WRITING NATIVE IDENTITIES: PERFORMING SURVIVANCE IN THE BOARDING SCHOOL AND THE COLLEGE WRITING CLASSROOM

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By

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The research and writing of this thesis is dedicated to Professor O’Connor. Thank you for the patient and critical reading—I owe you tea! I would also like to thank Chris Redman at the Bureau of Indian Education.
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Introduction

The utmost good faith shall always be observed towards the Indians; their lands and property shall never be taken from them without their consent; and, in their property, rights, and liberty, they shall never be invaded or disturbed, unless in just and lawful wars authorized by Congress; but laws founded in justice and humanity, shall from time to time be made for preventing wrongs being done to them, and for preserving peace and friendship with them.

Northwest Ordinance of 1789, Article 3.

[. . .]That it shall and may be lawful for the President of the United States to cause so much of any territory belonging to the United States, west of the river Mississippi, not included in any state or organized territory, and to which the Indian title has been extinguished, as he may judge necessary, to be divided into a suitable number of districts, for the reception of such tribes or nations of Indians as may choose to exchange the lands where they now reside, and remove there.

Indian Removal Act of 1830, Section 2.

The history and the future of American Indian life rests with, and within, the written word. As ordinances, laws, and treaties have played a significant role in shaping American Indian life for five hundred years, the impact of the written word is undeniable and often unpleasant. Although the United States Constitution only makes a cursory mention of Indian tribes in its description of the duties of Congress to uphold commerce and trade relations with American Indians, treaties—as legal documents structured according to the standards of the Constitution—were the primary written agreements between early white Americans and American Indians. However, as is evident through the egregious treatment of American Indians by American colonists, the written word was liable to be abused and misinterpreted by the very governments who drafted those
documents. While the Northwest Ordinance of 1789 promises the American
government’s respect for American Indian land rights, the Indian Removal Act, published
forty-one years later, reneges on this promise and assumes federal control over American
Indian land. In addition to written documents that dictated U.S policy towards the
American Indians, the United States government employed literacy education as an
instrument of cultural genocide meant to eliminate the identities and epistemologies of
American Indians. Colonists and missionaries taught American Indians that the written
word was sacred, permanent, and powerful. Because of this history, American Indians
have a distinctly problematic and complex relationship with the written word.

In addition to the political abuses engendered by treaties, the American
government and the missionaries before them found ways to oppress American Indians
through English literacy instruction. From the beginning of sixteenth century European
exploration in North America and until the establishment of the first government
boarding school in 1879, mission schools run by Spanish and French Catholics, as well as
Northern European and British Protestants, assumed the responsibility of educating
American Indians, who were seen as pagans in need of civilizing and Christianizing. The
objective of mission schools was to eradicate Native spirituality and replace it with
Christianity; this eradication process was coterminous with learning to read and write in
English. While many tribal leaders believed that mission schools were a direct threat to
their cultures, some saw education as a possible tool of empowerment. William Gerald
McLoughlin, historian at Brown University, presents evidence from Baptist missionary
documents that suggests American Indians embraced a white education. In one record, a
Cherokee chief explains to a Baptist missionary why he wants his children educated: “We want our children to learn English so the white man cannot cheat us” (155). Government boarding schools developed from the mission school’s basic framework but differed from mission schools in a distinctly nationalistic agenda. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the American military had failed to annihilate the American Indians in the quest for Westward expansion and the government sought an alternative to what Jon Reyhner and Jeanne Eder, authors of “American Indian Education: A History,” call “actual genocide” through “cultural, and specifically linguistic, genocide” (41). The government commenced this task in 1879 with the opening of General Henry Pratt’s Carlisle Indian School, in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. The school represented the government’s assuming responsibility for educating American Indians. This government-sponsored education attempted to assimilate American Indians by teaching them the skills and values of white society, thereby eliminating American Indians while transforming them into whites. However, in some cases this boarding school education did not successfully assimilate students, but instead helped to shape new formations of Native identities and to create opportunities for expressing those identities through writing in English. In this sense, the literacy skills American Indian students acquired in the preparation for white citizenship became tools of Native resistance.

Beginning in the early nineteenth century, American Indian authors and activists resisted assimilation and employed their English literacy skills for the preservation of their cultures. Although Sagoyewatha (Seneca, also known as Red Jacket) did not receive a traditional missionary education, he was an acclaimed orator within his community who
attracted more attention to his tribe in the 1820s by delivering speeches to white audiences that expressed the grievances of his tribe as their lands were being invaded by white settlers. By astutely observing the rhetorical tactics of white politicians during land negotiations, Sagoyewatha was able to adapt those tactics in arguments against white invasion and for the protection of Seneca culture. A century later, Zitkala-Sa (Yankton Dakota), a boarding school graduate, would follow in Sagoyewatha’s footsteps by expressing Native concerns to white audiences through referencing, and simultaneously resisting white rhetorical forms. Although not a boarding school graduate himself, N. Scott Momaday’s contemporary dramas interrogate the fundamental assumptions of assimilation and the consequences of performing Native identities in and outside the boarding school. Sagoyewatha, Zitkala-Sa, and Momaday reflect a distinctly Native world perspective while revising and manipulating the white discourses that were imposed upon them, and their writings present American Indians as active members of society who challenge systems of domination to defend rights to their own cultures, lands, and identities.

The critical concepts of performance theory and survivance provide productive dimensions for understanding the rhetorical strategies of American Indian authors. Performance theory, based on the work of sociologist Erving Goffman, imagines an individual’s identity as decentered and unstable, flexing and conforming to the expectations and circumstances of a social situation. Performance theory configures identity as a performance in which the individual selects discrete self-expressions to create a socially-specific image of self for social interaction. The experiences of boarding
school students, as well as the narrative representations of those experiences, reflect the distinctly performative nature of identity.

Performance theory acts as a productive counterpart to another critical theory that speculates various dimensions of American Indian writing and activism: survivance. American Indian literary critic Gerald Vizenor (Ojibwe) develops survivance as a way of interpreting American Indian literature, including boarding school narratives, by considering how American Indians live in an active present, rather than a victimized past, while working toward a future of self-determination. Portrayals of American Indians in an active present recognize culturally-specific forms of identification and highlight presentations of Native worldviews through a focus on the power of land and trickster characters who manipulate traditionally white American discourses and rhetorical strategies through complex rhetorical performances.

The performative survivance writings of Sagoyewatha, Momaday, and Zitkala-Sa respond to the destructive effects of government control on Native life by articulating their views in spite of using the language of the oppressor. Until the mid-twentieth century, American Indians were under the exclusive control of the U.S. government, and federal agencies such as the Bureau of Indian Affairs determined nearly all aspects of Native life. However, Civil Rights Era promises for equality of all peoples under American law inspired the American Indian fight for self-determination; and, by the late 1960s, American Indians united to take control of their lives and lands. Ironically, the dawn of this new era was made possible by government documents that drew national attention to the Native cause. Published in 1969 after two years of hearings and
authorized studies, The Kennedy Report, Indian Education: A National Tragedy, A National Challenge, revisited the same issues investigated in the historic Merriam Report—a government-sponsored study in 1934 that revealed the mistreatment of American Indians under government watch, including the horrific conditions of boarding schools. The Kennedy Report’s examination of Indian education found that little had changed in federal Indian policy since the Depression era and describes the government’s approach to Indian policy as one of “coercive assimilation with disastrous effects on the education of Indian children,” and asserts that Indian schools had become a “kind of battleground where the Indian child attempts to protect his integrity and identity as an individual by defeating the purposes of the school” (135). After nearly a century of subjection to a government-controlled education that attempted to eliminate Native cultures and identities, the 1960s saw American Indians beginning to assume control over their education. According to Kathryn Manuelito, a Navajo researcher at Arizona State University, a benchmark in the movement away from government control to self-determination is the establishment of Rough Rock Indian School in 1966 on the Navajo Indian Reservation in Arizona. With its all-Native school board and Navajo centered curriculum, Rough Rock represents a victory for American Indians in the cultural battleground of education.

What made government-controlled education a tool of cultural annihilation were its founding assumptions about identity. In order for boarding schools to believe they could successfully eliminate Native identities and replace them with white, “civilized,” American identities, faculty and administrators had to believe that human identity was
one-dimensional and could be altered by force. The boarding school assimilation model disregarded the multidimensional and flexible nature of identity that allowed some American Indian students to resist indoctrination: it did not consider that students could have identified themselves as more than just Indian, or that students could enact various ways of being Indian. The writings of former boarding school students as well as fictionalized boarding school accounts demonstrate the power of a liminal position between ways of being like an Indian learning to be a white person, and ways of performing specific tribal identities, such as Dakota or Kiowa. The study of writing is crucial to investigating Native identities because, as the research of Thomas Newkirk, Romy Clark, and Roz Ivanic indicates, writing reflects processes of constructing identity and performing it for rhetorical purposes. The survivance writings of Zitkala-Sa’s boarding school narratives and N.Scott Momaday’s dramas reveal the complex performative nature of identity and explore how Native identities adapt to the demands of assimilation practices.

The research of Thomas Newkirk, Romy Clark, and Roz Ivanic, composition instructors who study the writing practices of their students, provides productive insights for understanding how boarding school students simultaneously adapted to and resisted indoctrination. Ivanic and Newkirk describe the college writing classroom as a site of power struggles between professors who establish guidelines for expressions of identity, and students who resist or conform to the professor’s guidelines according to undeveloped and multilateral understandings of their own identities. Newkirk, Clark and Ivanic believe writing has the power to articulate the various performances students
create in response to tensions within the college writing classroom’s power structure. Because college is a time for young adults to begin thinking and speaking about themselves as autonomous subjects, it is an intriguing place to explore how American Indian students shape understandings and expressions of their Native identities.

Self-determination initiatives are productive steps forward in understanding the impact of education on identity-formation because they focus on incorporating Native values and beliefs into the curriculum. Research from William L. Leap, Jerry Lipka, Teresa L. McCarty, and most recently, Nanci M. Burk and Curry S. Mallot, investigates the methodologies behind these curricula and explores possibilities for future progress within them. However, it is yet to be seen exactly how American Indian students benefit from such initiatives and how culturally-relevant curriculums impact American Indian students’ conceptions of their Native identities within post-secondary education.

While education has historically been a tool of oppression used to devalue and erase Native cultures and identities, it has also created spaces for American Indians to resist and challenge the system through writings that complicate and preserve Native identity. Moves toward self-determination policies in post-secondary education encourage American Indian college students to continue this legacy of writing as resistance while creating new modes of expressing Native identity. Revealing articulations of performativity in boarding school narratives as projects in survivance can help to reconceptualize American Indian education, specifically in the post-secondary writing classroom. This reconceptualization demands an exploration of how performativity and survivance can interact to strengthen the mission of self-determination
in American Indian education. The subsequent chapters will explore the intersections of performativity and survivance in boarding school narratives and investigate how performativity and survivance can amplify and strengthen current methods in American Indian education.
Chapter One:

Background and History of American Indian Education

In order to insure the civilization of the Indians entering into this treaty, the necessity of education is admitted, especially of such of them as may be settled on said agricultural parts of this reservation, and they therefore pledge themselves to compel their children, male and female, between the ages of six and sixteen years, to attend school; and it is hereby made the duty of the agent for said Indians to see that this stipulation is strictly complied with; and the United States agrees that, for every thirty children between said ages who can be induced or compelled to attend school, a house shall be provided, and a teacher competent to teach the elementary branches of an English education shall be furnished, who will reside among said Indians, and faithfully discharge his or her duties as a teacher. The provisions of this article to continue for not less than ten years.

Treaty with the Navaho, Article 6. 1868.

