

Stimulating and Resisting Transborder Indigenous Adoptions in North America in the 1970s

Margaret D. Jacobs

Since the early 1960s, authorities with the Saskatchewan Department of Social Services had been removing increasing numbers of Indigenous children from their families and placing them in foster care. In 1967, the province began to aggressively promote the permanent adoption of Indigenous children, primarily by non-Indigenous families. Most non-Indigenous residents of the province regarded the program as a benevolent solution to the socioeconomic problems that bedeviled Indigenous communities and were unaware that Indigenous people regarded it as a grave threat to their families and communities. In 1975 and 1976, Indigenous protest finally gained widespread coverage in the province and confronted non-Indigenous people, perhaps for the first time, with a profound challenge to their benign views of Indigenous adoption.

The occasion was a high-profile case of Indigenous child removal and placement that engendered outrage and official investigation. Authorities had placed three children of Métis heritage (a distinct category of

M.D. Jacobs (✉)

University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL), Lincoln, NE, USA

e-mail: mdjacobs3@gmail.com

Indigenous people in Canada, descended from early European fur traders and Indigenous women) with Marcien and Rita Doucette, a working-class family in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, a community with large numbers of First Nations and Métis residents. Marcien worked for the Canadian National Railway while Rita maintained their home and cared for their children. The couple had raised three biological children of their own and had already taken in three Métis foster children when social workers asked the Doucettes to provide foster care for three more Métis children, Harold, Eileen, and Geraldine Laliberté. The Doucettes willingly, even eagerly, agreed to care for the Laliberté siblings, ages one, two, and three. Eight years later, in 1975, Saskatchewan Social Service authorities decided it would be best for the Laliberté children, now nine, ten, and eleven years old, to be placed for adoption with another family. They advertised the children and found a white family, the Todds, in Michigan, who expressed interest in adopting them. The Department paid for the Todds to come to Saskatchewan to retrieve the three children, against the protests of the Doucettes and the wishes of the children. The Department insisted, however, that the children go with the Todds.

The Indigenous community in Prince Albert responded with shock and anger, as did some non-Indigenous citizens of the province, but the Department of Social Services dug in its heels and refused to return the children. Protests led, however, to an official investigation by the provincial Ombudsman, Ernest Boychuk. His report of August 1975 offers a rare glimpse into how authorities promoted and justified the removal of Indigenous children; usually such records are confidential and closed to the public. Boychuk concluded that the Doucettes were a fit and loving foster family, but he upheld the decision of officials to remove the children on the grounds that the children lacked “stimulation” and needed “permanency.” These twin priorities underwrote much of Indigenous child removal in the 1960s and 1970s, and permanency remains a pillar of child welfare legislation today. The ill-defined concept of “stimulation” rested on unarticulated class, racial, and colonial biases and functioned as a flexible tool that allowed authorities to remove Indigenous children and place them outside their families and communities. Officials also prized “permanency,” defined as termination of parental rights and a closed adoption, over ongoing connections with birth families, “impermanent” caretakers, and Indigenous communities. Saskatchewan social service authorities were not alone; other Canadian

provinces and American states engaged in similar practices and based them on comparable ideologies. What sets this case apart, however, is that official reasoning became public and engendered vehement protest.

INDIGENOUS CHILD REMOVAL IN NORTH AMERICA

Both the United States and Canada developed boarding (or residential) schools for Indigenous children in the late nineteenth century, ostensibly as a means to educate and assimilate Indian or First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people and to end Indigenous dependence on the American or Canadian governments. Removal of children to distant schools functioned as a means to simultaneously undermine Indigenous children's ties to their families, communities, and homelands and to usher them into the modern capitalist economy through training in low-wage, unskilled occupations.¹ (Contrary to popular belief, then and now, many Indigenous people had long engaged with modern capitalism, but policies in both nations had often undermined their initiative and enterprise.)² Canada and the United States consulted with one another about schools for Indigenous children, and institutions in both nations had much in common, despite the more prominent role of churches in running the schools in Canada. Government authorities in both countries often forcibly removed Indigenous children to the schools, where children were frequently subjected to harsh discipline and physical and sexual abuse. Children also suffered from inadequate food, disease, and poor health care.³ The institutionalization of Indigenous children continued until the late twentieth century in both countries, but fell out of favor after World War II, in part because of its high cost and because authorities believed the schools had failed in their efforts to assimilate Indigenous people and end their dependency on national governments.⁴

After the war, a new era of liberalism took hold in North America, and with it a shift in policy toward Indigenous children. Authorities now deemed the institutionalization of Indigenous children as damaging (as they had argued for white children since the turn of the century). Rather than reversing decades of Indigenous child removal, however, authorities now emphasized placement of children within non-Indigenous families. Officials justified this shift in policy and practice with color-blind equality rhetoric, of extending the same opportunities and rights to Indigenous children as to other children.⁵

In the United States, members of Congress pushed for “termination” and “relocation,” policies designed to eliminate tribal entities and their unique status vis-à-vis the federal government and to encourage American Indians and Alaska Natives to move to urban areas.⁶ The federal government sought to shift the burden for the education and care of Indigenous children to the states. In so doing, many states from the late 1950s into the 1970s swept up many Indigenous children into their child welfare systems, allegedly for neglect. In 1958, the Bureau of Indian Affairs contracted with the Child Welfare League of America (an umbrella organization with affiliated agencies in both the USA and Canada) to promote the adoption of dependent Indian children by non-Indian families through the Indian Adoption Project (IAP) and later the Adoption Resource Exchange of North America (ARENA). The IAP and ARENA were federal programs that transferred Indigenous children from one state to another, but they also encouraged states to make adoptive placements of Indigenous children within their own borders as well. By the 1970s, an estimated 25–35% of all Indigenous children in the United States were living apart from their families, some in institutions, but many in foster care or adoptive placement in non-Indian (mostly white) families.⁷

