The Quest for
CITIZENSHP
The Quest for Citizenship

African American and Native American Education in Kansas, 1880–1935

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For Luke and in memory of Mom
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The Quest for
CITIZENSHIP
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In 1944, G. B. Buster, a longtime African American teacher, gave a college commencement speech imploring churches, community organizations, and government leaders to sound a “clarion call” that would finally solve the largest social problem in the United States—racial tension between whites and people of color. If members of the larger society were to continue fostering “race prejudice, discrimination, arrogance, insult, and exploitation of minority groups,” the entire country would feel the harm. Therefore, he charged his audience, comprised mostly of African Americans, to work together with whites in pressing for the enforcement of equal civil rights for all Americans.1 A few years earlier in 1941, Henry Roe Cloud (Winnebago), a well-known Native American activist and educator, addressed a group of superintendents of Indian agencies and reservations. He criticized the federal government for its past record of destroying Indian cultures and praised the more recent efforts toward preserving cultural practices, studying traditions before they completely disappeared, and encouraging self-government among Native American tribes. He hoped for a day when Indians could embrace the kind of political organizations, industries, and economics modeled by the dominant society without having to give up their own arts, religions, and aesthetics—two sets of values that many whites had often thought of as incompatible.2

In each address, Buster and Roe Cloud, respectively, represented long-held desires of twentieth-century African Americans and Native Americans with regard to American citizenship. Black parents, leaders, and teachers like Buster had been working for decades for social integration and equal rights in their schools and in other public places. When they spoke of citizenship, they expressed their longing for complete inclusion with all of the accompanying rights and privileges. At the same time, Native American students, teachers, and activists like Roe Cloud had pushed back against decades of assault on their own cultures, beliefs, and traditions and instead said that they could claim identities as American citizens by embracing
the behaviors, habits, and practices that whites demanded while simultaneously holding onto their traditional customs. Inclusion and integration for African Americans and autonomy and bicultural identities for Native Americans provided the focal point for each group’s understanding of what it meant to be an American in the twentieth century, even though those notions stood in exact opposition to the ideas that white reformers had originally outlined for them a few decades earlier in the 1880s and 1890s.

*The Quest for Citizenship* tells the story of how, during the last decades of the nineteenth century, in the midst of confusion about the status of Indians and blacks in the United States, white reformers opened separate schools for children from each group in order to fit them into the dominant culture’s definitions of American citizenship. At the time, most whites considered Native Americans and African Americans outsiders, vulnerable to forced migration, violence, and warfare or to colonization and removal. Missionaries, educators, and government officials—whom I call reformers—referred to the longtime exclusion of Native Americans and blacks from American identity as the “Indian Problem” and the “Negro Problem,” and those who tried to solve each problem considered themselves to be friendly advocates whose educational campaigns were intended to elevate students’ status in American society. They operated under similar ideologies and used similar curricula in black and Indian schools, yet there were distinct differences between the ways in which education prepared students for citizenship roles depending on their race. For Native Americans, segregated education required children to move away from Indian reservations and aspire to full assimilation. Segregated schools purported to prepare them for transition into public schools with white students and ultimately into work environments with white adults. The possibility of intermarriage between whites and Indians could perform the final step toward integration of Native Americans into white society; or as one reformer argued, intermarriage “gradually narrow[ed] down the racial cleavage.” Reformers hoped that by learning to speak English, attending mandatory Christian services, and engaging in so-called American activities—joining the YWCA or the Boys Scouts, for example—Native American children would eventually become indistinguishable from white Americans. Altering students’ cultural attributes, (e.g., hair, dress, and language), would eradicate their “Indianness,” thereby transforming their various tribal identities into a single American one. Conversely, white reformers almost always designed segregated education for African Americans with the intention of preparing students for a lifetime of marginalization. Black students were to be trans-
formed into citizens who would make contributions to the larger society through their labor in tandem with, but distinctly separate from, whites. Reformers believed that blacks would neither blend with nor disappear into white society in public schools or through marriage because their racial category was considered to be less mutable than the tribal identities of Native Americans. Instead, they wanted African American students to conform to a set of values and behaviors to help them become well-trained laborers, domestic workers, and farmers—positions that would subjugate them to distinct and permanently lower-class positions in society. A sense of duty to God and the nation guided reformers’ efforts, but as benevolent as they thought they were being, reformers never truly viewed members of minority groups as their equals. Inevitably the schools they created pushed African Americans and Native Americans outside of mainstream American society.

Despite the determination of reformers to create their own versions of minority citizens, both Indians and blacks ultimately created new versions of American identities for themselves. Native American students often ran away from school, shared their forbidden traditions, and found other means of protest while they were in school. On behalf of African American students, parents and other advocates not only contested the inferior condition of their schools, but also took advantage of segregated environments out of view of white school boards to develop curricular and extracurricular programs infused with race pride. In the twentieth century, when Native Americans became teachers themselves, they also encouraged their students to take pride in their heritage and adopt pan-Indian identities while simultaneously developing a sense of biculturalism that allowed them to integrate into white American culture whenever they desired. Both African American and Native American teachers showed their students that it was possible to move away from the predetermined definitions of American citizenship established by white reformers, and thus Indians and blacks reversed the intentions of white missionaries, teachers, and government leaders by redefining what it meant for them to be American.

Although blacks and Native Americans responded to similar educational campaigns in the 1880s and 1890s, they reacted differently to the expectations that their segregated schools established. Dissimilar perceptions about the role of the law in their lives guided each group’s actions; that is, African Americans, believing that they had always been integral to the nation’s history, sought legal means to foster social change and equality, but Native Americans, not necessarily wanting to be completely absorbed