



Title: The Historical Work of Cultural Rhetorics: Constellating Indigenous, Deaf, and English-Only Literacies

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The Historical Work of Cultural Rhetorics: Constellating Indigenous, Deaf, and English-Only Literacies

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Founded in 1879, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School is notorious as the site where the U.S. government went beyond territorial theft to colonize the language and literacy of North America's Indigenous nations. At Carlisle, director Richard Henry Pratt created the first curriculum for tribal language extinction. What did Native students do when they faced that curriculum? How did they winnow their language through cracks in the assimilation structure to make the school a site of pan-Indian identity even as the government poured resources into Pratt's mission to "Kill the Indian, Save the Man?"² (Pratt 260). To understand language and literacy at Carlisle, the binary of assimilation and resistance that so often structures scholarly accounts of the off-reservation boarding school is insufficient. I turn instead to the emergent theorizing of scholars working in cultural rhetorics³ to make sense of Carlisle's earliest curriculum, which was based in the Deaf education movement. In particular, I am building on the notion developed by Phil Bratta and Malea Powell that "a cultural rhetorics approach to comparative study always requires an examination of issues of power, both those that arise within each cultural site of practice, and the power relations between the cultures involved in the comparative analysis" ("Introduction"). At Carlisle, the federal government invented new methods for a centuries-old project: land and resource theft in the Americas. But other important changes were occurring following the Civil War, including a shift across educational

¹ Tweet 2:36 PM - 6 Jan 2018

² In 1892, Pratt delivered a speech to the Nineteenth Annual Conference of Charities and Correction in which he articulated his now famous motto: "a great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one, and that high sanction of his destruction has been an enormous factor in promoting Indian massacres. In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man." Pratt's speech is included in the Official Report of the Nineteenth Annual Conference of Charities and Correction, pp. 46-59. See works cited for full citation.

³ See the special issue of *Enculturation* on Cultural Rhetorics <http://enculturation.net/21>, *constellations: a cultural rhetorics publishing space* <http://constell8cr.com/>, and the Cultural Rhetorics Consortium <http://cultrhetconsortium.org/>

reform movements towards assimilation and standardization. In the interest of national unity and Darwinian notions of social progress, the Deaf education movement united with the Indian education movement to enforce increasingly standardized forms of English.

In what follows, I provide one model for a comparative, historical cultural rhetorics methodology by reading Carlisle's earliest literacy curriculum, which was based on John Keep's *First Lessons for the Deaf and Dumb*. To make sense of the constellation of Indigenous, Deaf, and English-only literacies, we need a methodology that accounts for the conditions in which intercultural rhetorics emerge and interact. As the Cultural Rhetorics Theory Lab has articulated, a constellation allows for all of the meaning-making practices and their relationships to matter. It allows for multiply-situated subjects to connect to multiple discourses at the same time, as well as for those relationships (among subjects, among discourses, among kinds of connections) to shift and change without holding a subject captive. (CRTL 1.2)

As we do the work of writing histories through a cultural rhetorics methodology, this means casting a broader net in our engagement with a historical landscape. Academic disciplines are not often hospitable to work at the intersections, and yet intersecting oppressions are crucial for understanding the inter-group relations from which human subjects make meaning. In the Assimilation Era, settler society cast American Indians as culturally disabled in order to justify violent land grabs, and Indian educators responded to this colonial logic by creating a curriculum based on another group they viewed as communicatively disabled: the Deaf. Historical cultural rhetorics work calls us to a constellated understanding of how different bodies and social identities are shaped and understood through language. Students at Carlisle were subjected to new forms of colonial violence, and they developed new rhetorics of survivance in response. As Malea Powell has written, they used language to refigure the "Indian" from object to subject status in colonial discourse ("Rhetorics of Survivance" 400). Bridging so many categories of analysis—race, colonization, Indigeneity, Deafness, disability—is no easy task, but as scholars and teachers of writing, we do our work in spaces where rhetorics of racial identity and disability coalesce to structure pedagogy and curriculum. This is an essay about how educators from a dominant culture understand difference, how they (or we) get it wrong, and how students resist becoming subject to the categories that their teachers apply to them.

As a scholar working in the history of rhetoric, I aim to understand and articulate how social conditions emerge from daily practices of communication and meaning making, and conversely, how larger social and cultural shifts trickle down to structure the day-to-day acts of writers in educational environments. The archive is a crucial site for primary research to capture these

dynamics. The Carlisle archive is particularly rich, as it has allowed me and many others to explore how Indian education changed after the Civil War and how the off-reservation boarding school restructured relations between settler and Indigenous peoples. The pedagogical and curricular writings of Carlisle's first educators demonstrate their belief that Indigenous languages were holding students back from learning how to be American citizens. By examining these materials and practices for their intersection with theories of embodiment and disability, it becomes clear that assimilationist literacy education is rooted in nineteenth-century beliefs about embodied difference and national belonging.

While off-reservation boarding schools devastated indigenous language and kinship structures, they also generated inter-tribal coalitions that laid the groundwork for new waves of Indigenous activism in the twentieth century. In what follows, I read a series of artifacts from the Carlisle archive to explore how comparative cultural rhetorics work can benefit from the fine-grained inquiry that archival research affords. Part 1 lays out the paradigm shift that occurred from missionary-sponsored to boarding school education at the end of the nineteenth century, and how changing views of social evolutionism brought heightened scrutiny to the embodied literacy practices of Deaf and Native Americans. Part 2 looks at the meeting of Carlisle director Richard Henry Pratt with educators from the Deaf education movement that resulted in a gesture-based, English-only curriculum for Native students. Part 3 constructs a constellation of literacy, disability, and race to contextualize Carlisle students' lived experiences within broader logics of race and disability at the end of the nineteenth century. Part 4 examines how Plains Sign Talk became a rhetoric of survivance as students realized that their teachers would sanction gestural Native languages while banning those languages when spoken. Finally, I close with some preliminary thoughts for how this particular history might impact the pedagogies and curricula of contemporary literacy educators. Ultimately, I hope readers will take away how archival methods in cultural rhetorics work we can make settler-colonial violence visible in the minutiae of day-to-day classroom practices, while also capturing the acts of negotiation and resistance that allowed students to survive boarding school with their tribal identities and their nations' futures intact.

Part 1: From the Mission School to the Boarding School ⁴



Prior to the opening of the first off-reservation boarding school, settler society approached Indian education beneath the broader umbrella of missionary efforts toward Christian conversion. In this paradigm, bilingualism or multilingualism did not present a problem, so long as religious

conversion and biblical literacy were the end result. Christianizing Indians had been a concern of Euro-American settlers since the early 1600s with Puritan John Eliot's first proselytizing efforts with the Massachusetts nations. After the founding of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) in 1810, Protestant missionaries played a central role in the printing and teaching of the bible from the Cherokee Nation to the Kingdom of Hawai'i.⁵ Missionary-sponsored Indian education was formalized as a national interest in 1819 when Congress established a "civilization fund" that went primarily to missionary societies (Spack 4). Ruth Spack writes, "classes were typically conducted in vernacular to promote understanding of biblical teachings, although most mission schools eventually added English-language instruction (4). The long history of missionary education resulted in countless primers and other teaching materials in Indigenous languages as well as many experienced teachers who spoke Indigenous languages.