The Treaty with the Navaho reflects the objectives and methods of the United States government in their dealings with the American Indians. Heard in the first line, the purpose of education was civilizing American Indians in concurrence with proper and necessary funding. However, many treaties neglected to fulfill their promises while continuing to assume that American Indians would embrace white agricultural lifestyles. The Treaty with the Navaho is a written record of the systems of domination imposed upon American Indians; and, in order to begin locating resistances against white systems of domination, specifically within the boarding school, one must first understand the history and the strategies of government-sponsored education. Although the history of American Indian education really begins with missionary schools that educated students in a religious-centered curriculum, I will focus mainly on government-funded boarding
schools in this discussion of American Indian education. While mission schools sought to convert American Indians for the purposes of spreading Christianity, the U.S. government managed to combine the Christianizing endeavors of mission schools with military-style discipline and industrial training to transform American Indians into patriotic American citizens. General Henry Pratt founded the Carlisle Indian School in 1879 and saw the purpose of boarding schools for Indians as taking the “Indian” out of his Indian students in the hopes of eliminating all American Indians under the guise of educating them (Reyhner and Eder 46). These attempts to transform American Indians into white citizens created new spaces for students to experiment with performing institutionally-imposed roles. Literacy education and the experience of schooling afforded American Indians the authority to (re)construct Native identities within and beyond the boarding school’s program of assimilation.

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, after many costly military campaigns against American Indians in the pursuit of land, the U.S. government resolved to design a more effective way to curb American Indian resistance that would require little or no sacrifice of American lives: the government boarding school. American Indians could no longer pose a threat to westward expansion if they were inducted into white society, and the government designed boarding schools to inculcate American Indians into white culture. While the government believed its schools were meant to help American Indians to adapt to mainstream agricultural lifestyles, its objectives demanded an erasure of American Indian culture. This full-scale de-Indianization of American Indians satisfied the aims of armed conflict under the guise of a civilizing, Christianizing,
and humanizing educational endeavor. An abundance of scholarship from Native and non-Native authors traces the links between language loss, population decrease, and government-sponsored education to strongly suggest that government education was, to a significant degree, as effective as armed conflict in subduing the American Indians threat to white America. Much of this scholarship retains the language of military discourse to characterize the practices of government education: destroy, annihilate, attack. A closer look at boarding school practices, language loss statistics, and population data support the language of this wider scholarship.

Amelia V. Katanski, author of Learning to Write Indian: The Boarding-School Experience and American Indian Literature, is one such scholar who investigates the complex effects of boarding schools on American Indian culture. Katanski points toward the history of failed military endeavors prior to the founding of boarding schools to underscore education as the government’s next strategy of annihilation. By speculating on the partial success of government education to subdue American Indians by erasing their culture, Katanski confirms that boarding schools continued the process of war by eliminating American Indians through taking the Indian out of Indian boarding school students in a linear (and therefore genocidal) assimilative process (parenthetical hers 8). This linear process resulted in a cultural, rather than a physical, death: American Indian students who survived this process often, but not always, lost their essential Indianness. Katanski identifies General Henry Pratt as the founder of the government boarding school model and Barbara Landis, Carlisle Indian School biographer, traces Carlisle’s beginnings to the imprisonment and subsequent education of Arapaho, Cheyenne, Kiowa,
and Comanche warriors under Pratt’s guardianship. Landis explains that when these American Indian warriors arrived at Fort Marion Prison in St. Augustine, Florida, General Pratt

removed the prisoners’ shackles, cut their hair and issued them military uniforms. The Indians were expected to polish their buttons and shoes and clean and press their trousers. After a time, they were organized into companies and given instruction in military drill. Eventually, their military guards were dismissed and several of the most trusted Indian prisoners were chosen to serve as guards. (1)

Through establishing an environment in which the American Indian prisoners were expected to behave as white men, General Pratt successfully “civilized” his formerly Indian charges (Landis 1). Landis notes that “[Pratt] agreed that to ‘civilize’ the Indian would be to turn him into a copy of his God-fearing, soil-tilling, white brother” (1). Pratt presented the results of his Fort Marion prison experiment to the Bureau of Indian Affairs and his selected benefactors and successfully convinced them that a larger-scale civilizing effort based on his Fort Marion experiment could be effective in stamping out American Indian resistance.

Luther Standing Bear (Sioux) corroborates Landis’s version of the story of Carlisle’s establishment in his 1928 autobiography, My People, The Sioux. Standing Bear shares his version of the school’s establishment: “Captain Pratt [. . . ]conceived the idea of placing these Indians in a school to see if they could learn anything in that manner [. . . ] that gave Pratt another idea. He thought if he could get some young Indian children and
educate them, it would help [the Indian] people” (134). Standing Bear understands that Pratt, with the support of the government, established boarding schools to assist American Indians in living civilized, enlightened lives; however, he also recognizes education as a paternalistic, objectifying endeavor in which students have no consent because Pratt, and by extension, the government, claim to know what is best for the students. Pratt must “get” students before helping them—according to Pratt’s linear model, this “helping” assumes American Indians are naturally ignorant and need to be shown the light of white civilization. Although the government promoted educating American Indians into white culture as a form of assistance and support, education was a mainly crucial bargaining chip in the government’s land expansion plans. Kathryn Manuelito reiterates the importance of convincing American Indians of education’s benefits in order to ameliorate conflicts with American Indians: “Most American Indian nations surrendered their lands to the United States government with the important condition that formal education be included as part of the negotiations” (77). The exchange of education for land underscores the inextricable connection between land, education, and the oppression of American Indians. For the U.S. government, education was a currency that could be traded for much desired land. However, some American Indian leaders saw these deals, like the Treaty with the Navaho, as opportunities for their youth to apply their knowledge of English literacy to fight the U.S. government for the lands and the futures of American Indians; in some cases, the American Indian leaders did anticipate the empowering possibilities of education.
The Christianization and subsequent civilization of American Indians that was built into education thus depended on the eradication of their Native identities. Boarding school indoctrination strategies forced American Indian students to abandon their identities, or more aptly, to be robbed of them, in order to adopt a white identity and assimilate into white society. Boarding schools employed various methods to erase the identities of their students, one of which occurred immediately upon their arrival to the school: taking white names to replace their Native names. Renaming is a two-fold process that involves the erasure of a student’s tribal identity and the conceptions of his/her individual identity in relation to their tribal affiliation. Boarding schools erased tribal identities by refusing to differentiate between tribes or clans and referring to all incoming students as “Indian.” Subsuming all students into one category neglected the rich diversity among individual tribes and enabled boarding schools to oppress and control students. After categorizing all incoming students as Indian and calling them Indians, an act in which students had no choice or say, boarding schools forced students to adopt a white identity by making them choose a Christian name to replace their Native name. According to the autobiographical accounts of Zitkala-Sa and Luther Standing Bear, students chose their new white identities from a list of names written on a classroom’s chalkboard. This name-choosing experience is an integral feature of many boarding school narratives because it crystallizes the more complex process of students disassociating their Native identities. However, Myriam Vuckovic, author of Voices From Haskell: Indian Students Between Two Worlds, 1884-1928, writes that students were often assigned names that reflected their regional roots to maintain some sense of
their identities. Students from the Black Kettle area of Wyoming took Kettle as their last name, and chose among names such as Ernie, Starr, Malcolm, and Nathan for their first names (74). Luther Standing Bear and N. Scott Momaday, whose writing I will examine later, illustrate the impact of name-choosing as the initial step in distancing students from the Native identities through which they learned to interpret their relation to the world.

In addition to the deep psychological scars resulting from the school’s coerced identity transformation, students also suffered the negative effects of being forced to conform to a white appearance by having their hair cut and being outfitted in military-style uniforms. Because long hair was a marker of individual strength and character, the cutting of hair was intensely traumatic for many students. In her 1921 autobiography, American Indian Stories, Zitkala-Sa reacts to her altered appearance by relating the trauma of having her hair cut to the shame associated with short hair in her Yankton Sioux culture: “Among our people, short hair was worn by mourners, and shingled hair by cowards!” (47). Substituting tribal garments with military style uniforms completed the required transformation of physical appearance. The boarding school’s prescribed transformative processes erased all markers of the students’ Native identity and replaced them with markers of white identity. The stylistic alterations of wardrobe and haircut supplemented the indoctrination methods of military and industrial training. Students were trained to perform military drills, such as marching, which served as entertainment for the white community surrounding the school while also instilling in students an understanding of discipline, order, and rank (Katanski 44). Reyhner and Eder recount the precedents that inspired boarding schools to incorporate occupational training into their
curricula: the first formal “manual labor schools” were established in 1839 and educated “Indian children in farming and homemaking”—government boarding schools continued this tradition, but rarely or never compensated students for their labor (39). Boarding schools capitalized on the cheap labor offered by the able-bodied students and forced them to work various jobs that boosted the local economies, such as farming, weaving, and textile production. Students were also employed in the daily operations of the school, from cooking and cleaning to landscaping and caring for livestock (Reyhner and Eder 40).

The boarding school’s de-Indianizing assimilation program replicated Pratt’s Fort Marion experiment by literally giving students a role through which to perform the white American cultural values of military order and discipline; however, the assimilation agenda was also effective for what it took away from students. In addition to taking away traditional dress and prohibiting Native behaviors, the most significant method of eradicating Native behaviors was forbidding the speaking of a Native language. Leonard Peltier (Lakota), an American Indian Movement activist found guilty of involvement in the deaths of two federal agents and imprisoned since 1975, argues that the power of language lies in its capacity to encapsulate the culturally-specific world view of its speakers: when an individual is forced to abandon their native language, they disconnect from their culture’s own unique view on reality (44). By using this interpretation of language as a reference, one can see how forcing students to speak English conditioned them to conform to a white American worldview. Vuckovic supports Peltier’s contention and emphasizes the significance of language to cultural identity:
The suppression of tribal languages was a key aspect of forced assimilation. Destroying native languages meant destroying native cultures—their storytelling traditions, their histories, their songs, their religions, and their ceremonies. If the children would lose their language, they would lose the connection to their people’s past as well as to their own families. (74)

The dehumanizing erasure of Native identity was accompanied by physical and sexual abuse amidst the deplorable conditions of the schools themselves. Many schools were overcrowded and illnesses that could have been prevented and/or treated with basic medical care spread quickly. Katanski acknowledges the destruction boarding schools inflicted upon American Indian communities:

Many students lost their lives as the result of intense physical abuse and neglect, infectious diseases that attacked them in their dormitories, or severe emotional battery and trauma. Even more students experienced a psychic death at the schools, driven away from their families and toward the harmful cycles of alcoholism and violence. (14)

Katanski’s conclusions are derived from sociologist and demographer Thornton Russell, who collects and analyzes data from a number of sources, including government documents and personal accounts, to delineate the collateral damage resulting from white American expansion and conflict with American Indians. According to Russell, from 1775-1880, the Indian Wars claimed between 30,000 and 45,000 American Indian lives.
Armed conflict, along with the spread of disease and other fatalities, contributed to the American Indian populations in North America, Central America, and the Caribbean to decrease from an estimated high of ten million before Columbus’s arrival to 250,000 at the beginning of the twentieth century (5, 30). Due to the egregious abuses of the past, American Indians now comprise only a small portion of the U.S. population: the U.S Census Bureau estimates that in 2000, American Indians represent only 1.5% of the U.S. population; of these 2.5 million people, 1.6 million reported American Indian or Alaska Native in addition to some other race (Ogunwole 1-2). However, the presence of American Indian communities today and the rise of the self-determination movement indicate the resilience of American Indians and the government’s failure to take the Indian out of the Indian.
Chapter Two:

Performativity and Survivance

Before investigating how boarding school narratives voiced the identity transformations of American Indian students, I will outline the terminology integral to my analysis of those texts. Performativity and survivance are crucial to theorizing American Indian writing about the boarding school experience. Because survivance is more than just a method of literary criticism, it needs to be thought of in active, performative dimensions. The performative nature of identity, as seen in boarding school narratives, allows students to resist assimilative strategies, manipulate white discourses, and imagine a future of self-determination—the fundamental actions and aims of survivance.

