

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Assimilation, Resilience, and Survival: A History of the Stewart Indian School, 1890—2020

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0mr8x5h1>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 46(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Hinzo, Angel M.

Publication Date

2023-11-06

DOI

10.17953/A3.2570

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

REVIEWS



Assimilation, Resilience, and Survival: A History of the Stewart Indian School, 1890–2020. By Samantha M. Williams. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2022. 334 pages. \$60.00 cloth; \$60.00 ebook.

Samantha M. Williams' text *Assimilation, Resilience, and Survival* traces over a century of history of the Stewart Indian School and comes full circle in describing how Native American people have fought to reclaim this space as a museum and cultural center. Williams' work is a significant addition to boarding school histories and will be of interest to those who would like to study western boarding school history and Nevada history specifically. She discusses her methodological frameworks, including viewing the text as a decolonizing project, and integrates student narratives throughout the text, centering Native American voices. This work complements the histories of other scholars such as K. Tsianina Lomawaima and David Wallace Adams, and historians, educators, community members, and others who want to discuss how to address boarding school histories and move toward healing will be interested in reading it. The text is clearly written and would be great for use in graduate or undergraduate courses. This book should be placed under consideration for use in Nevada schools and may be of interest to those especially interested in the boarding school experience of Diné or Shoshone-Paiute students.

Williams organizes her text chronologically, enabling the reader to gain an understanding of shifts in federal policy as it applies to the case of the Stewart Indian School. Through her in-depth research, Williams also includes instances where the situation at Stewart was counter to the federal policy. This work further highlights the need for these histories as they illustrate the different experiences present at individual schools.

Chapter 1 details the history of Stewart Indian School from 1890 to 1925. Williams discusses the curriculum of the school, including the gendered vocational training, and early student experiences. One of the surprising contributions made within Williams' research is how Native American basketry and craftwork were encouraged during this period and seen as a possible source of income for students. This attention to detailed research is a strength of Williams' research, in showing how Native students and community members tried to maintain autonomy within the schools. Williams asserts that Native American children and their families pushed Stewart officials to accommodate their needs to maintain enrollment in the school. The accounts of students running away demonstrates that students asserted their autonomy in protest of the constraints put into place at the school.

Chapter 2 discusses the progressive policies and continuation of assimilative practices in Stewart curriculum following the Meriam Report. Williams notes frequent asynchronies in the implementation of policies. For example, Williams notes that the

commissioner of Indian affairs, John Collier, circulated a policy on Indian religious freedom and Indian culture in 1934 but Stewart officials still encouraged Christian practices and the presence of missionaries within the school. Williams discusses the Special Navajo Education Program and connects education to the Termination Era in Chapter 3. Williams clearly illustrates how Diné community members attempted to advocate for their children by opposing removal from their communities and assimilative practices, and the push from the Diné for local schools is a significant point that Williams emphasizes in her text.

The author documents the continued abuse and assimilative practices taking place into the 1950s, addressing the physical and sexual abuse present at Stewart. Similar to the issues of concern in the establishing of the Stewart Indian School Cultural Center and Museum, Williams is adamant about not presenting a sanitized history of these traumatic events. Chapter 5, "Reclaiming the Stewart Indian School," integrates the importance of institutions in framing historical narratives. Williams contrasts the sanitized historical narratives of the Stewart Indian School with the narratives remembered by Native American community members. Williams highlights the work of the Nevada Indian Commission and Native American community members in framing a history that recognizes the trauma inflicted by assimilative programs and the resilience of students attending Stewart Indian School.

Williams discusses the difficulty experienced by alumni of Stewart in accessing their school transcripts and the frustration individuals experience when trying to access records and archived materials. The discussion of how the Stewart Indian School Cultural Center and Museum was established will be of interest to communities who are looking to create museum spaces that offer accounts of traumatic histories. Williams' documentation of the fight to keep the Stewart Indian School as a Native space to serve the needs of the community intersects with contemporary Native American activism.

Williams' work complements the work of previous boarding school histories by investigating the power dynamics between the federal government officials operating the schools and the Indigenous students and community members. The inclusion of the students' families in this conversation and the discussion of how the students consistently worked to keep officials at the Stewart Indian School accountable is an important addition to the literature. Williams includes borderland theory as one of her methodological frameworks in the introduction of the text, but this theory is not discussed as thoroughly throughout the book. Williams argues that the borderlands approach highlights "the fragility of settler colonial projects" (10). I would have liked to have seen the author more engaged in the use of this framework throughout the text. However, this opens the possibility for readers to discuss how boarding school spaces and the examples in Williams' text connect to the borderlands approach to discuss this framework more thoroughly.

Williams asserts that one objective of this project is to present a history that "moves beyond the idea of a binary relationship between colonizer and colonized by analyzing moments of cooperation and collusion between the two" (11). While boarding school histories are important to demonstrate the complexity of colonial relationships, I

would argue that none of the examples Williams includes illustrate “collusion” between Native American community members and boarding school officials. Throughout the text Williams reiterates how Native students and communities effectively worked to change the curriculum and challenged assimilative practices rather than collude toward assimilating Native students.

Overall, Williams’ text is a great contribution to the field of boarding school history and may serve as a model to other researchers on how to integrate oral traditions and archival materials while centering community narratives.

Angel M. Hinzo
University of San Diego