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ABSTRACT

Little attention has been paid to students' specific literacy practices within Indian boarding schools. This paper examines the letter writing practices of students from the Genoa Industrial Indian School (GIS) in Genoa, Nebraska, from 1884-1934. The paper "reads" the letters as social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, pointing out that the letters were often used by school administrators to promote public awareness about Indian education and to construct and disseminate public images of Native American identity. Students' letters home were read by GIS teachers before they were sent to ensure that negative representations of the school would not be circulated, but sometimes the letters were used in "nonsanctioned" ways--to criticize the school's administrative practices, for example. To preserve the school's history, some Genoa citizens created brochures, renovated the remaining building into a museum, and held an annual reunion for former GIS students and their descendants. In 1991, letters solicited from former students about their experiences were collected in a yearbook and distributed to reunion participants. The town newspaper printed two contemporary letters written between a former GIS student and his white boyhood friend, and that, just as the long ago letters represent a contact zone, these letters function as a contemporary contact zone as these individuals participate in a public dialogue that seeks to work out representations of the school's history. Paragraphs from two early letters and "Rules for Letter-Writing" (1917) are appended. (Contains 28 references.) (CR)

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Lettered Resistance at the Genoa Indian School, Genoa, Nebraska (1884-1934)

In the past 25 years, historical studies on Indian boarding schools have proliferated, ranging from analyses of federal policies regarding Indian education (Adams, Coleman, Prucha) to particular institutional histories such as *They Called It Praire Light*, *The Phoenix Indian School*, *Cultivating the Rosebuds*, and *Out of the Depths*. While specific instititional practices may differ, most scholars of American Indian education agree that the boarding school experience of removing Indian children from their families and tribes and educating them to "live the white man's way" created a legacy of deracination and cultural violence that continues to impact American Indian families and communities today, with effects ranging from alienation and alcoholism to the extinction of native languages and cultural practices.

Given this abundance of scholarship, it is surprising that so little attention has been paid to students' specific literacy practices within these institutions. Most discussions of literacy have focused on the federal "English only" requirement that prohibited Indian pupils from speaking their native languages and the punishments they received, which ranged from removal of privileges to beatings to having acid poured on their tongues. There's no question that federal off-reservation boarding schools' literacy policies were brutal, causing many Indian school pupils to lose their ability to communicate with their families. But by focusing on literacy instruction primarily in terms of speaking, other important aspects of literacy, such as the impact of writing instruction, have been overlooked.

This lack of attention to the written texts that students produced has important consequences, particularly in terms of reading students' resistance to the hegemonic culture of these schools. As Deborah Brandt suggests, literacy artifacts reflect how individuals intersect "at a certain time with the ongoing, official history of mass literacy and the institutions that have controlled it," representing "a complex, sometimes cacophonous mix of fading and ascending materials, practices, and ideologies"(666). It is this micro-level attention to literacy materials, practices, and ideologies that is often absent in educational histories of Indian students' boarding school experiences, an absence which renders invisible how students enacted, remade, and resisted federal literacy policies in local and personal ways.

In this paper, then, I examine the letter writing practices of students from the Genoa Industrial Indian School, which existed in Genoa, Nebraska from 1884-1934. As Lucy's paper suggests, late 19th century letter writing instruction often became relegated to elementary school textbooks, focused on etiquette and the memorization of rules as a means of reproducing hegemonic cultural values. But these commonplace distinctions between public and private, between social etiquette and political action, are elided when examining the GIS students' letters. Rather than reading these students' letters solely as examples of cultural domination, then, I seek to read them through the lens of Mary Louise Pratt's much used metaphor of "the contact zone," as social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (444). For even as GIS pupils were learning rule-bound strategies for letter writing from their textbooks, the actual letters that they produced were not simply classroom exercises. Their letters were often used by school administrators to promote public awareness about Indian education in general and to construct and disseminate images of Native American