I. Performativity

Erving Goffman’s landmark 1959 publication The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life is a foundational text in the field of performance studies that revolutionizes conceptions of identity. As a work of sociology, Goffman’s research involved close observations of the social interactions of residents of the Shetland Isles and reconsiderations of literary representations of identity from a dramaturgical perspective. According to Goffman, identity is not a stable, fixed entity, but a complex collection of various performances that individuals enact for social purposes (1). Therefore, the process of interpreting the social expressions of others and responding to those interpretations according to situational expectations constitutes social interactions.
Goffman’s performance theory has since been translated into literary theory and philosophy by such critics as Judith Butler, Jose Esteban Munoz, and the late Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who focus primarily on conceptualizing gender and sexuality as performances. Their complex ideas, while contemporary and significant to questions of identity, require a more thorough analysis than this current investigation of boarding school narratives and American Indian education can provide. Nonetheless, the notion of identity as performance is integral to understanding the boarding school experience and the texts that narrate that experience. The dramaturgical approach of performance theory reveals the basis of social establishments (such as the classroom) to be constituted by “a team of performers who cooperate to present to an audience a given definition of the situation” (Goffman 238). Boarding school students did not completely transform into white people; however, they did learn to perform the role of a white person through appearing and behaving as white people. What seemed to boarding school administrators to be the adoption of a white identity was simply a performance of an identity created by, and through the agency of, the student. The dynamics of performative expectations at the boarding school are reflected in Goffman’s flexible consideration of the relationship between the performers and the audience: the performers are at once the audience and the audience is the performer (17). This dynamic conceptualizes identity as a product of an interaction, or a series of interactions, that constitutes a co-informing circuit of perceiving and being perceived. The flexible and creative dynamics of social interaction presented in performance theory liberate the boarding school experience, as well as its narratives, from the strictures of an oppressive agenda of assimilation.
II. Survivance

Gerald Vizenor, professor of American studies at the University of New Mexico, provides an apt framework for understanding the implications and functions of performativity in American Indian writing with his concept of survivance\(^1\). In Vizenor’s use, survivance explores constructions of Native identity, and the possibilities of those constructions, in terms of Native empowerment and sovereignty. More than just a genre of literary theory tailored specifically to American Indian literature, survivance, in its broadest terms, responds to art, politics, and history by considering the impact of various disciplines and events on the rights of Native peoples to their lands and cultures. In rejecting the empty acquiescence of survival, the term that seems its synonym, survivance builds upon the French term for inheritance and advocates continuing Native traditions and portraying American Indians as active participants in determining their futures. As an “active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion [...] the continuance of stories. Greater than the right of a survivable name,” survivance demands an active fight for the right to be Native, instead of taking a Native heritage for granted (Vizenor 1).

III. Performing Survivance

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\(^1\) The first definition Oxford English Dictionary provides for “survivance” is “survival; now rare”; however, Gerald Vizenor is inspired by the second definition based on the French term for inheritance: “The succession to an estate, office, etc. of a survivor nominated before the death of the existing occupier or holder; the right of such succession in case of survival.”
The *Our Lives* exhibit at The National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in Washington, D.C., created in close collaboration with seven American Indian tribes, demonstrates not only the above definition of survivance, but also articulates another dimension of it that counters conventional, and harmful, imaginings of American Indians. Traditionally, museums tend to relegate American Indians to the past under the guise of memorialization (such as placing artifacts in glass cases) which has become a method of oppression because it forgets and denies the active presence of American Indians. Survivance challenges representations of American Indians as figures of a tragic, distant past and positions them in an active, autonomous present. *Our Lives* highlights an “active sense of presence over absence” with audio, visual, and kinesthetic examples of how American Indian tribes live today (Vizenor 1). The Kahnawake (Mohawk) section of the exhibit features video commentary from current students, teachers and administrators at Kahnawake Elementary school, which was founded in 1970 after local parents decided that their children should receive a Kahnawake-based education together, in the same school, instead of being separated into the two local Protestant and Catholic schools. Immersed in the sounds of children singing in Kanien’ke’ha, the Kahnawake language, this section also includes stunning photographs and videos of the New York skyscrapers that Kahnawake steel workers helped to build, as well as Kanien’ke’ha language textbooks created specifically for the school. The Kahnawake are just one example of what a museum can do to promote survivance: without resorting to the museum convention of placing items in glass cases, the NMAI honors Native cultures by
encouraging visitors to participate in learning about the preservation of Native languages and cultures into the twenty-first century.

The trickster figure is also a crucial element to survivance, especially within American Indian texts and narratives. Chinese, African, and African American cultures also recognize the trickster as a figure who simultaneously challenges and reasserts cultural values through comical representations of moral lessons. For Vizenor, the trickster embodies a Native counterargument to images of romanticized Native victimry: the trickster’s agency and wit allow him/her to respond to, and even perform, cultural transgressions to illuminate the importance of personal accountability and responsibility within the community (5,6). While critics often ignore humor, Vizenor asserts that the trickster draws his transgressive power from humor (5). Tricksters enact survivance by fighting with their wiles and words, exposing the ironies and humor behind humanity’s foibles in order to fight systems of domination while negotiating the boundaries of those systems (Vizenor 3). Karl Kroeber, Mellon Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University, comments on the comic appeal of the trickster figure: “Only humans are capable of communal laughter, the sharing of intense subjective pleasure in perceiving our own dangerous foolishness, and it is a perception that produces frequently wiser, more life-enhancing thinking and behavior” (37). The illuminating power of humor provides a means for manipulating and subverting conventional discourse of power and oppression, making it an appropriate venue for Native empowerment.

Vizenor’s 2006 haiku-inspired epic poem, Bear Island: The War at Sugar Point, is based on the true story of a little known battle between the United States Army and the
Anishinaabe Indians in 1898 on the Leech Lake reservation in Minnesota—a battle that the Anishinaabe won. Vizenor’s retelling of the Anishinaabe victory highlights the Indians as tricksters. In one scene, Vizenor assigns a specifically white-sounding vocabulary to an Indian warrior, “hole in the day,” who jumps up on a fence as he mocks the nearly vanquished U.S. army. Anishinaabe warriors begin to gain the upper hand in the battle

as hole in the day
bravely tread
by martial counts
over cabbage
hearten the soldiers
by swagger and counts
give it to them boys
give em hell
we’ve got em licked
give em hell. (69)

While imposing the English language on American Indians was a strategy of oppression, Vizenor reverses this operation when “hole in the day” adopts white language into a war cry: for a moment, “hole in the day” performs whiteness through his call. Even “hole in the day’s” position on the fence is emblematic of a trickster, as he is literally on the border of the Anishinaabe forest and the U.S. territory. In Vizenor’s poetic retelling
of the true story of the battle at Bear Lake, Indians defeat white colonists on their own terms, and the trickster’s voice and physical position represent Native empowerment.

Vizenor’s *Bear Lake: The War at Sugar Point* transfers land into American Indian possession in an account of a military event that has been written out of American history—a history that has always featured the triumph of the white Americans. *Bear Lake*’s interpretation of an American Indian victory in a battle over land encompasses another integral aspect of survivance: locating power in land and galvanizing American Indians to fight to reclaim rights and power over their land. Critiques based on survivance theory investigate how those who have controlled the land have also controlled the history and the lives of the people on it; they also explore how American Indian narratives locate power in land.

Treating land as a foundation for culture can be traced back to early nineteenth-century speeches by American Indian activists, such as Sagoyewatha, also known as Red Jacket. Sagoyewatha is a vivid example of a survivance project that precedes Vizenor’s conception by two centuries. Sagoyewatha’s early nineteenth century communications are concerned with protecting the lands of his people from invasion by white settlers. According to Robert Blaisdell, editor of *Great Speeches by Native Americans*, Sagoyewatha understood English, but refused to speak it in public. Unlike American Indian activists after him, Sagoyewatha employed translators to communicate with white audiences; but, most importantly, he was still able to understand the tactics of white American rhetoric and manipulate them in fighting for rights to Seneca land.
Despite not using English, Sagoyewatha demonstrates his ability to manipulate the white rhetoric of essential racial difference in “To Rev. Elkanah Holmes at Seneca Castle,” where he opposes the proposition of sending another Christian mission to his Seneca tribe in 1800. Sagoyewatha begins by acknowledging the common spiritual nature of both the Senecas and the missionaries: “We [Indians] believe there is a great being above, who has made Heaven and earth and all things that are therein, and has the charge over all things—who has made you whites as well as us Indians; and we believe there is something great after death” (103). After establishing common ground between the Seneca and the white missionaries, Sagoyewatha highlights the essential differences, in his mind, between the two groups: “Probably the Great Spirit has given to you white people the ways that you follow to serve him . . . and probably he has given to us Indians the customs that we follow to serve him” (104). Sagoyewatha mimics the racial philosophy of white missionaries by recognizing distinct cultural and religious differences between the whites and the Seneca, and asserts that the Great Spirit intended to create those differences. However, he moves from an acknowledgement of these differences to a full-scale critique of the white Americans’ hypocrisy: “We [Indians] are astonished that the white people, who have the good book called the Bible among them, that tells them the mind and will of the Great Spirit, and they can read and understand it, that they are so bad, and do so many wicked things” (105). Sagoyewatha replaces the white term, God, for the Native term, Great Spirit, to characterize the concept of a higher power in Native terms. His message counters white missionary rhetoric by acknowledging the essential differences between white and Native spirituality only to
reveal the whites’ abuse of their own religion, one that assumed a Native primitivism to assert a prerogative for invading Seneca land.

Granville Ganter, rhetoric scholar, explains that Sagoyewatha’s sharp response against Christianity implicitly communicates concern for land preservation because a Christian presence on Native lands typically presaged land sales (187). In re-appropriating the rhetoric of racial difference and separation that whites continually referenced to claim the inferiority of American Indians and the necessity to eliminate them, Sagoyewatha performs an “inversion of missionary rhetoric” (Ganter 184). By arguing for respecting racial differences instead of trying to extinguish them by converting American Indians to Christianity, Sagoyewatha defends Native spirituality while protecting Seneca land. Christopher Densmore, author of Red Jacket: Iroquois Diplomat and Orator, observes the successes of Sagoyewatha’s rhetorical battle for Seneca sovereignty: “In evaluating Red Jacket’s legacy, it is critical to remember that today Senecas live on the Cattaraugus, Alleghany, and Tonawanda reservations within New York State on lands that were theirs before the arrival of the whites, with rights stemming from a treaty negotiated by Red Jacket . . . Red Jacket’s goal was survival, and the Senecas have survived” (xix). The impact of Sagoyewatha’s rhetoric reflects the primary aims of survivance: preserving Native land in order to preserve Native culture and Native life.

While Sagoyewatha offers a glimpse into how early American Indians manipulated traditionally white rhetorical forms to protect and preserve their lands, Keith H. Basso, a linguistic anthropologist at the University of New Mexico, provides an
ethnographic perspective that illustrates a vivid example of the significant connection between Native languages and lands. In his study of the storytelling traditions of the Western Apache on the Cibecue Reservation during the late 1970s, Basso explores how Native culture and language intertwine with land.

