

SECTION FOUR

PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES

SOME LINES can never be crossed and can only be pushed, leaned against like a barbed wire fence: flexible to a point, but a nasty bite nonetheless. Race relations in the North American West have generally worked like this, as whites and people of colour bumped up against each other, pushed and resisted, accommodating but only to a point. It is a prickly and painful story, with more than enough villains and unhappy endings to go around.

The U.S. West in the late nineteenth century and the west coast of British Columbia in the mid-twentieth century had few things in common, but among those few things were contentious race relations and the unexpected centrality of education to political debates about race. Educators and the education system worked to build fences as often as they worked to bend them or tear them down. The articles in this section offer two new ways of seeing how educators reinforced or resisted the boundaries of race. Margaret Jacobs and Helen Raptis take us to the heart of these tensions as they discuss two different kinds of educational reformers in two very different Wests.

Shifting U.S. policies toward Native Americans gave education a new prominence after 1880, and Jacobs shows how central white women reformers were to this process. By portraying native mothers as dirty or heathens or immoral, and therefore unfit to raise their own children, white women invented and justified their “duty” to re-educate Indian children. However noble their intentions, Jacobs shows how “great white mothers,” no less than the “great white father,” acted as agents of white colonialism.

Edith Lucas, the subject of Helen Raptis’s article, was a rather different sort of educator who spent her career challenging racist inequalities. British Columbia’s physical and social geography worked against the aims of a public education system, yet Lucas devoted her career to finding ways to challenge those obstacles. Her successes might have been unexpected, given that she was only one of three women to head a branch of the province’s education department when she was appointed in 1941. Raptis probes the particular bureaucratic circumstances that enabled Lucas’s efforts. The challenges of serving Japanese Canadians in World War II relocation camps and, later, new immigrants who arrived after the war, illuminates racial divides in British Columbia. It also invites comparisons with the policies of the United States toward Japanese Americans during the war and would-be immigrants after 1945.

These two very different chapters in the history of western women educators are vivid reminders of the power of education to reinforce or to bridge the boundaries of race. Both articles highlight the centrality of children to the state’s plans. In both cases the state was trying to punish the parents—for being Japanese and therefore a supposedly unassimilable threat to the nation, or for being native and therefore an obstacle to the nation’s development. And in both instances, the profession that empowered some women could not eradicate the racism that constricted other women and their children. In neither instance could the racial boundaries be entirely overcome. Reformers could only choose to push the boundaries, push the people they sought to serve, or be pushed.