In the same period, missionaries also took an interest in Deaf education with Congregational minister Thomas H. Gallaudet opening the first American school for the Deaf in 1817. Douglas Baynton has argued that Protestant missionaries saw an overlap in Indian and Deaf education because they romanticized these two groups as preliterate. Based on their belief that God had created oral language and gesture before humans adopted writing, they considered so-called primitive languages and gesture to be closer to the divine because they preexisted the fall of man (*Forbidden Signs* 37). This belief in the purity of pre-alphabetic forms allowed multiple literacies to thrive. As Darwinian evolution grew in prominence, however, reformers in both the

⁴ School Room at Carlisle

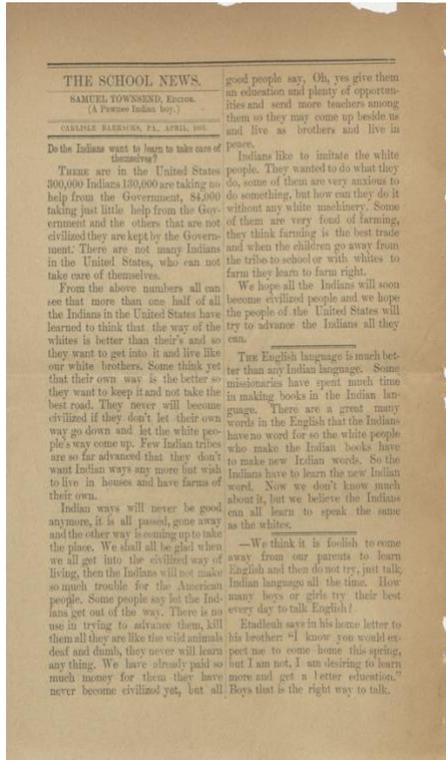
⁵ For more on the history of bilingual missionary literacy efforts with Native American tribes, see Hilary Wyss, Bernd Peyer, Kristina Bross, and Jennifer Monaghan.

Indian and Deaf education movements wanted to unite the nation under a standardized English literacy. They believed that European speech and writing were ultimately the most evolved forms of human expression. Tribal languages and deaf sign languages became indicative of barbarism and savagery, with “Darwin himself [writing] of gestures as a form of communication ‘used by the deaf and dumb and by savages’” (*Forbidden Signs* 42). If these literacies were allowed to persist, Darwinian thought proposed that they could reverse evolution and delay national progress. Pratt shared the beliefs of his contemporaries that English was the language of individualists, and that by learning English, Indian students could better acculturate into Euro-American society (Spack 29). As social evolutionist thought gained prominence, Pratt built a literacy program in explicit opposition to earlier missionary efforts. Pawnee student Samuel Townsend represents Pratt’s views in the following opinion piece from the *School News*, a student newspaper,

The English language is much better than any Indian language. Some missionaries have spent much time in making books in the Indian language. There are a great many words in English that the Indians have no word for so the white people who make the Indian books have to make new Indian words. So the Indians have to learn the new Indian word. Now we don’t know much about it, but we believe the Indians can all learn to speak the same as the whites.⁶

⁶ *The School News* Vol. 1 No. 11 April 1881 p.2

Pratt views the English language as more developed, efficient, and specific than any Indigenous language. He argues that tribal languages lack sufficient vocabulary to be accurately translated



into writing. Even more importantly, the labor of translating English to a Native language was inefficient and burdensome to White educators. To be included in the U.S. nation, students would have to use a language that shared the imagined superior characteristics of Euro-American culture—efficiency and intellectual advancement. By viewing tribal languages as under-developed, Pratt disqualified all preexisting teaching materials and all trained, multilingual missionary teachers. He now had to design an Indian education policy from scratch. It was certainly lost on Pratt that the far more expedient method for English education would be to engage existing bilingual texts to teach students to speak in both English and their Native tongues. Only the twisted settler-colonial logic of “destroy to replace” makes the Native language seem inefficient in this scenario. Pratt thought he could prevent students from speaking their home languages at school by replacing those languages with signs. His educational

philosophy is an eerie mirror to the settler-colonial project wherein the settler state destroys Indigenous nations to replace Indigenous presence in perpetuity (Wolfe 388).

Pratt was not alone in his view that a program for English-only education was in the national interest. Indigenous nations represented a troubling irregularity in U.S. sovereignty and had since the nation’s founding. When Indian wars broke out in the Southern Plains and the Dakotas after the Civil War, there was a public outcry for a less violent approach to settlement of the West. As a result, the late 1860s saw a shift in colonial strategy to the “Peace Policy,” which argued that “it costs less to civilize than to kill” (Spack 17). The English language was the linchpin of the Peace Policy. Commissioner of Indian Affairs Nathaniel Taylor argued that English could erase differences between Anglo-Saxon and Indigenous peoples, creating “one homogenous mass” that could be more easily controlled by the government (17). The notion that English could unite diverse and opposing groups led ultimately to the belief that a standard language, or a standardized English, was a crucial component of national cohesion. Taylor’s beliefs echo those of many reformers known as the Friends of the Indian but also resonate with emerging thought in the Deaf Education movement. When reformers from both efforts noticed that Native Americans were using sign language to assist in inter-tribal communication and the

Deaf were using sign language to communicate with other deaf people, this commonality rebounded negatively on each group.

As English became the accepted standard for national belonging, sign languages began to be seen as evidence that Deaf and Native Americans were culturally, linguistically, and cognitively behind the Euro-American citizen ideal. This paradigm led educational reformers to attempt to eradicate all communicative forms they viewed as non-standard Englishes, including Indigenous spoken languages and Deaf sign languages. The late nineteenth century move to eradicate linguistic difference is an example of how, as Lomawaima and McCarty have argued, “standardization has segregated and marginalized Native peoples and others as it has circumscribed a narrow zone of tolerable cultural difference” (5). What follows will illuminate how educational reformers understood different forms of languaging and how Carlisle students manipulated those understandings to create culturally sustaining linguistic opportunities for themselves. There are so many ways that this nineteenth-century paradigm of enforced monolingualism persists in today’s writing classrooms, perpetuated through the fantasy of benevolence that Pratt and his contemporaries operated within. By returning to pedagogical and curricular materials from the earliest national efforts to standardize English education, scholars and teachers of writing are forced to attend to how cultural beliefs about literacy become a tool of colonization. The archive of the Carlisle school’s early curriculum demonstrates how important it is for writing teachers to act as vigilant defenders of non-standard Englishes in their classes as they convene in the legacy of these colonial roots.

