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Fostering Assimilation?: Intimate Boundaries between Natives and Anglos in Foster Families in the Uintah Basin

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**Fostering Assimilation?: Intimate Boundaries between Natives and Anglos
in Foster Families in the Uintah Basin**

Background of Research Interests:

Since the coming of Europeans to America there has been some type of boundary between Native American and white Euro-American settlers. (At the risk of oversimplifying but in order to conserve time, I will be referring to indigenous people of North America as Native Americans and to white Euro-American settlers as Anglos.) Boundaries between these two communities have been physical, racial, and economic. Individuals have experienced varying degrees of permeability between these borders during different stages of American history. At some stages, Anglos have drawn geographic borders to physically separate the two communities, such as when they created reservations. At other times, Anglos have unsuccessfully attempted to erase these boundaries altogether through extermination or assimilation.

The US government has used many methods to support native assimilation including treaties, legislation, education, and community programs. The most infamous of these actions promoting assimilation was probably the Dawes Act of 1887 which encouraged Natives to reject communal living and adopt Anglo agrarianism in which individuals worked their own plots of land. Many Anglo leaders have been disappointed to see assimilation policies fall short of their intended

purpose. Treaties, legislation, and land development have diminished Natives' capacity to produce a profit from their lands. In addition, Native lands are not always arable and whites frequently own the rights to natural resources that are found there.

Recent academic studies have suggested that US policies toward Native Americans have created a colonial relationship. Colonialism can be defined as a relationship in which processed goods and raw materials are exchanged between core and peripheral groups. Colonialism can also be seen as a type of control that the metropole holds over marginalized areas. In *Haunted by Empire*ⁱ, Ann Laura Stoler proposes, that a colony can be foreign or domestic and that colonial controls can entail more than economic relationships. Stohler suggests that some of the more insidious forms of colonial controls are "intimate ones" that "push bodies into new habits" (17). Intimate colonial controls can take the form of governments dictating what individuals eat, what they wear, what language they speak, and how families are allowed to interact with each other. An example of intimate control is government policy that makes children (in Stoler's words) "temporary wards of the states, removing them from their home environments while offering high doses of discipline... [and] remaking [their] racialized selves" (49). Some Native American boarding school students have experienced this situation. In Lucy Madox's *Citizen Indians*, Gertrude Bonin notes that demoralizing "constrictions and dislocations...were imposed on her by boarding schools" (142).ⁱⁱ In the same source, Luther Standing Bear criticizes boarding schools and accuses them of being "a coercive effort to force him 'to remake [himself] ...into the likeness of the invader'" (163).

Despite these many government policies aimed at transforming Native Americans into "profit-producing", capitalist Americans, success has been elusive and many Native Americans still

suffer the repercussions of assimilationist policies that were framed in a previous era. Today, on the Ouray Reservation in the Uintah Basin, Native Americans have some of the highest poverty rates, high school dropout rates, and crime rates of any other ethnic group in the state.

Foreground of my research:

Currently, I am studying intimate government control over Native Americans in the last half of the 20th century. I am particularly interested in the state foster programs that attempted to remove Native Americans from their home environments and to supplant their “traditional ways” with those of Anglo-Americans. I am studying the experiences of these foster children and the processes that families went through to assimilate their foster children into mainstream American society. In my experience, most families that sponsored Native American children were doing so, not in order to implement government policy, but in order to strengthen their communities. While an official border does exist between the two communities in the Uintah Basin, Natives and Anglos are not separated by an impermeable boundary. Rather, these two groups interact on a daily basis at schools, shopping centers, churches, etc. Each community is impacted by happenings in the other and each has a stake in assisting the other.

My interest in Native American and Anglo interactions may stem from experiences my family had while living in the Uintah Basin. Our family lived not far from the Ouray Reservation and interacted with Natives nearly on a daily basis. I remember Native Americans coming in full costume to my school as a child and dancing for us. My father worked in an elementary school where he taught both Native and Anglo students. He also spent time mentoring Native youth and proselyting on the reservation. Although there were no Native Americans in my neighborhood, I often saw Native Americans in the shops and on the streets of our town. In the late 1960s, my

parents provided a foster home for about two years for a 10-year old girl who was from the Ouray Indian Reservation. Her mother was having difficulty providing a stable home environment for her two youngest children and Social Services sought out alternative residences for them. For two years, my family shared our home and culture with this child and exercised what Stoler would term, “intimate controls”. My parents gave her guidance on what they saw as the “correct” way of doing things--such things as personal hygiene and work and social habits. The two foster children later returned to their mother on the reservation where they witnessed and were victims of violence and the young girl, unfortunately, met with an early death.

Over time I’ve learned that my family’s involvement with the foster program was not unique but that many families in that area and in other western states have fostered Native American children. Through speaking with other families, I’ve learned that these foster experiences have been varied—some positive, some negative and most have had a high degree of ambiguity. My family’s residence in this area and our participation in this program has left me with a desire to better understand ethnically-based foster programs and Anglo and Native relations in general.

Through my research, I hope to gain a better understanding of how Native American foster programs worked. I hope to answer questions such as: What were the goals of program directors? What would constitute success? How did Native students get involved in the program and how did they feel about their participation? What were some of the methods that Anglo foster parents used to encourage natives to adopt white lifestyles—haircuts, chores, piano lessons, new clothes and names, etc? What methods did natives object to? What types of methods brought the two cultures together and promoted unity among the diverse “family” members? How did Native

Americans adjust when they returned to their respective reservations? And finally, does US government interaction with Native groups on an intimate level give new meaning to freedom and control?

Historians typically analyze government documents and legislation, newspapers, tax records, etc. in order to understand the past. These types of documents, however, do not always reflect the views of marginalized individuals nor do they typically demonstrate how individuals accepted or rejected government policies. Oral history interviews can fill this void and can shed additional light on the processes and impact of government policies. I hope to integrate traditional historical analyses with oral histories from Anglo families and Native participants who were involved in state foster programs.

Borders:

In conclusion, there currently exists a man-made border between Native and Anglo communities in the Uintah Basin. This line is crossed daily as individuals from both communities traverse that border for many different purposes including education, religious affiliation, commerce, law enforcement activities, etc.. I hope to study these interactions and the impact they have had on individuals, communities, and states.

ⁱ Ann Laura Stoler, ed., *Haunted by Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

ⁱⁱ Lucy Maddox, *Citizen Indians* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).