identity to the public. At the same time, GIS pupils used letter writing to build and sustain networks with school alumni, and, in some cases, used the textual models and strategies taught in the classroom to write letters that resisted or challenged school policies. For GIS students, letter writing was both a public and private enterprise, one in which they were *forced* to participate and which participated in constructing them as "Indians" within the larger culture but also an enterprise that they used to critique and reject these constructions. And, as I will discuss later, letter writing is a present-day means for GIS alumni to resist whitewashed representations of their experiences as they create autoethnographic texts in selective collaboration with and sometimes resistance to the ways that current Genoa community members are writing the school's history. Indeed, the various purposes GIS students had for letter writing highlights for compositionists the complicated nature of reading the historical significance of writing instruction in students' lives and the importance of carefully attending to literate acts and artifacts produced in these past and contemporary contact zones.

Background to the Genoa Indian School

The GIS was the fourth and one of the largest of the almost 30 Indian government boarding schools built in the United States at the turn of the nineteenth century. Started in 1884 in a one room building, the GIS grew to encompass a 640-acre campus with over thirty buildings, sixty teachers and staff, and, at the height of its enrollment, had almost 600 students from over 30 different tribes.[1] The GIS curriculum followed the U.S. government's half and half guidelines for Indian schools. Students

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1 For a more complete description of the Genoa Indian School see Wilma Daddorio's "They Get Milk Practically Every Day: The Genoa Industrial Indian School, 1884-1934."*Nebraska History* (Spring 1992): 2-11 and Ronald C. Naugle and Nancy Svoboda Ledford's, "Glimpses of Life at the Genoa Industrial Indian School 1884-1934." Genoa: Genoa Historical Board, 1982.

attended academic classes for half the day followed by assigned work details in areas such as the dairy, the kitchen, the laundry, the harness shop, etc. Because the GIS was virtually a self-sustaining campus, this vocational work often took precedence over academic instruction. But when students were in the classroom, English was the primary subject, especially in the early grades where most students came with little or no prior experience in speaking it. In the later grades, the GIS literacy curriculum followed Indian Commissioner Thomas Morgan's 1890 federal guidelines, utilizing literature and extensive writing practice. Approved classroom texts included the *McGuffey Reader Series, Hyde's Practical Lessons in the Use of English* , Tarbell's *Lessons in Language Book I* and Reed and Kellogg's *Graded Lessons in English* . These readers were supplemented with literary texts such as *Robinson Crusoe in words of one syllable*, *The Swiss Family Robinson*, Swinton's *American Classics, Grandfather's Stories*, and popular magazines such as *Harper's Young People, Chatterbox,* and *Wide Awake* .

Letter writing instruction, which GIS students began around the age of ten, was an important component of the composition curriculum. Commissioner Morgan's description of the approved curriculum for letter writing included "Instruction and drill in the writing of letters of business and friendship, notes, invitations, bills, receipts, telegrams, etc...." (Morgan, *Studies* 101). Because most classroom work was done on slates and blackboards, few letters remain that students produced in response to particular textbook exercises. In examining letters that students produced at the GIS, then, I rely primarily on letters reprinted within the student newspaper as well as those archived in different school administrators' files.

Students' initial experiences in letter writing (between 1884-1910) were shaped by the GIS administrators' desires to gain support for the school's goals, both from the

parents of the children who attended and from possible donors in the general public. Thus, GIS students were required to write letters home to their parents at least once a month, letters which were read by GIS teachers before they were sent to ensure that negative representations of the school would not be circulated. The instruction that GIS pupils received in letter writing often must have seemed at odds with their experiences. For example, their Reed and Kellogg textbook, *Higher Lessons in English*, notes that in the body of a letter, "If addressing one of your family, write just as you feel, only *feel right*" (309). Given the fact that GIS pupils were often forcibly separated from their homes for up to three years, punished for speaking their native languages, and often underfed and overworked, the notion that they could "write just as you feel" must have been a curious one. Certainly what they felt was right was often in dissonance with what their teachers defined as right conduct.

Beyond writing to family, GIS pupils also participated in letter writing exchanges with other children from primarily well-to-do East coast schools and social clubs. More so than letters to family members, these letters participated in a politics of representation and cultural production of Native identity to meet the interest (often voyeuristic) of the public, who generally viewed Indian pupils as savages in need of being civilized. For GIS administrators, pen pal exchanges not only provided audiences for GIS students to write to; they also incited public interest in the goals of the GIS in general, thereby participating in the civilizing discourse that NA children could and should be educated to live "like white children."