Part 2: Literacy Training and the Indian⁷ Body

Because Pratt rejected the missionary model of Indian education, he had no model to follow, so Carlisle’s earliest English training was a trial and error endeavor. Pratt turned to the Deaf Education movement for guidance. He wrote about how he developed his new curriculum in the first edition of the school newspaper, the *Eadle Keatah Toh*:

Professor Keep and Dr. Porter, well known educators of the deaf and dumb, during a recent visit here, were struck by the many features held in common by

⁷ Whenever possible, I refer to the peoples making up the first nations of North America as either Indigenous or Native American. I use the terms relatively interchangeably in an attempt to be inclusive to the largest scope of intellectual traditions in the fields of Native American, American Indian, and Indigenous studies. I use the term “Indian” to represent a figuration of settler society. The term “Indian” appears often in the writings of Richard Pratt, for example, and when referring to his writing, I use the term to underline his racist and colonial views. The term “Indian” also allows me to talk about the rhetorical construction of Indigenous peoples, and I often use the term to indicate how settler society creates shifting images of Indigenous peoples to justify their ongoing, unjust occupation of the American continent and the land grabs of the late nineteenth century.

the Indians and the deaf and dumb in their sign languages. The teachers received a number of valuable hints from the learned gentlemen with reference to the way of teaching the dusky pupils of English.⁸

When Pratt, Keep, and Porter collectively witnessed Plains Sign Talk, they decided that it was a parallel language to Deaf sign language. But Pratt had been familiar with PST for many years and had not previously viewed the language in this way. He encouraged the use of PST at Hampton Institute where he first hoped to house his Indian education efforts. When he was warden of prisoners from the Southern Plains at Fort Marion in Florida, he had employed an interpreter fluent in both Cheyenne and PST, even having one of his prisoners give a talk in “Indian sign language” to raise money for the prisoners’ education (*Battlefield and Classroom* 163, 188). Pratt was not fluent in PST, but he was forced to negotiate with this language in a way that decentered his own English-language literacy as he lived and communicated with the prisoners at Fort Marion and Hampton. He clearly viewed the language as an effective way to communicate across linguistic barriers and an important intercultural tool in the space of the Southern Plains. Yet in 1880, Keep and Porter’s visit caused Pratt to reinterpret his understanding of PST. Alongside changing theories of Deaf education in the Postbellum period, Deaf sign language and Plains Sign Talk were collapsed and decontextualized so that Pratt could enforce an English-only policy.

When Porter and Keep visited Carlisle, they made recommendations based on a historically specific set of logics around race, embodiment, and disability. They ascribed cultural deficiency to Native students because of the racialized ways they interpreted the students’ embodied language practices. Amelia Katanski has studied how educational reformers in the late nineteenth century, particularly those “Friends of the Indian” involved in the boarding school movement, espoused the theory of social evolutionism, imagining “a linear, hierarchical relationship among races. The ideology was accompanied by a ‘replacement’ model of identity, which claimed that education would totally transform student as they ‘progressed’ from tribal ‘savagery’ to Western ‘civilization’” (4). Again, the settler-colonial project of “replacement” emerges in language education. Because reformers believe that the English language can transform Indians into American citizens, vestiges of Tribal languages constitute a direct threat to the advancement of the civilizational program. Hence, pedagogies grounded in social evolutionism encouraged extreme standardization of English structure and usage. As Porter wrote to Pratt,

⁸ *Eadle Keatah Toh* Vol. 1 No. 1 Jan. 1880

There is a point upon which I should think there would be need of very determined effort on the part of the instructors. I refer to the tendency to employ broken English. I think that may prove one of the greatest difficulties you will have to contend with. With this also, and of course the tendency to use Indian idioms and Indian order of words, the only way must be not even to allow, except in extreme cases, any such violation of correct usage to go uncorrected.⁹ (4)

Porter insists that all tribal language features must be extinguished in order for students to learn English. His word choice emphasizes Native language as a problem or a pathology to be rooted out. Porter fears “broken English,” which he characterizes as the English instructor’s “greatest difficulty.” The notion of broken English makes language a material problem, like a broken bone—non-standard English is a sign that the body is not operating properly. Porter’s word choice of “extreme cases” also indicates that he is viewing language variation as an embodied problem, like an extreme case of a disease. He seems to suggest that deviance from standard English, whether in idiom or word order, could further disable the students and keep them from achieving the imagined linguistic purity that would demonstrate the success of the social evolution project. To reframe Porter’s point in the language of “replacement” we might say that, just as settler society must replace Indigenous society on the land, so too must English replace all Indigenous languages. There can be no remnant of Indigenous nations left to challenge the righteousness of the settler society’s claim to the land; there can be no remnant of Indigenous language features in the students’ English either.

Porter associates “broken English” with a racialized Indian body that is culturally dysfunctional. Later in his career, Pratt would articulate his understanding of Indigenous cultures as disabled as well. In 1892, He gave a speech at the Conference of Charities and Correction arguing against on-reservation education where Indians:

formulate the notion that the government owes them a living and vast sums of money; and by improving their education on these lines, but giving no other experience and leading to no aspirations beyond the tribe, leaves them in their chronic condition of helplessness, so far as reaching the ability to compete with the white race is concerned. It is like attempting to make a man well by always telling him he is sick. (265)

Porter uses the language of disability to describe the Carlisle students’ non-standard English and Pratt applies a similar language to describe on-reservation education. He refers to the “chronic condition” of helplessness and suggests it is impossible to “make a man well by always

⁹ *Eadle Keatah Toh* Vol. 1 No.1 January 1880

telling him he is sick.” Here, Pratt blames Indigenous peoples themselves for their dependence on government annuities, failing to recognize that those annuities were stipulated in treaties when these nations ceded, or were forced to remove from their ancestral lands. Instead, Pratt believes that there is something inherent in Indigenous cultures that leads to these “sick” notions of helplessness and dependence. Only by taking children away from their culture and kin can this sickness be cured. As such, English-only education at boarding school becomes the solution to the imagined disability of Indigenous languages and promises to end the reservation system forever, creating a single language, culture, and land-base for the settler society.

