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*Girls' Literacy in the Progressive Era:
Female and American Indian Identity
at the Genoa Indian School*

The Progressive Era (1870–1930) is marked by several forces that shaped U.S. girls' literacies, including the success of the common school movement (and coeducational high schools in particular), the progressive reform movement (especially in terms of progressive educators), new technologies of literacy and print media, women's leadership in social welfare legislation, and the proliferation of women's clubs and civic groups. All these forces shaped girls' reading and writing practices in both constraining and empowering ways. In this chapter, I examine girls' literacy experiences in the Progressive Era within the context of one group of American Indian girls who attended the Genoa Industrial Indian School (GIS), a federal off-reservation government boarding school in Genoa, Nebraska, which operated from 1884 to 1934. In analyzing the Genoa girls' literacies, I argue that although the dominant ideologies of the GIS and the progressive reform movement in general shaped the production and consumption of their texts, the girls also used literacy to write against and resist these ideologies. Thus, the GIS girls' literacy practices can be viewed as a case study for understanding how girls in the Progressive Era in general used literacy to secure material gains in their own lives.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the success of the U.S. common school movement had greatly affected girls' literacy experiences and practices. Priscilla Ferguson Clement notes: "Advocates sold citizens on the worth of the common school by appealing to accepted religious, political, and economic beliefs."¹ Their success was reflected in the fact that nearly universal school enrollment for elementary-age children was achieved by 1890: "In 1890, almost 80 percent of American children ages ten through fourteen already attended school sometime during the year; by 1910, 88 percent did so."² This rise of formal schooling helped to alleviate disparities in girls' and boys' literacies: "by 1870 women had nearly equaled men in basic lit-

eracy, with women's illiteracy rates only one percentage point above men's 9 percent."³ By 1900, coeducational high schools were the norm, with girls outnumbering boys by nearly a third in public high schools and women accounting for about one in five college students.⁴ By the end of the nineteenth century, boys and girls were generally integrated within public high school classrooms, and they studied the same academic curriculum.

Riding on the heels of the common school movement was the progressive reform movement, spurred by the increasing social pressures of industrialism, urbanization, and immigration in the second half of the nineteenth century. This reform movement depended mainly on women, especially those of the middle class, who began extending their power in the public sphere by being "social housekeepers."⁵ Their work not only led to organized efforts in improving child welfare, sanitation, housing, and recreation but also connected neatly to the suffragist cause.⁶ As Nancy Woloch suggests, "Progressives endorsed a battery of electoral reforms and believed that all social problems could be solved by legislation. . . . enfranchising women would double the middle-class, educated, fair-minded electorate who would support other progressive reforms."⁷ Oftentimes, reformers advocated government intervention as a means of controlling and disciplining other social groups (e.g., immigrants, American Indians, etc.) "supported by the rationale that families who did not adhere to middle-class definitions of domesticity and virtue were a threat to the American nation."⁸

Within educational contexts, progressive reformers viewed schools as the primary site for addressing social inequality. Progressive educators sought to broaden the program and function of schools to include direct concern for health, vocation, and the quality of family and community life.⁹ The movement to educate and assimilate American Indian schoolchildren was a natural extension of progressive reformers' views that education could be an equalizing force in U.S. society. By the late 1800s, the federal government was grappling with what came to be called the "Indian question." With most of the American Indian population forced onto reservations, the government turned away from military force and toward education as a means of promoting American Indian assimilation. Thus the U.S. government created a system of day schools, reservation schools, and off-reservation boarding schools across the country to educate and assimilate American Indian children. The off-reservation boarding schools were modeled after the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania founded by Colonel Richard Pratt in 1879 and based on the philoso-

phy “kill the Indian, save the man.” Although specific institutional histories differ, for the most part scholars of American Indian education concur that the boarding school experience was and continues to be a seminal moment for generations of Indian families and communities.¹⁰ It is against this social backdrop that the GIS girls’ literacy practices can be read.

The Genoa Indian School

The Genoa Industrial Indian School was the fourth and one of the largest of the government Indian boarding schools built in the United States. Originally built for Pawnee children before the tribe moved from Genoa to Oklahoma in 1875, the GIS grew to encompass a 640-acre campus with over thirty buildings, sixty teachers and staff, and almost 600 students from over thirty different tribes.¹¹ As with other federal off-reservation schools, the earliest GIS students were recruited (and in many cases forcibly removed) from their reservation homes by school superintendents. GIS students were drawn primarily from reservations in Nebraska and South Dakota, but they also came from as far away as Canada and Michigan. Students as young as four years old were enrolled at the school, and they often stayed for ten or more years. Because school policies required that students stay three years before visiting home and because many families could not afford to fund student travel back and forth to the school, many students did not see family members (other than siblings also enrolled) for several years. In later years, many students chose to attend the GIS, either because of the school’s reputation or because of the tradition of other family members attending. By 1934, when the school closed, several generations of family members claimed alumni status.