Similarly in Canada, officials, in the name of equality for Indigenous children, insisted that provincial governments rather than the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) should take responsibility for Indigenous children. As in the United States, this led to a dramatic increase of Indigenous children within the provincial child welfare systems by the late 1960s. The Indian and Métis population of Saskatchewan constituted only 7.5% of the population, but by 1968–1969 Indigenous children accounted for 42%, or 1443, of the total 3444, children in care.⁸ In 1967, Saskatchewan Social Service officials developed a program similar to the IAP in the United States to place Indian and Métis children for adoption. They first called the program AIM, Adopt Indian Métis, but later changed the name to REACH, Resources for Adoption of Children, after protests from Indigenous activists. The name change meant little, however. Program administrators still advertised Indigenous children through an aggressive TV, radio, and print media campaign that aimed to increase interest among white, middle-class families in adopting the children.⁹

This campaign represented adoption as a win-win situation for Indigenous children, adoptive couples, and the Canadian nation as a

whole. First, it would bring equality to deprived Indian and Métis children. One adoption proponent declared, for example, “The 32.3% of children in care who are of Métis or Indian extraction have proven they are no different from the other 67.7%, except for the color of their skin. All children have one common denominator, they need secure homes. These children are being denied that basic human right.”¹⁰ Second, adoption would be good for non-Indigenous families. One news editorialist wrote: “It is really hard to assess just who stands to gain the most from adoptions under the AIM system. The child gains the love and security of a family of his own. The family in turn gains the opportunity of immeasurably enriching the lives of its members and widening their understanding and scope.”¹¹ Finally, AIM and REACH asserted, adoption would serve as a means to reconcile Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada. “The future for children from such [adoptive] families is bright in its potential for mutual understanding and improved human relationships,” the opinion writer concluded.¹² Noticeably absent from this list of beneficiaries were the Indigenous families and communities from which the children came. Soon they would make their voices heard.

THE REMOVAL

In early 1975, the Saskatchewan Social Services Department decided to advertise the three younger Métis foster children, Harold, Eileen, and Geraldine Laliberté, who had been living with the Doucettes for over eight years. The Todds, a white family from Ann Arbor, Michigan, responded positively to the ad, and officials arranged for the Todds to come to Saskatchewan in June 1975 to meet and become acquainted with the children. According to the Doucettes, when the Todds arrived in Prince Albert, the children were “rushed away by strangers without much p[r]eparations.” At first a social worker told the children “they didn’t have to go [with the Todds] if they didn’t want, too [sic].” Yet after Mrs. Doucette allegedly “refused to cooperate and was abusive toward the [social] worker,” authorities decided that they would not return the children to the Doucettes. When the social worker informed the children they must now go with the Todds, “each put their jacket over their face and had a little cry.” Despite the distress of the children, authorities sent the children to live with the Todds in Michigan while moving forward with adoption proceedings.¹³

Marcien and Rita Doucette sought every means possible to regain custody of the children while “keep[ing] the children’s rooms as they were before they left.” They gained a meeting with the Minister of Social Services in July 1975, but it proved ineffectual. Rita left the meeting in tears, telling the press that “he doesn’t care a bit about those children ... he could have been talking about horses for all he cared.” It was clear that the Minister had no intention of responding to the Doucettes’ pleas for the return of their foster children: he had prepared a press release *before* the meeting, stating that he still supported the removal of their children.¹⁴

The Indigenous community in Prince Albert was outraged, and they rushed to the defense of the Doucettes even though Marcien and Rita did not openly claim to be Métis themselves. Robert Doucette, one of their older Métis foster children, has conducted genealogical research that provides some evidence that his foster father was Métis. Robert, now President of the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan, explains that in the 1960s and 1970s many people of Métis background hid their heritage and tried to pass as white because they faced enormous prejudice. This may have been the case with the Doucettes. According to Robert, his foster family maintained close relations with local Indigenous families, and the Indigenous community in Prince Albert regarded the Doucettes as one of their own, offering them their wholehearted support in the effort to regain their foster children.¹⁵ About 250 people crowded into the Prince Albert library auditorium to protest just a few days after the Social Services Department had transferred the children to the care of the Todds. The meeting resulted in three outcomes: a resolution to send a caravan to Michigan to enable the Doucettes to see their children and to confront American authorities about the removal; a petition to the provincial government calling for the return of the three Laliberté children to the Doucette home and first priority to the Doucettes in adopting them; and the establishment of “a citizens’ committee [...] on native adoption policy.” Attendees used the Doucette family’s struggle to expose and protest the larger collective issue of Indigenous child removal. They unanimously agreed that “native foster children should be adopted by native parents” and that all Saskatchewan children should stay in the province if adopted.¹⁶ The case also generated outrage from non-Indigenous people. Former Prime Minister John Diefenbaker, a Saskatchewan resident, denounced the removal of the three children as “scandalous,” as a “wrong, unjust, cruel, and even dastardly act” and

charged that “whoever took these children away after eight years with their foster parents has committed a grave injustice.”¹⁷