Given the overlap in Pratt and Porter’s beliefs about Indigenous languages and cultures, it is not surprising that Deaf educators greatly influenced Pratt’s development as an Indian educator. In August of 1880, about six months after Keep and Porter’s visit, Pratt reported to the Congressional Indian Committee that teachers were using Keep’s *First Lessons for the Deaf and Dumb*.¹⁰ This instructional method illuminates the day-to-day procedures that enacted settler notions of Native disability with material results for Native students’ learning. In Keep’s curriculum, students first learn nouns and names by associating physical objects with words. One sample lesson from Keep’s textbook asks a teacher to hold up a sponge, write the word sponge on a slate, and then ensure that the correspondence between word and object is clear to the students. They reproduce the word on their own slates or spell it aloud. The relationship between signifier and referent here is primarily alphabetic, which makes sense in a classroom of deaf students who would not hear a word spoken orally. It does not make sense, however, for a class of Native students who can certainly access language in its spoken form. The “word method,” as Pratt calls it, circumvents oral language entirely, stripping students of their communication and, paradoxically, disabling their means of communication. This is an educational example of how, as Senier and Barker have noted, “settler colonialism is implicated in the production of Indigenous disability, discursively and materially” (125). This pedagogy constructs Native students as people with no concept of the relationship between words and things. It privileges the alphabetic at the expense of the oral. Students are asked to spell the word aloud so that the oral is subsumed beneath the logic of the written. Pratt embraces Keep’s method because he believes it will allow him to block students from speaking in their Native languages and more quickly extinguish tribal oral literacies.

Another key effect of this curriculum is to center linguistic authority and the power of naming on the teacher. In the lesson on verbs, Keep suggests first that the teacher “draw the attention of all upon himself,” centering his own linguistic authority. Then, the teacher takes the sponge and throws it, writing immediately upon his own large slate, Mr. _____ threw a sponge. A

¹⁰ *Eadle Keatah Toh* Vol. 1 No. 5 August 1880

sponge they know, and Mr. _____ they know. As they look at the sentence, some of the brighter members of the class will show that they understand what the new word means, by making the sign for throwing. (6) In this example, oral language is again sidestepped, this time in favor of both gesture and alphabetic text. This lesson attempts to block Native students from associating a new word, “throw,” with their existing term for the same action. Unlike bilingual pedagogies, Keep’s text does not add to students’ existing means of communication but attempts to block students from the act of translation. At the same time students are blocked from accessing their oral literacies, the Euro-American teacher is placing him- or herself at the center of meaning-making.

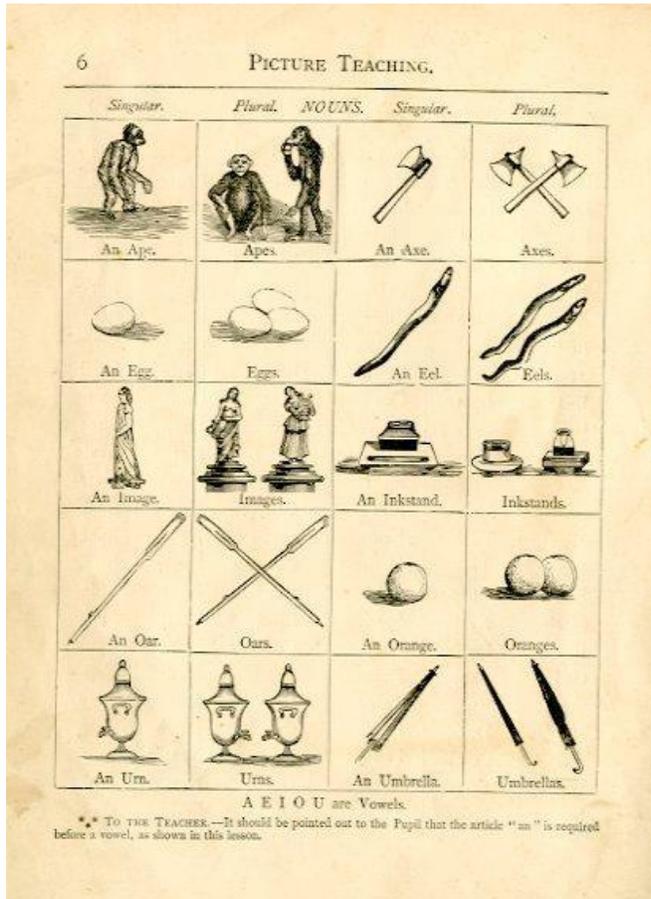
This relationship between language and authority is mirrored in the object lesson, a method that Pratt used alongside Keep’s text. The object lesson was a popular nineteenth-century pedagogical method for infants and young children where an image represents an object which is accompanied by an explanatory text (Crain 119). Pratt used Janet Byrne’s object-lesson book *Picture Teaching*, arguing it was “especially adaptive to Indian work.”¹¹ According to Patricia Crain, object lessons had “the effect of emphasizing the material objects while increasing the authority of the voice” (121). While the object lesson was designed to center the authority of the mother in the White, middle-class home, at Carlisle that authority rested with the White teacher who gained the power to order things in the world. In the context of Euro-American teachers and Native students, the picture-teaching method attempts to re-orient language relations that position Euro-American teachers at the center of language acquisition. The teacher replaces the parents and extended kinship networks that students drew upon to access to what Lomawaima and McCarty refer to as “language-rich contexts for education” where instruction was embedded in names, songs, and stories (31). Lomawaima and McCarty argues that “centuries of plain language, perplexing myths, lyrical songs, demanding questions, scolds and lectures, words of comfort and love and more—all have contributed to the language-rich life surrounding and nurturing Native people. Language has been a key, but not exclusive, medium of instruction in Indigenous educational systems” (36). At Carlisle, Euro-American teachers replace the kinship networks that allowed Indigenous languages to pass from one generation to the next. This colonial strategy disrupts tribal continuance through literacy training.

Byrne’s text works in a very similar way to Keep’s method. Both circumvent oral communication *and* translation. In *Picture Teaching*, Students see alphabetic text alongside a picture of an object, such as an egg or an ax. These lessons try to prevent students from translating their existing words into new English words. They are not adding new language but replacing their

¹¹ *Eadle Keatah Toh* Vol 1. No. 5 August 1880

language with English. In this way, English-only education achieves sweeping colonial outcomes through day-to-day techniques of linguistic disruption. The racial assumptions at work in the settler society structure literacy lessons, which then create a feedback loop to replace Indigenous rhetorical sovereignty with settler language, literacy, and land rights.

Carlisle teachers established their power to name not only objects, but students as well.



Students' names were often the first victims of the Carlisle curriculum. As Brenda Child explains, "government teachers complained that the Indian names were unpronounceable, pagan, and sometimes even embarrassing" (29).

