

## Teaching Legacies of the Carlisle Indian School

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### Cover Page Footnote

1 In many Native America communities, tobacco is commonly used in such contexts as a gesture of respect.

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### Introduction and Rationale

The horrifying news of the discovery of hundreds of graves of children at Native American boarding schools in Canada has a contemporary companion: the tears of Latinx kids on the border in the summer of 2018 (Kelly, 2018). You may recognize these voices as those of the immigrant children who were separated from their parents upon crossing the US/Mexico border in the summer of 2018. I'd like you to juxtapose them with any of the thousands of Native American children separated from their parents and forced to attend US-run boarding schools in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A different time and different languages, indeed. But the emotion is likely the same: the fear and desperation of dark-skinned children forced to live in the crossroads of US colonization. While many American citizens said in horror during the summer of 2018 that this is not the US, it is, and it has been, many times before.

To highlight this connection, I share my experiences teaching a class on boarding schools, which I believe is one effective response to today's encounters with colonialism. Although I have always included some boarding school material in my Native American Literature survey class at West Virginia University, in the fall of 2019, I had the opportunity to design a one-credit Native American class entitled "Carlisle Indian School Legacies." As a one-credit course focused on the experience of visiting Carlisle, it was less involved than a normal three-credit class. Therefore, I share here some of the literature and assignments I plan to use when teaching a larger version of this course.

### Learning Objectives

I have three main goals for this course. First, I want to situate Carlisle in relation to the other boarding schools in the United States. Fear-Segal and Rose (2016) discuss Carlisle's position as the first non-reservation, federally funded school in the country. Carlisle existed alongside 60 other schools by the 1880s that were both non-reservation and reservation institutions. As editors Fear-Segal and Rose relate, "The purpose of the education matched previous policies: dispossessing Native peoples of their lands and extinguishing their existence as distinct groups that threatened the nation- building project of the United States" (p. 1). Books that detail boarding schools on a larger basis include Fatzer et al.'s (2006) *Boarding*

*School Blues: Revisiting American Indian Educational Experiences* and Adams' (2020) *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875–1928*.

My second goal is to improve the students' oral and written communication skills. This involves the assignment of a journal, two essays, one oral presentation, and one final essay (see: "Topics" and "Assessment" below).

My third goal is to enhance the students' understanding of the racist and misogynistic elements of this particular colonial system. This is the most difficult and in-depth objective, and it requires a good deal of reading and discussion on such topics as gender expectations, racist beliefs, and the historical context of the schools.

### Explanation

Boarding schools for Native American children exemplify colonialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and as the first federal, non-reservation school, Carlisle is an ideal subject for such a course. This study enables a comprehensive examination of specific tactics, such as surveillance and education, that were used by whites to perpetrate the oppression of Native Americans. It also allows for the study of students' and parents' resistance to that oppression in the form of running away or resisting enrollment.

As a professor of English, literature is usually the core substance of my courses, though I can imagine it being used successfully in a number of disciplines. My favorites are the following, for both their appeal to students and their excellent craftsmanship:

Louise Erdrich, "The Runaways"	Poem	Middle school; high school; university
N.K. Momaday, <i>The Indolent Boys</i>	Play	Advanced high school; university
Laura Tohe, <i>No Parole Today</i>	Poetry	High school; university
Luci Tapahonso, "The Snakeman"	Short story	High school; university
D'arcy McNickle, <i>The Surrounded</i>	Novel	University
<i>American Indian Stories</i>	Short stories	High school; university

Selections would depend, of course, on the course level and intent.

In addition to literature, I've learned a few things I would recommend to anyone teaching about boarding schools. First, consider if there are any nearby sites you could visit. Field trips, when done well, tend to make the material come alive in a way it can't within a classroom. Carlisle and Haskell are the two schools that have the most established memorials, but other schools may be accessible. Because

Carlisle is now an active Army War College, people can only visit after having background checks. See U.S. Army War College (2021) for more details.

While many of the boarding schools were abusive and misguided, some were more effective and actually appreciated by the students. It's important to remember the experiences were as diverse as American Indians themselves; some found they provided food during difficult economic periods such as the Great Depression, and others fondly remember their educational and social advantages. Fortunate Eagle (2010) and "The Brighter Side of Indian Boarding Schools, 1870-1940" (in Trafzer, 2006) offer a more positive account. Although I am careful not to suggest they were all, or even most, good experiences, I think it is important to relay that some survivors do not agree with the more critical accounts; indeed, some even protest the word survivor itself.