THE INVESTIGATION

As a result of widespread protests and intense media scrutiny, the province assigned their Ombudsman, Ernest Boychuk, to investigate the case and decide whether the children should be returned to the Doucettes. Boychuk identified many irregularities with the case, not the least of which was the social worker’s act of telling the children that *they* could decide if they wanted to live with the Michigan adoptive family. Boychuk also determined that “the children were well established as part of the [Doucette] family and there was genuine mutual affection,” and that “the foster children seemed to feel quite secure.”¹⁸

Yet Boychuk upheld the Department of Social Services’ decision on two main grounds. First, he cited officials’ claims that “the Doucettes had experienced difficulties with their own children in adolescence and the prospects for the foster children ‘may not be too good.’” Boychuk vaguely referred to incidents in the late 1960s when the Doucettes had quarreled with their neighbors and the police had been called. He also raised concerns that one of their older foster children had run away from home. Boychuk subtly condemned the Doucettes by mentioning these accusations against them, but he left no opportunity for them to directly refute his charges, asserting instead that “little purpose could be served here by going into the private lives of the members of this family.” Boychuk never even interviewed the Doucettes or their foster children.¹⁹ Rita Doucette complained, “It seems that they just took the social worker’s word for everything without consulting anyone else.”²⁰

Because the authorities had spread rumors about the Doucettes without giving them a chance to defend themselves, the Doucettes went to the press with their side of the story. Rita explained that their biological son had stolen a car as a juvenile, but had since settled down. In the case of her older foster daughter, Rita revealed that social authorities had placed the adolescent girl temporarily in a Saskatoon girls’ home. She had run away from the institution, not from the Doucettes’ home. Many readers empathized with the Doucettes. Liberal Party leader David Stuart, Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) for the Prince Albert area, told the media, “I wouldn’t have too much difficulty finding thousands of families in Saskatchewan which have had a runaway

daughter or son.” Moreover, Steuart asserted, “if [the Doucettes] were a good enough family for the children for nine years, then surely they were good enough to adopt them.” As for the neighborhood quarrel, Rita claimed that the Doucettes had called the police about a “menacing neighbor.” The Social Services Department threatened to take the foster children away if the Doucettes did not resolve the problem. At their own expense, the family moved to a new neighborhood, after which there were no reports of disturbances.²¹ The Doucettes believed that they had done everything possible to comply with the demands of the Department of Social Services, only to have the children they had loved and taken care of for more than eight years summarily removed from them.

At least the first set of charges that Boychuk made were specific enough that the Doucettes could counter them. Boychuk’s other justification for upholding the removal of the Laliberté children, however, was so subjective that the Doucettes would have found it nearly impossible to refute. Boychuk contended that the Doucette home “seemed to be lacking in stimulation.”²² He never specified exactly what he meant by “stimulation,” but seemed to consider it legitimate grounds for removing the Laliberté children from the home that all officials conceded was loving and secure. Social Service Department officials and many reporters implied that the Todds, in contrast to the Doucettes, would properly stimulate the three children. “The Todds enjoy music,” a reporter wrote admiringly. “Mr. Todd sings and his wife plays the piano. They quickly discovered the three children shared their interest.” According to Mr. Todd, the children “really have a lot of potential [...]. They have a really good grasp for esthetics. They enjoy music. They have a lot of talent, they really do.”²³ In extolling “stimulation,” the Ombudsman, Saskatchewan’s Minister of Social Services, many non-Indigenous social workers, and several reporters seemed to agree that families needed to do more than meet children’s basic material needs and provide them with emotional support and loving care. Especially when it came to Indigenous children, adoptive families should be able to “stimulate” them with white middle-class ideals such as proper education in western literature, art, music, and “esthetics.” Officials avoided any rationale for adoption that included assimilation or elimination of Indigeneity, but their concern with “stimulation” betrays an ongoing desire to transform Indigenous children into middle-class, white subjects.

Many social workers and officials who prioritized “stimulation” seemed to possess unexamined middle-class biases and cultural norms that led them to regard Indigenous and/or working-class families like the Doucettes as deficient and even unfit. Child welfare administrators frequently invoked “stimulation.” Adoption ads for Indigenous children often claimed that the children had lacked early stimulation and sought adoptive families who would “provide them with love, stimulation, and guidance.”²⁴ “Stimulation,” though ill-defined, permeated Cold War North America. As the scholar Amy Ogata explains, “in the prosperous years after the end of the war, middle-class, predominantly white families interpreted children’s ‘needs’ to include [...] early education, such as nursery school, more personal space, increased opportunities for play, and an unprecedented number of personal belongings such as books and toys.” Ogata contends that, in this era, North American middle-class parents came to value creativity in their children and sought to “stimulate” their children through purchasing special toys, books, furniture, and educational experiences.²⁵

Exalting “stimulation” as a nebulous but necessary ingredient for adoptive placement granted much discretion to authorities to remove children, even though the concept had no precise criteria by which to measure its extent in a home or family. Authorities who dealt with the Doucette case seemed to prioritize “stimulation” over security and stability for the Laliberté children. In 1974, the children explicitly stated to a psychiatrist that they did not want to be placed anywhere else and did not want to be separated. The psychiatrist reported that “there is no problem with any of these three children and so any decision about future placements will have to be determined on the basis of resources that are and can be provided in the present foster home.” He or she concluded, “if the present foster home is adequate, then these three children should remain together in that home-like environment in which they are satisfied, adjusted and happy.”²⁶

Yet the psychiatrist had doubts that the Doucette home was “adequate” on the grounds that it was not sufficiently stimulating. He or she warned that “there is a distinct possibility that the children will regress in terms of overall functioning if they do not receive stimulation from the home environment.” He or she added that “leaving the children in the present home or [...] placing them elsewhere would be much easier if these children were of lower mental ability because then they would

not require as much stimulation and would not be as difficult to cope with.”²⁷ The records available in the Ombudsman’s Report do not reveal that the children had any psychological problems, but the psychiatrist envisioned a future hypothetical situation in which the children might “regress” or become “difficult” to cope with if they were not sufficiently “stimulated.” Just before removing the children from the Doucettes, a social worker reported in 1975 that the children “continue to be so spontaneous and natural it is refreshing. It is easy to see they are a real delight, though perhaps immature for their ages ... given a more stimulating environment they should bloom.”²⁸ For officials with the Social Services Department the middle-class ideal of “stimulation” carried greater weight than the children’s security and happiness in their foster home.

