

A Place to Call Home: Studying the Indian Placement Program

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LATE MORNING HEAT SHIMMERS OFF the hood of my battered Honda. Nothing in sight ahead but more parched fields stretching under an opal sky. A box of cassette tapes in the back seat rattles a staccato soundtrack to my solitary driving. I am near the border between the Navajo and Hopi reservations, where boundaries are forever in dispute. Four miles back I whipped by Coal Mine canyon, which drops off steeply into a dry painted ravine a mile behind the rodeo grounds, and turned off the highway onto an unpaved road. A group of horses shaded by a water tower shies away as my car approaches. I turn off the dirt road toward the trailer I have been told is there. My rear-view mirror reflects two streams of rusty dust kicking up from my tires, lingering in the dry air, marking my progress across a hill that seems to have no road at all. At last the mobile home materializes, with an ellipsis of old tires on the roof and a single strand of barbed wire outlining the dirt lot. Three wildly barking dogs announce my arrival as I mount the steps and knock.

The woman, dressed in a white shirt and short blue shorts, barefoot, opens the door. Her hair is parted in the middle and falls long and black nearly to her waist. She eyes me with suspicion. I introduce myself as an anthropology student studying the Mormon Indian Placement program and tell her I am interviewing Navajos who were on Placement, like herself.¹ She says she doesn't want to talk to me, but she invites me in anyway to the neatly kept interior. I note the set of encyclopedias, the house

1. The 1991 fieldwork for this study was funded by Leaders for Manufacturing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the MIT Kelly Fund. Thanks to Jean E. Jackson, James Howe, Heather Lechtman, H. Kent Bowen, Arthur Kaledin, Clarence Bishop, Thom and Bunn Ranger, George P. Lee, and especially Don Hangen. I respect the privacy of my informants by withholding their names.

plants, the bearskin (with claws still attached) hanging on the wall, the small television tuned to MTV.

She tells me it was a mistake for the LDS church to take kids so young for Placement, that she doesn't want to talk with me about it. I listen for about fifteen minutes to why she doesn't want to talk about Placement, about the rudeness of being thrust into another world as a ten-year-old girl. Finally, when it seems obvious she does want to talk about her experiences, I offer the consent form; we end up talking for three hours. She remembers the loneliness, feelings of rejection from her natural parents, isolation in public school among whites. She tells me it has taken her entire life to make peace with her own past. She estimates that less than 10 percent of Navajos who went on Placement have stayed active in the church; as for herself, she believes in the Book of Mormon, she says, but hesitates to lose ties to her older Navajo relatives and their traditional religion if she were to commit to "all those meetings." The program took her when she was too little to understand what was happening, she says, although she doesn't blame the church or her foster parents, whose intentions she's sure were good.

Her questions haunt me. "When people graduated and came back to the reservation," she asks me, "what was supposed to happen to the values they learned? What was supposed to happen to them? I know for me, I have more bad feelings than good; and nobody has the answers to those questions, no one knew how it would come out."² Our conversation winds down. She shows me a small rug she has just finished weaving, which she intends to sell to her coworkers. I snap her picture, the rug flapping out in front of her chest, and watch her gracefully climb back over the barbed wire. Her flip-flops make a little slapping sound. I start my engine and point my car towards the horizon.

PLACING PLACEMENT

The Indian Student Placement program was a cross-cultural foster care program administered by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints which placed Native American Mormon children into white Mormon homes during the school year. From informal arrangements between southern Utah beet farmers and the children of Navajo migrant pickers in the late 1940s grew a program that at its peak in the early 1970s placed close to 5,000 students a year.³ Placement recruited children eight

2. Interview with anonymous informant, Coalmine Mesa, Arizona, 10 Aug. 1991.

3. Neil Birch, "Helen John: The Beginnings of Indian Placement," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18 (Winter 1985): 119-30; Clarence Bishop, "Indian Placement: A History of the Indian Student Placement Program of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints," M.S.W. thesis, University of Utah, 1967; Garth Mangum and Bruce Blumell, *The Mormons' War on Poverty: A History of LDS Welfare, 1830-1990* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1993), 193-95.

years old and older to live with Mormon families, returned them to their reservations for the summers, and was designed to allow Indian children to "have educational, spiritual, social and culture opportunities in non-Indian community life."⁴ As such, the program embraced dual goals: *educative*—teaching young Indians knowledge, skills, and language to better their chances for success in school and career, and *acculturative*—bringing them in contact with the morals, folkways, and cultural practices of another ethnic group with the expectation that the Indian children would benefit from adopting (white) LDS values and behaviors.