Students were stripped of their names for the same reason that Pratt refused to use primers translated into Native languages—Euro-American educators did not want to engage in the labor of inter-cultural communication and translation. In his memoir *My People the Sioux*, Luther Standing Bear recalls his first class at Carlisle and the loss of his Lakota name:

Our interpreter came into the room and said "Do you see all these marks on the blackboard? Well, each word is a white man's name. They are going to give each one of you one of these names by which

you will hereafter be known." None of the names were read or explained to us, so of course we did not know the sound or meaning of any of them. (136)

Students took on such peculiar titles as Rutherford B. Hayes and George Washington. In a sense, the first alphabetic literacy lesson ("these marks on the blackboard") required students to obscure their identities and kinship ties with new, Euro-American names. What is also striking about Luther Standing Bear's memory is that he recalls a translator being in the room. Bilingual communication and teaching in translation were always available options and must have been used when students first arrived, but all communication had to be re-oriented and contorted to fit the English-only orthodoxy at the center of the school's mission.

This pedagogy discounted a bilingual alternative that would have done much to distribute authority between Euro-American and Indigenous epistemologies. To justify the departure from the far more practical precedent of multilingual education, Pratt and his fellow educators had to view Native students as disabled by their language and in need of drastic intervention to achieve the imagined cultural advancement of the settler society that wanted to absorb them. The rhetoric of disability was not the only sense in which literacy education at Carlisle was an embodied process. Pratt believed that Indian students would best learn English by expressing the language with their bodies. In a report to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1882, he had his head teacher, C.M. Semple explain their teaching methods. She writes:

Almost from the first, by the use of slate and blackboard the pupils were taught to write and read the names of objects, or short sentences—using script—describing actions. “Harry ran.” “Mattie ran.” “Ina ran.” written upon the board by the teacher, following the action by the child, copied upon the slate, at first almost illegibly, was one of the first lessons given a class of little Pueblos who came to us ignorant of English and without previous schooling . . . Running, jumping, ball throwing, paper throwing, drinking, eating etc. afforded amusement and exercise, alternating with the really difficult first lessons in writing. To expedite the process of learning to write, the sentences, or words, were written upon the board by the teacher, and after being almost erased, the little hands were guided in tracing the characters. This device, and a judicious amount of commendation and criticism secured success in the manual effort which in this method presents the only real difficulty.¹²

The report references Keep’s textbook as the source of their curriculum two years after his initial visit, suggesting that this remained the primary approach for the entirety of the first students’ three-year term at school. In order to learn verbs, children must enact the word with their own bodies, running, jumping, ball throwing etc. It is as though the English language enters the bodies of the students to create a racial transformation. In this way, the students’ bodies become conduits for the English language. Through this process, all other acculturation is meant to naturally follow. Writing English is also an embodied process guided by the white educators—students trace sentences written by their teachers and the teachers go so far as to physically guide their “little hands.” The English language-learning curriculum aims to change the very movements of the pupils. If language is a racialized trait in the English-only schema and race is seen as residing in the body, a certain alchemy occurs in this embodied training where the student is imagined to shed their culture as the English language enters and inoculates the Indigenous body making it fit for entry into the Euro-American citizenry.

¹² Report from Richard Henry Pratt to Commissioner of Indian Affairs Hiram Price. 25 January 1882. Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA. Manuscript.

Literacy development is an embodied process. Learning to write letters and create sounds with the mouth and tongue are bodily acts through which children learn the English language in its spoken and written forms. Semple reports on how the teachers manipulate the students' mouths to teach them proper annunciation: "It is often necessary to show the Indian pupil the proper position of the teeth, tongue, and lips and insist upon his imitation. When he finds that it is possible to make the difficult sounds, a great deal is done toward success in English speaking." One can imagine teachers not only modeling their own tongue and lip positions but also touching the students' faces and moving their mouths into the shapes that create standardized English sounds. The emphasis on the words "show" "insist" and "possible" indicates a power dynamic where the teacher imagines herself as the authority figure who must "insist" upon her students' bodily conformity in order to make English "possible" for them. Again, the body is the crucial site for English-language training, and the racialized body comes fully under the control of the Euro-American teacher who holds the power to make her students' bodies and words fit within the settler polity.

To study the rhetorical dimensions of literacy, according to John Duffy, is "to chart the symbolic environments in which reading and writing take place, and to look at how these environments influence the practice, dissemination, and meanings of literacy" (3). During the allotment period, Indigenous languages and literacies accrued meaning within discourses of social evolutionism and attendant ideas about the racialized and disabled body. Pratt's literacy project was both assimilationist and genocidal. The pedagogy through which he enacted that project aimed to eradicate Indigenous lifeways and nations in North America by destroying not only language but the kinship lines through which language was passed down. Language assimilation has not been fully understood as an embodied process. Because Carlisle students' bodies were racialized through their languages, English-only training sought to move, shape, and alter them to destroy Indigenous identity and replace it with settler culture.

Part 3: Constellating Literacy, Disability, and Race

When Carlisle students used Plains Sign Talk, they drew on a familiar and expedient language to communicate with each other in an unfamiliar environment. When Pratt, Keep and Porter observed PST, they did not see savvy students drawing upon their rhetorical repositories to engage the basic human need to communicate. Instead, they made sense of PST within late nineteenth century theories about fixed racial characteristics that classify human groups in a taxonomy of cultural development. To make sense of this constellation of racialization, disability, and language, we need to understand how intercultural rhetorics emerge and interact in a site of vastly uneven power, where one group can enforce their own interpretations of language onto the other. As Powell and Bratta have argued, cultural rhetorics

is a field that can take on the comparative analysis required here, provided that the approach takes on “an examination of issues of power, both those that arise within each cultural site of practice, and the power relations between the cultures involved in the comparative analysis” (Introduction n. pag.). Cultural Rhetorics acknowledges that the study of rhetoric as a Western phenomenon is not hospitable to sense-making at the intersections of multiple identity categories and power dynamics. These intersecting oppressions are crucial for understanding the inter-group relations from which rhetors make meaning in the off-reservation boarding school.

At Carlisle, PST accrued meaning during the assimilation period as settler society cast American Indians as culturally disabled in order to justify a new wave of territorial expansion. Indian educators responded to this colonial logic by creating a curriculum based on another group they viewed as communicatively disabled: the Deaf. Historical cultural rhetorics work calls us to a constellated understanding of how different bodies and social identities are shaped and understood through language. Bridging so many categories of analysis—race, colonization, indigeneity, Deafness, disability—is no easy task, but as scholars and teachers of writing, we continue to do our work in an environment where theories of racial identity and disability influence literacy pedagogies. By engaging the history of English language and literacy education as an assimilationist project, we may begin to construct a new paradigm that honors the culturally rich and expedient languages our students use to communicate as they enter new and unfamiliar rhetorical situations.