One example is a pen pal exchange between GIS girls and a group of schoolgirls in Boston who were both enrolled in the social/religious club called the King's Daughters. The Boston club first wrote to the Indian school pupils because they were "greatly interested in the Indian work" (*POP*, March 13, 1891 3). In addition to

writing to individual GIS pupils, the Boston girls sent dimes to subscribe to the GIS newspaper, *The Pipe of Peace*. By May 15, 112 subscriptions had been requested by the King's Daughters Boston circle, the largest of any group nationwide (*POP* May 15, 1891 3). GIS administrators were enthusiastic about this letter exchange for many reasons: 1) they felt it represented the Boston circle's "warm interest in the welfare of the Indian children" (*POP*, April 17, 1891 2), an interest that could be cultivated to other East Coast groups as well; 2) by printing the exchange of letters in the school newspaper, administrators were able to profile their students' writing abilities to a broader audience; and 3) GIS administrators felt that engagement of the public through letter writing was more important than classroom work because they viewed the Boston children as role models for GIS pupils. As one article in the *Pipe of Peace* noted: "The Indian children are particularly susceptible to good influence and good example from those whom they are taught to look to as their instructors. In fact, in the present generation more good will be derived from this ...than from books and slates."

While the value of letter writing seemed clear to GIS administrators, this correspondence must have seemed quite one-sided to GIS students, especially in terms of writing to children whose economic, cultural, and social backgrounds were so strikingly different. Indeed, reading the Boston girls' letters seems remarkably similar to the contemporary exchange of "Literacy Letters" that Linda Brodkey profiles between her students and a class of basic writers. Not surprisingly, the letters produced by GIS students were brief and vague, a fact that was noted by the Boston girls and GIS administrators, both of whom exhorted GIS pupils to provide more information about their lives. For instance, one Boston girl, Bessie Tripp, wrote to Lizzie Hope: "Dear Friend, I have been looking over your last letter, and as I have an opportunity will try and answer it. The only fault I find with your letters, they are so

short. Very interesting, I must admit, what there is to them." Later in the letter, after asking a series of questions, Tripp writes "If these questions tire you, simply ignore them, but if you feel disposed to gratify my curiosity, I should like to hear all you can say about these things. Just tell me in a simple way, as if you were talking to me" (*POP* May 15, 1891 2).

Despite their common affiliation in the King's Daughters, the Boston girls letters represented more in common with the goals of GIS *faculty* than the students. For instance, Tripp's letter concludes by describing her role in civilizing another member of an "Other" group: "I generally go in town (Boston) to church. There is a Chinese Sunday-school connected with the church and I teach a Chinaman. There are about one hundred who come every Sunday. They all are anxious to learn to read and write. My scholar is very bright and ambitious. I enjoy teaching him. A number of our circle of King's Daughters teach in the school" (*POP* May 15, 1891 2). In a similar vien, Grace Goold's letter to GIS pupil Rose Pulliam describes her educational opportunities as well as her tutoring work: "I hope you will tell me something about yourself and school life. I will be so glad to hear from you, and you know if we are both the King's daughters we surely are sisters and that is a beautiful relationship I think. Do you enjoy music and are you fond of reading? I play the piano and organ and am learning to play the guitar, also to speak German. I like French very much, also Italian. My Chinese Sunday school scholar has taught me a few sentences in that language, but it is too hard to make a study of" (*POP*, March 13, 1891 3). While the brevity of the GIS students' letters might be accounted for in terms of their limited language use--most pupils did not arrive at the school speaking or writing English--their length might also be connected to GIS students' resistance to participating in the civilizing discourse of the letter exchange. Given Grace's dismissive attitude toward her Chinese scholar's

language, it is probably fair to say that Rose might have felt her native language was equally devalued by her well-meaning Boston "sister."