In many ways, the Indian Placement Program replicated other social-welfare institutions aimed at converting Indians to white, Western modes of thought and belief. But one crucial difference is the unique theological relationship the LDS church has claimed with Native Americans. The Book of Mormon itself was intended for the descendants of its writers, or as most Mormons popularly believe, the indigenous people of this hemisphere.⁵ From its inception, then, Mormonism was intended to be a Native American religion—dedicated in part to restoring the gospel to those whose ancestors embraced it anciently. Following this logic, some believe that Lamanites (a Book of Mormon term that has come to refer to all Native American Indians) will play a central role in preparing for the imminent second coming of Christ, and that non-Lamanite members are merely assisting Lamanites in this work. This idea was clearly expressed before 1900 by church president Wilford Woodruff, who wrote: "The Lamanites will blossom as the rose on the mountains. It will be a day of God's power among them, and a nation will be filled with the power of God and receive the gospel, and *they* will go forth and build the New Jerusalem, and *we* shall help them."⁶ These kinds of interpretations were commonly espoused as recently as twenty years ago, when Placement seemed to fulfill such prophecies about Native Americans in the church.⁷

4. LDS Social Services, *Indian Student Guide* (May 1973), 1.

5. "The Book of Mormon is a record of the forefathers of our western tribes of Indians—by it we learn that our western tribes of Indians are descendants from that Joseph who was sold into Egypt, and that the land of America is a promised land unto them." Joseph Smith, Jr., *Documentary History of the Church*, 1:315, 4 Jan. 1833, quoted in *Latter-day Prophets Speak: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Church Presidents*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (1947; repr. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 347.

6. *Journal of Discourses* 15:272, cited in *LDS Reference Encyclopedia*, ed. Melvin K. Brooks (Salt Lake: Bookcraft, 1960), 261-62, emphasis added.

7. Thomas J. Fyans, "The Lamanite Must Rise in Majesty and Power," *Ensign* 6 (May 1976): 12-13; Jerry Jacobs, "The Church has Divine Mandate to Teach Gospel to Indians," *Church News*, 20 Nov. 1976; Dean L. Larsen, "Mingled Destinies: The Lamanites and the Latter-day Saints," *Ensign* 5 (Dec. 1975): 8-13; James D. Mathews, "A Study of the Cultural and Religious Behavior of the Navaho Indians which Caused Animosity, Resistance or Indifference to the Religious Teachings of the Latter-day Saints," M.R.Ed. thesis, Brigham Young University, 1968, 73-77.

In a 1975 First Presidency message, Spencer W. Kimball reminded Lamanite readers, "You are a chosen people; you have a brilliant future. You might possess all the wealth of this earth, but you would be nothing compared to what you can be in this Church."⁸ Dean L. Larsen described ideal Mormon-Indian relations in the church as a reciprocal arrangement: "in gratitude for the Book of Mormon, Gentile Mormons would 'nourish' and restore [Lamanites] to their promised blessings. Neither group would be able to completely fulfill their destiny without the other."⁹

The view that North American Native Americans would play a central role in the events of the last days may have been easier to sustain when they constituted the primary "other" to nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century white Mormon settlements, but it becomes harder to make these claims today. In the last ten years the church has become ever more international in membership, rhetorically emphasizing cultural diversity and global missionization as a general theme; this provides the context in which Placement has been gradually cut back.¹⁰ Enrollment in Placement has been steadily decreasing, while coordinating programs like the Indian Education department at BYU, the Indian Committee of the Quorum of the Twelve, Indian seminaries in BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) and public schools, and Indian youth conferences have all ended. Age of participation has been raised to sixteen, so that Placement now only involves academically gifted high school juniors and seniors. As one measure of the program's diminished existence, several of my informants believed the program had already been phased out altogether. Among the rest of the sample, the general opinion prevailed that Placement would soon end.

One way to interpret Placement's decline is historical. Changes in the church's Indian programs followed the 1985 death of President Spencer W. Kimball, who was outspoken all his life on behalf of Native Americans. Succeeding church leaders have tended to emphasize church growth abroad. With accelerating membership outside the boundaries of the United States, programs like Placement may be less relevant to the propagation of pluralistic, worldwide missionization. Then too, as some of my informants suggested, Placement may be a natural victim of its own success; conditions on the reservation have changed, and today's children can benefit from their parents' opportunities without needing to be relocated to another family for decent education and church participation.

An alternative explanation is theological. To some Native American

8. Spencer Kimball, "Our Paths Have Met Again," *Ensign* 5 (Dec. 1975): 2-7.

9. Dean L. Larsen, *You and the Destiny of the Indian* (Salt Lake: Bookcraft, 1966).

10. See the many thoughtful articles on this topic in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29 (Spring 1996).