Given the many ways that theories of race and disability show up in the Carlisle curriculum, it is worthwhile to zoom outward to late nineteenth-century developments in education that made it possible for the eradication of Indigenous languages to be seen as a benevolent project. Multilingual education was not prohibited for all American students at this time. As Malathi Michelle Iyengar has argued, Western European immigrants were able to become citizens without surrendering their home languages through the 1790 Naturalization Act category of “free white person.” As an example of the implications of this act, bilingual public education for German students flourished from the 1830s through World War I (42). But for Pratt, even Europeans languages within the national boundaries presented a problem. In his third annual report to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1882, he wrote “ignorance of our language is the greatest obstacle to the assimilation of the Indians with our population. It will be better for all when tribal names distinctions and languages are obliterated. The plan of exclusive schools for Germans was tried in the state of Pennsylvania and found to be foreign to the interest of the commonwealth in that it banded together a large mass of people to peculiar and special

interest in each other rather than in the general welfare.”¹³ Pratt believes that language is one of the only ways to bind together a nation-state with such disparate populations and expansive territory. In his argument, federal law allowing immigrants that fit within the category of whiteness to maintain their national tongues was failing. Native Americans especially had to learn English because their languages threatened the racial-linguistic purity of the United States. Like Native Americans, the Deaf fell under eugenic logics that blocked them from access to the full benefits of U.S. citizenship. Unlike other Western-European immigrants, the Deaf were viewed as undesirable entrants to the United States.

Douglas Baynton writes that the Immigration Act of 1882 denied entry to any “lunatic, idiot, or person unable to take care of himself or herself without becoming a public charge” (“The Undesirability of Admitting Deaf-Mutes” 393). Deaf people were sent back to their countries of origin at U.S. ports under the category of “person unable to take care of himself or herself.” Baynton explains that deaf people were “culturally defined as social dependents rather than social contributors” and eugenicists increasingly swayed policy with their view that the Deaf were “bearers of potentially defective heredity” (395). Like Native Americans, known legally as “domestic dependent nations” following the *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia*¹⁴ decision in 1831, deaf people were considered insufficiently individualistic to enter the body of American citizenship. This notion of dependency characterized Native and Deaf cultures as childlike and created a paternalistic dynamic that the state exploited to institutionalize these two groups.

While Pratt certainly believed in the linguistic purity of the American nation, in other ways his racial views were out of step with the social evolutionism of his contemporaries. While social evolutionism takes a racialized—that is, fixed and biological—view of indigeneity, Pratt tended to embrace a much earlier notion of indigeneity as largely cultural¹⁵— that is, mutable and

¹³ Report from Richard Henry Pratt to Commissioner of Indian Affairs Hiram Price. 25 January 1882. Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA. Manuscript.

¹⁴ *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia*. 30 U.S. 1. p. 2. Supreme Court of the United States. 1831. Supreme Court Collection. Legal Information Inst., Cornell U Law School.

<https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/30/1>

¹⁵ Pratt’s view of indigeneity can be traced back to the first Indian Policy in the United States. George Washington’s Secretary of War, Henry Knox, believed that a civilization program would eventually subsume all tribal identities beneath the purview of American citizenship. Drafted in 1789, Knox’s program planned a fifty-year window for Indians east of the Mississippi to integrate into Anglo-American society. By extinguishing titles, denationalizing tribes, and leaving only “individual Indian landholders scattered as farmer-citizens among the whites,” Knox believed that the question of relations between whites and Indians would be resolved (McLoughlin 4). This policy reflected the cultural rather than racial divide between Euro-Americans and Indians. Indians were seen as uncivilized simply because they had not been adequately exposed to Euro-American cultural practices. For more on Knox’s civilizational program see William G. McLoughlin’s “Experiment in Cherokee Citizenship, 1817-1829.”

subject to change through immersion in settler society. Pratt's view of indigeneity led him to dismiss the possibility of educating Native Americans with emancipated African Americans shortly after the Fort Marion prisoners arrived at Hampton. He quickly came to believe that Indians would benefit more from exposure to White families than from intermingling with African Americans. During Pratt's stay at Hampton, he and Hampton director Samuel Chapman Armstrong went on long walks at night debating the question of how to educate the two races. Pratt later summarizes his views on the topic in his 1892 address "The Advantages of Mingling Indians with Whites." He says of enslaved Africans, "they became English-speaking and civilized, because forced into association with English-speaking and civilized people; became healthy and multiplied, because they were property; and industrious, because industry, which brings contentment and health, was a necessary quality to increase their value." Indians, on the other hand, "remained savage, because forced back upon themselves and away from association with English-speaking and civilized people, and because of our savage example and treatment of them" (263). For Pratt, slavery benefitted African Americans because it exposed them to the English language and habits of industry. The greater evil, he argues, was an Indian policy of removal, reservations, and war. We can see that Pratt's approach to Indian education emerged from his extreme views of environmental racial identity formation. The most important thing was to expose Indians to settler culture. He viewed the off-reservation boarding school and slavery as parallel benevolent institutions because they had the potential to "civilize."

As a result of Pratt's uneven views of race, two competing and overlapping logics of indigeneity came into play in the early Carlisle curriculum. On the one hand, Pratt believed that the students' very bodies were disabled by their language and culture—a social evolutionist view to be sure. On the other hand, Pratt pushed forward with his conviction that the Indian "is born a blank, like all the rest of us," characterizing students not through fixed, racial characteristics, but through a mutable, cultural framework (268). If Indians were Lockean blank slates, then they could learn to be industrious Americans through education. This conviction shaped the school program in many ways. Students had to be taken away from their communities—as far away as possible—and they needed to spend time with white families on "outing" or long periods of farm labor away from school. Pratt's policies were shaped by the notion that "the way to break up the tribe was to break up the Indian family and to cultivate children's allegiance to the United States rather than to the tribe" (Piatote 5). By implementing a curriculum based on pedagogies in schools for the Deaf, Pratt created the "blank slate" conditions that he believed would allow his students to unlearn and relearn language, unlearn and relearn culture. If students could not speak, but learned gestural language instead, they would be primed for full exposure to English without a trace of their previous linguistic knowledge. Only in this frame can we begin to understand why perfectly standard English was necessary. Any idiom or syntax from their native tongues would indicate that the students had

not erased their cultural knowledge completely in order to start again as Euro-Americans. The project of destroying to replace would never be complete if students did not speak standard English.

Porter's letter to Pratt indicated his affiliation with a growing movement for standardization in the Deaf education movement as well. In the 1870s, Deaf language and literacy education shifted from a bilingual/bicultural model known as manualism to an assimilationist model known as oralism. Like the Carlisle curriculum, this emergent approach demanded embodied and mental conformity to norms of an imagined standard English. Oralist schools would eliminate signing "by teaching only in speech, and by providing training in lip reading and articulation" (Edwards 184). Like the Carlisle students, Deaf students were forced to change their embodied language practices to fit within an imagined national ideal. In the previous paradigm, Deaf educators generally recognized signs as "the natural language of deaf people, both as the language that they most commonly used among themselves and as the language that originated from the deaf community itself" (Edwards 34). By coming together in large numbers for the first time in the missionary schools of the Antebellum period, physically deaf people formed a Deaf community with its own language, culture, and values. These schools for the Deaf allowed students to develop their language without the attendant need for assimilation into standard spoken English.

