

Sarah Klotz

Impossible Rhetorics of Survivance at the Carlisle School, 1879–1883

This article proposes embodied and multimodal readings of student compositions from the Carlisle Indian Industrial School as a way to illuminate processes of assimilation and resistance. Drawing on Gerald Vizenor's concept of survivance and the ways that the field of composition has taken up Vizenor's work, I argue that the project remains incomplete if we confine our history of cultural rhetoric to resistant, individual, alphabetically literate voices as the sites of rhetorical sovereignty and rhetorics of survivance.

The observers participated in one of the most treacherous simulations of the tribal heart, a dance in chicken feathers to please the missionaries. Would we have been wiser to denounce the child at the time, to undermine the simulations of the dance in the presence of the superintendent? We should have told the child then and there our honest reaction to his dance, but we were his audience of solace. How could we be the assassins of his dreams of survivance?

—Gerald Vizenor

I have no friends to write to. I had an aunt once, but the bears eat her up.

—Ernest White Thunder

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On June 25, 1880, photographer John Choate captured the slate of a student named Rutherford B. Hayes. The top of the slate shows a series of words (*apple, get, grew, all, trees*). Below appears a short composition about a boy, Frank, in an apple tree who plans to give an apple to Ann. Next, a letter composed to the student's father, informing him that "this here at Carlisle all the boys and girls like very nice school some boys and girls read in book every day work hard." At the bottom, a series of equations appear next to a pictographic rendering of a warrior riding a horse. These inscriptions, erased for other lessons, have been preserved for 130 years in Choate's print.

The slate is a snapshot of the processes whereby the Carlisle Indian Industrial School attempted to assimilate Native children into cultural norms of whiteness. Everything from the student's assigned name to the composition about apples to the letter home indicates what, for Richard Henry Pratt and his colleagues, could "Kill the Indian, Save the Man." Simultaneously we glimpse another semiotic system—one that signifies in the student's culture. He depicts a horse, a technology of war introduced by the Spanish in 1540, and long since an integral part of life for the Cheyenne, Comanche, Arapaho, and other western tribes. While he learns alphabetic literacy then, this student produces pictographic literacy beside his newly acquired words. Just as his ancestors incorporated the horse into the fabric of tribal life, a student at school thousands of miles from home attempts to do the same with English.

This student's composition is not well known. He did not become a famous essayist writing against US colonization. He did not go on to publish a memoir of his time at boarding school. His ephemeral text is only preserved through the lens of a photographer who viewed it as a cultural curiosity. But if we want to understand how the history of composition has been intimately, even inextricably linked with colonization, then this student's work illuminates the complex processes whereby well-intentioned educators became tools for the dispossession and deculturation of Native peoples. In what follows, I enumerate the dynamic routes of assimilation and resistance at the Carlisle school. My goal is not only to emphasize the

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colonialist history of writing education in the United States but also to demonstrate how students found and exploited multimodal, embodied rhetorics to resist alphabetic literacy. Indeed, as scholars engaged in the teaching of writing today, we cannot ignore the past and ongoing assimilationist motives of writing education. By grappling with this history, we can refuse to be well intentioned yet complicit in ongoing processes of cultural erasure in our writing classrooms.

As I have pored over the texts produced during Carlisle's early years (photographs,¹ periodicals, letters, government reports, autobiographies), I have been struck again and again with the impossibility of what I find—students like Rutherford B. Hayes resisting and surviving the cultural genocide imposed upon him. For one thing, these

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are children still forming tribal identities. It is their youth and developmental stage that led the government to choose them for an acculturation experiment. The first students ranged in age from seven to young adulthood. For another thing, their texts are not only coerced but highly mediated. Students know that their teachers and the superintendent

will read everything. They could be punished physically or humiliated in campus newspapers for usage mistakes. Additionally, these students are sick from new and strange food, an unfamiliar climate, and institutional epidemics such as tuberculosis, trachoma, measles, pneumonia, mumps, and influenza (Adams 125). To reckon with this rhetorical situation is to confront the impossible.

And yet, I am reminded of Gerald Vizenor's story quoted in the epigraph: a boy dancing in a headdress of yellow-dyed chicken feathers at a missionary school with an "audience of solace" who cannot bear to assassinate his dreams of survivance. Survivance is not elegant in this story. It is not pure or unadulterated tribal continuance. It is a process of compromise, incorporation, humor, and discomfort. Survivance, a combination of survival and resistance, has become foundational to the study of Native rhetorics, yet we often turn to heroic, individual rhetors who stand out among the many tribal peoples of the late nineteenth century. Usually, these individuals were highly alphabetically literate—Zitkala-Ša, Charles Eastman, Luther Standing Bear—which helps us read their texts today.

My essay locates rhetorics of survivance both in and beyond the written word because, without a capacious and embodied rhetorical lens, the early Carlisle students are impossible to recognize as “fully human subjects capable of tactical refigurings” (Powell 405). It is through multiple literacies and the rhetorical body that Carlisle’s early students pushed back against assimilationist education and maintained tribal identity in the face of intractable odds.

