By education and conduct’: educating trans-imperial Indigenous fur-trade children in the Hudson’s Bay Company Territories and the British Empire, 1820s to 1870s

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Abstract:
Mid-nineteenth-century Indigenous fur-trade students were part of a larger group of mixed-descent children in the British Empire who were the product of intimate relations between British men and local women in the colonies. These imperial children were the source of a great deal of anxiety for their parents, British administrators, missionaries, and entrepreneurs. In the mid-nineteenth-century Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) territories, the parents of elite Indigenous fur-trade children sought a British-style education for their children in order to equip them thrive in the HBC territories and the larger British Empire. These children were sent to schools in the HBC territories, the Canadian colonies, and Britain in order to learn how to perform gendered British middle-class identities. In the HBC territories, however, missionaries who were attuned to the project of civilizing and Christianizing Indigenous peoples leveraged this curriculum in different ways than their counterparts in metropolitan spaces. Elite Indigenous fur-trade students were highly mobile, as schooling often required children to live at boarding schools far from their homes at fur trade posts. An extensive network of British and Indigenous kin that spanned the HBC territories, the Canadian colonies, and Britain supported fur-trade students who were at school. For these trans-imperial children and their families, the HBC territories were not an isolated outpost of the British Empire but were only one site in an imperial circuit of familial mobility. The children’s educational mobility provides a window into the reciprocal movement of people, ideas, and culture between the HBC territories, Britain, and other parts of the Empire that formed the ‘mutually constitutive’ Empire. The elite Indigenous fur-trade children in this study were able to draw on both their Indigenous heritage and the privilege afforded to them by their elite status in their attempts to negotiate the shifting racial and social boundaries in the HBC territories and the larger British Empire. Indigenous skills, language, material culture, and kin ties existed and operated alongside the British cultural practices and values that served as signifiers of their elite social status. These students performed versions of British middle-class ‘respectability’ that were both ubiquitous to the British Empire and tailored to the local conditions of the HBC territories.

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