As the GIS became more established in the early 1900's, the letters published in the school newspaper reflect a shifting purpose and audience, primarily from representing Indian education to the public to a more institutional, school-bound priority of creating and sustaining networks for GIS faculty, students, and alumni. For GIS faculty, the new school newspaper, *The Indian News*, served as a bulletin board for news about former colleagues and other federal boarding school practices. While excerpts from students' letters home were still printed, for the most part published letters were from school alumni who described their lives after Genoa and who often exhorted GIS pupils to make the most of their school experiences. And, during World War I, letters from the 69 students who served in the armed forces were frequently printed as a means of fostering patriotism within the GIS community. But beyond this more overt propaganda (which was initiated *by GIS alumni* and enlisted students themselves--not the GIS faculty), students' letters provided an important way for students to sustain networks with members of other tribes beyond the school campus, fostering what K.Tsianina Lomawaima describes as Pan-Indian identity. In this respect, alumni letters were important not because of their content--which usually evoked the same propagandistic discourse that administrators used--but rather because of who they were written by and how they described themselves in terms of occupation and geographical location so that current students could maintain connections with them.

Outside of the school newspaper, GIS students sometimes used their letter writing instruction in "nonsanctioned" ways, particularly in criticizing the school's administrative practices. In these cases, students' letters often directly contradicted the

"Rules for Letter Writing" that they were taught. [see handout of "Rules for Letter Writing."] In these letters, one can see how students' experiences with letter writing often clashed with the promised value that teachers claimed for it, reflecting a curious mix of possibility and denial for GIS students who sought to use writing to change their material situations.

One frequent form of letter writing between student and administrator was the request to visit home. School policy required that most children remain on campus year round for at least three years because funding was tied to the number of enrolled pupils and administrators feared that students who visited home wouldn't return. Despite this policy, the archives are full of student letters requesting permission to visit him. And when these requests were denied by the school superintendent, some went over his head and wrote directly to the Indian Commissioner for a second opinion. For instance, one student, Iva Valliere wrote:

> Would you please let me go home on a visit as I have been gone for a year and want to go home for a while. I want to stay a week at home and then come back to school. All the rest of the girls got to go home and I didn't. Mr. Chandler, my agent said if you were willing for me to go home a week it was all right with him. I have been good and I have always minded the rules.

Upon receiving letters from GIS students, the Commissioner usually wrote to the school Superintendent to ascertain the reasons for the initial refusal. In this particular case, the Superintendent's reply to the Commissioner--which was never sent to Iva herself--illustrates other motivations for retaining her at school, namely his belief that the mother sought Iva's inheritance from her dead father and that her request to return for a week "is simply a ruse to get home. She would not return" (Davis, 1922).

Another form of student letter writing was the request for transfer to another school, either back to public schools that some had previously attended or to other off-reservation boarding schools where additional educational training could be received. Like letter requests for home visits, students frequently wrote the Commissioner behind the Superintendent's back. For instance, Luke Going requested a transfer so that he could take a higher course of study:

> I have the honor to request that I be transfered from Genoa Indian School Genoa Nebr. to Lawrence Kansas, I mean the Haskell Institute, to complete my education, would like to take a 4 year course. I have being (sic) at Genoa school six years and wish a change and better my self in line of education. I am eligible for the 7th Grade. I enclose my certificate of promotion for your information.

The interplay of Luke's letter and the Superintendent's response illustrates the mixed literacy messages that students received at the GIS. While Luke wanted to further his education at Haskell in keeping with the GIS's assimilationist goals, the Superintendent's response to the Comissioner reflects the often times patronizing attitude the GIS administration took toward its Indian pupils:

> I have the honor to state that this boy is a very good pupil. He has been here six years and has made his grade each year. He will be in the 7th grade this next term.
>
> He will never make an office man. It would be a waste of time and money for him to undertake a commercial course. He will, in all probability, devote his time to farm pursuits after finishing his next term. At least, that in my opinion, is what he should do. This school is convenient and a number from his reservation are enrolled here. He can

> receive as good advantages here as at any Government school, therefore, I recommend the disapproval of his application for transfer (1921).

