage in Missouri and Arkansas, this mission was unfortunately accomplished.

Chapter 4 discusses the Osage experience on their Kansas reservation. This is a period somewhat marginalized in the historiography because it was after their imperial hegemony and before their shrewd and profitable use of land sales and ranching, farming, and oil drilling leases in Oklahoma. Life in Kansas presented considerable challenges for the Osage in virtually every sense. Though they had long hunted in the region, they now had to build their towns and agricultural fields in a new landscape that placed significant pressure on gendered work. Weather, insects, and colonizing settlers hindered agriculture and thus undermined the associated ritual practices and their reiteration of complementarity. Nevertheless, women kept planting as the entire nation tried to maintain their spiritual and physical survival. In Kansas, the Osage preserved other aspects of gendered work as they focused on hunting and trade (a product of men’s and women’s labor) as the primary method of subsistence. Hunting and trading were successful early on in Kansas, but dwindling game and settler horse theft made acquiring bison increasingly difficult over time, limiting survival in both the physical and spiritual contexts. And as the primary Osage enemy became Americans, they abstained from warfare, preferring to preserve lives rather than fight the invading population, meaning the war rituals that reaffirmed women’s and men’s roles in perpetuating the nation correspondingly declined.

Also in Kansas, federal officials funded the Catholic Osage Mission, and these missionaries hoped to succeed where their Protestant predecessors failed. Difficulty in farming—for Americans and Natives—hindered these “civilizing” efforts, and the Osage reliance on hunting produced a mobile lifestyle that again kept them away from the missionaries and federal agents. Yet the Osage were hospitable toward missionaries, using them as diplomatic allies in relations with the federal government and as sources of education needed to survive in the American empire. From the 1830s into the 1850s, the Osage supplemented their economy with federal annuity payments and trade
with the Comanche on the western plains. This additional income ended at the same time American settlers arrived. Settler depredations, variable climate, and disease prompted prolonged use of mobility as a survival strategy. The rising power of the American population culminated in the final Osage confinement in present-day Oklahoma, where their lives changed in unprecedented ways: their agriculture-hunting-trading economy was destroyed, the rituals that defined this economy no longer seemed relevant, and their population was significantly diminished.

However, their time in Kansas was important because they effectively used their religious and economic structure, built on gender complementarity, to control and direct change. With all of their struggles in Kansas, this should have been the period when the Osage people became culturally or literally extinct. As Patrick Wolfe has argued, “Settler colonialism destroys to replace.” The United States needed the “elimination of the natives in order to establish itself on their territory.” The pressure just to survive was intended to make the Osage and all Indigenous people acquiesce to demands by federal agents and missionaries to change everything. Osage women should have been subjugated as men became farmers and everyone adopted Christianity. Or the destruction and despair of it all should have killed them. But that did not happen. Maintaining gendered work and the corresponding religious practices in still-relevant ways preserved their social structure that had long used self-directed adaptations to persist and even thrive in a changing world. In Kansas they made some changes to their economic and ritual practices in light of new circumstances. However, many of the “old ways” —though severely challenged—were the best methods of survival. In Oklahoma, things were different, and that was where they made more significant changes. Nevertheless, the longevity and solidarity the Osage nation has today would never have happened if they had become assimilated, sedentary, Christian farmers in Kansas. And that is why aspects of gender complementarity still connect the modern Osage with their imperial ancestors.

The conclusion briefly discusses the importance of “recovering the feminine” in the Osage empire and connects this study’s main arguments with Osage history after the nineteenth century. As US colonization continued, Osage economics and spirituality changed, but again, the Osage directed these changes in whatever ways they could to maintain Osage sovereignty. And most notably, gender complementarity remains prominent.