

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

Boarding School Voices: Carlisle Indian Students Speak. By Arnold Krupat.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0gd051h4>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 46(2)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Whitt, Sarah

**Publication Date**

2023-07-14

**DOI**

10.17953/aicrj.46.2.reviews.whitt

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

**Boarding School Voices: Carlisle Indian Students Speak.** By Arnold Krupat. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021. 402 pages. \$80.00 hardcover; \$80.00 ebook.

In *Boarding School Voices: Carlisle Indian Students Speak*, Arnold Krupat presents writing by those who attended the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania (1879–1918), the United States’ first federally funded off-reservation boarding institution intended solely for American Indian people. Drawing from Dickinson College’s Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center and its voluminous holdings, Krupat’s latest work follows on the heels of his recent two-volume study *Changed Forever* (2018; 2020), which comprises boarding school narratives from disparate institutions and regions. Rather than showcasing the accomplishments of such well-known figures as Luther Standing Bear or Zitkala-Ša, however, Krupat’s focus in *Boarding School Voices* is on those who have “long been anonymous” (xxviii)—everyday Native people, often young women and men in their twenties, whose voices ring out across time and space to recall their experiences at Carlisle and afterward. Questionnaires sent by Carlisle founder Richard Henry Pratt and subsequent superintendents to “returned” students of varying ages and tribal affiliations form the bulk of the reprinted material, and provide insight into home conditions, occupations, health, family, and other dimensions of Native peoples’ day-to-day lives at the turn of the twentieth century. The standardized format of the questionnaires lends a degree of consistency to the book’s four chapters, and Krupat interjects his own voice only sparingly to offer historical contextualization, clarifying remarks, and, occasionally, literary analysis.

Despite the streamlined nature of the student questionnaire responses, however, the text is organized regionally rather than thematically, which has a somewhat disorienting effect. In justifying this decision, Krupat suggests that a thematic arrangement would have created more problems than it solved, since most of the writing featured in this anthology was sent from, and indeed is about, the places that former Carlisle attendees called “home.” While this arrangement might excite readers interested in issues relating to allotment, land ownership, or the specificities of place, the regional organization sometimes obfuscates commonalities of experience across tribal-national boundaries, and the strong relationships Native people forged at Carlisle and maintained with those outside of their own communities in this era. At the very least, it is an interesting organizational decision; as Krupat asserts, one of the book’s main scholarly contributions is to challenge restrictive assimilationist/traditionalist tropes and “reductive binaries” that threaten more nuanced readings of boarding school writing (xxvi). Notably, however, Krupat uses labels such as “traditionalist” and “progressive”—as well as the Gramscian “organic intellectual”—to characterize Native respondents and the writing they sent back to Carlisle.

Chapters one and three focus on the returned student questionnaires, while chapters two and four highlight the experiences of two Native men, Mike Burns (Yavapai) and Siceni Nori (Laguna Pueblo), respectively, through Carlisle correspondence and other source material, including autobiography. The staggered emphasis on collective and individual experiences lends a pleasant rhythm to the book, but for those interested in the gendered dimensions of Carlisle labor, punishment, or “schooling,” one wishes that the author would have dedicated a chapter to Native women. Nonetheless, Native girls and women are represented strongly among questionnaire respondents, and their writing highlights in stark detail the struggles, triumphs, and complexities of their lives in the so-called assimilation era.

The book begins with a chapter titled “I talk white nicely,” a lengthy survey (108 pages) of largely unedited student responses organized by tribal affiliation or agency. In 1890, Pratt sent a questionnaire to “returned” students—those who had left Carlisle for myriad reasons, including sickness, expiration of term, and expulsion—and, of the 103 responses that Pratt received, Krupat has included fifty-six in chapter one. Many respondents write at length about their occupations—farming, blacksmithing, and carpentry, most often—or express dissatisfaction with the lack of opportunities to obtain meaningful work or adequate housing, a common theme throughout the book. Leonard Tyler (Cheyenne), for instance, wrote that despite seeking additional schooling at the Haskell Institute in Lawrence, Kansas, there were few opportunities for work at the Darlington Agency: “That is why so many of the return students gone back in Indian ways” (36). These and similarly complex concerns about maintaining, adapting, or rejecting “the Indian ways,” as well as fighting to obtain land title and US citizenship, pervade this fascinating first chapter.

The following chapters proceed in similar fashion, with Native voices featured more prominently than Krupat’s commentary or analysis. The book’s final chapter, “One of the most trusted members of the faculty,” and perhaps the most interesting, centers on Siceni Nori (Laguna Pueblo), a former Carlisle enrollee who was later employed as Carlisle’s chief clerk, and who became embroiled with Moses Friedman’s embezzlement scheme during his superintendency (1908–14). Friedman, of course, was acquitted of the charges brought against him; Nori, however, was sentenced to several months in prison. Krupat’s focus on Nori’s lesser-known perspective is an effective departure from standard narrations of this scandal, which often center Friedman and “Pop” Warner in institutional histories of this period.

*Boarding School Voices* joins a growing body of scholarship that aims to nuance conversations about boarding school experiences by centering Native voices and perspectives. Within this milieu, Krupat’s focus on student questionnaires offers a nice complement to another recent text, Jacqueline Emery’s *Recovering Native American Writing in the Boarding School Press* (2017), which analyzes distinct genres of student writing—editorials, short stories, and essays, to name a few—as profound literary texts. Similarly, in *Writing Their Bodies: Restoring Rhetorical Relations at the Carlisle Indian School* (2021), Sarah Klotz critiques the assimilationist imperative that undergirded Carlisle’s early curriculum through the lens of student correspondence. While *Writing Their Bodies* is narrower in scope, focusing on Native students’ experiences

from 1875 to 1885 and the era of overt military violence that preceded and informed Pratt's "educational experiment," Krupat's latest work is more general in the breadth of topics covered and less specific in its analytical framework, though not quite as expansive as either volume of *Changed Forever*. Students of the boarding school era in particular may find *Boarding School Voices* to be a wonderful research companion, with its straightforward contribution, powerful photographs, and accessible writing—replete with a helpful appendix of those referenced by name in the book.

*Sarah Whitt*

University of California, Irvine