According to Robert Doucette, Marcien and Rita never saw the Ombudsman’s Report and its vague accusations against them, but in at least one letter they demonstrated that they, too, sought to provide their foster children with stimulation, albeit not the kind sanctioned and prized by the Saskatchewan Department of Social Services. In one letter, the Doucettes pleaded with the head of Social Services, “Please Sir, let them come back to their loved ones here, also their ponies, puppies, bikes and other toys and also little friends they had to leave behind.” Robert Doucette remembered that his foster parents sought to support each of their children’s interests, in his case playing hockey and going to the library.²⁹ The Doucettes may not have exposed their children to a middle-class lifestyle or been able to afford the material objects that supposedly would “stimulate” a child properly, but they seem to have provided their children with plenty of other kinds of stimulation.

There was a coded racial dimension to authorities’ use of “stimulation” as a basis for removing Indigenous children and placing them in white homes. Many social critics and observers invoked a color-blind ideal in the postwar years. For example, Winnipeg newspaper columnist Shaun Herron declared in 1968, “We must make enormous efforts *to place the Indians in society as people, not as Indians*. They must have the same rights, the same opportunities, the same responsibilities and the same rewards as others.”³⁰ Yet a belief that Indigenous cultures (if not individuals) were racially inferior accompanied this rhetoric of racial equality. Postwar social scientists and social workers developed a virtual consensus that Indigenous cultures were inevitably dying out. As a result, Indigenous communities had, according to the Supervisor of the Family Service Department of the Children’s Bureau of Delaware, a “dead-end

quality,” a “soporific quality,” “a humdrumness.”³¹ Anthropologist Gordon MacGregor, in his study of the Pine Ridge Sioux in the 1940s, concluded that the “modern Indian way of life is one of emptiness.”³² Canadian social service employees shared these dim views of Indigenous life as utterly lacking in stimulation and a virtual dead-end.

Officials, thus, minimized protesters’ concerns that adoption of Indigenous children by non-Indigenous families would undermine Indigenous families and cultures. A three-member Advisory Committee that conducted a *second* investigation into the Doucette case concluded that “complaints about a loss of native cultural heritage by moving the children out of their Prince Albert foster home were largely unfounded [...] and any such loss would be minute and not a major factor in deciding the children’s future.”³³ Mr. Todd, too, shared these assumptions. He told one journalist that the children seemed “completely unaware of their Indian heritage.” Mr. Todd claimed in fact that he could better teach the children about their cultural background than the Doucettes and the Prince Albert community because he had been trained in cross-cultural communication.³⁴ Mr. Todd, officials, media analysts, and probably most non-Indigenous Canadians and Americans assumed that Indigenous cultures and peoples had suffered irreversible decline. Hence, it seemed entirely plausible that a non-Indigenous person who had merely read about Indians in books and taken some courses on cross-cultural communication could teach Indigenous children about their heritage.

Indigenous people in Prince Albert and across the continent in the 1970s refused to accept these reductive views of their communities and cultures. Canadian and American policies, such as assimilation through residential and boarding schools, had, indeed, delivered a blow, but Indigenous peoples had survived and they now asserted their rights to self-determination. Indigenous children, in their views, deserved to learn their heritage through imbibing cultural practices within the web of extended family and tribal relationships. A small group of mostly Métis women activists had issued a statement protesting AIM in 1971 that emphatically declared, “As Métis parents of Saskatoon, we are decidedly opposed to having our children separated from Métis homes and culture and being forced to live in white homes.” The group contended, “We want our children to be brought up as Métis and not as middle class pseudo-whites [...]. Those children belong in our Métis culture and nation.”³⁵

Authorities' view of Indigenous family life as "humdrum" and "soporific" in contrast to the "stimulation" of white, middle-class families had a strong gendered component. Authorities signaled that the Doucettes failed to conform to modern, white standards by virtue of their overly large family. Even though the Social Services Department had itself placed six foster children with the Doucettes, Department officials criticized the family for having too many children. The Advisory Committee concluded that although "the Doucette home offered a happy and loving environment [...]" "The fact is however that the home environment was not equipped to take care of eight or nine children, particularly those reaching and going through adolescence and the early and mid-teen years."³⁶ As with Boychuk's investigation, this committee never identified *any* specific problems in the Doucette family; nor did they accuse the Doucettes of abusing or neglecting the three Laliberté children. Nevertheless, the Doucette household, with nine children, failed to pass muster with authorities, who implicitly upheld the post-World War II middle-class family ideal in which parenthood was carefully planned and mothers gave intensive attention to their properly spaced children.³⁷ Here, too, Social Services officials put greater emphasis on placing Indigenous children in small nuclear families that seemed to exemplify the middle-class ideal rather than keeping children (who had already suffered removal once from their biological families) in loving and stable homes.