Although public schools during the late nineteenth century focused mainly on academic subjects such as reading, math, spelling, penmanship, and geography, government Indian schools focused heavily on vocational work (a predecessor to the vocational movement within the progressive movement).¹² The early GIS curriculum followed the “half and half” model instituted by Federal Indian Commissioner Thomas Morgan in 1890. Under this model, pupils studied traditional subjects half the day and then worked the remainder on vocational details in campus buildings such as the harness shop, the dairy barn, the printing shop, the bakery, and the laundry room. Because the GIS was underfunded—with the federal government allotting only \$ 167.00 per student per year—the students’ vocational duties were vital for sustaining the school’s operation and usually took

precedence over academic studies.¹³ Students made their own uniforms, grew their own crops, raised livestock, and performed daily work such as laundry, cooking, and cleaning.

Similar to public schools in which immigrant girls were placed in “sink-or-swim” English-only immersion classes, GIS girls’ literacy instruction emphasized speaking and writing only in English.¹⁴ Students were forbidden to speak native languages, even outside the classroom. Commissioner Morgan’s views about the role of English in assimilation were the cornerstone of language instruction at all Indian schools:

The Indian dialects are numerous, and in them there have come down the stories and traditions of their ancestors. . . . [which] have a tremendous force to keep them out of the tide of modern civilization.

Give these young Indians a knowledge of the English language, put them into a great current of thought which is expressed in the English language and it will break that up.¹⁵

For Morgan and other educators, literacy in English was a vehicle for the transmission of “American” culture. In its early years of operation, GIS educators adhered to this privileging of “English only.” In 1888 GIS superintendent Horace Chase wrote that he was especially fortunate because he had a corps of teachers “who are in thorough sympathy with the rule prohibiting the use of the Indian tongue” and that he had “as far as possible dispensed with interpreters, thus forcing all new-comers to quickly learn enough English to at least express their wants.”¹⁶ GIS teachers also used peer pressure and rewards to divide students between those who did and didn’t speak only English:

Tuesday was Mr. Backus’s [the superintendent’s] birthday. The girls who had not talked Indian for a month had their treat of nuts and candy up in the parlor, while those who had to pay the penalty were sent to their rooms with the privilege of listening to the merry-making of those who were enjoying themselves.¹⁷

Four months later, GIS administrators reported that girls who had not been able to speak “a word of English, are now making excellent progress, while reporting a roll-call for talking Indian grows decidedly less. With the exception of two or three new girls, all are prepared to say ‘no’ to speaking their home languages.”¹⁸

In addition to speaking English, the GIS heavily promoted reading and writing. In 1886, the principal teacher, Bessie Johnston, wrote

an addendum to the yearly narrative report that “two Friday evenings each month we have exercises consisting of compositions, recitations, singing, &c.”¹⁹ A 1913 school calendar illustrates that literary society meetings were held every other week, and the 1931–1932 school handbook describes the library as holding 2,942 volumes and 51 different periodicals, with 300 additional volumes in the first six grades of the school.

In keeping with the importance of transmitting culture through reading, literature was considered a primary route for furthering students’ assimilation. In an annual report to the commissioner, one teacher wrote: “We hope to obtain some story-books and pictorial papers for our boys and girls to read. They enjoy them thoroughly, and I am sure that it will broaden their views of life and give them a greater desire to live and be ‘like a white man.’”²⁰ Although classes were coeducational, there were differences that shaped the girls’ literacy practices, particularly with respect to constructions of female and American Indian identity. One such factor was the use of conduct fiction.

Conduct Fiction and *Stiya*

GIS educators’ views about the value of reading literature for assimilation were, in part, an outgrowth of the legacy of conduct fiction. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, conduct fiction (in the form of tracts, letters, and novels) was a primary form of education for girls that participated in the cultural and social production of “girlhood” more broadly.²¹ As Barbara Sichermann notes, “literature in general and fiction in particular have been critically important in the construction of female identity. . . . The scarcity in life of models for nontraditional womanhood has prompted women more than men to turn to fiction for self-authorization.”²² Conduct novels such as Martha Finley’s *Elsie Dinsmore* (1867) or Faith Gartney’s *Girlhood* (1863) usually affirmed the value of education and stressed the sentimental and social value of literacy, promoting the “social goals for the progress of the Republic.”²³ In the Progressive Era, changing economic and social conditions of the late nineteenth century led to new markets for girls’ conduct novels, which averaged fifty etiquette books per decade during the last thirty years of the nineteenth century.²⁴ To meet the reading demands of the expanding middle class, a juvenile literature market also emerged that “was increasingly segmented by gender.”²⁵