Mormons, Placement's wane signals a fundamental shift in doctrinal interpretation of Lamanite roles; perhaps the church leadership was suddenly disenchanted with the idea of last-days Lamanite leadership. George P. Lee was, of course, the most notable proponent of this idea.¹¹ Although since his excommunication in 1989 Lee has eschewed the idea of leading a splinter group, he is not alone in questioning whether the church neglects its obligation to its Native American members. The vital expansion of the church in some parts of the world is not reflected on the Navajo reservation, where many LDS congregations are shrinking and being consolidated. During my fieldwork, several people estimated that church activity on the reservation stood at around 10 percent of members on the rolls—a statistic that, true or not, was being bandied about freely. Clearly, the present situation is at odds with what was a widely-accepted interpretation of the destiny of Native Americans in the church, and where optimistic observers saw Lamanites "blossoming as the rose" twenty years ago, today there seems less to celebrate. Between 1990 and 1996 the number of Placement students has dwindled from 450 to 50. Both the long-time administrator, Clarence Bishop, and the current commissioner of the program, Steve Sunday, say that they expect Placement will continue as long as parents want to send their children.

Curiosity prompted me to undertake a study of the Indian Student Placement Program in the summer of 1991; I was interested in what participants remembered about the program, how they perceived its consequences in their lives, what were their speculations about its effect on the wider Mormon community. Growing up in the East after the program had begun to be cut back, I had no history with Placement. At college in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I was struck by the way many of my Utah-raised church friends viewed Placement—a distinctly Western Mormon experience—with something akin to embarrassment, like the garrulous uncle at a family reunion. Our parents' and grandparents' generation perpetuated the program, which in our present-day world of multiculturalism seems tinged with imperialistic, antiquated values of assimilation and cultural mentoring.

The churchwide need for some kind of closure, if not consensus, seems more than evident. Yet the program has received little scholarly attention either from outside the church or from within, and the silence on the subject is puzzling, born perhaps of this present-day embarrassment, perhaps of familiarity, perhaps of indifference. Church publications have reported on Placement primarily from the foster family's

11. George P. Lee, "To the First Presidency and the Twelve," reprinted in *Sunstone* 13 (Winter 1989): 50-55.

perspective.¹² What few formal studies of Placement there are make use of social scientific data to assess the program's success or failure.¹³ A mere handful of the thousands of former Placement participants have written publicly about their experiences.¹⁴ A common theme in published accounts of Placement is the conspicuous absence of the Native American participants' own perspectives.

This study was designed to address that deficit. In order to understand Placement's consequences, I gathered twenty-two participant oral histories during several weeks of fieldwork on the Navajo reservation in 1991. I conducted my research from a particular position: as an insider to Mormonism (a life-long member and Eastern white female academic, to be precise), yet a total outsider to Navajo life. My fieldwork therefore had some methodological complications. On the one hand I was objectively studying Navajo self-perceptions and reconstruction of memory, entering my informants' worlds as a curious but distanced outsider. And on the other hand, my "objectivity" was mere academic fiction; my informants and I shared not only involvement in a common American culture but association in the church's tightly knit religious subculture—including a common discourse about the nature of truth.

12. A Father, "Six + One = Six," *Ensign* 1 (Jan. 1971): 27-29; Gerry Avant, "Foster Daughter Fits in Just as Her Mother Did," *Church News*, 20 Jan. 1979, 5; Harold C. Brown, "The Church in the Lamanite World: Learning the Best of Both Cultures," *Ensign* 5 (Dec. 1975): 22; Victor L. Brown, "Blessing the One," *Ensign* 9 (Nov. 1979): 88-91; "Foster Families Needed for More Indian Students," *Church News*, 31 July 1976; "Indian Placement: The Three Most Common Questions," *Ensign* 6 (July 1976): 35-37; "Indian Students Bless Many Homes," *Church News*, 22 May 1976; "Indian Students Bridge Two Worlds," *Church News*, 11 Mar. 1978; "Indian Placement Notes Twentieth Anniversary," *Ensign* 3 (Jan. 1973): 78; Janice Kapp Perry, "Shared Son," *Ensign* 10 (Oct. 1980): 42-44; Mary Helen Powell, "Room for Calvin," *Ensign* 3 (May 1973): 61-63.

13. Bishop, "Indian Placement"; Robert D. Smith, "Relationships Between Foster Home Placement and Later Acculturation Patterns of Selected American Indians," M.S.W. thesis, Utah State University, 1968; Martin D. Topper, "Mormon Placement: The Effects of Missionary Foster Families on Navajo Adolescents," *Ethos* 7 (Summer 1979): 142-60; Bruce A. Chadwick, Stan L. Albrecht, and Howard M. Bahr, "Evaluation of an Indian Student Placement Program," *Journal of Contemporary Social Work*, Nov. 1986, 515-24; Bruce A. Chadwick and Stan L. Albrecht, "Mormons and Indians: Beliefs, Policies, Programs and Practices," in *Contemporary Mormonism: Social Scientific Perspectives*, ed. Marie Cornwall, Tim B. Heaton, and Lawrence A. Young (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994): 287-309. The program has, of course, generated much criticism as well. For typical examples, see John Heinerman's assessment in *The Mormon Corporate Empire* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 223-27; also Bob Gottlieb and Peter Wiley, "The Kids Go Out Navaho, Come Back Donny and Marie," *Los Angeles Magazine*, Dec. 1979, 140.