Basso’s conclusions regarding the interdependent relationship between American Indians, their language, and their land, anticipate the project of survivance before it became a critical theorization of American Indian culture. Basso claims that the structure of Western Apache storytelling exemplifies “how two symbolic resources—language and the land—are manipulated by Apaches to promote compliance with standards for acceptable social behavior and the moral values that support them” (23). The Apache’s land-based language supports a story-telling system that frames moral instruction in Apache culture. Basso’s study reveals how the complex nature of Apache storytelling draws power from the surrounding landscape. The Western Apache language’s place-name system allows for detailed, yet condensed, descriptions of specific locations in the reservation landscape. These place-names identify the beginnings and endings of historical tales, or morality tales, that serve to edify individuals who have strayed from Apache morals: “These lines [place-names] frame the narrative, mark it unmistakably as belonging to the ‘agodzaahi’ genre and evoke a particular physical setting in which listeners can imaginatively situate everything that happens” (Basso 35). For example, the place-name of “big cottonwood trees spread here and there” signals a historical tale describing the consequences of “overstepping traditional role boundaries” (Basso 36, 38). The story describes an event that occurred in a field of cotton trees during an Apache
battle with the Pima. As the Apaches are trying to hide, an old woman loudly criticizes her son-in-law and inadvertently gives away the Apache’s position to their enemy, resulting in a Pima invasion of the camp (Basso 37). According to Apache tradition, a bride’s mother does not have the authority to openly criticize her daughter’s husband: the story’s bloody conclusion is the result of the old woman neglecting this tradition.

Western Apaches can fully apprehend a story’s message because it directly relates abstract concepts—virtue, honesty, responsibility—to physical markers of the landscape recognizable to listeners. Basso’s extensive interviews with Apache storytellers reveal that these historical tales “establish highly meaningful relationships between individuals and features of the natural landscape” (41).

Historical tales are told to members of the tribe who appear to be in need of moral edification. One of Basso’s subjects, Nick Thompson, explains that these historical tales influence reflection on moral behavior because they

go to work on your mind and make you think about your life. Maybe you’ve not been acting right. Maybe you’ve been stingy. Maybe you’ve been chasing after women. Maybe you’ve been trying to act like a Whiteman. People don’t like it! So . . . someone tells you a story about what happened long ago. It doesn’t matter if other people are around—you’re going to know he’s aiming that story at you. All of a sudden it hits you . . . now you know that people have been watching you and talking about you. They don’t like how you’ve been acting. So you have to think about your life. (Basso 41-42)
According to Basso, after someone listens to a historical tale, “features of the landscape take over and perpetuate it [the historical tale]. Mountains and arroyos step in symbolically for grandmothers and uncles,” and the surrounding landscape constantly reminds the listener of the tale’s moral lesson (43). Western Apache morality tales intertwine Apache virtues, epistemology, and moral philosophy within the physical landscape. This deep connection between land and language enact survivance and support Vizenor’s contention that creating a future of Native culture begins with recognizing the Native relationship to land. Survivance in Apache culture depends on continuing historical tales that reinscribe Apache moral instruction into the land. The survivance orientation of Basso’s exploration recognizes the stakes of preserving Native land: without the land, Apaches lose their anchor for cultural and moral teachings and their way to continue those teachings into the future.
Chapter Three:

Boarding School Narratives

The most vivid examples of the failures of boarding school assimilation strategies are seen in the works of former boarding school students and contemporary American Indian writers. These authors recognize the destructive potential of the boarding school system and simultaneously challenge its strategies by reconceptualizing it as a space for performing Native resistance. Luther Standing Bear, Zitkala-Sa, and N. Scott Momaday illustrate how students adapt to and manipulate boarding school assimilation strategies while defending the rights of American Indians to preserve their languages and cultures. Because their writings imagine a future of American Indian empowerment by portraying American Indians actively resisting white oppression through using the discourses of white society, Zitkala-Sa, Standing Bear, and Momaday enact the objectives of Vizenor’s survivance.

Katanski’s analysis offers a productive starting point for investigating the significance of identity performance to survivance writing and the impact of writing on American Indian self-determination. Katanski explores the multiplicities of Native identity in boarding school narratives to reveal the various “rhetorical strategies and identity positions” students assumed in their writing (xi). As evinced in the previous chapter, the first step of the boarding school indoctrination process is labeling all students “Indian.” Katanski argues that this labeling resulted in more than an identity binary consisting of only two identities: a boarding school-created American identity, and an Indian identity. Although boarding schools designed the “Indian” label as a strategy of
oppression, the imposition of an Indian identity became a source of rhetorical empowerment. Native students resisted the dehumanizing strategy of the label “Indian” by recognizing it as a common bond uniting students from various tribes who otherwise would not have had an opportunity to learn about each other outside the school (Katanski 7). The students’ boarding school experiences reveal the power of in-betweenness to destabilize essentialist identity formations. Katanski cites anthropologist Paul Kroskrity’s term, “repertoire of identity” to characterize how students combined notions of their own tribal identity with the “pan-Indian” and “student” identities imposed upon them: “Instead of losing their tribal identities, however, students explored and inhabited diverse identities that contradict both nineteenth century social evolutionism and our contemporary understandings of ‘biculturalism’” (8). Students retained their tribal identities while adopting an “Indian” and “boarding school student” identity for survival purposes and even preserved those identities for productive purposes after leaving the school. Through writing in the English language they learned in boarding schools, American Indians were able to preserve and communicate Native identities in a time and place where it was unacceptable to be an American Indian. Luther Standing Bear, or Chief Standing Bear, a Carlisle graduate, makes this aim clear in his autobiography, My People, The Sioux, a retrospective that considers the impact of the boarding school experiences on his life. His preface begins with an explication of his autobiography’s objectives.

The preparation of this book has not been with any idea of self-glory. It is just a message to the white race; to bring my people before their eyes in
a true and authentic manner. The American Indian has been written about by hundreds of authors or possibly by an Indian of mixed blood who has spent the greater part of his life away from a reservation. These are not in a position to write accurately about the struggles and disappointments of the Indian. (xi)

Ostensibly, Standing Bear criticizes the popularity of stories during his time that misrepresent Indians as either savages or romantic victims, while addressing the concerns of American Indian audiences who have been demeaned by negative portrayals of Indians at the hands of non-Indian authors in publications, such as dime novels, that were popular at the turn of the century. However, on a rhetorical level, the preface addresses white audiences through a pan-Indian identity that intersects with the educated, “civilized” Indian identity created through his boarding school experience. Writing through this intersection of identities allows Standing Bear to represent the struggles and interests of not only the Sioux, but of all American Indians, and to expose the truth behind “the first Americans and their relations with the United States” (xi). His edifying rhetoric employs the language he learned at Carlisle to protest whites, and some Indians, using that same language to defame and misrepresent American Indians. Like many successful American Indian authors after him, Standing Bear accesses boarding school-created identities to manipulate the discoursal and rhetorical traditions of white society while arguing for Native sovereignty.

Standing Bear further resists assimilative doctrine and reasserts his Lakota identity by incorporating Native beliefs about identity into the story of his re-naming
experience, where he chooses the name Luther as a foundation for building his white identity. When describing how he was named, he recalls how one student called before him in the naming process “turned to [me] as much as to say ‘Shall I—or will you help me—to take one of these names?’” (137). Standing Bear imagines the moral dilemma faced by his classmate: choosing one’s own name contradicted the tribe’s sacred responsibility to name an individual according to their own unique individuality. Standing Bear recognizes the threat of white culture in this violation of Sioux beliefs. When he chooses a name to signify his new identity, he senses the threat to his own Sioux identity: “I took the pointer and acted as if I were about to touch an enemy” (137). Standing Bear parallels the experience of claiming a marker for a still-to-be-formed white identity—his English name, Luther—to the Sioux tradition of counting coup: touching the body of a vanquished enemy to demonstrate respect for the deceased and to prove personal bravery. Katanski explains that Standing Bear’s metaphor is “an assertion of Lakota identity in a threatening moment” that calls attention to how he and his fellow student interpret the boarding school experience of identity disassociation through a Lakota cultural schema (12).

Standing Bear’s interpretation of boarding school experiences through Lakota culture foregrounds Zitkala-Sa’s textual reconstructions of resistance that identify methods of negotiating Native identities while developing a white American identity. Zitkala-Sa (also known as Gertrude Bonin), one of literature’s most well-known boarding school graduates, published American Indian Stories in 1921 as a reflection on her life before, during, and after her education. A significant feature of Zitkala-Sa’s narrative is
her performance of a pan-Indian identity, a product of the discourse of assimilation, to communicate with American Indians across tribal and regional boundaries. American Indian Stories exemplifies the importance of boarding school narratives to understanding how American Indian politics and poetics have been shaped in the fight for Native sovereignty through rhetorical sovereignty (Katanski 9).

Zitkala-Sa claims that she never felt quite at home in either the Dakota community or white society because of her education; however, this liminal existence empowered her activism and informed her writing. Zitkala-Sa’s American Indian Stories subverts white American discourses to expose the truth of Native struggles from her Native perspective. In the first essay in her book, “Impressions of an Indian Childhood,” Zitkala-Sa describes the learning experiences of tribal childhood on the Dakota plains prior to attending boarding school. According to Katanski, the re-telling of this transition demonstrates that Zitkala-Sa “was not uneducated when she was taken to the boarding school,” but was knowledgeable in the social mores and traditions of her Yankton tribe (116). In an excerpt from “The Beadwork,” Zitkala-Sa illustrates how she exercised a growing knowledge of social codes and behaviors in describing her young friends practicing proper social etiquette after observing their mothers’ interactions:

I remember well how we used to exchange our necklaces, beaded belts, and sometimes even our moccasins. We pretended to offer them as gifts to one another. We delighted in impersonating our own mothers. We talked of things we had heard them say in their conversations. We imitated their various manners, even to the inflection of their voices. In the lap of the
prairie we seated ourselves upon our feet; and leaning our painted cheeks
in the palms of our hands, we rested our elbows on our knees, and bent
forward as old women were most accustomed to do. (15-16)

The story of her pre-boarding school life on the reservation contradicts the blank slate
model that was the basis for Indian boarding schools: the assumption that students enter
school ready to be imprinted with knowledge (Katanski 117). Zitkala-Sa recalls that her
initial desire for attending school began with seeing a postcard of a Quaker boarding
school and the “big red apples” of its orchard (45). As a child growing up on the Dakota
plains, she had no exposure to such exotic fruits and as an adult remembers how she
fantasized about “running through orchards of red apples” (45) By connecting the desire
to attend boarding school with an exotic and wonderful fruit, Zitkala-Sa revises the
biblical story of the temptation and the fall by positioning the boarding school as a
corrupting figure who eventually leads her to deny her Great Spirit.

Zitkala-Sa’s subverions of Christian discourse are a hallmark of her resistance
writings. In one particularly powerful scene, Zitkala-Sa’s bitter rejection of Christianity
permeates her memory of a fatally ill schoolmate: “The dying Indian girl talked
disconnectedly of Jesus the Christ and the paleface who was cooling her swollen hands
and feet”; and, Zitkala-Sa remembers blaming the “hard-working, well-meaning, ignorant
woman who was inculcating our hearts with her superstitious ideas” for her friend’s death
(67). Zitkala-Sa believes the death of her classmate is a direct result of the school’s
misguided interpretations of Christianity that responded to severe illnesses with futile
prayers instead of necessary medical treatments.
 Appropriately, Zitkala-Sa’s protest against Christian education includes sharp criticism of oft-repeated warnings of the Devil’s work. Prior to learning about the Devil at her school, Zitkala-Sa had never considered a personification of evil as a reality; she writes that in Yankton Dakota spirituality, evil resides in the world, but not in a particular form: “Among the legends the old warriors used to tell me were many stories of evil spirits. But I was taught to fear them no more than those who stalked about in material guise. I never knew there was an insolent chieftain among the bad spirits, who dared to array his forces against the Great Spirit, until I heard this white man's legend from a paleface woman” (55). Zitkala-Sa constructs a striking metaphor for her rejection of Christianity in “The Devil.”