Finally, I encourage you, whether you are of Native heritage or not, to include as many American Indian voices in the classrooms as you can. One of the best components of my field trip were our two Native tour guides, both of whom have ancestors who attended these schools. Obviously, then, they are very invested in giving a thorough and honest take on the experience of both attending these schools and, more personally, the multi-generational effects of them. The Carlisle Boarding School Project, currently under construction, will likely offer more information about potential hosts upon its completion. Similarly, Sanchez and Stuckey (1999) offer ways for non-Native instructors to include Native Americans in their teaching in a respectful, genuine way.

## Topics

There are any number of topics a course on boarding schools might pursue; for one, the gendering of students. Girls were taught domestic tasks with the expectation that they would ultimately become maids in whites' homes, while boys were taught more physical and industrial labor. The 'outing' experience, in which students were placed in whites' homes for a certain period of time, enforced such expectations, with girls assigned as cooks or maids and boys assisting outside. Exceptional readings of these gender norms include Adams (2020) and Fear-Segal and Rose (2016). Gilbert et al. (2012) include a useful discussion of the outing program. Others focus specifically on gender: Trennert (1982), for example, offers a useful account in the article "Educating Indian Girls at Nonreservation Schools." Students could draw from much of the literature, including, for example, Zitkala-Ša (1921), Momaday (2007), and Tapahonso (1978).

Instructors might also choose resistance as a topic. One of the great ironies of these boarding schools was that once they taught students to replace their various

Native tongues with English, the students were then able to plan resistance. Because children were taken away from their parents to attend Carlisle and other non-reservation schools, a process that didn't become illegal until 1978 when the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) passed, and because it was typically hundreds of miles away from home, parents often resisted their children's enrollment. Officials often responded by refusing the parents funding or food. Schools that were on reservations tended to arouse less resistance from parents, though some students still ran away. Helpful sources are Celia Haig Brown (2002) and Winona LaDuke (2016). The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition (2020) has a useful bibliography with other sources (<https://boardingschoolhealing.org/education/resources/book-list-for-indigenous-peoples-day-2020/>).

## Assignments

The assignments I have designed cover a range of topics and involve distinct skills. They enable me to reach a number of goals: increasing the degree of empathy of my students for the Native American or Latinx children they are studying; understanding some of the most tragic elements of the boarding schools, like the death of students; comprehending the schools on a daily, microscopic level; drawing connections between the schools and the southern border; learning more about specific aspects of both, like the gender expectations children faced. The following are my suggestions to instructors; individual assignments can be devised in a number of ways:

- 1) In an effort to encourage personal reflection throughout the class, I require a journal with prompts like, "Write about a time when you felt alienated or uncomfortable in school. What was your experience? How might it relate (or differ from) the experience of an American Indian boarding school?" The idea is not to create a simplistic relation between the boarding school and today's educational environment, but to get students thinking more personally about structural limitations of schools as institutions, and to have empathy for the students. As Robbins (2017) notes, "although 'majority' students and teachers would rarely, if ever, have a past history with abusive education comparable to Indian residential settings, their reevaluations of problematic moments in their learning histories can still be valuable tool for projecting forward to future teaching" (p. 141).

- 2) If you are able to visit Carlisle, pass out the names and biographies of actual students. Some of them died and were buried there. Students who get the names of a pupil who died can be encouraged to find the gravesite. When I gave this assignment, I found that one of my students was moved to spread tobacco on

the grave<sup>1</sup>. Note that some remains from Carlisle have been repatriated to their respective tribes; the Northern Arapaho, Sicangu Lakota, Blackfeet Nation, Oneida, Modoc, Iowa, Standing Rock Sioux, Rosebud Sioux, and Unanga (Aleut) have all participated in this process. Repatriation can itself become a useful topic of classroom conversation.

3) Thanks to the archivists at Dickinson College, we now have a tremendous degree of material to investigate. Ask your students to consult the documents they have provided. Each student can choose a particular text, like a letter written by a student or a transcript. My students found wonderful resources to analyze; one discussed a particular interchange of letters that documents the federal offense of a commissioner reading through a student's mails. As the student argues, "These documents argue that the foundation of the Carlisle Industrial Indian School relied upon the dominant culture restraining the power of the Native Americans, not only as school children, but throughout the span of their lives to ingrain rules and expectations unto them that does not apply to the dominant, white culture." The student went on to discuss the commissioner's invasion of the student's privacy and her unrealistic, exclusionary expectations of her.

4) Ask students to expand on the comparison between the Latinx children's experience on the border in 2018 and the Native American children's time in the boarding schools of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They might, for example, investigate if there is any writing done by the former that could be compared to Native American writing from the schools. Or they could contrast the daily activities of the two: how the supposed "education" of the boarding schools was not necessarily superior to the caged environment at the border. Similarly, they could contrast how assimilation as a process was expected, or resisted, in both environments.