14. George P. Lee, *Silent Courage: An Indian Story, the Autobiography of George P. Lee, a Navajo* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1987), esp. chaps. 9-15; Birch, "Helen John"; Giles H. Florence, Jr., "The Best of Both Worlds," *Ensign* 20 (Jan. 1990): 58-62; Pershlie Tewawina, "A Lamanite: Who Am I?" *New Era* 1 (Aug. 1971): 49.

The ambiguity of this position is nothing new in the social sciences, to be sure, and the acknowledgment of researcher subjectivity has become something of the fashion in the disciplines, accompanied by much chest-thumping of the *mea culpa* variety. The once-solid footing of (social) scientific objectivity seems permanently dismantled. Contemporary anthropological research, thoroughly informed by postmodern and postcolonial theory, has come largely to revolve around the interplay between researcher and informant, about shared meaning and negotiated truth. It has become the initial assumption that the social scientist more than leaves a mark on her informants; she is implicated in—even more, responsible for and revealed by—her interpretation of her informants and the effect of her conclusions. The argument hardly needs to be made any longer that maintaining a significant critical distance is an illusory goal and that all research, to greater or lesser extent, is self-revelation.¹⁵

Given my initial position on Mormon scholarship—thoroughly, unapologetically subjective—I argue even further that starting as an insider is actually a more, not less, authoritative stance. I also claim that postmodernism's critique of objectivity opens the way, even within Mormon truth-centered epistemology, for a more authentic representation of the past and present. I will have more to say about this last point later in the essay.

REMEMBERING PLACEMENT

Because of the program's scope and the thousands of Native Americans and white Mormon families who participated on both sides of the relationship, Placement's reach was long and deep into LDS homes. Its effects colored our most intimate daily rituals of family life, our memories both individual and collective. The potential pool of informants on this subject is vast and largely untapped, and their stories—in their own words—provide a compelling window onto struggles at once applicable to understanding cultural frontiers wherever and whenever they occur, and at the same time deeply, finally, personal.

The informant sample on which this essay is based, although not randomly selected, is a fair demographic representation of Placement partic-

15. See, for example, James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Clifford Geertz, "Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought," *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 19-35; Michael Jackson, *Paths Toward a Clearing: Radical Empiricism and Ethnographic Inquiry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989); Roger Sanjek, ed., *Fieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).

ipants.¹⁶ My sample was composed of twenty-two interviewees, all members of the Navajo Nation. Seven were male and fifteen female, a male-female ratio similar to that in the program at any given time. Average age was thirty-three and all but one had been born on the reservation. All had completed high school; ten had attended some college; and four held college degrees. They had a range of Placement experiences: fourteen had been under ten when they first went on Placement, and eighteen were under thirteen, while three were in the last year or two of high school. Forty-three percent lived with a single foster family. Another 43 percent lived with two, and 14 percent lived with three or more families. The average length of time in the program was seven years, with an average age of ten at the time of first placement. The interviewees all declared themselves to be church members.

Based on these statistics, my sample may be considered comprised mainly of "success stories" from the church's perspective: long-term participants on Placement, with more or less lasting ties to the church. Given this, the most surprising element of my findings was the depth of ambiguity among those who at first glance would seem to be the most ready defenders of the program. Painful memories surfaced as informants remembered their initial adjustment to their foster homes. Lingering bitterness tinged their sense of being "of two minds," of belonging, as some said, to two worlds and yet to neither.

This theme initially surfaced when former participants remembered entering the program for the first time. Children going on Placement were bussed to a central location where they had medical checkups and waited for their foster families to meet them. One man remembered—as a twelve-year-old boy who'd never been more than a few miles from home—deciding to go back home and running away from the building, making circles in the city for hours until his foster parents found him. "As it turned out," he said, "the people that took me in were a very well-to-do people. I didn't know that; I thought all anglo people were that way. The car they picked me up in turned out to be a Cadillac." Perceiving his loneliness, they offered to send him home if he wanted. He recalled, "I remember they tried to do everything they could to try to get me over the lonely feeling. They had a swimming pool in the back yard. I knew how to swim, and [when] they got me in the pool I just went over to a corner and stayed there. I wouldn't come out of my corner."¹⁷

Most Placement participants I interviewed had similarly poignant memories of their initial adjustment to life in a white Mormon family and

16. Tona J. Hangen, "I Remember Placement: Participating in the Indian Student Placement Program of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," B.S. thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1992.