By the 1870s, proponents of the Oral method began to attack Deaf sign language. Prominent Deaf scholar and activist Paddy Ladd has referred to oralism as linguistic colonialism, a term that elegantly maps the parallels between Native and Deaf education at this time. Ten years before Pratt opened Carlisle, oralists were insisting that Deaf Americans pass as hearing, an educational shift that went hand in hand with racialized views of language development. As Douglas Baynton argues, "sign language came to be seen as a language low in the scale of evolutionary progress, preceding in history even the most 'savage' of spoken languages and supposedly forming a link between the animal and the human" (*Forbidden Signs* 40). As early as 1844, Horace Mann and Samuel Gridley Howe pressed for the oral method. When Howe became chairman of the Massachusetts Board of State Charities in 1863, he persuaded the state legislature to charter an oralist school. By 1880, a transatlantic congress of deaf educators (all hearing), committed to the Treaty of Milan, which stated that sign-language restricted deaf children and should be replaced by oral training (Branson and Miller 43). Like Native students, the Deaf were forced to abandon their literacy practices to perform the dominant mode of language in America—standard English.

This overlapping history of Postbellum Indian and Deaf education demonstrates how the concept of disability stripped Native Americans of their culture and language as the concept of

the Indian savage was stripping Deaf Americans of their culture and language. The overlap between the understanding of Deaf and Native literacies shows how, as Jay Dolmage's has argued, power circulates through communication.¹⁶ The shifting curricular methods at schools for the Deaf and off-reservation boarding schools further demonstrate how cultural meanings of literacy can radically shape the experiences and worldviews of human beings (Duffy 193-200). Indigenous and Deaf sign languages came to threaten the racial-linguistic purity of the United States and literacy education began to demand monolingual, spoken, and standardized English. The legacy of that standardization retains its power today. Despite language revitalization movements in both Native and Deaf communities, public literacy education remains stubbornly reliant on a standard English paradigm in which difference is a problem to be solved rather than an inherent characteristic of all communication.

Part 4: Plains Sign Talk as Survivance

To enact an English-only curriculum, Carlisle made an imagined hierarchy of literacy real. Reformers used social evolutionism to justify colonial desires for land and a monocultural society. These colonial impulses materialized in English classrooms where teachers were throwing sponges and teaching object lessons. Carlisle teachers produced linguistic disability in their students by stripping them of their rich communicative forms and then treating them as if they had used sub-standard communicative practices all along. To standardize has historically meant to diminish a student's available means of communication, and yet, Native students persistently refused to submit to the curriculum designed to eradicate their rhetorical practices. Gerald Vizenor's landmark term, *survivance*, combines survival and resistance to characterize how Native American cultural identities persist in the face of colonial violence. At Carlisle, students used Plains Sign Talk to take advantage of their teacher's misunderstanding of their communication systems and push back against the curriculum that sought to strip them of their identities and languages.

While Pratt and his teachers worked hard to block students from using their tribal languages, students continued to communicate in their native tongues. Two years after teachers implemented their English-only curriculum, Stephen K. White Bear wrote about the persistent use of Siouxian languages in his editorial "Speak Only English." Because the editorial opens with a justification for why White Bear has been "talking Indian," it is likely that he was assigned this editorial as a punishment. He writes,

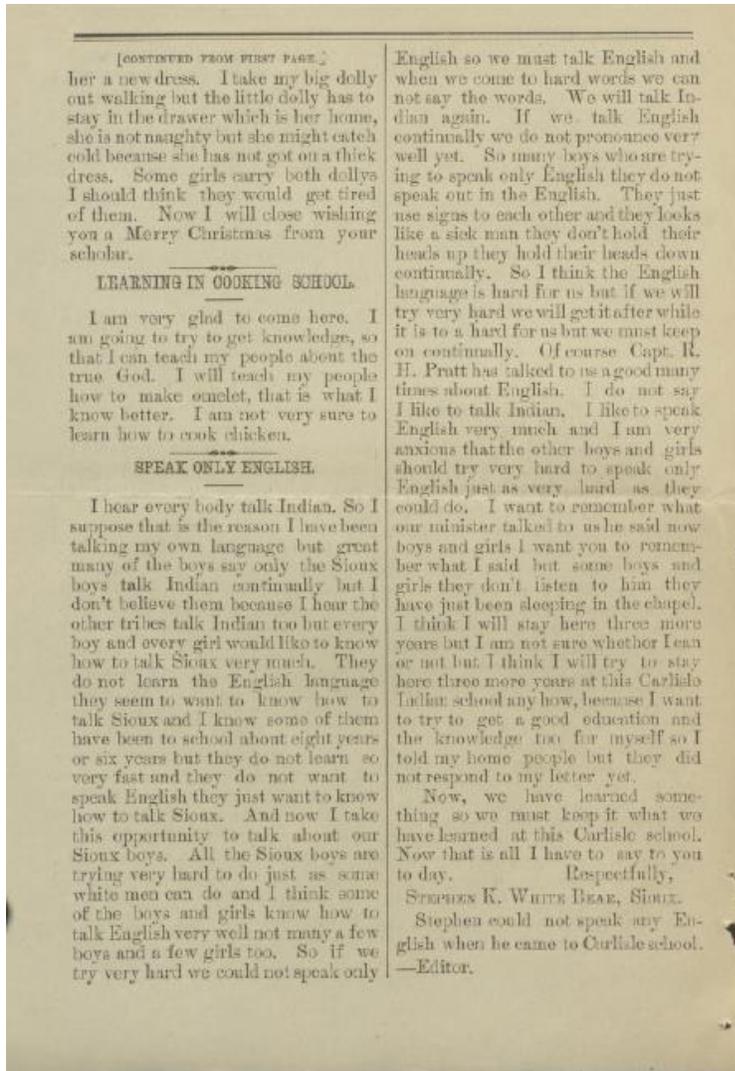
¹⁶ In *Disability Rhetoric*, Dolmage characterizes rhetoric as "the strategic study of the circulation of power through communication" (3). He believes "we should recognize rhetoric as the circulation of discourse through the body" (5). Following Aristotle's famous definition of rhetoric as "the faculty of discovering in any particular case all of the available means of persuasion," Dolmage argues that "the body has never been fully or fairly understood for its role in shaping and multiplying these available means" (3).

I hear everybody talk Indian. So I suppose that is the reason I have been talking my own language but great many of the boys say only the Sioux boys talk Indian continually but I don't believe them because I hear the other tribes talk Indian too but every boy and girl would like to know how to talk Sioux very much. They do not learn the English language they seem to want to know how to talk Sioux and I know some of them have been to school about eight years or six years but they do not learn so very fast and they do not want to speak English they just want to know how to talk Sioux. ¹⁷

Because the majority of the first students came from the Rose Bud and Pine Ridge agencies, Lakota would have been the most common spoken language between 1879 and 1883. It is clear that this has become a privileged language at the school among the students, with many wanting to learn Lakota more so than English. This trend has come to the attention of the teachers, hence their assignment of the editorial to Stephen White Bear as a punishment.