The Superintendent's reply illustrates that despite the ideology of assimilation promoted at the GIS, vocational education was still stressed over academics because he did not truly believe that GIS students were as bright or could be as successful as their white counterparts. Although Luke had successfully completed the GIS's academic course of study and received a certificate of promotion, he was not considered "office man" material.

Some students used letter writing to lodge complaints about their treatment. In 1909, several girls wrote Commissioner R.G. Valentine asking for the removal of their house matron. While the girls' original letter no longer exists, apparently their rhetoric was successful because the Commissioner wrote to the Superintendent:

> From the tone of the letter, I judge that these girls are sincere in their complaints, and did not write in a malicious or defiant spirit, and it seems to me that a kind-hearted, tactful employee with a knowledge of where the trouble lies should be able to win them over in a very short time. Much discontent and homesickness can often be overcome by giving thoughtful consideration to such appeals as this.

Although the Commissioner's reply attributes the girls' request to homesickness rather than to the legitimacy of the complaint, the girls' letter still seems to have been well received, despite the fact that it directly conflicts with a main rule for letter writing that they were taught: "Don't write anything that has the least semblance of inflicting punishment or of encroaching in any other way on the proper prerogative of any other (BIA) bureau or office."

Lettered Resistance in Reclaiming History

In 1934 the Genoa Indian School was shut down due to a changing federal policy that aimed to educate Indian children more economically and efficiently in public and reservation schools. Today, a few artifacts and the memories of the surviving students are all that remain. The students' letters that I've profiled represent only one small part of GIS pupils' literacy instruction but they provide rich evidence of how these students utilized instruction to enter rhetorical spaces, to accomodate to and to resist federal assimilationist policies, and to attempt to claim ownership of their education.

Ironically, letter writing continues to play a role in contemporary efforts by members of the white Genoa community (a town of 1,082 people) to reclaim and preserve the history of the school. In the past 15 years, a group of Genoa citizens has sought to preserve the school's history by creating brochures and markers, renovating the remaining building into a museum, and holding an annual reunion for former GIS students and their descendants. In organizing the first reunion in 1990, foundation members solicited letters from former GIS students about their experiences that were collected in a yearbook and distributed to reunion participants. And in 1991 the town newspaper, *theGenoa Leader Times*, printed contemporary letters written between a former GIS student, Sidney Byrd (now living in New Mexico), and his white boyhood friend, Leonard Lowe, who now lives in a small town 10 miles from Genoa. Just as the students letters from almost a hundred years ago represent a contact zone, this letter exchange functions as a contemporary contact zone, as these two individuals participate in a public dialogue that seeks to work out representations of the school's history.

This exchange began when Lowe wrote a letter about his memories of the Genoa Indian School that was published in the town newspaper. This letter was read by Byrd, who then wrote Lowe in person about *his* memories, beginning a private letter exchange that lasted over the course of a year. As Lowe received Byrd's letters, he also sent them on to the newspaper editor, who printed Byrd's letters in concert with copies of the letters that Lowe sent Byrd. All total, 14 letters were printed in the town's newspaper over the course of several months. In 1997, all of these letters were published together as part of a commemorative souvenir newspaper about the town's history.

While these letters represent primarily a friendly exchange of long-ago memories and stories about the two writers' childhood experiences, they also can be read as a site of contested dialogue about how the history of the Genoa Indian School should be written. For instance, while Lowe's letters emphasize a somewhat romanticized version of how the GIS operated, as told to him by his father who worked at the school, Byrd's letters often overtly refer to telling the "rest of the story" from a Native perspective, pointing to ways that universalized representations eliminate important differences in the authors' interpretations. In this sense, Byrd's letters might be labeled *autoethnographic* in Pratt's terms, as texts in which he undertakes to describe himself and his fellow students in ways that engage with the representations that others, such as Lowe, have made of GIS pupils.