17. Interview with anonymous informant, taped interview, Page, Arizona, 5 Aug. 1991.

community. Regardless of their present-day feelings about the program, they had little good to say about their first encounters with this entirely foreign set of experiences. In particular, the impersonal atmosphere of the processing center (a building on BYU campus for many years) stands out in the recollections of many participants, especially those who were quite young at the time. "It was a crazy way they did it," said one woman who was eleven when she first went on Placement. "They put us all in this big building, and gave us our shots and got everything updated. They took care of us until about three or four in the afternoon, and then the families started coming to pick up the kids. They had the names picked out ahead of time—they knew who they were looking for but I didn't know anything about them; being taken from your family and into a different family, it was the loneliest [of] feelings."¹⁸ Another woman, eight at the time, remembers total bewilderment at leaving her parents. "I didn't even know what's going on. Mom and Dad didn't tell me," she recalled. "They just put me on the bus and said goodbye. I didn't know where I was going. My brother at that time was in fourth grade and I was in third grade so we both went together on the same bus. I remember it was a scary experience. I remember it well. Being put on a bus and having to travel all night and being herded like sheep into the stake center and we had to be bathed and printed, so to speak; it wasn't a good experience. They'd look through your hair and they wouldn't tell you why."¹⁹

With one child being placed in each foster home, siblings and relatives traveling to the processing center together were then separated. As one woman put it: "We were all in this great big room, and they were calling the names and when they called your name you left the room and you never came back! And my aunt left and I was nine years old, sitting there. I didn't know anybody but my aunt and now that she left, she didn't come back, and I was just really scared. Finally they called my name and I went out into the room where my foster parents were and I met them and they were really nice. That was in Provo, and we had to drive all the way back to near Ogden and on the way I remember crying. So, they pulled over to this ice cream store and they got me ice cream. And after that, you know, I wouldn't talk to them for about a week or two. I knew how to talk English; I guess I was just really shy."²⁰

Many Placement participants recalled that feelings of loneliness and alienation overwhelmed them in the first few weeks away from home; and their sense of being different intensified as they began to attend

18. Interview with anonymous informant, Coalmine, Arizona, 10 Aug. 1991.

19. Interview with anonymous informant, taped interview, Tuba City, Arizona, 9 Aug. 1991.

20. Interview with anonymous informant, taped interview, LeChee, Arizona, 5 Aug. 1991.

school and church. "I came from an all-Indian school and then I went to an all-white school because it was a rich neighborhood," one person told me. "Just me and one other guy were the only Indians in the school. It was a different world. I just felt like I was in a foreign country or something. Everywhere I looked all I could see was white skin and blond hair."²¹ Contact with other Navajos was limited for most of the people I interviewed; few parents could afford to visit, most natural families did not have telephones, and letters came only sporadically from parents who often had difficulty communicating in English. A few said that they were actively discouraged from speaking in Navajo with their siblings and Indian friends, while others said the simple fact of being immersed in anglo culture meant they forgot a lot of their Navajo language during the school years. Few children had access to other Placement students who might be experiencing the same conflicts.

Most participants I spoke with drew stark contrasts between the conditions on the reservation and on Placement, emphasizing the sometimes enormous class differences between the two worlds. As one woman recalled, "It was a complete change when I went on Placement. For one thing we didn't have any electricity or running water [at home on the reservation]. We lived in a—I wouldn't know how to call it, kind of like a shack, and it had a dirt floor. And there weren't any beds, we had sheepskin to sleep on. Then here I went up to Orem and you know, completely different! Their house was really nice. It was just like any other suburb community you would see nowadays and they had everything most people would have nowadays."²² In retrospect, participants tended to conflate class and race, echoing the widespread American ethos of white superiority. "Through the years you are told, you know, that anglos are a superior race," one Placement student told me, then corrected herself: "They don't really tell you that, but you get that feeling somewhere along the way. Maybe even my mom and dad have said, you know, 'the white people are able to do this, they have invented things, they are able to make the money to have all the stuff that they have,' and so you end up thinking that white people are superior."²³ Another young man hoped to better himself by replicating what he perceived as a "white" life-path. He said, "I told [my mom] I was going to marry a white lady. I told her that. I want to be able to go college, marry a white girl, and live here [in Utah] and make something of myself, because my relatives, you know, they work two jobs and they're barely pulling it off."²⁴

21. Interview with anonymous informant, taped interview, Provo, Utah, 18 July 1991.

22. Interview with anonymous informant, taped interview, LeChee, Arizona, 18 July 1991.

23. Interview with anonymous informant, taped interview, Page, Arizona, 6 Aug. 1991.

24. Interview with anonymous informant, taped interview, Provo, Utah, 18 July 1991.

Listening to words like these, I could see how in one sense Placement reinforced the powerful class and race hierarchy that persists in American society. With its emphasis on assimilation (via conversion, education, cultural immersion, and so on), the program might be considered functionally and ideologically similar to secular social welfare programs in the familiar paternalistic mode, like Bureau of Indian Affairs schools. But the church's doctrine regarding Lamanites complicates this picture; the unequal power relationship inherent in Placement's structure takes on additional significance in light of Book of Mormon teachings. This significance, I found, was open to interpretation and has changed over time—a fact which is, I think, one of the key sources of discomfort about the program's legacy within the church.