Later in the editorial, White Bear reveals that students have also continued to use Plains Sign Talk: “so many boys who are trying to speak only English they do not speak out in the English. They just use signs to each other they looks like a sick man they don't hold their heads up they hold their heads down continually.” I read this moment as evidence that students are using PST covertly to talk to each other and block the teachers from understanding what they are saying while also ensuring plausible deniability because they are using signs, which have been previously endorsed by their teachers. The teachers may view this language as evidence of disability— “they looks like a sick man”—but signing has been an important part of Pratt's curriculum, and students have strategically continued to use Plains Sign Talk to communicate within the constraints of the total institution where they are detained.

¹⁷ “Speak Only English.” *The School News* Vol. II No. 8 January 1882 p. 4



To be sure, this a sophisticated rhetoric of survivance.¹⁸ Students are using their teachers' interpretation of PST as an unsophisticated series of gestures to keep their language alive and communicate in secret. According to Kay Yandell, while PST "served to protect privacy between the two signers within earshot but out of sight of others, it also functioned to relay messages throughout or across a group" (536). It was also widely used by children as part of their everyday communication (535). Plains Sign Talk allows students to communicate privately with one another or share information quickly across the entire group without their teachers understanding what they are saying. Their teachers have unwittingly endorsed these covert communications within their English-only environment because they failed to understand PST as a

communicative system with the same level of complexity as any European language. These students are taking advantage of their teachers' low cultural expectations of them in order to maintain their languages. Because they will certainly be punished for "speaking Sioux," sign talk is a powerful method of survivance for Carlisle's earliest students.

Another indication that students continued to covertly use their languages and subvert their education in other ways appears in Pratt's report at the end of the school's first three-year term. On September 30, 1882, he writes "three years in school is not education and judgments based upon the success or failure of those who have made this mere beginning can only be

¹⁸ See Powell, Malea. "Rhetorics of Survivance: How American Indians Use Writing." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 53, no. 3, 2002, pp. 396-434.

imperfect.¹⁹ As he attempts to manage the Indian Bureau's expectations, we note a hesitancy in his usually bombastic prose. Pratt knows that many students are returning home without achieving the full measure of "civilization" that he hoped for. He also writes that the classroom model has become "Make haste slowly," another indication that the promise of the three-year language-transformation has turned out to take longer than expected. Perhaps the delay is due to the students who continue to "speak Sioux," or those who have decided to learn Lakota as well as English, or those who use Plains Sign Talk to communicate covertly with one another. It seems that most students are not speaking perfectly standardized English as they prepare to return home. In fact, many may be speaking new Indigenous languages as well.

Hazel Hertzberg has argued that twentieth-century Pan-Indian movements emerged from off-reservation boarding schools (18). At Carlisle, Native students from dozens of tribes met one another and were exposed to Lakota and Plains Sign Talk for the first time. These languages became shared strategies for surviving the boarding school experience and allowed students to resist the English-only curriculum while they were at school. Linguist William Leap has written that Indian student varieties of English were "*codes under construction*, codes students were creating, as individuals and as a group, on the basis of the knowledge of language they had acquired in their home/tribal communities, were learning from their teachers, and were learning from each other" (162). While their teachers believed they were destroying tribal languages and replacing them with English, they were in fact witnessing the creation of rhetorical and linguistic strategies for a new era of Indigenous survivance. When students used these languages strategically and at great risk of punishment, they sowed the seeds of Indigenous resistance for the twentieth century.

Part 5: Concluding Notes for Educators

In 2014, I took a job as a writing teacher at a community college in Butte County, a rural region in the far north of California's central valley on the unceded lands of Maidu-speaking nations. During that time, I thought a lot about how important it is for scholars and teachers of writing to historicize our curricular decisions. I would often talk with my colleagues about Standard Written English as a colonial project, and they would argue that students need grammatical correctness and perfect usage to succeed in our society as students and then workers. As Mya Poe et al. have recently argued, the social justice imperative demands that we move from these elemental logics to ecological views of student's writing capacity. Part of that ecology is the history of how standard English emerged from the American colonial project. Without this history, "the fallacy of a universal linguistic standard results in replicating the existing social hierarchy under the false promise of opportunity" (Poe et al.8). When we invoke the specter of

¹⁹ Report from Richard Henry Pratt to Commissioner of Indian Affairs Hiram Price. 30 September 1882. Archives and Special Collections, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA. Manuscript.

Standard English, we replicate and reproduce the colonial relations of power on the American continent that Pratt so powerfully translated into language curricula.

In 2016, Californians passed Proposition 58, a law that overturned the English-only mandate in public education. The ongoing influence of English-only policies is evidence of literacy as one of the most potent tools deployed by colonial governments for territorial control. The earliest English-only policies stem from the U.S. annexing California after the Mexican-American War. In 1855, the state of California declared that English would be the only language used in schools, and by 1879, California became the first state to establish English as its official language in legal and civic contexts. In the same year, Indian educators on the East coast established the first English-only boarding school for Native Americans just as oralist educators were arguing that deaf children should speak rather than sign. U.S. imperialism instantiated the standard English and English-only policies that remain with us today.

This essay is a call for writing educators to engage in cultural rhetorics praxis grounded in historical inquiry. Our understanding of difference shapes the means of communication that our students can safely deploy in our classrooms. Our beliefs about language difference structure how students enact and maintain their resistance to the assimilating processes of our education systems. In reflecting on the strategic use of Plains Sign Talk by students at Carlisle, I am pushing us to think about how we can surface our students' practices of survivance in our classrooms and the broader institutional spaces they are navigating. The curriculum we use in first year writing, rhetoric, and professional and technical communication courses can center survivance as a foundational practice in the fight for social justice. As we prepare students for the rhetorical situations they will face in their majors, let us point them to the histories of racism, ableism, and settler-colonialism that live at the center of every academic discipline. Let us use the writing classroom as a space for students to experiment with their own rhetorics of survivance in collaboration, community, and coalition with others subject to systemic oppression in our schools and our society.

At Carlisle, students took advantage of their teachers' cultural bias to maintain private communications in Plains Sign Talk. Because teachers and students had completely different understandings of this language, students navigated both challenges and opportunities to maintain their linguistic identities. Ultimately, the rhetorical history of Carlisle shows us how a standard English policy constructs difference as disability in order to reproduce colonial relations of power. It is up to us as educators to reframe students' language difference as strategic and productive for their survivance within the institutions that seek to assimilate them.

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