This project is deeply indebted to conceptual groundwork laid by Scott Lyons and Malea Powell, two voices pushing against the oral/literate binary still so prevalent in rhetoric and composition and calling unceasingly for Native worldviews as fundamental to the field.² I have grappled with Lyons’s term “rhetorical sovereignty,” what American Indians want from writing, and Powell’s “rhetorics of survivance,” the *use* of writing by Native peoples, to make sense of Carlisle students. These young people are barred in many ways from rhetorical sovereignty, “the inherent right and ability of *peoples* to determine their own communicative needs and desires . . . to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and language of public discourse” (Lyons 449, emphasis in original). Carlisle demanded that they give up the notion of themselves as part of peoples. They were coerced to detribalize, dehistoricize, and reconstruct their identities as English-literate subjects of the United States. And yet they did *use* writing, and like Sarah Winnemucca and Charles Eastman, their use of writing must be “seen as deliberately rhetorical, consciously and selectively interpretive with a specific audience’s needs in mind” (Powell 406). In the sections that follow, I read the texts of Ernest White Thunder, Charles Kihega, and an unnamed Nez Perce girl as Native rhetors using their words and bodies to make meaning in the impossible rhetorical situation of the English-only boarding school. By learning to read these extra-literate forms, we acknowledge not only the imperial underpinnings of writing education but also the ways in which student resistance is a powerful and humanizing form of rhetorical expression.

In October 1879, Pratt began his experiment in Indian education at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. Pratt fought in the Civil War, commanded a unit of Buffalo Soldiers in Oklahoma, and served in a cavalry regiment during campaigns against tribes of the Southern Plains—hardly qualifications to create a new educational paradigm. Yet Pratt’s military experience speaks to the role of violence and control that would become the backdrop of

the off-reservation school. Pratt developed his strategy of Indian education after taking charge of seventy-two prisoners of the allied Kiowa, Comanche, Cheyenne, and Arapahoe tribes at Fort Marion in Florida. Based upon Pratt's success "civilizing" the Fort Marion prisoners, and hoping that he had finally provided a solution to the Indian Problem, the US government gave him the abandoned army barracks in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, to open the first off-reservation boarding school for Native children.

Carlisle housed over ten thousand students between 1879 and its closing in 1918 and served as a prototype for boarding schools on and off reservations during that time. The school opened with eighty-two children, both boys and girls, from the Lakota Rosebud and Pine Ridge agencies in South Dakota, as well as some relatives and recruits of the Fort Marion prisoners. The War Department and Secretary of the Interior demanded that Pratt recruit Lakota children in particular to dismantle resistance to the US government only three years after Custer's defeat at Little Big Horn (Witmer 13). They reasoned that western tribes would be less likely to act against the US government if their children were hostages thousands of miles to the east.³

Pratt's military affiliation places the boarding school project within a long history of literacy training *as* settler colonialism in North America. Carlisle students lived at a military location, and the US government funded the majority of their expenses. Pratt maintained a perpetual public relations campaign to convince federal and private donors that his school was achieving its stated goals: assimilating Indian children into Euro-American norms of language, gender, labor, and individualism. Pratt established a periodical public relations strategy that would last through the tenure of the institution, even after he left in 1904. I detail the history and genre characteristics of these periodicals below because these documents are the source of almost all of what we know about Carlisle's early years and how students engaged with English literacy during that time.

The school's first publication, the *Eadle Keatah Toh*, appeared in January 1880. This newspaper went through numerous name changes, later becoming the *Red Man* and the *Indian Helper*. As Jessica Enoch has noted, "these publications proudly informed supporters of Indian education of the ways Carlisle's teachers were successfully 'civilizing' Indian 'savages' by transforming them into self-sufficient individuals" (74). Periodicals also served as a disciplinary and surveillance device (82). Students were publi-

cally shamed or rewarded for language use, compositions, and behavior. Carlisle periodicals were fundamental elements of industrial and literacy training as well. Native apprentices set the type for all publications. Perhaps no periodical was more important in this capacity than the amateur paper *The School News*. Students contributed content, set type, and edited the final product. This paper was available within the school for students to read, and anyone around the country could subscribe. *The School News* ran from June 1880 through May 1883 with one volume per month of four pages each.

This amateur newspaper is an untapped archive that can tell us much about the relationship between industrial and literacy training at Carlisle in its early years, as well as how students interpreted, responded to, and challenged English-only education. Kathleen Washburn has noted increased attention in recent years to the indigenous archive (380). She looks at the publications of the Society of American Indians, a “vexed addition to expanding indigenous archives because of the group’s association with the national

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project of assimilating indigenous people to a rigid domestic order in the early twentieth century” (381). *The School News* offers a similar challenge to a reader looking for a resistant narrative of indigenous expression. Neither obedient nor entirely defiant, the contents of this paper demand new modes for making sense of Native voices. This essay offers some possible ways we might think through the experience of Native students learning to read, write, and use English. The periodical is important precisely because it is difficult to interpret within our existing frameworks. *The School News* demands careful and contextualized reading practices that take seriously Native rhetorical dispositions within or beyond alphabetic text. Such rhetorical practices include subtle critiques of white culture, silence when teachers demand speech or writing, excruciatingly careful performances of audience expectations, and multimodal inscription that is illegible as resistant to cultural outsiders.