Living out some of their most formative years while dividing their time between two different (sometimes opposing) worlds, former Placement participants had to confront deeply personal questions about selfhood and identity. The people in my sample were at various levels of engagement with these questions: some had constructed what they said was a satisfactory sense of self out of their past experiences, while for others their childhood on Placement had only initiated an elusive and frustrating search for harmony. Among their responses I found three loose categories of self-definition: those who identified themselves primarily as "Mormons," those who identified themselves as "Navajos," and those who held themselves apart from any notion of "culture" or who tried to maintain a balance between two cultural worlds.

Those whose primary self-identification was with Mormon culture choose to sublimate Navajo influences and emphasize those of the Mormon way of life. They want to assume responsibility in their generation to provide opportunities for their children through the church which they themselves had not had. Several expressed to me they saw themselves part of a special generation of Native American Mormons. As one said, "My kids don't need to go on Placement, because I'm active in the church and I'm able to make sure they go to school and take care of those things."²⁵ Another imagined exhorting people like himself with these words: "Somebody gave it to you, now it's time for you to give it. I make [my listeners] responsible: 'It's up to you, YOU did it. It happened to YOU. The reason why you went was so that you could learn to take care of your own children, yourself and not have somebody else to do it.'"²⁶

Other former Placement participants see themselves primarily as Navajo. They may resent the program for having interfered with family and cultural ties so central to Navajo life, or they may see its potential to

25. Interview with anonymous informant, taped interview, Page, Arizona, 4 Aug. 1991.

26. Interview with anonymous informant, taped interview, Page, Arizona, 5 Aug. 1991.

strengthen those ties, but either way they believe that Placement's total package devalued Indian goals and practices to the detriment of its participants. I heard these words from a man who celebrated his Navajo identity although he considered himself a committed church member: "We want to survive as a people. We don't want to blend in to the point where people say, 'Oh, they were Indians once upon a time here.' One of the ideas of the program was to be able to see the dominant culture, the opportunities in anglo culture, develop an awareness of who you are, and to be able to take the best of both. Being Indian is not to run around in a breechcloth, saying, 'The white man screwed me.' But to sit down and communicate with the banker or the lawyer and know what he's talking about so you can't be fooled."²⁷

The third group's response was deeply personal. One woman who struggled for years to answer to herself whether she was white or Indian concluded, "Later I finally realized it doesn't matter."²⁸ Her words echoed others who tried to maintain a balance between the two worlds, saying things like "I'm just who I am" or "I need to accept both sides of myself." Suspended between two worlds, they say they are comfortable—at least for now—with that suspension. Their "between-ness" evokes a rich literature (in ever-widening disciplinary circles) on the *liminal*: that which lies "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial."²⁹ This notion was developed by anthropologist Victor Turner, who identified liminal cultural spaces in ritual performance—for example, between the sacred and profane. Turner recognized ritual as a framing device for the reaffirmation of cultural categories; by being set apart from ordinary life, ritual performance highlights the structure outside of which it seems to occur.³⁰ Liminality, as Leach and Jackson have separately pointed out, occurs when we impose culturally constructed linguistic or cognitive classification systems on the natural world: what falls between the tidy categories ("nonthings," as Leach puts it) defines the liminal.³¹ Since straddling the

27. Telephone conversation with anonymous informant, 12 Mar. 1991.

28. Interview with anonymous informant, taped interview, Provo, Utah, 18 July 1991.

29. Victor Turner, "Liminality and Communitas," *The Ritual Process* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), 95.

30. Ronald L. Grimes, "Victor Turner's Definition, Theory and Sense of Ritual," in *Victor Turner and the Construction of Cultural Criticism: Between Literature and Anthropology*, ed. Kathleen M. Ashley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 141-46.

31. Edmund Leach, "Anthropological Aspects of Language: Animal Categories and Verbal Abuse," *New Directions in the Study of Language*, ed. Eric H. Lennenberg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1964), 23-63; Jean E. Jackson, "Straddling the Mind-Body Split: Liminality and Chronic Pain," Feb. 1996, privately circulated; Robert Sardiello, "Liminality in a Post-modern World: From Ritual to Ritualoid," paper presented at the Conference on Media, Religion and Culture, Boulder, Colorado, Jan. 1996.

boundary calls attention to its permeability, liminal beings and states of being threaten the apparent naturalness of the social order—possessing a disturbing and potentially subversive (or transformative) power. It may be that Placement participants like the two women I have quoted here can access the ambiguous power of their presentday “placement” between clearly defined Mormon and Navajo worlds. They may find a way to transcend arbitrary notions of “cultural worlds,” finding for themselves a personal place where ethnicity cannot penetrate. They travel paths of their own making, often lacking role models; I have sensed their struggles, and I wish them luck.