I took my revenge upon the devil. Stealing into the room where a wall of shelves was filled with books, I drew forth The Stories of the Bible. With a broken slate pencil I carried in my apron pocket, I began by scratching out his wicked eyes. A few moments later, when I was ready to leave the room, there was a ragged hole in the page where the picture of the devil had once been. (56)

The young Zitkala-Sa’s scratching out the illustration of the Devil in the Bible protests what she believed to be an unrealistic, impossible portrayal of evil in the world, and performs an act of rebellion against a religion she sees as oppressive and destructive. Ruth Spack, author of America’s Second Tongue: American Indian Education and the Ownership of English, interprets Zitkala-Sa’s act of vandalism as a “sign of a literate
culture . . . to perform the ultimate act of revision, obliterating a threatening Christianity” (123).

Although her youth was fraught with rebellion against Christianity, Zitkala-Sa locates her detachment from Native spirituality in her year-long teaching career at Carlisle Indian School. At Carlisle, Zitkala-Sa again confronts the dehumanizing practices of assimilation, and as a teacher is expected to enforce discipline and curricula meant to train her Native students for life in white society. Zitkala-Sa recounts realizing why she would not be able to fulfill her duties as teacher: “As months passed over me, I slowly comprehended that the large army of white teachers in Indian schools had a larger missionary creed than I had suspected” (82). By characterizing her fellow teachers as an “army,” and simultaneously manipulating the militaristic rhetoric that inspired the government boarding school, Zitkala-Sa illustrates Carlisle as a battleground where teachers assume the role of soldiers fighting to defeat Native culture. Zitkala-Sa’s recollections as a teacher add a powerful dimension to her boarding school narratives because they confirm the inhumane practices of boarding schools from an instructor’s perspective.

Zitkala-Sa’s writing selectively re-interprets conventions of white discourse, such as Christian teachings and the militaristic agenda of boarding schools, to express her distinctly Native experience. Although boarding schools believed they could program students into accepting the values and doctrines of white Christian culture, Zitkala-Sa’s boarding school narratives demonstrate that indoctrination strategies were not always effective because they did not account for the strength of Native identity and spirituality.
Further, in projecting Native experiences through manipulations of white discourse to speak for Native causes, Zitkala-Sa performs an act of survivance.

While Zitkala-Sa autobiographically communicates the experiences and effects of the boarding school, N.Scott Momaday’s drama The Indolent Boys, part of his 2007 publication Three Plays, examines Native identity through retelling the true events surrounding the deaths of three Kiowa boys who ran away from the Kiowa Indian Boarding School in 1891. Their bodies were found some forty miles away in the snow, and when their families received word of the boys’ deaths the tribe retaliated against the boarding school: “they marched upon the school, beat up the superintendent, and threatened war” (Momaday 9). In The Indolent Boys, Momaday imagines how the students manipulated the school’s assimilative strategies and offers an intimate glimpse into Kiowa culture and its foundational epistemologies.

Momaday begins The Indolent Boys with a Prologue that privileges a Native perspective by challenging the conventions of white storytelling language. The narrator, Mother Goodeye, directly addresses the audience through a distinctly Kiowa perspective: she refers to the runaway boys in the present-tense, claiming that the boys have gone “camping” (Momaday 13). In a preface to the play, Momaday explains the cultural background of this perspective choice: “In Kiowa oral tradition, it is not unusual to speak of the dead in present tense” (9). The Kiowan present-tense reference rejects a Christian teleology of life and death that influences mourners to refer to the deceased in past-tense; according to Kiowan spirituality, the deceased remain a part of the living world.
Mother Goodeye continues her critique of Western practices when she introduces the three boys, one of whom is named Jack: “Jack! It’s like a tree cracking, or someone trotting on old, crusty snow. It’s not a name, it’s a cough” (Momaday 11). By locating an apt description of his name within a natural landscape, Mother Goodeye reasserts the boys connection to the land while criticizing the assimilative practice of re-naming. Through Mother Goodeye’s comparison of the American name to unpleasant sounds in nature, Momaday magnifies how English names, and the English language itself, ring discordantly in Native ears. Mother Goodeye condemns English names again in her derision of Barton Wherrit, the school’s head administrator: “What kind of name is Barton Wherrit? It is not the name of someone who is good with horses. It is not the name of someone who carries a famous shield” (12). Mother Goodeye questions the significance of Barton’s name and sees no relation between his name and Barton’s individual identity or his capacity for bravery. In the Kiowa tradition, names hold a spiritual significance because they define an individual’s particular strengths and abilities in relation to the tribe. Vuckovic presents evidence that supports Momaday’s critique of American naming traditions:

The giving of names was often embedded in an elaborate ceremony, and it was common to rename Indian youth at crucial times in their development, for instance, when a young man accomplished his first brave deed and became a warrior. Tribal naming practices were rich in cultural meaning and gave native youth ideals to live by. (75)
Through Mother Goodeye’s Kiowan interpretations of American naming practices, Momaday criticizes American conceptions of names as irrelevant to an individual’s unique identity, a disjuncture that reinforces the identity-erasing practices in boarding schools.

Along with exposing the hollow nature of American naming practices to reclaim Native conceptions of identity, Momaday illustrates the tenacity of Native cultures, specifically Kiowa epistemology, to survive attempts at erasing Native knowledge. This tenacity, depicted in misinterpretations and miscommunications between boarding school faculty and students, is a key to preserving Native identity. The repetition of “know” in various dialogues articulates the tensions between white and Kiowa ways of knowing.

When Wherrit, the head administrator, and his colleague, Gregory, suspect that the students have some knowledge of the boys’ whereabouts, they allude to the mysterious nature of Kiowa knowledge that binds all of the students as well as Emdotah, a Kiowa janitor they assign to search for the boys.

    WHERRIT: Besides, he [Emdotah] knew where they were bound. He knew exactly where they were going. He always knows.

    GREGORY: Oh, he knew, for a fact. He always knows. He has eyes in the back of his head . . . They have an extra sense, you know.

    Primitive, an instinct. They always know. (17)

Gregory and Wherrit are aware of, but struggle to comprehend, the power of the Kiowa’s collective, interconnected knowledge of each other’s well-being—a dimension of a specifically Kiowan epistemological system that is made intelligible through a shared
intuition rather than empirical knowledge. By depicting the instructors as lacking authority over the students’ knowledge, Momaday reverses the conventional role of boarding school instructors as keepers and providers of knowledge. Although the school’s primary purpose is erasing Native knowledge and replacing it with American Christian epistemologies, Momaday illustrates students resisting this indoctrination and subverting the boarding school assimilation strategies by sharing an untranslatable, and undetectable, cultural knowledge.

The Indolent Boys demonstrates the strength of Native epistemologies to withstand the essential fiction of boarding schools that Momaday reveals in The Moon in Two Windows. This fiction forecloses on the possibility of students preserving a Native identity by presupposing that American Indian students will readily adopt a white identity and identify themselves as whites after completing their education. Although The Moon in Two Windows is undeniably anti-assimilationist, Momaday does convey some positive elements of the boarding school experience, most notably in the opening scene. Just before the football championship between Carlisle and Army (which Carlisle wins), Carlisle’s Coach Warner motivates his team with a speech outlining the high stakes of the game.

You Carlisle Indians have one thing, if that, in your favor. You have a score to settle. The gentleman of Army are the sons of the soldiers who fought your fathers at Sand Creek, the Washita, Wounded Knee. But today they have no superiority in weapons, or in numbers, and they are not taking you by surprise. Today the Army meets you on a level field, eleven
men against eleven men. For you, that equality can be an advantage. Make it so. (112)

Here, football is an opportunity for Carlisle Indians to defeat their oppressors and claim a victory for themselves as a product of their own efforts. Momaday explores athletics as an area of the boarding school that allows American Indian students to earn respect by virtue of their skill and determination, not their racial background or skin color.

However, in order to have such an opportunity for “equality,” administrators expected American Indian students to sacrifice their connections to their cultures, languages, and ways of understanding the world. The reality of these expectations was always hidden from American Indian parents when recruiters explained the school’s purpose, as Momaday illustrates in an Act One dialogue between General Pratt and Spotted Tail, the father of Luther Standing Bear, when convincing him to send his children to Carlisle: “You cannot speak the language of this country. You cannot trust interpreters to tell you the meaning of the treaties you sign. . . If your children were educated in the ways of the white man, they would be better able to avoid the mistakes of their elders” (117). General Pratt exploits the American Indian’s resentment of past injustices and advocates education as a defense against future white intrusions and elides the contradictory reality of education: American Indians would be conditioned to abandon their cultures and identities in the process of acquiring that education. Momaday asserts that this education compromise hinges on a fiction that ignores the fluidity and strength of identity by assuming American Indian submission to the assimilation program.
In Act Two, when General Pratt discovers a hidden stash of tobacco in the boys’
dormitory, his shouting reprimands allude to the founding assumption of the boarding
school fiction: “When you set foot upon these grounds, you left such things as this (holds
up pouch) behind you forever” (137). Momaday illustrates the reality of students
maintaining Native traditions, such as keeping tobacco for medicinal purposes, in secret
rather than completely abandoning them while attending the boarding school. Vuckovic
explains that for many students, the use of tobacco had a “cultural significance, serving as
a means of cultural preservation as well as an expression of personal choice and freedom”
(213). Momaday highlights Pratt’s ignorance and desperation as Pratt himself falls
victim to the illusions of the boarding school. Years later, when Pratt talks to his former
student, Luther Standing Bear, at a football game, he praises Luther for becoming a
skilled carpenter due to the school’s program.

PRATT: You became a pretty good carpenter. Imagine.

LUTHER: Imagine that.

PRATT: It was a transformation, you must admit. When you first came to

the school you were. . .

LUTHER: Not a carpenter, that’s for sure.

PRATT: You were…

LUTHER: A savage?

PRATT: You were . . . unschooled, unsophisticated. You were an Indian.

LUTHER: I still am. Imagine. (Momaday 153-4)
Pratt’s “imagine” emphasizes his wonder that an unschooled, unsophisticated Indian could learn a useful skill. The repetition of “imagine” suggests that Pratt can only understand Luther retaining his Native identity through an act of imagination; conversely, the “imagine” of Luther’s rejoinder underscores the unanticipated reality of retaining his Native identity after the boarding school experience. Momaday’s word choice highlights the essential differences between white expectations of the boarding school’s impact on Native identity and American Indian realities that deny the implicit oppression of those expectations.

Momaday’s most convincing attack on the fiction of the boarding school, and his most vivid illustration of the performative nature of Native identity, is in the final scene of Act Three, when General Pratt meets Luther before Luther’s performance in a Wild West Show. As Luther prepares for his role as a Wild West Indian, Pratt says he finds it ironic and disappointing that Luther is now “dressing up like an Indian” (Momaday 171). Luther’s response captures the performative reality of boarding school identity training: “you taught me to dress like a white man, but I did not therefore become a white man” (Momaday 171). Pratt continues to lament the “spectacle” and the “crude imitation,” in which Luther is participating. Luther answers in anger:

You can look me in the eye and I will not blink. And I will have your respect. I demand it. Yes, this is make-believe, but so was Carlisle. I had to pretend there that I was not who I am. I am tired of that pretension. This one is better at least for me, for the time being. It may well be more honest. Bright lights, greasepaint, buffalo that live in cages, trained prairie
dogs. But at least we are Indians in the arena, men who under their poster paint and cotton buckskins are Indians, real Indians. And I am one of them. (Momaday 172)

Carlisle’s fiction, its “make believe,” expected and forced Indians to play white; now, after his successful boarding school performance, Luther plays Indian in order to reconnect with a lost Native identity. By repositioning Luther as a fictitious Indian to illustrate the performative nature of identity, Momaday demonstrates that the failure of boarding school assimilation strategies results from underestimating the flexibility and resilience of Native identity.