In keeping with conduct novels designed to teach middle-class girls how to behave, novels also were written expressly for girls who

represented disenfranchised social groups, including American Indians. K. Tsiana Lomawaima has noted how educators in off-reservation boarding schools were charged with teaching “Indian girls new identities, new skills and practices, new norms of appearance, and new physical mannerisms.”²⁶ GIS teachers promoted this remaking of girls’ identities through the reading of literary texts explicitly written for Indian youth. One literary text used to accomplish these aims was *Stiya*, a book written by Marianna Burgess (1891), a teacher and superintendent of printing at the Carlisle Industrial Indian School in Pennsylvania who frequently visited the GIS to give lectures. *Stiya* demonstrates dominant cultural ideologies about female and American Indian identity and offers a glimpse into the institutional ideology of the GIS more broadly.

As a conduct book, *Stiya: A Carlisle Indian Girl at Home* purports to be a realistic depiction of the transition between boarding school and reservation life, “founded on the author’s actual observations.” The plot revolves around *Stiya*, an Indian girl who attends Carlisle and then returns to her pueblo, where she becomes dissatisfied with her family and their way of life. Upon returning home, *Stiya* refuses to “dress Indian,” engage in the family’s domestic practices, or participate in a mandatory tribal dance. *Stiya*’s refusal to dance results in her family’s arrest, public whipping, and rejection by the community. But her courage in the face of this hardship inspires her father to take a job hauling coal for the railroad so that he can build his family a bigger home. In the end, *Stiya*’s example transforms her entire family, which is confirmed by a visit from two former Carlisle teachers.

GIS students were frequently encouraged to read *Stiya*, as the May 22, 1891, edition of the *Pipe* illustrates:

One of our teachers has received a copy of “*Stiya*,” an account of an Indian girl’s experience at her home after a few years at Carlisle. The story is written by one of the Carlisle teachers, and is replete with interesting facts, giving a very graphic description of the trials of a young girl and the strength and fortitude with which she met the barbarism and cruelty of her own people, and nobly stood up for the right. It should be read by every Indian girl and boy.²⁷

Two weeks later, the June 5, 1891, *Pipe* further emphasized the importance of reading *Stiya* with an endorsement from the GIS superintendent: “Monday evening Superintendent Backus gave the children an interesting and instructive talk, using ‘*Stiya*’ for a text. It is a subject that cannot be too thoroughly discussed before the Indian children.”²⁸

As a conduct novel, *Stiya* reinforced assimilationist ideologies espoused by government boarding schools and modeled strategies that girls could use to resist future “temptations” they might encounter after leaving these schools. American Indian girls were often ill prepared to return to reservation life after having spent years in government boarding schools, and educators worried that the money spent educating and “civilizing” Indian youth would be wasted if they returned to the social and cultural practices of their communities. Samuel Tappan, GIS superintendent in 1885, described reservation life as having “the horrible and disgusting features of Mormonism, socialism, and kindred evils.”²⁹ Similarly, 1887 GIS superintendent Horace Chase wrote in his annual report: “The difficulty lies not so much in the school children as in their parents and homes. . . . Struggle as they may they find the battle at home overwhelming and themselves almost helpless. . . . They must either return to school or drop down to the parents’ level.”³⁰

Given these educators’ attitudes, *Stiya* was a useful text for reinforcing GIS assimilationist ideologies. One strategy that *Stiya* models is reading others’ identities via their physical appearances and making judgments about their culture from these readings. For instance, upon returning home from Carlisle, *Stiya* views her parents with shock and surprise:

“My father? My mother?” cried I desperately within, “no,”
“never . . .”
I had forgotten that home Indians had such grimy faces.
I had forgotten that my mother’s hair always looked as though
it had never seen a comb. I had forgotten that she wore
such a short, queer-looking black bag for a dress, fastened
over one shoulder only, and such buckskin wrappings for
shoes and leggings.³¹

Stiya emphasizes the importance of veiling such negative responses while remaining determined to transform family members’ appearances and daily practices. *Stiya* constantly monitors her inward feelings about her family, so as not to offend them but also to resist their values. In a conversation with a friend who has also recently returned home, *Stiya* advises rejecting parental advice about wearing native clothing: “It is best to obey our fathers and mothers, but, Annie, I think we know so much more than they do now that if we are kind to them we ought at the same time to do what we know is right, even if it is contrary to what they wish.”³²

Stiya served as an assimilationist handbook for GIS students' behavior both at and beyond the school campus. *Stiya* states that not to live the white man's way is to be unappreciative of the schooling that she received and thus she pledges to remain ever vigilant about her identity transformation: "Do you think I would be so ungrateful after the Government has spent so much time and money to educate me as not to use the knowledge I have obtained? ... I mean to beat out the Indian ways, if such a thing is possible, and I believe it is possible."³³