PLACING MYSELF

Researching Placement meant negotiating the interstices between clearly defined roles. Like my informants who had spent their lives asking themselves, “Who am I, when?” I found that investigating Placement challenged my sense of self-identity and presented me with occasions to perceive divergent, sometimes oppositional, ways of thinking—within myself.

Being both an insider and an outsider in complicated ways, I juggled the psychological imperative to reaffirm the world view I held in common with my subjects with the need to be critical, even cynical, of that world view. As a committed church member, I naturally found ways to interpret my experiences and those of my informants in light of the gospel, while at the same time hesitated privileging that interpretation in my (supposedly) dispassionate social scientific research. I worried that the critical self-reflexivity imposed by contemporary theory and its distrust of objective truth spelled the downfall of my own inner ultimate meaning. None of these conflicts has an easy answer, as the words of my informants themselves—who had faced far more disturbing cognitive disjunctures—attest. But in the process, I have come to realize that post-modern, self-reflexive Mormon anthropology—or history, or sociology, or even physical science for that matter—may hold out great promise for a more authentic representation of faith in our times. In that way my experiences and methodological challenges become useful as a mirror, a “type and a shadow,” if you will, for thinking about self and spirit, community and truth.

Before I began my fieldwork, I wanted my beliefs and my social scientific perspective to occupy different and mutually exclusive spaces. I imagined my task primarily as one of role-switching, or exchanging one set of interpretive lenses for another, and told myself that recognizing which lenses I was holding at the time was the key to studying Placement as a (white) Mormon. It did not take long for that tidy conception to

break down. Witness my first field note, badly typed in a cheap motel after a day on the road listening to narrated Book of Mormon tapes. "Today I listened as an insider AND an outsider and trying to do both at once is disturbing to say the least," I reflected. "I'm wondering, should I set aside time to feed my soul in the way I believe is best? And then set aside time to look with outsiders' eyes and pretend I don't have feelings all tied up in what I'm doing? Or is that just another form of denial? Is there any point in pretending like I'm not here and I don't have beliefs?" I concluded by asserting that my acknowledged perspective—believer, Mormon, insider—could not be separate from the research. "I do exist," I insisted, "I am studying something and I have feelings about what I'm studying. My feelings are going to be tangled up in what I do. They will shape my research and be changed by it. There is an alchemy going on inside me that will be a consequence, and a side effect, and for that matter a driving force of my research. I am going to begin by refusing to deny that I am biased, that my feelings [could] be separate from my work. I hope that makes me a revolutionary."

In the field I tried to follow through with my resolution to sustain critical and reaffirming perspectives at the same time, but despite my intentions, I often ended up compromising both. In-group participation inhibited my critical skills. I relied on church networks for housing and interview contacts, for example, rather than appear to be coming from outside the Mormon community. I attended local wards and tried to blend in (succeeding too well one Sunday, when a visiting regional representative mistook me for the daughter of my white hosts in Tuba City). I often nodded without questioning when I heard Mormon catch phrases in interviews, assuming that my take on those terms necessarily matched the informant's meaning (for example, prayer, the gospel, testimony). Looking out of place on the Navajo reservation encouraged me to seek out other Mormons among whom I would "belong," seeking familiarity instead of novelty.

Sometimes, however, my differences, my "outsideness" came to the forefront, obstructing my view of ultimate, transcendent gospel truth. My personal spirituality suffered in the field; I felt myself being critical of my own prayers, my own convictions. Even in the midst of familiar circumstances, at times I felt very much shut out of inner meanings, as if my shared beliefs with other Mormons could never compensate for vast cultural and ethnic differences. One experience stands out in particular: the Sunday before Pioneer Day, when I attended an Indian ward in Provo. I was about the only non-Indian in the room, the guest of a Navajo family who wanted to give me a sense of the non-reservation Mormon Indian community. Ads for Pioneer Day sales and for the upcoming parade had sensitized me to the potentially touchy issue of celebrating white Mor-

mon history in an Indian ward. I didn't know what to expect from the sacrament meeting program.