THE ADOPTION AND THE CHILDREN'S RETURN

In the meantime, while these investigations played out, the Todds had returned to their home in Ann Arbor with the Laliberté children. Soon reporters began to call and to show up unannounced on the Todds' doorstep. Feeling hounded, the Todds "packed up and ran" to a remote cabin for several weeks. Here, Mrs. Todd told a reporter, the children told the Todds they had "decided to be part of [their] family." But once the Todds brought the children back to Ann Arbor, they "decided the adoption would not work." So after just ten weeks, the Todds now "requested the children be removed from the[ir] home," allegedly "due to adjustment problems." The Todds said that, if the news media had not harassed them, the adoption would have been successful.³⁸

Saskatchewan's Social Services Department returned the children to Saskatchewan in September 1975, but they refused to place them back

in the custody of the Doucettes. Instead they put them in a foster family in a remote community, North Portal, near the North Dakota border, a day's drive from Prince Albert.³⁹ The Department continued to search for an adoptive family for the Lalibertés; it even put an advertisement for the three children in the *Prince Albert Daily Herald* and other Saskatchewan newspapers in January 1976. Rita Doucette and other members of the community were horrified. Rita wrote to the editor, "It was inconceivable to me that the REACH people could be so inhuman as to subject these children to this kind of publicity." Another reader, Mrs. B. Delorme, also wrote to the editor, "What right do these people have to make a spectacle of these children" and "to place their pictures in a newspaper and to give a resume concerning abilities, disabilities, etc. ... These children are not animals in a pet shop to be placed on exhibition."⁴⁰

The Doucettes applied repeatedly to the Department of Social Services to adopt their former foster children. It was clear, however, that authorities did not regard the working-class family with ties to the Indigenous community as a suitable permanent home. The Doucettes had already tried to adopt one of the foster children before the ordeal, but Social Services authorities had stipulated that they would have to adopt all the foster children or none. Like all foster parents, the Doucettes received a small governmental allowance that enabled them to afford to care for their six foster children in addition to their own. If the Doucettes had adopted all six of their foster children, it would have meant that the provincial government no longer subsidized their care. This would have been a severe financial hardship for the Doucettes. Authorities subsequently contended that the Doucettes made no serious efforts to adopt the children, and therefore the Department was within its rights to find a "permanent" home for the three youngest children. However, after the Department removed the children, the Doucettes continued to plead with authorities to allow them to adopt all the children, no matter the financial consequences.⁴¹ As Indigenous people protested against the loss of their children through adoption, many argued for subsidized adoption, a concept that has since become part of much child welfare legislation.⁴²

Such legislation came too late for the Doucette family. Authorities continued to rebuff their efforts to regain custody of and adopt the Laliberté children. In May 1976, the Department of Social Services sought to find an adoptive family in another Canadian province. They

ran ads for the children in the National Adoption Desk Bulletin, REACH distributed a special bulletin to all provinces about the children's availability, and Ontario's "Today's Child" column featured the children.⁴³ Still no prospective adoptive families responded to the ads. Yet rather than returning the children to the Doucettes, the Department considered placing the Laliberté children with the Todds again. Thinking better of it, they left them in their foster care placement in North Portal.⁴⁴ By the standards of child welfare work in the 1970s and in our own time, authorities with the Saskatchewan Social Services seemed to be willing to subject the Laliberté children to undue stress and trauma, all in the name of ill-defined concepts based on unexamined cultural, racial, class, and gender assumptions.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PERMANENCY

Authorities justified such practices in the name of championing "permanency," that is, formal, closed adoption with termination of parental rights over foster care or long-term guardianship. As Boychuk explained approvingly in his report, "the [D]epartment [of Social Services] is of the opinion that the difference in legal status between a permanent ward and an adopted child in a home is of sufficient significance socially and psychologically to a child to compensate for the trauma of separation involved even in the placement of older children."⁴⁵ Boychuk's own evidence, however, belied the Department's "opinion." By all psychological assessments, the Laliberté children had been safe, secure, and happy in the Doucette foster home for more than eight years. They were probably unaware of and unconcerned with their legal status until authorities removed them from the Doucettes. The permanency of adoption would have, indeed, been "of sufficient significance socially and psychologically" to them at that moment, for if they had been legally adopted by the Doucettes, they would have been spared "the trauma of separation" from them. Moreover, if the Laliberté children had been formally adopted by the Todds, it is doubtful that their new official status would have conferred the same sense of security and belonging that they had already possessed in the Doucette home.

Like stimulation, "permanency" is another watchword that has permeated the discourse of child welfare, particularly in regard to Indigenous adoption. One AIM report contended, for example, "The short and long-term economic benefits of permanent adoption to a

society are obvious. As a result of sound adoption placements [...] children are in a better position to become productive, contributing members of society.”⁴⁶ As Allyson Stevenson observes, “The central tenet of ‘modern adoption’ was that the adopted child would, in every aspect, assume the same rights and privileges as the naturally born child. Thus, adoption among Indian people became a method of ensuring the gradual elimination of Indian status.”⁴⁷

And like stimulation, “permanency” rests on many unexamined assumptions about gender, race, and class. Though adoption supporters rarely stated so explicitly, “permanency” required child placement within a nuclear family, not an extended family, in which a mother was devoted full-time to the care of the child and did not work outside the home. Supporters of adoption for Indigenous children in non-Indigenous families often denigrated Indigenous families because children often had multiple caregivers within their extended families. Social worker Stella Hostbjo, for example, criticized Indian families in which children “frequently pass back and forth between mother and grandmother or some other relative.”⁴⁸ Arnold Lyslo, head of the IAP, similarly asserted that “many of these children are left to run loose on the reservation without proper care or supervision, and no permanent plan is made for them.”⁴⁹ Such comments conveyed a gendered critique of Indian women for allegedly neglecting their maternal duties. Since poverty meant that many Indian women had to find employment outside their homes to support their families, concerns with permanency also betrayed a middle-class bias.⁵⁰ By virtue of their “race” and culture, Indigenous people also lacked permanency in the eyes of adoption proponents. As mentioned above, most non-Indians in this era believed Indigenous culture and old lifeways to be doomed to extinction. A priority on permanency among adoption supporters signaled a widespread but unarticulated dismissal of Indian families and communities.