Momaday’s portrayal of the necessary performance of Native identity to re-animate a previously violated sense of identity parallels a fascinating historical example of mimicry examined by David Murray, author of “Racial Identity and Self Invention in North America: The Red and the Black.” Murray explores the case of Long Lance, a Carlisle Indian School graduate who published his autobiography in 1928, then committed suicide six years later. An investigation into Long Lance’s death revealed that he was not, in fact, Indian, but half-Negro and a quarter Indian: Long Lance (born Sylvester Long) had, according to the detective report, a full-blooded negro as a father, and a Mother half-Indian (Murray 93). Long Lance joined the circus for a summer during his childhood and realized that he could pass as an Indian if he identified himself as such. During his work at the circus, Long Lance acquired a strong Indian vocabulary and enrolled in Carlisle the following fall, claiming fifty-percent Indian blood and
denying all accusations of his possible Negro ancestry. Murray comments that there is a “wonderful irony about his career at Carlisle”:

Ostensibly there to become less Indian and more civilized, actually Long Lance was acquiring the Indianness on which he was to trade for the rest of his life. But he could only trade on it indirectly, in that it provided the basis from which he was supposed to have developed and for which he was admirable. So we have the paradox of him needing to be an Indian in order to be congratulated for being like a white, civilized, which of course he always had been. This points to the asymmetry between different ways of being “like a white man.” (94)

Long Lance’s experiment in racial identification reveals the performative nature of identity. Luther of Momaday’s The Moon in Two Windows echoes Long Lance’s experience and demonstrates the boarding school’s ignorance and neglect of the performative possibilities of Native identity. The fiction of Carlisle expects that students be transformed into white people and does not account for the possibly heterogenous identities of its students or the flexibility of those identities. Pratt and his successors believed they had the power to alter Native identities, but could not imagine that Native identities could be expressed in various manifestations beyond the control of the boarding school.

Standing Bear, Zitkala-Sa, and Momaday voice their individual Native perspectives to perform an act of survivance: speaking through dominant discourses to communicate the active presence of American Indians within a system meant to eliminate
Native culture and identity. These authors locate the complex nature of identity as performance to manipulate assimilative discourses in acts of resistance.
Chapter Four:
Composition Theory

The identity performances featured in boarding school narratives and the writing strategies of those narratives prompt an investigation of composition theories that emphasize the role of identity in writing. Luther Standing Bear and Zitkala-Sa not only emphasize identity’s performative nature in resisting dominant, assimilationist discourse, but also perform various identities in their writing to demonstrate writing as a space where identities can be shaped and negotiated. The composition theories of Thomas Newkirk, Romy Clark, and Roz Ivanic do not concentrate on American Indian students specifically, but reflect the featured American Indian authors’ exploration of identity performance as an articulation of a discoursal interaction. These identity-focused approaches to college composition reinforce the idea of identity as a performance and interrogate the boundaries of identity in the hierarchal environment of the college writing classroom.

The influence of Goffman’s performance theory is clear in the title to Newkirk’s book, The Performance of Self in Student Writing, which explores the identity performances of his own students at the University of New Hampshire. Newkirk structures an analysis of his students’ writing practices according to these questions: “What kind of ‘self’ are we inviting students to become? What kinds of ‘selves’ do we subtly dismiss?” (6). While Newkirk agrees with Goffman’s contention that identity is not a fixed or stable entity, but a process of creating various performances according to
social interactions, Newkirk also understands that not all student writers have such a problematized notion of identity: writing instructors must consider that some students believe their identities are settled and complete, and express these identities in writing. Newkirk’s argument complicates widely accepted, postmodern philosophies of writing and identity to propose a different way of understanding how students write their identities.

Newkirk observes that trends in academia during the mid-nineteen-nineties privilege a fragmented vision of the world where “foundational beliefs in rationality and ‘essences’ are discredited” (101). Taking this observation further, Newkirk asserts that academia’s postmodern agenda holds significant implications for students whose socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds call for more stable conceptions of identity that reiterate cultural values and mores (100). Newkirk believes that the postmodern privileging of ambivalence, ambiguity, and cynicism challenges the knowledge and beliefs of students who express strong convictions on moral and cultural values, and “advocate[s] a form of skepticism that is antipathetic to the sources of moral and spiritual power in many working-class communities” (101). While Newkirk promotes encouraging students to reflect and re-evaluate how they articulate their views in writing, he opposes the postmodern expectation of students performing a shift from a previously accepted sense of self to a newly developed awareness of the illegitimacy of their past self-conceptions; this shift ultimately writes a problematized version of their identities where an ambiguous sense of self prevails over the previously unenlightened self. This privileging of ambiguity creates a writing classroom hierarchy where writings that reflect
a postmodern philosophy supersede, and view as idealistic, writings inspired by class-bound notions of coherent identities and strong moral convictions.

One of Newkirk’s own students reflects the tensions created by this hierarchy. Newkirk argues that students are aware of the instructor’s implicit expectation of identity shifts, but often manage to resist these expectations and express their rather unambiguous views on morality. Newkirk remembers an experience with a student who found it difficult to set aside his own moral and religious views during a literary analysis.

The assignment was to analyze Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger of Memory* using Mary Louise Pratt’s critical concept of “contact zones.” The writer found the book reprehensible because Rodriguez showed such profound disrespect for his parents, a violation of one of the Ten Commandments; in fact, he became so angry that midway through he began referring to the author as a “punk.” (15)

When Newkirk explains that he tried to push the student to see Rodriguez’s perspective from a critical, objective standpoint, the student relented by only adding a few perfunctory sentences in the conclusion explaining his Christian duty to forgive Rodriguez’s actions (15). Newkirk continues:

I suspect that a student with this form of Christian conviction would find [the instructor’s] advice either mystifying or blasphemous. Why would anyone invite an experience that contradicted basic beliefs? How could a profound and unconditional belief be so open to change and contradiction?
Experience is the living out of a commitment and a promise, not the perpetual calling into question of these basic beliefs. (15)

Newkirk acknowledges the possibility that some students perform selves that resist postmodern conventions of academic writing and questions the extent to which the objective critiques of academic discourse dictate a student’s identity performance. This possibility reinforces Lester Faigley’s notion that a student’s writing reflects the power dynamics of the classroom. Newkirk draws on Faigley, rhetoric scholar at the University of Texas, who asserts that student performances are enmeshed in power dynamics where “students will be judged by the teacher’s unstated assumptions about subjectivity and that every act of writing they perform occurs within complex relations of power” (128).

Newkirk’s challenge to the postmodern tradition reflects current moves in American Indian studies to disclaim postmodernism as a legitimate access point into textual and cultural analysis. Robin DeRosa, author of “Critical Tricksters: Race, Theory and Old Indian Legends,” confronts tensions between American Indian studies and postmodern philosophy. Although postmodernism initially seems to liberate American Indian texts from the epistemological constraints of other forms of critique by debating stable and widely-accepted realities, DeRosa identifies a conflict between postmodern contentions of the absence of truth and the very real nature of oppression—a fact that cannot be denied or theorized out of existence in American Indian history (173).

Newkirk’s attention to the unstated expectations of the writing classroom’s power relations reflects the arguments that Romy Clark and Roz Ivanic present in The Politics of Writing. Clark and Ivanic are writing instructors who draw on their backgrounds in
linguistics to analyze student writing at Lancaster University in Lancaster, United Kingdom. Their student writers are non-traditional—adults returning to college after spending time away from academia to assume family and career responsibilities. However, Clark and Ivanic’s students perform identity negotiations similar, yet not identical, to those of Newkirk’s students.

Clark and Ivanic design a three-pronged system through which to conceptualize how students negotiate their identities according to the perceived demands of the power relations structuring the classroom. In the essay “Writer Identity,” Clark and Ivanic explore the compromises student writers make in academic writing by identifying three co-informing and overlapping understandings of self: the autobiographical self, which includes the student writer’s prior experiences and knowledge; the discoursal self, which illustrates the identity a student writer performs in his/her writing; and, the self-as-author, which reflects the writer’s belief in his/her own authority in writing and the value of their ideas in a wider discourse (137). According to Clark and Ivanic, the self-as-author is often socioculturally bound and contingent upon how the student perceives his/her own value in society (137). This tripartite system situates the discoursal self as a combination of the self as author and the autobiographical self, and as a vehicle for expressing those selves. These three identities triangulate the possible identity constructions that students shape and perform in college writing.

First-year college writers must adapt to the demands of academic discourse conventions—an act that requires navigating the overlapping terrain of this triangle. Clark and Ivanic describe the physical and linguistic dimensions that characterize
academic discourse and how students participate through them: “undertaking the assignment alone, working at a desk in a study bedroom, treating existing theory and research with reverence [. . .] using Graeco-Latin vocabulary, using a lot of abstract nouns, avoiding the use of ‘I,’ and writing long clauses” (139). These abstract conventions that constitute academic discourse are, for Clark and Ivanic, socially constructed and can be socially challenged (140). A student’s discoursal self, the self a student constructs as a representation of him/herself in writing, can reflect, manipulate, or resist, the objectivity demanded in academic discourse, as seen in Newkirk’s analysis.

Clark and Ivanic outline the possibilities of such resistances in their examination of how Sarah, a nuclear fuel industry employee and widowed mother of two returning to school to study environmental ethics, struggles to balance her autobiographical self within the objective framework of academic discourse. An excerpt from Sarah’s essay on strategies of nuclear waste disposal demonstrates her professional knowledge of the nuclear industry:

NIREX [Nuclear Industry Radioactive Waste Executive] proposed three alternative “deep disposal concepts”—basically all involving underground disposal and eventual sealing off after backfilling with a suitable grouting material. The important difference between these three concepts is their access arrangements: under land, under seabed accessed by land or under seabed and accessed by sea. (qtd. in Clark and Ivanic 148)

Sarah’s confident use of technical terminology, “backfilling,” “grouting material,” and “access arrangements,” originates in her own experience and knowledge: she does not
cite scholarly sources for her information, and does not need to, because her professional
knowledge provides a strong basis for her argument. As a performance of her sense of
self as author, Sarah draws from her career experience to give her a sense of authority in
her essay.

However, other moments of the essay are more complex and perform an
autobiographical self tied to Sarah’s experiencing the death of her husband. According to
Clark and Ivanic, writing the essay is particularly challenging for Sarah because her
husband, an employee at the UK Atomic Energy Authority, died of cancer (142). Because
Sarah has lost a significant other to an environmentally-influenced illness, she approaches
the assignment with a more personal interest than her more traditional classmates. Clark
and Ivanic acknowledge how this interest manifests in the specific challenges Sarah faces
in writing:

Imagine the difficulty she had in approaching this subject “objectively,”
attempting to weigh up the various arguments about “disposal,” when all
she could think of was that nuclear waste should not exist at all, because
of the harm she believed it caused. So she brought to the task several
conflicting interests and beliefs along with a plethora of different
discourse types for writing about the topic. (142)

Sarah’s attempt to include her career and personal experience into her writing resists
academic discourse’s privileging of objective and critical distance and illustrates the
value of knowledge created by real-world experience. However, all too often students
who adhere to the demands of the writing classroom and its conventional focus on
objectivity are rewarded, while those who access subjective experiences as sources of knowledge are edified to keep themselves out of essay writing. The hierarchal nature of the writing classroom is reflected in the rift between academic discourse’s expectations and students’ approaches to incorporating what they believe to be valid sources of knowledge into their writing.