To my surprise, between speakers the congregation sang "They, the Builders of the Nation." I struggled through the first verse ("They the builders of the nation/ Blazing trails along the way/ Stepping stones for generations/ Were their deeds of ev'ry day/ Building new and firm foundations/ Pushing on the wild frontier"), fighting the urge to hoot out loud at the ludicrousness of the situation. Me, sitting in a roomful of Indians, singing about pioneers, wondering what they were all thinking. As we shouted out "Blessed, honored Pioneer!" my host and I, who were sharing the hymnbook, caught sidelong glances of each other. The nervous tension turned into mutual awkward giggles, but I had the sense that somehow he and I were not sharing a joke at the expense of the rest of the congregation. Laughing acknowledged the many layers of meaning in the simple act of singing, but did not remove the unspoken barriers I felt.

My ambivalence in the field about the relationship between insider and outsider positions turned to discouragement when I returned home and began transcribing interviews. My outside-ness to the world view of my Navajo informants seemed to undermine my ability to speak for them as an insider. I began to doubt whether what I shared with my informants could ever transcend the hurdles history, theology, and practice had placed in the path of true understanding. The lowest point struck while I was watching a PBS-produced documentary about BIA boarding schools for Indians. Gloomily I wrote:

One of the films Placement produced to show its critics claimed that Placement was truly the golden rule in action. I wonder. I wonder how much we would really like to become someone else because we were in a dependent position. I wonder how much we would like our children taken away for months at a time. I wonder how much we think we could learn from the whites, were we Navajos or Sioux or Comanche or any other tribe of American Indians . . . The spiritual strength, the community, the deep belief, the culture that makes a Navajo who he is, an Inuit who he is, a Cheyenne who he is—how quick we have been to call them all Lamanites. It's just substituting one word for another . . . Mormons have coopted their history, written them another and called it true. God forgive us [because we do not] know whether it is or not. As one of my interviewees said, when her father dies, the knowledge he has will die with him, because she didn't have the time or the ability or the understanding to learn it from him, and after him it will be gone. We have been calling the Indian a vanishing race for hundreds of years. I wonder how long until we are finally right. Yet I do have faith in the enduring and adaptive resistance of American Indian tribes. They have seen trouble before, have faced the extinction of their ways of life and culture and yet have endured, have even resisted.

I ended my study of Placement painfully aware of ambiguities: the depth of bitterness *and* of gratitude participants harbored, the difficulty of disarticulating Placement from other assimilative trends in postwar American society which have struck at the cultural institutions of Native American groups, and the complications inherent in "faithful criticism." While I believed—and still believe—that there needs to be room both in academic and in religious discourse for truth-making through storytelling about the past, the narrative I had collected from this small sample of Navajo Placement graduates seemed much too fragmented to have anything to teach us.

Upon deeper consideration, however, I realize that the lack of cohesiveness *is* the thing to be learned from aggregating individual accounts of Placement. That the program resists dualistic classification (good/bad, helpful/harmful, progressive/assimilative) compels us to consider it more closely, more locally, more intensely—and ultimately more realistically. For me, the academic quest in search of Indian-centered truth about Placement became something else: a transformative occasion to rethink the boundaries of meaning itself and to reconceptualize it in processual terms. Understanding Placement—for my informants primarily and also for myself—was less about discovering meaning than about making it: in retelling stories, in living out experiences and enacting rituals, and in articulating clear visions of the social and racial dynamics of the Mormon community.

Are Mormon-Indian relations within the church in irreversible decline? My informants' testimony (and testimonies) suggests otherwise; although to my surprise, less because of enchantment with Placement than because of their everyday achievements in making meaning out of their experiences. As Navajos and Mormons and former Placement students, they continually *signify* themselves as whole people, seeking—and occasionally finding—inner peace.

As for me, the conflicted researcher who ended her study mired in ambiguity, my thoughts on Placement and the Mormon community have become more hopeful. I see in my informants and in my lopsided, post-modern dialogue with them the potential for a more communicative present of understanding and acceptance. I am reminded that the beauty of the gospel for the faithful is in people coming together imperfectly, yet having their human-ness hallowed by the transcendent grace of God. And by my experiences I am encouraged that self-reflexive research offers, to those of us seeking to reconcile our faith with our academic disciplines, a more authentic version of truth. By "authentic" I do not mean truth which stands outside our cultural constructions of verifiability, but rather truth in the image of those constructions: fragmented, contested, multifarious, capacious, and fecund. Such a conception of truth would be

appropriate to the times in which we live, neither discrediting spiritual certainty nor elevating it to the primary position as a replacement for scientific objectivity. The warring gladiators (Religion, the Immutable Word vs. Science, the Unchanging Proof) both have been toppled in contemporary discourse,³² but perhaps for us that is the gain. There is room for us to reconsider ourselves amid the other and the other within ourselves. When I think of singing the pioneer hymns among Indians, I am heartened by the strength of their voices.

32. See Karl Sandberg's felicitous reflections on the notion of the Word in "Thinking About the Word of God in the Twenty-first Century," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29 (Spring 1996): 58-79.