Thus, *Stiya* taught GIS girls not only to remake themselves and their bodies—through the adoption of western dress, manners, and habits—but also to remake their families and communities. When her mother tells *Stiya* that she will get used to washing clothes on rocks instead of a washboard, *Stiya* internally responds, "never! I shall never wash this way again,' and I never did." *Stiya* then critiques her father, whose trousers come only below the knees: "A man among civilized people would not be called dressed if he wore such trousers."³⁴ The next day, *Stiya* uses the forty-seven dollars she has saved at Carlisle to refurbish her parents' home with cooking and cleaning supplies, a bed and mattress, dinnerware, and clothing, including a "white man's hat" for her father.³⁵ Throughout the book, *Stiya* remains purposeful in transforming herself and her parents according to the "civilized" ways espoused at Carlisle.

Of course, attention to the remaking of girls' bodies was not only a concern for GIS educators. As Joan Jacobs Brumberg describes, the Progressive Era saw increasing attention to the policing of U.S. girls' bodies, especially with respect to home hygiene. Departing from Victorian attitudes about beauty as derived from spiritual, internal qualities, Brumberg notes:

in the first two decades of the twentieth century, women began to think about beauty and the self in ways that were more external than internal. Because of the introduction of many new kinds of cultural mirrors, in motion pictures and popular photography, in mass market advertising in the women's magazines. . . . girls began to subject their face and figure to more consistent scrutiny.³⁶

The remaking of Indian girls' bodies was even more intense because it focused on them not only as individuals but as members of the larger Indian communities from which they came. And, of course, this project was explicitly directed by the educators, not the girls themselves. The literacy technologies that Brumberg describes as shaping girls' attitudes are reflected by the literacies that Genoa girls consumed. For instance,

Stiya uses pictorial rhetoric that contrasts *Stiya's* home and school lives to persuade readers that Indian boarding schools were transforming American Indian students. As Lonna Malmshemer suggests, "before and after" photographs taken of Indian students served as "iconic representations of the cultural transformation that was the central aim of the school."³⁷ These photographs, sold to the public in the form of postcards and posters, functioned as evidence that the schools were fulfilling their assimilation mission. Photographs and advertisements published within the GIS's *Indian News* further reflect this attention to remaking American Indian girls' bodies. In the June 1915 edition, one page focuses on girls' hygiene with the heading, "Clean Teeth Lend a Glow of Sunshine to Your Smile."³⁸ Pictured above this heading are four Indian girls dressed in school uniforms and brushing their teeth. On the bottom of the page is a second photograph of a young Indian girl standing over a bowl, engaged in some kitchen activity. Beside this photograph is the following statement: "Personal cleanliness is a spiritual and physical development. To be clean of person is to be wholesome in the sight of those who are your neighbors, and to be at peace with your Maker." Another photograph published in the *Indian News* shows two pairs of GIS girls sitting together, with each pair composed of a girl dressed in a school uniform and the other dressed in native clothing. The girls in uniform are wearing their hair up, whereas the other two are wearing their hair in braids with feathers. The placement of the girls and their facial expressions suggest that the girls in uniform are caring for or protecting the other girls, who are clearly in need of being transformed.

GIS girls were also asked to participate in the construction of such identities by writing to school patrons about the values they were being taught at the school. For instance, Lucy Lasley's essay, "The Dress of the Genoa Students," illustrates how the social norms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century regarding girls' physicality and appearance were connected to the "civilizing mission" of the federal government schools. Lasley's essay emphasizes similarities in fashion sense between Indian girls and "their White sisters":

The [GIS] girls are dressed in the modern fashion of the day. They are dressed appropriately for school, work, and all social affairs.

This being an industrial school, the students are not lavishly dressed at any time.

The Indian girls, like their White sisters love pretty clothes, sheer silk hoses, and high heel pumps. Their knowledge of cosmetics is in evidence every day.³⁹



Native American girls (National Archives)

It is difficult to assess how conduct novels such as *Stiya* and the assimilationist images described above shaped GIS girls' perceptions because few written responses to them exist.⁴⁰ But one can examine how Genoa girls negotiated these discourses in relation to their female and American Indian identities via their classroom-based expository writing. Lucille M. Schultz documents how nineteenth-century reforms shifted the emphasis in classroom-based writing from abstract and depersonalized topics to the "experience-based essay," in which students "write about their own socially and historically and culturally situated lives."⁴¹ In keeping with this shift, the May 1908 commencement issue of the *Indian News* showcases several eighth-grade persuasive essays, written on topics such as "Shall the Indian Tongue be preserved?" and "Should Indians be absorbed into the white race?" In analyzing the different approaches that GIS girls take in their classroom-based expository writing, one can read how GIS girls accepted, co-opted, and re-made the GIS assimilationist ideology within their own lives.