Permanency was anathema to Indigenous people because it required that parental and/or caretaker rights be completely terminated, with no contact between the adopted children and their biological parents, siblings, extended family members, or (as in the case of the Doucettes) their long-time caregivers. Now with greater control over children who are tribal members, many Indigenous courts grant permanent guardianship rather than formal adoption in child welfare cases, refusing to sever family and tribal ties between a child and his or her relatives and nation.⁵¹

THE AFTERMATH

In the name of permanency, Saskatchewan Social Service Department officials initially barred the Doucettes from all contact with the Laliberté children even after the children returned to the province. The Doucettes violated these orders on several occasions, however. “We will never give up if we have to follow them to the end of the world,” they wrote to the Minister of Social Services. “They will always be in our hearts and on our minds and know they will never forget us and will be back as soon as they get a chance no matter where they are put.”⁵² The Minister threatened legal action against them, arguing that continued contact would “undermine our efforts to locate the children in a suitable home.”⁵³ In June 1976, the Doucettes hired a lawyer who advocated that they be allowed to correspond with and visit their former foster children.⁵⁴ The Department finally backed down and allowed the Doucettes to visit the three children in October of 1977 and arranged for three visits per year after that. The Doucettes claimed that their former foster children told them that, as soon as they turned sixteen, they would return to Prince Albert, where they could reunite with the Doucettes and their other siblings.⁵⁵ Robert Doucette recalls that his parents faithfully made the long drive to North Portal several times a year, and that all three children did return to Prince Albert once they came of age. Marcién and Rita were never the same, however, he says, after losing their three youngest foster children.⁵⁶

Rita Doucette, even in her grief, hoped that some good would come from the ordeal, that it “will help other children in the future.”⁵⁷ The case did, indeed, lead the Saskatchewan Department of Social Services to overhaul its Indigenous child welfare practices. It stopped all placements of Indigenous children outside the nation.⁵⁸ It also established a review committee to take complaints from Indigenous community members and took steps toward a subsidized adoption program, which would enable low-income foster parents to adopt children for whom they had been caring for many years.⁵⁹ The Doucette case thus generated some change in Indigenous child welfare policy and practice. Nevertheless, authorities still prized “stimulation” and “permanency,” amorphous concepts in which they cloaked their underlying biases against Indigenous families and communities. It remains to be seen whether recent efforts in Canada to make the government accountable for inadequate and inequitable funding for Indigenous child welfare in Indigenous communities

may unmask these attitudes and lead to a thoroughgoing exposure of such damaging codes of thought and conduct.⁶⁰

NOTES

1. A sampling of the many books on US and Canadian boarding and residential schools includes David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875–1928* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995); J.R. Miller, *Shingwauk's Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996); John S. Milloy, *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879–1986* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1999); Andrew Woolford, *This Benevolent Experiment: Indigenous Boarding Schools, Genocide, and Redress in Canada and the United States* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015).
2. Zoë Laidlaw and Alan Lester, eds., *Indigenous Communities and Settler Colonialism: Land Holding, Loss and Survival in an Interconnected World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
3. See particularly Woolford, *This Benevolent Experiment* and Margaret D. Jacobs, *White Mother to a Dark Race: Settler Colonialism, Maternalism, and the Removal of Indigenous Children in the American West and Australia, 1880–1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009).
4. See Margaret D. Jacobs, *A Generation Removed: The Fostering and Adoption of Indigenous Children in the Postwar World* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 7–13.
5. Jacobs, *A Generation Removed*, 18–32, 37–64, 173–175, 216–223; Allyson Stevenson, “Intimate Integration: A Study of Aboriginal Transracial Adoption in Saskatchewan, 1944–1984” (Ph.D. diss., University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, 2015), 121–122, 175–178.
6. There is much scholarship on termination and relocation. Some overviews include Roberta Ulrich, *American Indian Nations from Termination to Restoration, 1953–2006* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010) and Donald L. Fixico, *Termination and Relocation: Federal Indian Policy, 1945–1960* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986).
7. Laura Briggs, *Somebody's Children: The Politics of Transracial and Transnational Adoption* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 71–74; Karen Balcom, “The Logic of Exchange: The Child Welfare League of America, The Adoption Resource Exchange Movement, and the Indian Adoption Project, 1958–1967,” *Adoption & Culture* 1: 1 (2007): 1–65; Jacobs, *A Generation Removed*, 15–32, 103.