I read Carlisle periodicals within a genealogy of the periodical in

Indian Country and look beyond the narrative of assimilation that often characterizes a surface reading of Carlisle texts. These newspapers are but a single link in a long chain of intercultural print practices traced by such scholars as Hilary Wyss, Philip H. Round, Kristina Bross, and Birgit Brander Rasmussen. A key part of this history is the missionary efforts of ABCFM (American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions) schools in Cherokee Country in the early nineteenth century. M. Amanda Moulder applies Deborah Brandt's concept of the literacy sponsor to show how Cherokee women in mission schools used the literacy practices provided by missionary educators (for example, letters and diaries) to resist training in patriarchal norms and retain their indigenous identity and power as women. Moulder writes, "Cherokee women took these tools and indigenized them" (77). Likewise, Carlisle students used newspapers, letters, classroom compositions on slates, and oral literacies to push back against the training provided by their literacy sponsors at Carlisle.

Lucille M. Schultz terms the practices of nineteenth-century student composers such as letters, diaries, newspapers, and memoirs the "extra-curriculum" and urges us "to listen to the voices of the young composers: the receivers rather than the deliverers of instruction, the authors of texts that to date have received the least attention from composition historians" (108). For Schultz, the extracurriculum is a "site for self-expression and for resistance that was not ordinarily available in classroom-based writing" (134). Forced letter and periodical writing at Carlisle complicates this rosy portrayal, perhaps even illustrating a tendency in rhetoric and composition that Malea Powell has identified as "deliberately unseeing its participation in imperialism" (398). If we contextualize the extracurriculum in light of English-only training, we would have to reckon with how composition history is imperial history. There is simply no way to laud the resistant, expressive letters and periodicals of nineteenth-century children without acknowledging how these genres perpetrated cultural violence for young composers outside of white, middle-class households.

In the following three case studies, I read the productions of three Native students from the early years of Carlisle. These students' texts appear in the periodicals *Eadle Keatah Toh* and *The School News* and Richard Henry Pratt's narrative *Battlefield and Classroom*. These texts are impossible to read as authentic, unmediated, reliable portrayals of Native life at the end of nineteenth century. In that impossibility, new ways of reading survivance in

the archive emerge. Through the reading practices I enumerate, composition history and rhetorical theory gain a lens into blind spots in our interpretive and historical frames. By privileging alphabetic text and transparent forms of resistance, we have missed how the most vulnerable indigenous rhetors survived and persisted through the conditions of colonization.

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Ernest White Thunder's Rhetoric of Refusal

Ernest White Thunder was among the first eighty-two students to arrive at the Carlisle school. His father, Chief White Thunder, was a leader at the Rosebud Agency in South Dakota. This reservation was the single largest contributor of students in Carlisle's early years when Pratt depended on tribal leaders for recruits. In 1879, he traveled to the Rosebud and Pine Ridge agencies to meet with chiefs Spotted Tail and Red Cloud, respectively. Pratt and these chiefs were wary interlocutors. In fact, Pratt did not want to meet with the Lakota at all.⁴ He wanted to recruit students from the Cheyenne, Arapaho, Kiowa, and Comanche tribes because he had experience with these groups from his previous assignments. But Indian Commissioner Hyde insisted that Pratt had to begin his recruitment with the Lakota "because the children would be hostages for the good behavior of their people" (Pratt 220).

Likewise, chiefs at Rosebud wanted nothing to do with Pratt's plan for their children. According to Pratt's account, Chief Spotted Tail conferred with the other chiefs and said, "the white people are all thieves and liars . . . we are not going to give any children to learn such ways" (Pratt 222). Spotted Tail referenced the 1868 Black Hills Treaty, which the United States systematically violated, eventually confiscating 7.7 million acres of the Lakota's sacred Black Hills and creating several small reservations including Rosebud by 1877. Pratt countered that the chief's people needed to educate their children so that they could no longer be taken advantage of by Euro-Americans: "Cannot you see, Spotted Tail, what a disadvantage you and your people are under?" (Pratt 224). After a long discussion, Spotted Tail agreed to send five of his sons, and other leaders including Ernest's father sent their children with Pratt as well. Ernest White Thunder thus

became many things—a hostage of the US government, a leader's child who needed to set an example, and the stake on whom White Thunder would continue to claim authority as a chief. Like many Native leaders before him, White Thunder hoped that his son would learn the cultural practices of Euro-Americans to help his community survive the most recent imperial incursions by the US government.