In keeping with the ways American Indian culture was represented to them, many GIS girls compared their identities as Indian schoolchildren to that of immigrants from other countries. They describe themselves

as competing not against whites but with other immigrants who share similar difficulties with speaking English. Despite this shared assumption about their foreignness, however, GIS girls do not agree upon the value of retaining their own native languages. Some girls assert that native languages can be maintained while learning English, but others argue that their native languages will keep them down from the “civilizing forces” of English. And although all assume that English is the social discourse of power, some do not believe that native languages need to be lost altogether. For instance, Zoe Lamson maintains that Indians should be encouraged to speak native languages and English so that they can move between them:

I think the Indians should always be able to spea [*sic*] their own language whatever comes. They could also learn the English as most all of them do. . . . Nearly all the Indians can speak both languages even though they speak the English most of the time, they almost entirely forget their own speech. Most all the foreigners that come from their own countries can not speak English: but after they are over here awhile they almost forget their languages but when they go home it comes back to them very easily. The same with the Indians, when the boys and girls come to school and mix with the whites they almost forget the Indian languages. But when they go back again it all comes back to them and should be remembered.⁴²

Lamson’s essay speaks to the fears of GIS educators that students returning home will abandon English for their native languages. Besides pointing out how easily “it all comes back to them,” Lamson asserts that such languages “should be remembered,” a direct criticism of GIS’s language policy that privileged English. Lamson’s text resists the premises of the GIS language policy and asserts the value of her native language.

GIS girls’ essays also speak to the question of assimilation. Not surprisingly, all the essays published assert that students should be assimilated. Yet their essays reflect different attitudes toward assimilation. Rather than participating in the discourse of blaming themselves for the “Indian situation,” these girls lay responsibility for their situations squarely on the shoulders of the white people who displaced them. This naming of white responsibility usually occurs in the opening paragraph, before the girls then argue that Indians need to accept such conditions. For instance, the opening paragraph of Mary Rutledge’s essay asserts the unfairness with which Indians have been treated: “In the first place the Indians owned this country, and they were gradually driven off their lands, by other nations, so we find

reservations where they are packed together.”⁴³ Clara A. Livermore asserts: “Before the white people took possession of this country the Indians owned it; it was not right for the white people to take it by force; if they wanted the land why didn’t they ask or buy it from the Indians. Sure they ought to to [*sic*] have bought it from them in the first place and not take it by force.”⁴⁴

Not all the girls’ writing reflects resistance to GIS ideology, of course. Some students’ texts reflect the GIS’s ideologies almost wholesale. For instance, Ida McNamara argues that English is the more civilized language and thus should be privileged:

The Indian boys or girls ought to learn the English language so well that they will not go back to their Indian language; for probably within a few years from now the Indian will not speak it, and why should they want to preserve it? The English language is far ahead of the Indian languages. . . . This world is not standing still but is growing more civilized every day, and I am sure the ambitious Indian boys or girls do not want to speak one language all the days of their life while there are so many foreigners coming to this country who are grasping the English language and are so ambitious to learn and why not the Indians take the same chance that is given to them?⁴⁵

McNamara’s appeals to progress and the civilizing forces of English echo Rutledge’s essay, in which she writes: “I am sure the white people will never regret what they have done for the Indians. It is true the Indians are slow at learning, but if they are helped along they will one day know as much as their white brothers and sisters and make splendid citizens.”⁴⁶

Beyond expository essays, themes of resistance can also be read in the girls’ more creative writing. For instance, a short story written by Nettie Worth and read at the girls’ Victoria Society literary club mirrors the alienating experience that many GIS girls faced in government boarding schools. In the story, “The Mouse,” a family of mice live happily in a field. As the mice grow older, the mother “often warned us to always be on the look-out lest those great big giants they call people may happen to run across us and then there would be no hope for us.” One day the mother tells the mice to go out into the world and make a living. The siblings find a school building in which to make their home, where they discover the giants about whom they had been warned. As the narrator describes, one giant:

was speaking in a language that I could not understand then I noticed that different ones got up and spoke in the same language,

then I knew that the giant who was in front of all the others must be the teacher and the others [sic] pupils that she was teaching.