Despite this hierarchal nature, Sarah successfully creates a discoursal self through performing identities based in her professional and personal experiences, and demonstrates writing as a student’s negotiation of his/her various conceptions of self. Newkirk’s argument against academia’s postmodern tradition interrogates the implicit assumptions of the postmodern writing classroom: even if students truly identify with religious or cultural values that shape their interpretations of the world, they are expected to perform some transformation that questions those values. However, as Clark and Ivanic illustrate, student writers can perform a discoursal identity derived from personal experiences and values to challenge and manipulate the writing classroom’s foundational assumptions. The theories of Newkirk, Clark and Ivanic are especially pertinent to American Indian students, whose cultures and identities have been largely ignored in traditional post-secondary writing classrooms. Instructors who work with American Indian students at the post-secondary level can incorporate these composition theories by simply being sensitive to the reality that American Indian students exist on a spectrum of Native identity where some may feel strong connections to their cultures while others choose to identify more strongly with a non-Native identity. Instead of expecting students to reflect or to express a specific kind of Native identity, instructors must be open to the
possibility that some of their students may not have strong connections to their cultures. If this is the case, instructors can help American Indian students realize that they have a wealth of other experiences and knowledge based in their various identities, such as athlete, biology student, older sibling, or artist: American Indian students are much more than just American Indian. When American Indian students recognize their writing as a glimpse into the life experiences and knowledge that influence how they approach formulating ideas, they can better understand that writing not only communicates ideas, but also expresses who a student believes him/herself to be. For American Indian students, approaching writing as a space to express ideas through combining various modes of identification can help them to become more critically aware of how they position themselves as students in the academy and as members of a larger Native community.
Chapter Five:

American Indian Education

The investigations of Thomas Newkirk, Romy Clark and Roz Ivanic reveal the theoretical dimensions of a recurring theme in boarding school narratives: how the performative nature of identity allows for resistances and subversions of dominant discourses. These composition theorists inspire a more detailed exploration of education and pedagogical practices that recognize the performative elements of American Indian education. Analyzing a small collection of studies concerning pedagogy and the learning of American Indian students in elementary, secondary, and post-secondary education begins to illuminate the role of performativity and possibilities for survivance in the classroom. The connections between performativity and survivance in these studies present strategies for fostering the development of Native identity expression.

Before investigating multiple approaches to improving the quality of American Indian education, I must address facts regarding rates of literacy, high school graduation, and college retention within the American Indian population. A September 2005 study by Christopher D. Lohse, research analyst for the Office of Research and Policy Analysis in the Montana Legislative Services Division, and Susan Eckert, an economist at the Montana Department of Commerce, begins by acknowledging the undeniable fact of American Indians’ virtual invisibility in discussions of national educational issues: “Perhaps because of their low overall enrollment numbers in schools nationally, American Indian students are largely ignored in national discussions of the achievement gap” (1).
While it is true that most critiques of education focus on inequalities and discrepancies between black, Latino, and white American students, the educational needs of American Indian students are just as urgent and as complex as those of more recognizable minorities. Although Lohse and Eckert’s study concentrates on Montana, its results represent broader trends in American Indian education around the United States. Lohse and Eckert analyze data from attendance records of Montana schools, standardized test scores, and expulsion and drop-out records; then, they cross-reference that information with data on home-ownership, incomes, and migration/stability indexes from low-performing schools with an American Indian population. Lohse and Eckert conclude that the lowest performing schools (as determined by test scores and drop-out rates) with larger populations of American Indian students are the result of racial and economic isolation: “our data suggest that concentration of poverty (economic isolation) and racial isolation are more predictive than poverty or race, alone” (17). Lohse and Eckert present statistics that indicate significant achievement gaps between white and American Indian students: only 28 percent of American Indian students scored at or above the proficiency level in the Reading section of the 2005 Montana Comprehensive Assessment System (MontCAS) exam, compared to 72 percent of the white students scoring at or above the proficient level (5). The discrepancies between American Indian and white achievement on standardized tests repeat in the Math section as well, and continue into high school.

After high school, the statistics concerning American Indian educational achievement remain bleak. A 2008 report by the Graduate Management Admission Council (GMAC) indicates that American Indians are disproportionately over-
represented in the overall population of drop-outs in the United States: almost 28 percent of American Indians age 25 and over in 2004 had not graduated from high school, compared with the national average of 15 percent (3). These results are especially troubling when considering that American Indians are a statistically small fragment of the American population. Additionally, college-attendance trends demonstrate that higher educations are often not a part of American Indian adult life: “In 2003, 18 percent of American Indian 18-24 year olds was enrolled in college, compared to 42 percent of whites” (GMAC 3). In an effort to attract more students to its schools, tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) have tuition reimbursement and loan programs designed to encourage high school students to pursue a higher education; TCUs typically educate American Indian students whose family incomes average $13,998, or 27 percent below the poverty threshold (GMAC 4).

American Indian students at TCUs and traditional post-secondary institutions share certain factors that may inhibit or limit their success in college. Nicole Butt, educational researcher at the University of Wisconsin, reports that the following risk factors may influence a student’s completion of post-secondary education: “delayed enrollment, part-time attendance, being financially independent, having dependents, being a single parent, working full-time and being a GED recipient” (1). Contrasted against other major ethnic populations, American Indian students have a higher chance of having four or more of these risk factors upon entering college: 35.2% of American Indian students exhibit these risk factors, while only 14.2% of Asian/Pacific Islanders,
31.2% of Black Non-Hispanics, 26.5% of Hispanics, and 21.6% of Whites face the same obstacles (Butt 2).

These statistics suggest a history of isolating American Indians from the opportunities of leading lifestyles that hold possibilities of completing a higher education. Due to the socioeconomic strictures of living in rural, reservation areas, American Indians remain isolated from the resources necessary to support educational success. Sandy Grande, Quecha educator and critical theorist, recognizes the historical underpinnings of the American Indian educational experience:

Unless the relationship between culture and socioeconomic conditions within which [education] is produced is recognized, the so-called at-risk conditions common to peoples living under siege will persist [. . . ] this means understanding that “the Indian problem” is not a problem of children and families but rather, first and foremost, a problem that has been consciously and historically produced by and through the systems of colonization: a multidimensional force underwritten by Western Christianity, defined by white supremacy, and fueled by global capitalism. (19)

Grande’s observations illustrate the low educational achievement of American Indians as an effect of systems of domination beyond the control of the American Indian community. According to Grande, the history of this control is evident in the failure of mainstream schooling to nurture the intellectual development of Native children and to include Native culture and languages into curricula (20). Schools that divest American
Indians of their culture to promote capitalist aims have led American Indians to reject traditional educations, forcing them into reiterating cycles of oppression and poverty.

Although these statistics and their historical backgrounds are grim, it is important to note some progress toward self-determination in American Indian education. These statistics should inspire positive change and focused reforms of educational practices to account for the socioeconomic barriers faced by American Indians. The studies I investigate consider the role of education in a future for self-determination and call for changes—sometimes radical changes—in pedagogy and objectives.

William L. Leap, linguistic anthropologist at American University, complicates approaches to self-determination education in a 1991 article that exposes the tensions that surface within the Ute community when educators present a tribal-based language literacy initiative. The program aims to decrease unemployment and drop-out rates by including Ute language instruction alongside traditional English language education. This strategy hopes to rejuvenate interest in Ute culture while improving English literacy skills and making written Ute a viable and relevant form of communication on the reservation. Although incorporating Native languages into the classroom has been widely accepted as a solution for improving American Indian education, Leap finds that some tribal members oppose the literacy initiative due to strong cultural beliefs about language.

According to Leap, the Utes, for reasons stemming from values concerning spirituality and individualism, believe that oral language is a gift from the Creator, while written language is human-created and diminishes the sacred value of Ute language (30). Another obstacle to embracing written Ute is the deeply engrained belief that only a
spoken language can express and reinforce cultural values. Leap explains that the Ute highly regard those who, “through creative, personalized combinations of these options, are able to mark their participation in oral discourse with some sort of linguistic ‘signature’” (24). The value of a speaker’s performance depends on how he/she alters the Ute language to adapt to his/her own personal linguistic style. Because the structure of spoken Ute allows for the unique performance of an individual’s identity, some community members fear that written Ute constrains the freedom of expression inherent in spoken delivery.

Leap also addresses fears of how written Ute may affect the tribe’s cultural psyche. He states that the demands of writing could possibly alter how Ute speakers think and process their language “largely because the process of writing forces the speaker to place physical boundaries around ‘words,’ ‘phrases,’ ‘sentences,’ and other discourse segments whether he or she wishes to do so or not” (Leap 31). Writing requires a creative consideration, or rather prediction, of how the audience will interpret the author’s words without the advantages of oral communication, such as immediate feedback from the listener, that allow the speaker to alter his/her message to ensure understanding. The fundamental difference between space and time contexts in writing and speaking create tensions in the Ute community concerning changes to how its language is used.

According to Leap, encouraging student engagement with Ute literacy to promote its broader use on the reservation, involves a cross-disciplinary approach that includes Ute art and history with a strong focus on the individual learner’s autonomy (34). Although Ute, like many Native cultures, emphasizes kinship and values collectivism,
spoken Ute highlights individual expression that contributes to a wider tribal dynamic. The improvisational nature of Ute forces speakers to think of themselves as distinct parts of a greater whole, like an individual thread woven into a more complex pattern. Leap suggests that the success and popularity of written Ute can be achieved by understanding this focus on the individual in a student-centered approach that “treats each student as an independent sentient being capable of making choices based on critical reflection” (34).

A critical component of Ute writing classes is the emphasis on individual interpretation. Much like spoken Ute, written Ute has been designed to allow for personal markers, and writing programs have decided to adopt “a ‘path-of-least-resistance’ attitude [. . . ] By common agreement, there is no ‘correct spelling’ for any Ute word, other than the way in which the individual writer chooses to spell the word on any given occasion”; however, instructors encourage student writers to make certain that they can read what they have spelled and to make adjustments to maintain ease in reading (Leap 37).

The Ute literacy initiative emphasizes the contestable nature of language use that structures oral Ute traditions. While students are not trained in a prescriptive Ute grammar, they are nurtured to perceive the needs of their audience while communicating their ideas; so, students consider the implications of how they structure their statements and understand that their individual choices are open to discussion. In its shaping of Ute literacy education according to the traditions of individual agency within a collective engagement, the literacy initiative maintains integral Ute values of independence and personal accountability, and supports written Ute as a relevant form of cultural communication. The cultural basis for Ute writing instruction ensures the continuance of
Ute culture into the future: Ute documents will always be available as sources of cultural transmission. The permanence of the written word—an element of writing vaunted by early missionaries in convincing American Indians of the importance of education—actually has a positive impact on Ute culture. While providing a relevant form of inter-tribal communication, Ute writing can also create and maintain cultural records, thus reflecting the aims of Vizenor’s survivance: adapting Native traditions to ensure their continuance into the future.

Jerry Lipka and Teresa L. McCarty, authors of the 1994 article, “Changing the Culture of Schooling: Navajo and Yup’ik cases” address issues similar to Leap’s as they investigate the Yup’ik’s inter-tribal conflict over the implementation of culturally-centered education. After years of committee debate, some tribal members began to embrace the possibility of hiring bilingual teachers to instruct Yup’ik centered curriculums, while some older members of the tribe rejected not only the hiring of bilingual teachers, but also the larger goal of overhauling the curriculum to represent the values and practices of Yup’ik culture. Lipka and McCarty provide one example of tribal resistance to incorporating Yup’ik-based teaching strategies in local schools. During a presentation at a bilingual conference that involved demonstrating how to snare a ptarmigan (a type of sea-gull) to illustrate an ecological concept, two school board members walked out: “they said that they already knew how to snare a ptarmigan and so there was no reason to stay. The board members did not see the relevance of using Yup’ik culture and language in the process of schooling” (Lipka and McCarty 275).

Proponents of self-determination often face opposition from those who believe in
maintaining the status quo: educating American Indian students for life in mainstream American society, and not for the preservation of their cultures. The teachers demonstrating the ptarmigan snaring were illustrating that performing a Yup’ik tradition can teach students the same materials as textbooks, but in the process, give students a sense of pride in the cultures.