5) Encourage students to pursue a study of how gender expectations were communicated at both the schools and the border. How did girls' experiences differ from those of boys? How did the educational and "outing" experiences, for example, differ?

## Assessment

As with any lesson, it is important to have a final project that synthesizes the various ideas and voices students have been exposed to throughout the semester. I encourage students to use creative skills to either pursue a question they have not yet asked or to resolve an ongoing research question.

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<sup>1</sup> In many Native American communities, tobacco is commonly used in such contexts as a gesture of respect.

For a final project, encourage students to create artwork that ties to the material they've learned. A great example is Goshorn (2017), which shows the breathtaking baskets she made to commemorate the Carlisle school. Or ask students to pick a tribe and research its experience with boarding schools, considering these questions:

Was it on or off reservation?

If off reservation, where were the students sent? How far from home?

What was the age range of the kids?

When was the school in operation?

What was the daily experience like for students? How do we know?

What literature has been written about it? By those who experienced it?

Written by descendants? Fiction or poetry or drama or nonfiction?

How does it compare to and contrast the border camps of the summer of 2018?

## Debriefing

Returning to the connection between the American Indian boarding schools and the treatment of Latinx children at the southern border in 2018, I find it especially useful to bring this comparison to students' mind because it both challenges their attempts to see the oppression of brown and Black bodies as something limited to the nineteenth century and because there is a more immediate connection between them and what's happening today. This connection is particularly apparent in descriptions of the children's experience. Consider this parallel between a description of the border camps in 2018 that was published in the *New York Times* and Zitkala-Ša's initial impressions of the Indiana boarding school she was sent to in 1884. First, words from the *New York Times* on July 16, 2018:

Do not misbehave. Do not sit on the floor. Do not share your food. Do not use nicknames. Also, it is best not to cry. Doing so might hurt your case...Do not touch another child, even if that child is your hermanito or hermanita—your little brother or sister. . . .

Most of all, these facilities are united by a collective sense of aching uncertainty—scores of children gathered under a roof who have no idea when they will see their parents again. . . .

For an hour every day, the girls went outside to exercise in the hot Texas air. It was not uncommon to see someone try to escape. No whispers, no planning—just an out-of-nowhere dash for the fence. No one made it (p. A14).

Now for Zitkala-Sa's words:

Entering the house, I stood close against the wall. The strong glaring light in the large [sic] whitewashed room dazzled my eyes. The noisy hurrying of hard shoes upon a bare wooden floor increased the whirring in my ears. My only safety seemed to be in keeping next to the wall. As I was wondering in which direction to escape from all this confusion, two warm hands grasped me firmly, and in the same moment I was tossed high in midair. A rosy-cheeked paleface woman caught me in her arms. I was both frightened and insulted by such trifling. I stared into her eyes, wishing her to let me stand on my own feet, but she jumped me up and down with increasing enthusiasm. My mother had never made a plaything of her wee daughter. Remembering this I began to cry aloud (pp. 49-50).

In the summer of 2018, the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association published a statement connecting the current border experience with that of Native American children in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries:

While the cruel separation of refugee families is intolerable in every circumstance, Council wants to draw special attention to the unique experience of Indigenous migrants, who make up a significant percentage of these refugees. For Indigenous refugees, the devastating process in which children are thrust into cold, prison-like institutions, and parents anguish over the fate of their children, not knowing what to expect or if they will ever see them again, is further complicated by having limited or no language fluency in Spanish or English compounding their fear, isolation, and trauma.

Tragically, the targeting of children in both instances indicates a national, intent process to intervene in the present and future survival of entire groups. Fear-Segal and Rose's (2016) description of the boarding schools is eerily similar to the border experience:

Viewed from this perspective, the removal of Native children to boarding schools can be seen as inseparable from the sustained and persistent national resolve to eliminate the indigenous, racialized populations that stood in the way of nation-building. Scholarship that makes connections between settler policies of self-protection and Native assimilation—

through residential schools, reservations, fostering, and adoption— and the goals of the wider project lays bare both the patterns and the particulars of policies and institutions in different settler colonial societies (p. 18).

Between the news of graves found at Canadian boarding schools, protests of social justice sparked by George Floyd's murder, and conflict about the teaching of Critical Race Theory, I believe we are in an ideal place for such a class. Teaching this is not being unpatriotic or condemning the United States; it is the exact opposite: showing that we are brave enough to face the past. Remembering this picture, let us all share these voices, so they are not silenced.

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