One example of Byrd's intervention in Lowe's storytelling can be seen by comparing the conclusions of their initial letters (**see handout**). Lowe's letter contextualizes the "Indian tales" in terms of his personal memories and his general affection for Genoa as a hometown. His letter evokes a sense of longing for the past. On the other hand, Byrd's conclusion, while imitating Lowe's style, locates his story

within his participation in a larger Native American community and contextualizes it within the federal history of the Indian boarding school movement. While Byrd's interventions are subtle, they do serve to open up new understandings of how the history of the GIS can be read-- by Lowe as a recipient of the original letter and by the larger audience of newspaper readers who read these texts in juxtaposition with one another. Indeed, some of Lowe's later letters discuss how Byrd's letters have challenged his own interpretations of the GIS history. In introducing one of Bryd's letters about the school's superintendent, Lowe writes: "My Dad, who was employed for many years at the Genoa Indian School, often spoke of Sam B. Davis, so I was under the impression that he was a fine old gentleman from the south. A letter from Sidney Byrd shows the seamier side of old Sam B."

Thus, letter writing by former GIS students continues to play a complicated role, providing opportunities for alumni to respond to, reframe, and sometimes resist white interpretations of their experiences while also fostering participation in the identity formation of the town to which the school's history is connected. While it's difficult to theorize the significance of students' letter writing instruction in terms of students overall GIS experiences (given the lack of "complete knowledge" about individual students and their contexts), I believe that the few letters that remain open up possibilities for rendering and reading student response beyond the current large-scale histories of federal curricular hegemony. Overall, reading the lettered resistance of these students requires an appreciation of the multiple purposes and audiences for which these letters were written, and a respect for the possibilities that students imagined their texts might produce within these contact zones.

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Leonard Lowe's closing paragraphs of first letter:

Well, that is about the extent of "Indian tales" and as the years slip silently by and trails in the woods by the Beaver grow dim, I like to sit back and reminisce about the past, when the Beaver and Loup and ponds were clear and teeming with fish, the sloughs and back waters that held the big frogs that yielded the meals of succulent legs, I am thankful to have been able to spend my youth in Genoa, my home town.

Looking ahead, which I hope is the far distant future, and it is time for me to join my ancestors, it would be nice to stop in the "Happy Hunting Grounds," where a place around "little fire" would be waiting for "white boy" to parch some corn with his Red Brothers once again.

Sidney Byrd's closing paragraphs of first letter:

The days of the old Indian schools, as I knew them, are gone forever and, perhaps, it's just as well. However, our people continue to struggle for quality education, despite the proliferation of community colleges on or near our reservations in recent years.

We see no immediate relief nor improvement in our economic opportunities. We continue to fight to be ourselves, to live as other human beings, and for the right to enjoy the freedom of our great land with dignity and respect.

One day, when we join that great rabbit hunt in the sky, we just might see a skinny, little Lakota boy, with a grinning face, armed with a bean shooter, standing with a circle of friends, and greeting us with an old Lakota expression of gratitude, "Haho! Haho!"

Letter writers Sidney Byrd, former GIS student (left), and Leonard Lowe, former Genoa

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Rules for Letter-Writing
(*The Indian News*, April 1917, 23)

Don't write at all unless you have something to say and having said it, stop.

Don't give reasons or explanations unless they are called for.

Don't write anything in a perfunctory way but remember always that each letter or endorsement should bear impress of the writer's dignity, courtesy, and intelligence.

Don't hesitate to say "no" if that is the proper answer; and having said no, don't attempt to suggest an alternative aimed to circumvent your own "no."

Don't discuss people; discuss things.

Don't write anything quarrelsome (it would probably not be signed).

Don't get excited; or if you do, don't record the fact on paper.

Don't use long words when they can be avoided (and they generally can).

Don't be afraid to use the word "requisition" as a verb.

Don't say "shall" or "must" or "should" if you mean "will;" "verbal" when you mean "oral;" "amount" when you mean "quantity;" "in reference" when you mean "with reference'" "in accord" when you mean "in accordance;" "hardly" when you mean "scarcely;" or "with the view of" when you mean "with a view to."

Don't send a letter back unless the regulations require it. Originals are worth far more than copies for future reference

Don't write anything that has the least semblance of inflicting punishment or of encroaching in any other way on the proper prerogative of any other bureau or office.

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