After almost being caught by the giants while eating corn, the mouse “passed out of sight in a hurry and . . . never made another attempt at that corn since.”⁴⁷

Although written as a fictional account from a mouse’s perspective, this story can also be read ironically as a commentary on the writer’s experiences at the GIS and perhaps even as a response to conduct fiction like *Stiya*. *Stiya* laments the conditions of her childhood home, whereas the mouse reminisces about the “very nice home” and “kind” mother that attended to it. Instead of learning from the English language lessons, the mouse hides during these times: “somehow or other I was always able to escape unharmed.” And in the final scene, when the mouse “saw these giants with their hands which were about three or four times as large as I . . . reaching out toward me,” the mouse ran away. This scene can be read as a GIS girl’s rejection of the school’s assimilationist mission.

Gender, Race, and the Domestic Science Curriculum

Although the progressive education movement did not explicitly address gender in its social reform efforts, it did have important consequences for girls’ education, particularly in terms of its vocational emphasis.⁴⁸ Spurred by social efficiency theory, progressive reformers called for more direct relationships between curriculum and students’ work beyond school. Because girls’ life opportunities beyond high school were still conceptualized primarily in terms of marriage and motherhood, the new vocational emphasis spurred a gender-differentiated curriculum, one in which girls were routed into courses in the “domestic sciences” that “elevated women’s work to the status of nation building through the construction’ of the country’s citizens.”⁴⁹ For progressive educators, courses in home economics were a logical extension of the ideology of true womanhood. The curricular message to middle-class girls “was that they should approach their studies from the perspectives of futures wives and mothers most certainly, and perhaps as teachers, office workers, or domestics.”⁵⁰ As Knopp Biklen suggests, “higher education could be used not to advance the careers of economically independent women, but rather to create professional homemakers and mothers.”⁵¹ Thus, the domestic science curriculum was de-

signed not only to make housework more efficient but also to elevate its status to a “profession” so that girls could reconcile the tension between becoming economically independent and retaining a feminine image.

In contrast to the common academic subjects that boys and girls normally took together, the domestic science curriculum was typically for girls only. Beyond courses in sewing and cooking, the American Home Economics Association (1908) described domestic sciences as “the study of family consumption (or household economics), nourishment, family relations (calling upon psychology and sociology) and personal hygiene.”⁵² Although the domestic science curriculum for middle-class girls sought to professionalize the vocation of homemaking, its goals were decidedly different for girls in other ethnic and social classes. For the GIS girls, the domestic science curriculum reinforced the half-and-half curriculum that was already a staple of Indian boarding schools and further perpetuated racist attitudes of educators who “favored consigning whole groups to preparation for lowly work.”⁵³ Because Indian girls were assumed to have inherited a “lower level of physical organization and mental capacity” than white girls, their domestic science curriculum focused on obedience to authority, subservience, and training as domestic workers.⁵⁴

The impact of the domestic science curriculum—and its underlying assumptions about Indian girls’ abilities to learn—can be seen in GIS girls’ school writing. The June 1919 *Indian News*, for instance, published sixteen different girls’ paragraphs about their domestic science work. These paragraphs describe the various tasks in which GIS girls engaged within the curriculum, such as baking cakes and breads and cooking chickens. These passages also illuminate how GIS girls attempted to combat the notion that they were inferior by emphasizing how hard they were trying to succeed. For instance, Annie Arrow Side writes, “I am entered on my first year Vocational in the Domestic Science Department, and am studying the different kinds of cooking. I am trying to make my work fine and correctly done. I am trying to be a good girl in working.”⁵⁵ Similarly, Eloise Rave writes, “We have been trying our best... in our first year, trying to take great interest in our work. We are following right along with the course of study and trying to do as much work as we can do each day. We have to learn how to cook and we can’t all go through life without learning how to do things.”⁵⁶

The domestic science curriculum also created a visible shift in the girls’ academic writing. To advance the vocational component, the off-reservation boarding schools were encouraged to rely more heavily on practical demonstrations of student learning. One mechanism for making this change was the replacement of the “usual composition contest” with a

contest for demonstrations of students' industrial work.⁵⁷ This new focus on demonstrations shaped the essays that Genoa girls produced. Essays from the June 21, 1907, GIS senior program are typical. They average from thirteen to fifteen paragraphs and focus on the origins of the materials or ingredients that the girls were using in their demonstration—such as making an apron or a cake. After reading these essays aloud, the girls would then demonstrate their particular skills for audience members.