We know nothing of Ernest White Thunder from his own writing, because he refused to write at all. What little we do know comes from school newspapers and letters between Pratt and Ernest's father. Ernest arrived in Carlisle on October 6, 1879, and by February, it was clear that he would not be the exemplary student that his father had hoped for. Pratt wrote to the chief about Ernest's bad behavior, and White Thunder wrote back, "My son: I want to tell you one thing. You did not listen to the school teacher, and for that reason you were scolded . . . At this agency there are over 7000 people and there are four chiefs. These chiefs sent their children to school and others followed their lead" (qtd. in Adams 125).⁵ White Thunder asked his son to write home a letter in English and reminded Ernest, "I said if it takes five or ten years, if you did not learn anything you should not come back here." He closes with another encouragement for Ernest to write: "Your grandfather and mother would be glad to hear from you if you can write a word in English." Pratt reprinted this letter in the school's publicity newspaper, the *Eadle Keatah Toh*, as was his common practice to publicly scold students for poor behavior and incorrect language use. Pratt added his commentary to the letter, writing that Ernest "has been exceptionally idle, and sometimes disobedient." He continues, "When asked by his teacher to whom he would write the letter which each student is required to send home at the close of the month, he replied with the utmost nonchalance, "I have no friends to write to; I had an aunt once, but the bears eat her up." These are the only words attributed to Ernest White Thunder that remain in the historical record. In this rebellious proclamation, Ernest is one of Vizenor's postindian warriors. He "ousts the inventions [of the Indian] with humor, new stories, and the simulations of survivance" (5).

Ernest received pressure from all sides to learn to write in English and perform other behaviors such as speaking in English, wearing a uniform, performing work industriously, and running military drills with the other boys. He wanted to go home and wrote telling his family so, but he discovered that he could not return unless he succumbed to Pratt's demands. It

must have been a harsh blow to hear from his father that five to ten years might pass, and even worse, to know that his father's tribal commitments and leadership position overshadowed the pleas of his son. When faced with this pressure and the public shame of seeing his father's rebuke in print, Ernest resisted. After his father's letter did not generate the desired results, Ernest refused to write home at all. He claimed to have no friends or family, a reaction no doubt to a perceived betrayal by his father. Pratt minimizes Ernest's acts of resistance, seeing only a noncompliant student fabricating a story about an aunt eaten by a bear.

Ernest fought the English-only writing curriculum as best he could. In particular, Ernest refused to engage when the curriculum demanded his bodily, mental, and affective obedience to norms of Euro-American culture. To maintain kinship ties, students had to write in English. But this necessarily put strains on families already separated by thousands of miles. These letters home required Indian agents to mediate and translate the words of students to parents and then to translate parents' words back to English for students. All of this mediation ultimately allowed Pratt to oversee what students and parents wrote to each other. It further placed Native parents at the margins of communication with their children, breaking an affective and pedagogical bond that reproduced culture, language, and kinship structures. When Ernest claimed he had no family, he blocked Pratt's ability to control him through manipulation of kin and communication. He took his words out of the circuit of Pratt's curriculum, government agents, and his parent's words in translation.

As Mark Rifkin has argued, Pratt manipulated kinship ties as part of a larger government policy of allotment, which sought to break down Native communal formations of land ownership. "Land tenure, subsistence, and residency [were] reorganized in ways that [broke] down extended social networks and [broke] up shared territories and in which affective ties [were] rerouted from larger communal formation to the nuclear family" (32). Through his pedagogy of letter writing, and later sending his students on outings to Pennsylvania farms to observe and serve white families, Pratt hoped that tribal ties would be replaced by the individualized single-family model of the Euro-American agrarian ideal. While Ernest did not live long enough to experience the outing program, he experienced Pratt's early attempts to dissolve tribal bonds and force his students into new affective relations modeled in whiteness and individualism.

Ernest's refusal to write progressed into other bodily expressions of refusal that would eventually end his life. Ernest's father visited with a delegation from Rosebud in the spring of 1880. The visit prompted Chief Spotted Tail to withdraw his children from the school when he was horrified to see them performing military drills like white soldiers. But Chief White Thunder was unbending. He did not take his son home. As the delegation boarded a train to head west, Ernest hid onboard, but he was discovered in Harrisburg and sent back to Carlisle (Adams 126). He refused to stay at the school but was powerless to leave.