8. Saskatchewan Department of Welfare, *Annual Report* (1967–1968), 30; Saskatchewan Department of Welfare, *Annual Report* (1968–1969), 20. Reports available at Saskatchewan Archives Board, Regina (hereafter SAB).
9. Jacobs, *A Generation Removed*, 176–182; Stevenson, “Intimate Integration,” 179–244.
10. Quoted in Veronica Strong-Boag, *Finding Families, Finding Ourselves: English Canada Encounters Adoption from the Nineteenth Century to the 1990s* (Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2006), 152–153.
11. News clipping, op-ed, “Families of Their Own,” *Regina Leader-Post*, March 21, 1968, Folder I. 49, Deputy Minister Records, R-935, SAB.
12. “Families of Their Own.”
13. “Children Sent to Mich. To Stay with Foster Parents,” *Moose Jaw Times Herald*, August 2, [1975], III.H.15 (a) and E.C. Boychuk, Press Release Re. “Mr. and Mrs. Doucette—Prince Albert,” August 1, 1975, 22, III.H.15 (d), both in Alex Taylor fonds, R-1298; letter from the Doucettes to Rolfes, received March 1, 1976, I. 46d-55-1a, Herman Rolfes fonds, R-1100; both fonds are in SAB.
14. Quoted in John Drabble, “Snyder Still Convinced Adoption was Correct,” *Prince Albert Herald*, July 23, [1975]; “Snyder’s Mind Made Up Before Meeting Couple,” *Moose Jaw Times Herald*, July 23 [1975], both in III.H.15 (A) Clippings File, Taylor Fonds, SAB.
15. Interview with Robert Doucette by Margaret Jacobs, June 14, 2013, Saskatoon, Canada.
16. John Drabble, “Doucettes Going to Ann Arbor to See Children,” *Prince Albert Daily Herald*, July 17, 1975, Robert Doucette fonds, SAB, Saskatoon; Geoff White, “P.A. Couple Plans Trip in Hopes of Retrieving Three Foster Children,” *Saskatoon Star Phoenix*, July 17, [1975], III.H.15 (a), Taylor Fonds, SAB.
17. Quoted in “Dief Says Action ‘Unjust, Cruel,’” *Prince Albert Herald*, July 15, [1975], III.H.15 (a), Taylor fonds, SAB.
18. Boychuk, Press Release, 10.
19. Boychuk, Press Release, 7–10, 16, quote, p. 10; “P.A. Couple Disappointed with Adoption Decision,” *Moose Jaw Times Herald*, August 5, [1975], III.H.15 (a), Taylor Fonds, SAB.
20. Quoted in “P.A. Couple Disappointed with Adoption Decision.”
21. Peter Hawley, “Decision Remains Firm in Doucette Case Handling,” *Regina Leader-Post*, July 23, 1975; Steuart quoted in Tim Naumetz, “Steuart Questions Adoption by Americans,” *Regina Leader-Post*, July 11, 1975, both in III.H.15 (a), Taylor Fonds, SAB; Boychuk, Press Release, 9.
22. Boychuk, Press Release, 6.

23. Fred Harrison, "The Adoption that Backfired at Ann Arbor," *Regina Leader-Post*, September 27, 1975, III.H.15 (a), Taylor Fonds, SAB.
24. See, for example, Adoption Desk Bulletin 1, no. 1 (Ottawa: Health and Welfare, May 1976), I. 46d-55-1a, Rolfes Fonds, SAB.
25. Amy F. Ogata, *Designing the Creative Child: Playthings and Places in Midcentury America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 6–7.
26. Quoted in Boychuk, Press Release, 11.
27. Quoted in Boychuk, Press Release, 11, 12.
28. Quoted in Boychuk, Press Release, 17.
29. Letter from Doucettes to Rolfes, received March 2, 1976, I. 46d-55-1a, Rolfes fonds, SAB; interview with Robert Doucette.
30. Shaun Herron, "The Herron Folk," column, emphasis added, *Winnipeg Free Press*, May 4, 1968, clipping in Box 2395, Folder 15, Social Planning Council (SPC) fonds, Archives of Manitoba (hereafter AM).
31. Mary Davis, "One Agency's Approach to the Indian Adoption Project," *Child Welfare* 40:5 (1961): 15.
32. Gordon MacGregor, *Warriors Without Weapons: A Study of the Society and Personality Development of the Pine Ridge Sioux* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1946), 121, 191, 209. Interestingly, like Boychuk, MacGregor's evidence did not support his conclusions. His findings showed that members of the Pine Ridge community had sustained traditional extended family structures and methods of childrearing that provided children with a safe and secure upbringing.
33. Quoted in Geoff White, "Number of Children in Home Led to Decision," *Star Phoenix*, Saskatoon, October 18, [1975], III.H.15 (A) Clippings File, Taylor Fonds, SAB.
34. "U.S. Couple Blames Media for Failure of Adoption," *Saskatoon Star Phoenix*, September 27, [1975], III.H.15 (A) Clippings File, Taylor Fonds, SAB.
35. Statement from Métis Society, included in Memo from Sinclair to Sihvon, December 3, 1971, Folder I. 49, Deputy Minister Records, SAB.
36. White, "Number of Children in Home Led to Decision."
37. Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).
38. "U.S. Couple Blames Media for Failure of Adoption"; Harrison, "Adoption that Backfired"; "Minister Responds to Advisory Committee Report," press release, October 17, 1975, with Memo to Herman Rolfes, from Jim Oxman, Director, Information and Public Relations, July 8, 1976, I. 46d-55-1a, Rolfes fonds, SAB.
39. Letter from Herman Rolfes to Mr. E. Robert Stromberg (attorney), June 24, 1976; "Rolfes Reviews State of Children," news release, n.d., ca. June, 1976; both in I. 46d-55-1a, Rolfes fonds, SAB.