Beyond describing the specific types of domestic work in which GIS girls engaged, these essays also illustrate how the girls were taught to view their educational work in concert with federal Indian policies regarding land allotment and the increased use of commercial agriculture throughout the Great Plains.⁵⁸ In keeping with the school's assimilationist mission, these essays often make reference to the national project of manifest destiny, affirming the inevitable progress of western expansion through agriculture (and, implicitly, the right and inevitable loss of land and communal practices of Native American peoples). As Carolyn A. Haynes states, "The rhetoric of manifest destiny predicted and celebrated a divinely ordained spread of democracy, individualism, capitalism, and civilization throughout the North American continent." This rhetoric was especially important in the assimilation of Indian students because the "triumph of the nation could only be accomplished through the concomitant removal, acculturation, or elimination of nonwhite peoples."⁵⁹ Such rhetoric is evident in the GIS girls' writing. For example, Mabel Davis wrote and read from an essay about the origins and production of cotton before demonstrating her ability to make an apron. The initial paragraphs of the essay are similar to a research essay, providing a historical context for her topic on the origins of cotton: "We are told that cotton was unknown in the most ancient times and not until about 450 years before Christ. It was for the first time mentioned by Herodotus the ancient historian. This is the first record of the use of cotton, but undoubtedly it was used many years before he wrote."

Davis then invites readers (and listeners) to imagine those involved in the production of cotton:

Let us take an imaginary trip down to South Carolina, and visit one of these beautiful fields. . . . we discover that nearly all the work on the plantation is hand labor and is performed by the negroes. We notice them with bags tied about their necks or waists in which they put the cotton, and then empty it into a large basket, when filled they place the basket on their heads and carry it to the place where it is ginned.⁶⁰

One can read Davis's essay in terms of support of manifest destiny, in which the agricultural production of cotton is a sign of progress and civilization for the United States at large. Ironically, she focuses on another marginalized group, African Americans, instead of American Indians as laborers in this national project. Davis's writing then shifts into a performative mode whereby she demonstrates her sewing abilities: "there are many varieties [sic] of cloth made from cotton, we can only notice one, and here is a piece of the finished material which I will use to demonstrate in cutting of an apron." Mamie Stewart's essay, "From Field to Kitchen,"⁵ follows a similar rhetorical model in describing the origins of wheat prior to her demonstration of how to make dropcakes. Like Davis, Stewart's essay emphasizes the "civilizing" force of European-style agriculture, "When the inhabitants of a country sow wheat we know that civilization is there, for it makes the people stay and build their homes."⁶¹ She then tells the story of a young girl who compares the ocean to the "beautiful sight" of "the waving ocean of grain at home." Both essays contextualize the girls' domestic labor in terms of the civilizing importance of manifest destiny in their own lives and the country at large.

But not all GIS girls' writing can be read as simply the internalization of dominant ideologies. The questioning of ideologies of domesticity and manifest destiny can be read in Rosalie Sherman's class essay summarizing the class of 1907's experiences. Sherman begins with the traditional tropes regarding the march of progress represented by the country at large and then represents her own experiences (and those of the other five girls graduating) as participating in this civilizing project:

We have traced the history of the English people from their earliest barbarous days to the present, where we find them a mighty nation, having all that civilization can give. Taking the subject of our manual training, I think we have accomplished enough to work our way through life. We girls can all make our own dresses and cook a nice meal, and also have learned to take care of our homes. We would be glad to have you come and make us a visit some day in our own little houses, and then you can see for yourselves what we have accomplished in school.⁶²

But Sherman's essay complicates this reading by suggesting that she and other girls have not acquired all that they need from the GIS. She notes, "We don't say that we have learned all that there is to, learn, because we know none of us have gotten to the point where we can say we know it all. We do not think that because we have gotten over the little obstacles

that have come in our way, we can now go on smoothly. No, there are larger obstacles to overcome and conquer yet.” One struggle that Sherman describes is the difficulty of retaining students for graduation, foregrounding the high failure rate of federal Indian boarding schools to educate their pupils: “As a class we have struggled to keep together. A year ago there were eleven of us but as you all can see some have dropped out, and now there are only six of us that have worked our way through so far.”⁶³ Even among those six, Sherman writes, “Three of us feel that we have not accomplished all there is in store for us and so have decided to attend school again.”⁶⁴ So although Sherman’s essay seems to affirm the model espoused by Stiya—that visits to their own homes would reflect their school accomplishments—one can also read it in terms of critique about the failure of the GIS to prepare her as well as it might have.

Extracurricular Writing

A final site for analyzing GIS girls’ literacy is in the myriad forms of public writing—what Anne Ruggles Gere describes as the “extracurriculum”—in which they engaged.⁶⁵ As Schultz suggests, the extracurriculum of students’ literacy practices includes “letters, memoirs, and diaries; and . . . the border space between the classroom and home, [where] they wrote for their school newspaper or literary journal.”⁶⁶ Although Schultz views these forms of writing as generally “self-sponsored,” in the case of the GIS girls, this writing was often directed by GIS teachers or written in response to school policies. For instance, GIS girls used writing to promote public relations about the school and to request changes in school policies. Public relations were critical in persuading government officials and school patrons to donate money and resources to the school. Consequently, GIS girls were often asked to write about their school experiences to community residents. For instance, the senior high school girls wrote a set of essays on topics such as “Academic Courses,” “Social Activities,” “Summer Vacation,” and “Girls’ Physical Education” in response to a request from Mrs. Linda Mumford in Beatrice, Nebraska. GIS girls also were asked to write to girls’ clubs throughout the country via pen pal exchanges. One group with whom GIS girls corresponded was the King’s Daughters in Boston. Although the letters that Genoa girls sent to their pen pals were not preserved, the letters that they received from the Boston girls were frequently published in the *Pipe of Peace*, along with exhortations for Genoa girls to write more frequently.⁶⁷