Ernest's final refusals resulted in his death. By mid-December 1880, Pratt reported to Washington that Ernest was very sick because he refused to eat or take medicine. Pratt wrote on December 6: "He is still very obstinate [and] seems to rather want to die" (qtd. in Adams 128). A few days later, Pratt wrote to Chief White Thunder that his son was dead. His letter explained, "I had to make him go to the hospital and had to take his clothes away from him to keep him in bed. He would not eat and he would not take medicine unless I made him and then he would spit it out" (128). Pratt writes that Ernest changed his mind near the end and began to eat again, but it was too late. This student turned to the semiotics of desperation familiar to us from prison hunger strikes where the rhetor turns to silent self-destruction as a final form of protest. Ernest refused to write, refused to stay at Carlisle, refused to be a student, refused to stay in bed, and finally refused to eat when his resistance was ignored and punished. It is this rhetoric of refusal that can speak volumes as we try to understand what it meant to learn to write in English at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. Ernest shows us that writing itself became an assault on his identity and his connections to home and community. By refusing to participate in alphabetic literacy, Ernest learned a strategy of resistance that would carry though into other rhetorics. He used his body to signify the impossibility of his rhetorical situation—he could not be fully human and survive at the off-reservation school. In Ernest's case, the written archive is woefully insufficient. In order to make sense of his resistant rhetoric, an embodied, extra-textual heuristic is necessary. Indeed, Ernest's story shows how silence is one of the most powerful communicative tools for students resisting the cultural expectations imposed upon them by the powerful.

Charles Kihega's Visit Home

The next student I turn to takes us forward two years from Ernest's death to 1882 and exhibits the cultural consequences for a student on the opposite end of the English-literate spectrum. While Ernest refused to learn English, Charles Kihega likely knew some English from attending a mission school in Nebraska before coming to Pennsylvania,⁶ and he proceeded to become an exemplary English learner during his two and a half years in Carlisle. The summer of 1882 was a time of transition for the institution and for its students. The first Lakota children who had attended the school reached their agreed-upon three-year term, and most decided to return home to Rosebud and Pine Ridge on June 19. Both the student newspaper (*The School News*) and the publicity paper (the *Eadle Keatah Toh*) began to register the administration's anxiety about how the children would maintain their cultural training after returning home. Even more worrisome was the issue of how the school would return to an English-only environment with the most experienced students gone and an influx of new children entering in the fall.

In this context, Charles Kihega took a break from his duties as editor for *The School News* and typesetter for the *Eadle Keatah Toh* to visit his family for three months in White Cloud, Kansas. Charles wrote to Carlisle in August of that summer and his letter appears in volume 3, number 4 of *The School News*. Charles has been away from his home and the Iowa people for two years and five months, and the visit was fraught with expectations and disappointments. Charles was an important test case for Pratt's curriculum—here was a boy who had excelled not only at the English language but at writing, editing, and the printer trade as well. I imagine that Pratt and his colleagues feared that Kihega might not come back to school after his visit. Charles too must have wondered how his family would react to the changes he had gone through during his time in the East. Like Ernest White Thunder, then, Charles Kihega's rhetorics of survivance were situated within forces far beyond his individual agency. Hoping to maintain his position of literate authority at school while demonstrating his pride as a member of the Iowa tribe, Charles wrote to reconcile his competing

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identities and show what a returned student could do with his education in support of his tribe.

Much of Charles's letter illustrates the minutiae of Euro-American culture that he aims to re-create when he leaves school. He emphasizes timeliness and industry throughout by detailing the trains he took to travel west and emphasizing that he "had everything ready before bed" so he could take an early morning train from Atchison, Kansas, to White Cloud. This was a common practice students learned when going on school trips to Washington, DC, and Philadelphia. David Wallace Adams has identified the "relentless regimentation" of boarding school life that taught students to organize their time on strict schedules, breaking down the day with "a seemingly endless number of bugles and bells demanding this or that response" (117). Charles shows that he can replicate this Euro-American temporal system when he goes on at length about what trains he took and when, as well as how he prepared his belongings to be on time the next day. When he writes, "I had no trouble to come up here," Charles is showing that he understands the technological and temporal worldview of Euro-America and can function appropriately in this newly regimented landscape of the American West.

Charles also takes great care to emphasize how his family and the Iowa people are hard workers and effective farmers. When he arrives he does not find his "folks at home," he writes, "because they were out in the field working." He says, "the Iowas have raised good crops this year. They have wheat just as good as any white farmers have." Charles demonstrates pride that his community can produce high-quality wheat and shows his peers and teachers that his tribe is successful. He emphasizes his own continued industriousness as well. He says he worked for two and a half days at home but then went to his aunt's farm because his father ran out of work for him to do. He even translates that labor into money, calculating, "if I came home to stay I could earn thirty dollars a month." Charles shows his teachers that he works hard without Pratt's supervision and that his tribe too participates in industriousness. Charles disavows the myth of the lazy Indian that he has been taught at school. The pride he feels as a member of the Iowa tribe indicates that he has maintained a sense of tribal identity after two and a half years away.

But in spite of his hard work and sense of pride, all is not well. Charles says that he neglected to write home to tell his family he was coming, so

no one met him at the train station. Did he forget or did he lose touch with his family some time over the past two years? It also seems strange that he would go away from his parents to work for his aunt so soon after arriving—perhaps it was uncomfortable to be at home. And even though he has “plenty of milk to drink,” Charles says, “I do not feel well since I came home. I feel funny all the time.” In these statements, Charles uses his body to register a complaint against his audience. His distance from family and community has made his home foreign and uncomfortable. Even as Charles attempts to model the ideal returned student, he hints that the process of reintegration is painful and may be impossible after so much time. Charles is in a particularly difficult position because he has spent so much time setting the type for Pratt’s propaganda machine and replicating Pratt’s ideology in his own editorials for *The School News*. The mention of milk, a product of Euro-American agricultural practices imposed on or incorporated by the Iowa, symbolizes all that has changed on the land and indicates that whiteness is making him sick.