40. Margaret Lipman, National Adoption Desk, to Gerald E. Jacob, Director, REACH, May 19, 1976, I. 46d-55-1a, Rolfes fonds, SAB; Mrs. R[ita] Doucette to Editor, "Outraged by REACH Publicity Format," n.d. [ca. Feb 1976] and Letter to editor of *Prince Albert Daily Herald* from B. Delorme, "REACH Tactic Criticized," January 30, 1976, I. 46d-55-1a, Rolfes Fonds, SAB.
41. Geoff White, "P.A. Foster Parents Protest Adoption," *Saskatoon Star Phoenix*, July 11, [1975]; "Family Isn't Giving Up," *Regina Leader-Post*, July 23, 1975; Naumetz, "Steuart Questions Adoption by Americans"; III.H.15 (a) Clippings File, Taylor Fonds, SAB; Boychuk, Press Release, 6, 7, 13, 22, 29.
42. See for example, G. McRae, "Summary of the Position Paper on the Proposed Child and Family Services Act," 1984, Box 5055, File 29, SPC fonds, AM; Arthur Lazarus to William Byler, December 10, 1973, Box 75, Folder 3, Association on American Indian Affairs Records; 1851–2010; Public Policy Papers; Department of Rare Books and Manuscripts; Princeton University Library, Princeton, New Jersey (hereafter AAIA papers). The US *Adoption Assistance Act and Child Welfare Act* of 1980 established adoption subsidies for families who adopted "special-needs" children, which included Native American children.
43. Lipman to Jacob.
44. White, "Number of Children in Home Led to Decision."
45. Boychuk, Press Release, 26.
46. Department of Welfare, Province of Saskatchewan, "Adopt Indian-Métis Project," Report 1967–1969, 8, File 8.6.23, Folder 1, Department of Social Services, R-1655, SAB.
47. Stevenson, "Intimate Integration," 189.
48. Stella Hostbjor, "Social Services to the Indian Unmarried Mother," *Child Welfare* XL: 5 (1961): 8.
49. Arnold Lyslo, "Indian Adoption Project," April 1960, Box 17, Folder 3, 2; Child Welfare League of America papers, Social Welfare History Archives, Special Collections, University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis.
50. Carol Williams, ed., *Indigenous Women and Work: From Labor to Activism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012); Mary Jane McCallum, *Indigenous Women, Work, and History 1940–1980* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2014).
51. Barbara Ann Atwood, "Permanency for American Indian and Alaska Native Foster Children: Taking Lessons from Tribes," *Arizona Legal Studies* Discussion Paper No. 08–22, October 2008, accessed June 6, 2016, http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1275458.

52. Letter from the Doucettes to Rolfes, received March 2, 1976, I. 46d-55-1a, Rolfes Fonds, SAB.
53. Letter from Rolfes to the Doucettes, June 2, 1976 and letter from Rolfes to E. Robert Stromberg, June 24, 1976, I. 46d-55-1a, Rolfes fonds, SAB.
54. Letter from E.R. Stromberg, lawyer, to Herman Rolfes, June 4, 1976, I. 46d-55-1a, Rolfes fonds, SAB.
55. Garnet Wipf, Member of Legislative Assembly, to Herman Rolfes, Minister of Social Services, October 11, 1977 and Wipf to Mr. and Mrs. Doucette, December 2, 1977, I. 46d-55-1a, Rolfes Fonds, SAB.
56. Interview with Robert Doucette, June 14, 2013.
57. Quoted in Geoff White, "Doucettes Intend to Continue Case," *Saskatoon Star Phoenix*, August 2, [1975], III.H.15 (A) Clippings File, Taylor fonds, SAB.
58. Ruth Warick, "Adoption Protests: Native Persons Occupy Office of Deputy Minister," *Regina Leader-Post*, March 24, 1976, news clipping, File number 5.2, Department of Social Services records, R-1721, SAB. See also Memo from Cameron to F.J. Bogdasavich, Deputy Minister, October 4, 1976, File III.18.a, Folder I.49, Deputy Minister Records, SAB; and memo from Cameron to Regional Directors and DNS, October 23, 1975, File 58.9, Department of Social Services, R-1406, SAB.
59. "Adoption Review Committee Begins Work," news release, May 26, 1977, File 5.5, Department of Social Services, R-1721, SAB.
60. In 2007, the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society, under the leadership of long-time Indigenous child welfare advocate Cindy Blackstock, and the Assembly of First Nations filed a human rights complaint against the Canadian federal government, alleging that Canada's failure to provide equitable funding for culturally appropriate child welfare services to First Nations children on reserves constituted discrimination on the basis of race and ethnic origin. The Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ruled in January 2016 that "the Canadian government is racially discriminating against 163,000 First Nations children and their families by providing flawed and inequitable child welfare services." See "I am a witness," First Nations Child & Family Caring Society of Canada, accessed October 15, 2016, <https://fncaringsociety.com/i-am-witness>.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Margaret D. Jacobs is currently the Chancellor's Professor of History and Director of the Women's and Gender Studies Program at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL), USA. In 2015–16, she served as the Pitt Professor of American History and Institutions at Cambridge University. Her research and teaching focus on women, gender, Indigenous peoples, and colonialism in the American West and other settler colonial contexts. Her book *White Mother to a Dark Race: Settler Colonialism, Maternalism, and the Removal of Indigenous Children in the American West and Australia, 1880–1940* (2009) won the 2010 Bancroft Prize for the best book in American history from Columbia University. She published *A Generation Removed: The Fostering and Adoption of Indigenous Children in the Postwar World* with University of Nebraska Press in fall 2014.

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