Nanci M. Burk’s 2007 study, “Conceptualizing American Indian/Alaskan Native College Students’ Classroom Experiences: Negotiating Cultural Identity Between Faculty and Students” expands upon Grande’s assertions concerning the detrimental effect of conventional school models on Native populations: “[M]ost American college courses are deeply rooted in the hegemonic, capitalist, colonialist, pedagogical paradigm that trains instructors, produces textbooks, and designs instructional tools” (1). Burk examines how Western institutions reinscribe this paradigm through the instructor/student dynamic. Burk’s analysis is inspired by the legal idea of contracts as applied to social interaction to claim that individuals sign a contract in any given social context, including the post-secondary writing classroom, which determines the individual’s role and participation within that context (4). In accordance with performance theory, these social contexts also influence the expression of individual identity; so, contract-signing determines the degree to which a student must negotiate his/her identity in order to participate in the social context of the classroom. Of the three varieties of contracts that Burk presents, the “ready-to-sign” contract is the most destructive for American Indian students, but also the most common (Burk 4). Ready-to-sign contracts infer assimilation and are initiated by the authority figure (the instructor) under the assumption that the subordinate party (the
student) will accept the authority’s power and acquiesce to the authority’s demands; consequently, “the subordinate person, by appearing to accept the contract, has negotiated his/her identity within that relationship” (Burk 4).

The concept of signing contracts has significant implications for American Indian students. Because most colleges are situated within a Euro-American capitalist context, they create environments where indigenous behaviors are misconstrued as signing contracts that negate their identities. Burk characterizes the indigenous behavior of silence, or quietness: “American Indian cultures value listening, attentiveness, and adhere to strict rules concerning verbal engagements. Unless a student feels like they are fully prepared to speak—meaning, when they feel they have mastered the material well enough to speak on it—they will remain silent” (6). American Indian traditions value mastery before demonstration, as opposed to Western perceptions of experimentation and spontaneous verbal engagement as valuable classroom participation. It is also important to note that due to the mainstream college classroom’s profound neglect of non-Western traditions, American Indian students often believe that their cultural perspectives are not valued; thus, their silence may also indicate a profound alienation from the classroom’s ideological foundation.

Burk also finds that Western classrooms favor individual efforts and competition between students, rather than the values of group harmony and cooperation that characterize Native learning and behavior styles (10). While Western students may respond to the rhetoric of self-discovery that shapes activities encouraging students exploring their inner selves, American Indian students respond to kinship values that
privilege family over the individual and respond better to calls for examining lessons learned from elders (Burk 10). Because kinship is a sacred part of native spirituality, American Indian students may find it inappropriate to discuss family, or experiences with the family, in the public domain of the class.

Finally, most important to understanding American Indian learning is the significance of socioeconomic status. Burk claims that students from socioeconomically deprived communities may arrive on campus poorly equipped to manage the cultural dissonance they encounter in a typical classroom (8). Because middle-class values and norms are already inscribed into most post-secondary composition curricula, American Indian students lack the experiences necessary for comprehending and successfully participating in many writing assignments. The disjuncture between the expectations of the college writing classroom and the experiential knowledge and values of American Indian students forces them to negotiate their identities into the dominant discourse.

An overview of Curry Mallot’s *A Call to Action: An Introduction to Education, Philosophy and Native North America*, reveals possible solutions for resolving the cultural dissonance that American Indian students experience as well as providing them with the skills to assert themselves as active, critical members of both mainstream American society and their own cultures. Mallot accesses critical pedagogy, first developed in the works of Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux, to propose that educators make revolution their number one priority. Because the oppression of indigenous peoples is a direct result of a dominating capitalist system, the only way to end oppression is by teaching against the system: “educating against occupation” (Mallot 65). Mallot argues
that educators are responsible for bringing students into a radical consciousness, an awareness of the fact that we live on Native land; this land-based consciousness challenges a hegemonic capitalist system in order reclaim sovereignty to Natives and restore democracy to the state (37). Recognizing that all of North American society is built on Native land performs the survivance act of locating power in land. The simple, yet radical, step of acknowledging that today’s North America is a product of white occupation of Native land initiates a dialogue that can create possibilities for empowering American Indian students through education.

Mallot’s critical pedagogy emphasizes the teacher’s responsibility to expose ideology and guide students to recognize the subtle machinations of ideology in culture and, most importantly, to resist its domination. Mallot directly addresses white teachers, encouraging them to rethink their cultural biases (120, 125). American Indian students have been marginalized by an educational system that ignores their cultural knowledge and inculcates them with a white Eurocentric mindset that sees “the other” as a threat, a danger; this cultural dissonance often results in guilt and self-hatred (Mallot 81). When teachers adapt their teaching methods according to the reality of white occupation of Native land, they can empower American Indian students to resist systems of domination and to embrace their cultures.

A radical pedagogy interprets education as an act of survivance: a movement for improving the lives of oppressed indigenous peoples begins with the changes and actions of educators who adopt a radical, revolutionary mindset. This survivance pedagogy extends the investigations of anthropologists and educators who maintain that infusing
curricula with American Indian culture and language can create positive changes within the Native community and inspire students to become active participants in preserving and performing their cultures. Leap, Lipka, McCarty, and Burk recognize the power of performance in reforming American Indian education. From literacy instruction to ecology lessons, communicating the value of cultural practices to American Indian students begins with a performance of those practices.

Self-determination in American Indian education is much more than just incorporating Native values into the classroom: it requires making the classroom a space where students and instructors perform Native values and traditions in the process of learning. When American Indian students enact Native values while learning the skills necessary for academic achievement, they also perform an act of survivance. American Indian students who learn within a context of Native knowledge are better prepared to serve their communities and advocate for Native causes. Nurturing American Indian students to continue their own versions of Native performances outside the classroom can preserve Native cultures and languages, fulfilling the goals of self-determination and ensuring a future of survivance.
Conclusion

American Indian students, their teachers, and their schools are now in a position to reflect on the progress of the self-determination movement and collectively create an educational mission that reasserts the unique qualifications of American Indians to become leaders in the twenty-first century, and beyond. In the process of fostering leadership and cultural pride in American Indian students, educators must make writing a priority in not only elementary and secondary curricula, but also in post-secondary curricula. Analyzing identity-centered theories of composition and reviewing current trends in American Indian education may yield some solutions that could improve the writing of American Indian college students.

A crucial strategy for improving American Indian students’ writing is engaging students with culturally-relevant material. Particularly at the college level, where students face the task of actively interpreting their place in the university and the community, American Indian students could benefit from reading and responding to texts that demonstrate how American Indians before them used writing to interpret their roles and shape their identities. Exploring the texts of Zitkala-Sa and Luther Standing Bear, for example, can provide a historical context for understanding the implications of education on Native culture, as well as encouraging a discussion about how the current state of American Indian education has been shaped by white domination and colonial enterprise. This kind of historical contextualization reflects Mallot’s radical pedagogical aims. Additionally, the study of contemporary American Indian authors, such as Gerald Vizenor and N. Scott Momaday, can structure writing activities where students not only
interpret the themes of Vizenor’s and Momaday’s texts, but also write their own versions of haiku poetry and drama. By offering American Indian-authored texts as models for writing assignments, writing instructors can expose students to various genres of writing without resorting to conventional, white European-authored canonical texts.

Most importantly, writing instructors working with American Indian students must bear in mind the complex relationship between identity and writing. As Newkirk, Clark and Ivanic demonstrate, college writing engenders new and oftentimes confusing interactions between student writers and their self-conceptions. While such interactions are inevitable, instructors can guide American Indian students through these interactions by illuminating the situation of college writing: students are expected to maintain an objective, critical distance in analytical writing and to practice writing in specific ways. Recognizing how identity is implicated in these expectations can ease confusion and make students aware of when and how their writing reflects their identities, as well as when and how they may assume performances of alternate identities. Instructors can incorporate Clark and Ivanic’s three-part discoursal identity model into their curriculums by designing workshops where students read each others’ writing to identify how various discoursal identity constructions are portrayed. American Indian students can benefit from a collective atmosphere where they work together to investigate how each student performs his/her identity differently in writing. Ultimately, an approach to teaching writing that acknowledges American Indian students as a heterogeneous population with widely differing notions of what it means to be Indian can help them to write effectively in the college classroom.
It is also important to note the implications of Mallot’s critical pedagogy in the writing classroom. As seen in the introduction, the government has used writing in various forms, such as treaties and laws, in the process of colonizing, oppressing, and dehumanizing American Indians and other minorities. However, when instructors bring students into a radical awareness of the fundamentally capitalistic and imperialistic underpinnings of the educational system, students become empowered to use writing as a way to challenge and begin to change that system. Through understanding how the government and its supporting systems have used writing to subjugate and to dominate American Indians, student writers can better conceptualize the stakes of writing within the American Indian community and use the skills learned in composition courses to rewrite the power structure.

The studies of Newkirk, Clark, and Ivanic reveal that the performative aspects of boarding school narratives parallel the experiences of students first learning how to participate in academic discourse: the performances of student writers take on similar dimensions to both fictionalized and real boarding school students. The connections between these two groups indicate that there is, indeed, a place for theorizing the American Indian experience and Native identities in the modern college writing classroom. Leap, Lipka, McCarty, Burk and Mallot present a framework for understanding the stakes of Indianizing curricula to ensure the continuation of American Indian culture. One way to ensure this continuation is through incorporating some elements of Native oral storytelling traditions, or other performance-oriented and artistic practices, into the composition classroom. Such inclusions can illustrate the various
modes of communication available to Native communities and can demonstrate how these various modes reflect culturally-specific values. When American Indian students are given an opportunity to be critical participants in dialogues concerning their cultures, they are also given a chance to experiment with and to explore the dimensions of their Native identities.

Challenging American Indian students to see writing as an identity-forming exercise can teach them to use writing as a tool for empowerment and change. Thus, a vital goal of American Indian education should be to prepare the Native population for a more active role in creating solutions to some of the world’s most pressing issues, namely those concerning the environment and Native rights to land. When American Indians were first confronted with the necessity of sending their youth to school, many did so because they believed their youth would return to the tribe to protect its people and its land from colonial domination. Now is the time to realize that belief. Sagoyewatha, Luther Standing Bear, Zitkala-Sa, Momaday, and Vizenor stand out not only as Native writers, but as Native activists who call attention to the complex relationship between American Indians and education, and recognize the possibilities of this relationship. Their texts convey an urgency that must be responded to with action, with survivance. The action of survivance springs from a Native power located in land: it is the foundation for Native cultures and epistemologies. American Indian students who are equipped with the composition skills necessary for communication with wide audiences can more effectively promote the interests of their tribes and their cultures, such as land rights and environmental protection issues.
American Indians have been accessing white American rhetorical strategies to protect their land and cultures for more than two centuries. At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the stakes have steadily increased in the Native fight to regain control over traditional lands as tribes take action against the U.S. government and its business allies. Most recently, in December 2009, Sonali Kolhatkar of Uprisingradio.org, an independent news organization, reports that the Blackfeet tribe of Montana won a thirteen-year legal battle against the U.S. government in which they were awarded a 3.4 billion dollar settlement as compensation for over one hundred years of mismanagement of tribal funds and mishandling of Indian trust accounts by the U.S. government (1). The Blackfeet victory indicates that American Indians can successfully challenge historically oppressive systems and intervene in those systems’ discourses to benefit the Native community.

The classroom itself plays a significant role in engendering revolutionary reforms: it assembles spaces in which identity takes on various forms through contestation, an ongoing circuit of challenging, accepting, or manipulating not only academia’s discoursal expectations, but also the expectations and assumptions of society. Although it offers opportunities for American Indian students to rethink and revise their identifications and interactions with the world, the classroom is not the final proving ground for Native identities and resistances of institutionalized oppression. As the legal victory of the Blackfeet tribe demonstrates, these resistances must continue in the world outside the classroom to ensure a future of self-determination, and they are making a positive impact.
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