Charles did decide to return to Carlisle and quickly resumed editorial duties to include an essay on his visit home in the September volume of *The School News*. He tells a different story about his reception, exclaiming “they were all glad to see me because I had been away from home for two years and five months.” In the next lines, he reiterates, “I visited all my friends. They have made great improvements in the two years and five months I have been away.” While Charles continues to emphasize the progress his Indian community has made in the language of improvement so crucial to Euro-American yeoman ideology, he also repeats the time he has been away. The two years and five months are imprinted on his thoughts as the precise gap between himself and his community, a gap that his visit did not close.

In this editorial, Charles focuses on the geography of whiteness rather than the temporality. He writes, “Every Indian man has a house and from 15–160 acres of good ground fenced in with wire so the cattle and horses can’t break in and destroy their crops.” Charles speaks here of the early signs of allotment, an uneven process that would not take full effect on reservation land until the Dawes Act of 1887. It is clear that the Iowa have divided their communal lands into individual plots marked by fences and measured acreage. Adams describes these spatial markers as “a world of lines, corners, and squares,” which students first experienced upon coming to school (113). When Charles writes about the success of the Iowa,

he demonstrates that success in his observations about the marked space on which his tribe now lives. He closes his editorial with an echo of Pratt's purpose: "If the Iowa tribe can learn to farm and take care of themselves I think others can learn." Charles has learned what it means to act white at school, and his tribe has taken on the geography of whiteness at home. The editorial lacks the dissonance of his letter. Now that Charles is back, he uses writing to show how his identity is coherent—he and his people

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are successful Indians. The Iowa are proficient in marking the land in Euro-American sign systems just as Charles is proficient in marking the print sphere with his English words and printer's type. In stark contrast to Ernest White Thunder, Charles wrote all the time, and we have relatively

easy access to his textual productions. Yet it would be a mistake to take Charles's compositions at face value. Even the most alphabetically literate and seemingly assimilated Carlisle students pushed back against school training and maintained tribal identity while incorporating agricultural and communicative practices from Euro-American culture.

The Dissonant Rhetoric of a Student on Outing

One month after his return, in the October 1882 edition of *The School News*, Charles Kihega includes "a letter from a Nez Perce, in school two years and a half" who has gone on outing (2). The girl's name is not included. The outing process, a key component of Pratt's initial plan for Indian education, placed children with working proficiency in English on Pennsylvania farms under the supervision of Euro-American families. Pratt intended that the outing experience would help reduce prejudice and build understanding between American citizens and "noncitizen Indians" (312). In practice, outing became a source of free labor for Pennsylvania farmers and a radical assimilation experience for Native children who now lacked even their peers as a connection to indigenous identity. These students still wrote letters, but rather than writing to parents and grandparents, they shifted the focus of their texts to the Carlisle administration and staff. In this way, Carlisle became a second home for which students learned to express nostalgia. The

outing worked as yet another relocation from tribal land and community as students had to rebuild affective and kinship connections for a second time.

The letter I focus on demonstrates some of the dissonance that emerges when a young girl writes to parental figures at Carlisle. She addresses the letter, “Dear School Father, Miss Ely or Captain Pratt,” immediately demonstrating how the Carlisle authority figures have to some extent supplanted her own parents as primary kinship ties. Her first line asks, “I would like to know if the Captain is home now,” revealing that Carlisle has become a home for her over the past two and a half years. The writer later says she hopes “all of the school daughters and the teachers and yourself are getting along nicely,” naming herself and her peers as daughters to the teachers/parents. Given this parent/child dynamic, it is not surprising that the writer takes a tone of optimism and industriousness. She does not want to generate displeasure or disappointment in her audience. But even with a clear purpose of obedience, the writer manages to incorporate her complaints about the outing experience and her critiques of the Euro-Americans she observes.

The writer’s first sign of discomfort comes immediately after she politely inquires after Pratt’s whereabouts. She writes,

I am very glad to get here it is a very beautiful place to stay, very pretty out side but in my room where I stay is not clean its looks as if they were spilling some sugar on the floor and I have got only one sheet in my bed and the blanket smells very badly and I took the sheet to cover me all over.