GIS girls' extracurricular writing also consisted of letters and requests to school administrators. The school archives bulge with letters to school personnel written by GIS students. One frequent form of communication was the request to visit home. Because school funding was tied to the number of pupils enrolled, school administrators usually refused to allow students short visits home for fear that they would not return. When students' requests were denied, some wrote directly to the Indian commissioner for a second opinion. Iva Valliere wrote such a request for permission to go home for a week:

Would you please let me go home on a visit as I have been gone for a year and want to go home for a while. I want to stay a week at home and then come back to school. All the rest of the girls got to go home and I didn't. Mr. Chandler, my agent said if you were willing for me to go home a week it was all right with him. I have been good and I have always minded the rules.⁶⁸

In keeping with the *in loco parentis* role that GIS educators assumed for their pupils, Valliere's letter illustrates her use of literacy to gain agency. It is interesting that her rhetoric mirrors that of a typical teenager attempting to gain privileges—negotiating for rights on the premise that “All the rest of the girls” had them, reminding the reader that she has always played by the rules of the GIS, and referring to her reservation agent, Mr. Chandler, in an attempt to bolster her claim with another administrator's approval. The superintendent's reply to the commissioner—which was never sent to Valliere herself—shows his belief that the mother sought Valliere's inheritance from her dead father and that her request to return for a week “is simply a ruse to get home. She would not return.”⁶⁹ Clearly Valliere could never have persuaded the superintendent about the validity of her request given the assumptions undergirding his decision, but her letter does show that GIS girls used literacy in ways that sought to improve their own lives.

Other GIS girls used writing to lodge complaints about their treatment. In 1909, several girls wrote Commissioner R. G. Valentine asking for the removal of their house matron.⁷⁰ Although the girls' original letter no longer exists, apparently their rhetoric was successful because the commissioner wrote to the superintendent:

From the tone of the letter, I judge that these girls are sincere in their complaints, and did not write in a malicious or defiant spirit, and it seems to me that a kind-hearted, tactful employee with a knowledge of where the trouble lies should be able to win them over in a very short

time. Much discontent and home-sickness can often be overcome by giving thoughtful consideration to such appeals as this.⁷¹

In addition to these forms of writing, GIS girls also participated the production of the *Indian News*, a monthly newspaper that was distributed not only to students and their families but also to subscribers nationwide, including school alumni, other government boarding school employees, and community patrons. Although the content of this newspaper was tightly regulated by school administrators it did offer GIS girls opportunities to represent their classroom compositions and their extracurricular work, such as speeches written for debate contests. In addition, the *Indian News* published letters from school alumni, thus providing a site for exchanging information about former students and for maintaining connections to Indian communities beyond the school's boundaries. Thus, although GIS girls' educational experiences are often read in primarily assimilationist terms, they did use reading and writing to resist these constraints, both inside and outside the classroom.

Conclusion

In 1934 the Genoa Indian School was closed after a change in federal policy that aimed to educate Indian children more economically and efficiently in public and reservation schools. Most students returned to day schools on their reservations or entered public schools in their home communities. Although the GIS girls' literacies were shaped by the school's particular and local context, the artifacts they left behind also reflect more generalizable patterns regarding girls' literacy experiences in the Progressive Era. Although it is difficult to know the extent to which GIS girls were resisting school ideologies based on the literacy artifacts they left behind, their texts offer insights into how their reading and writing participated in, contributed to, and remade their experiences of being female and American Indian within a federal government boarding school. And although GIS girls faced unique constraints with respect to how the domestic science curriculum was conceptualized or technologies of literacy were used to represent their identities, they faced similar pressures as mainstream girls, particularly in terms of using their reading and writing to gain access in increasingly public contexts. As Catherine Hobbs suggests, literacy for women of the nineteenth century (and I would argue twentieth as well) was both a social disciplining and liberating phenomenon, creating women who were "empowered as subjects, sub-

jects who could not only resist restrictive socialization, but who could imagine alternatives and broader spheres of action.”⁷² As the GIS girls’ literacy artifacts suggest, girls in the Progressive Era used reading and writing to construct and assert their identities in response to the varied pressures they faced in a rapidly changing society.

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