Her comments focus on the landscape, but then turn to the contrasting interior space. Her room seems to be some type of storage or food preparation area where sugar has spilled. She expresses dismay at the dirty appearance and bad smells of her living quarters and implies that she is too cold at night because she has to choose between sleeping under a foul blanket or shivering beneath a thin sheet. This passage speaks to the physical discomfort and suffering that a servant would experience, not the care that a surrogate family member would receive. It also demonstrates an embodied rhetorical mode. While the girl cannot object verbally to her outing, her body speaks for her with bad smells, shivering, the feeling of sticky sugar on her feet. As Jay Dolmage has argued, “rhetoric has a body—has bodies,” and our goal as scholars is to “create rhetorical exigence for bodies that have been

overlooked and Othered” (2). Here, an embodied rhetoric shows resistance and survival. Like Ernest White Thunder, this girl will speak with her body, but unlike her predecessor, she will survive as well.

Lest she appear ungrateful, the writer turns again to the valleys around her that “looked very beautiful to me.” She continues, “I liked to stay here very much. I don’t care how the blanket smells. I want to say this that if the things don’t shoot me well I have to do it I want to try to be a brave girl and not be afraid to work hard.” As her syntax picks up speed and flows

together in this final sentence, we can infer the writer’s turn to lessons she picked up at school. Hard work is the most important quality she could exhibit. She seems even to have picked up an English idiom, a version of “that which does not kill me makes me stronger”: “if the things don’t shoot me well I have to do it.” But in her version, we see the added violence of a weapon and a sense of resigned obligation. “Well I have to do it.” I imagine this writer turned to letter writing out of despair and homesickness and managed to find some comfort in pleasing her teachers by demonstrating what she had learned from them. Perhaps these lines provided small comfort, a way to make the filthy room and cold nights tolerable.

When this writer turns to her thoughts on the white children she has met, her critique is even less subtle. She writes,

I go to Sunday School and church but its very different to me in the Sunday School the children come in they begin to run to their seats, just as if they did’nt know anything. I am glad the Indian boys and girls don’t rush to their seats they behave better I think.

Here we see the writer taking ownership over the actions of her peers in Carlisle and critiquing the unruliness of white children. On the one hand, we can read this moment as the success of Carlisle behavioral training. This young girl has absorbed lessons of Euro-American decorum. On the other hand, this is a moment when the writer can wage critique in the language of her teachers, simultaneously setting herself and her Native peers above white children while exhibiting what she has learned at school. She writes that the white children seem to not know anything. Something is wrong

with how they are behaving, and the writer can see herself as a child who acts appropriately even in a foreign and difficult situation.

This awareness of behavioral propriety stems in part from the role that Native girls were meant to play in the broader project of the off-reservation boarding school. In the March 1881 edition of *The School News* (vol. 1, no. 10), editor Samuel Townsend included a quote from Secretary of the Interior Carl Schurz, likely reprinted from a major newspaper, that speaks to the gendered education imposed on Native students. Schurz writes “particularly do I believe in the usefulness of [government] schools for Indian girls. The position of these women is the way to the question. The Indians will never be civilized until they are attached to a permanent home and this will only be accomplished by the elevation of their women” (2). Rifkin has identified the gendered Carlisle curriculum as taking part in “a network of interlocking state-sanctioned policies and ideologies that positioned monogamous hetero couple hood and the privatized single-family household as official national ideals” (28). The kinship reorientation that placed Pratt and his female teachers in the parental role is part of this process as well. In other words, gender training and family replacement were part of a larger project of detribalization and allotment wherein single-family units replaced tribal kinship structures, and a domestic division of labor mirrored the imagined ideal of the Euro-American yeoman home. The reorientation of kinship, landscape, labor, and gender are all elements of Pratt’s assimilation project, and through these idioms student rhetors found ways to register resistance.

Samuel Townsend’s own commentary, likely drawn from Pratt’s views, states this process even more clearly: “If just the Indian boys were educated and the girls not, it would take a long while to civilize the Indians . . . If a boy goes out in his country and has had some schooling, and he gets a wife that has not been at school she would not keep the house clean because she don’t know anything about household duties” (2). When this young Nez Perce girl went into the country for her outing, she was meant not only to perform gendered labor for a rural family but also to observe and mirror how white women behaved. When she speaks to the improper behavior of

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white children, or the dirtiness of her house, this writer suggests that her white relations are not the ideal after which she will model her own actions. She feels she has more in common with her Native friends at school than she does with these white strangers. This letter shows a crack in the assimilationist structure. Although the writer in some ways acquiesces to the standards of her Carlisle “parents,” she uses her body to express resistance to the outing process and her words to critique the Euro-American culture she is supposed to replicate.

In an irony that would surely rile the Carlisle administration, the Nez Perce girl reaches us today without her Americanized name and is only known by her tribal identity. She demonstrates how Native young women pushed back against the dual colonial forces of gender and linguistic violence. She uses the language of her body to critique the outing experience and, by extension, the entire Carlisle project. While she shares the embodied rhetorical mode of Ernest and Charles, her writing adds the lens of gender to our understanding of assimilation and resistance in Carlisle’s early years.

Zitkala-Ša’s Boarding School Stories

Today’s most well-known boarding school narratives, Zitkala-Ša’s *American Indian Stories*, reflect upon the off-reservation project with an adult’s hindsight, illuminating what Ernest, Charles, and the Nez Perce girl could not say in the immediacy of their own circumstances. After leaving her reservation home in 1884 for White’s Manual Labor Institute in Indiana and spending much of her youth in boarding schools, Zitkala-Ša (then called Gertrude Simmons) took a teaching position at the Carlisle School. Like Ernest, Charles, and the Nez Perce girl, she experienced the first years of the off-reservation boarding school experiment and turned to writing as a means to push back against the very system that generated her alphabetic literacy. In 1899, she resigned her position under Pratt’s administration and published three short stories in *The Atlantic Monthly* criticizing the project of Indian education under which she had been both student and teacher for fifteen years. Zitkala-Ša asks whether “real life or long-lasting death lies beneath the semblance of civilization” (113). She faults “the white man’s papers” for her loss of faith in the Great Spirit and for forgetting “the healing in trees and brooks” (112). Education destroys the Indian student, just as the white man’s literacy requires the destruction of the living envi-

ronment, the tree, to make writing. For Zitkala-Ša, alphabetic literacy will never replace the value of her tribal culture.

In response to these essays, Pratt and his colleagues were furious. Zitkala-Ša wrote to her fiancé, Carlos Montezuma, on March 5, 1901,

“already I’ve heard that at Carlisle my story is pronounced ‘trash’ and I— ‘worse than Pagan.’”⁷ Pratt envisioned that his pupils would learn to be US citizens by participating in alphabetic literacy, but he did not foresee one of his teachers turning that literacy against him. Pratt did not intend for his students to make writing a tool for

Zitkala-Ša has entered our literary canon because she was exceptional—a strong, clear, and resistant voice in print. But the students I have examined take part in a similar project—they have taken the literacy enforced upon their bodies and minds and added it to a reservoir of tools for the maintenance of tribal identity in the face of cultural genocide.

rhetorical sovereignty, tribal solidarity, or cultural sustenance. Zitkala-Ša has entered our literary canon because she was exceptional—a strong, clear, and resistant voice in print. But the students I have examined take part in a similar project—they have taken the literacy enforced upon their bodies and minds and added it to a reservoir of tools for the maintenance of tribal identity in the face of cultural genocide.

In this essay, I have traced the dialectic of assimilation and resistance at the granular level to make visible what has been impossible to see: Carlisle students defied linguistic and cultural training in deliberate, creative, and inventive ways. *The School News* is a repository of indigenous resourcefulness and survivance. By focusing on alphabetic text, our field risks neglecting the deep well of cultural sustenance from which Native rhetors draw under conditions of colonization. It is my hope that these noncanonical, archival, and embodied reading practices will allow composition studies to more fully acknowledge the complicity of literacy education in the colonial enterprise while learning from the rhetorical resiliency of Native American peoples.

Notes

1. For an extensive reading of Carlisle photographs and the assimilationist project, see Wexler’s “Tender Violence.”
2. I am thinking in particular of a graduate seminar, *Literacy and Technology*, that relied heavily on Walter Ong’s *Orality and Literacy*, a text that troublingly

maintains an oral/literate dichotomy, places orality temporally and culturally prior to literacy, and insists that civilization is a product of alphabetic literacy while ignoring myriad cultures that developed advanced and complex epistemologies without alphabetic literacy.

3. From the Report to the House of Representatives from the Indian Committee, 46th Congress, 2nd Session, Report no. 752: "It is claimed for this school that it serves a double purpose—first, as an educator of those who are here, and, second, as an educating and controlling influence over the Indians of the West. It is plain that they will feel a lively interest in an institution which shelters and provides for their children. It is also plain that the fact of having here so many children of chiefs and headmen is an effectual guarantee of the good behavior of the tribes represented" (*Eadle Keatah Toh*, vol. 1, no. 5, August 1880, p. 1).

4. Pratt and the Indian Bureau would have used the term *Sioux* to describe the tribes of the Pine Ridge and Rosebud agencies. I opt for the indigenous name, *Lakota*, for accuracy as well as decentering the colonial US government's power to (mis)name Native peoples.

5. White Thunder to Ernest White Thunder, reprinted in *Eadle Keatah Toh*, vol. 1, no. 2, April 1880, pp. 1–3.

6. An 1861 treaty between the US government, the Iowa, and the Sac and Fox nation required the Iowa to cede land to the Sac and Foxes, and in return, the US government agreed to open a schoolhouse for the benefit of the Indians (Article 5).

7. Society of American Indians, on microfilm, papers of Carlos Montezuma, copy at the Cumberland Country Historical Society.

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Sarah Klotz

Sarah Klotz has the honor to live, work, and write on the sacred land of the Gabriolino/Tongva nation as an assistant research professor of education at the University of Southern California. Her current book project, generously funded by the CCCC's Emergent Research Award, illuminates philosophical and pedagogical continuities between off-reservation boarding schools and contemporary developmental education. This monograph uses archival and decolonizing methodologies to make the case for the urgent and unfinished work of cultural competency in literacy education.