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Book Review: Learning to Write "Indian": The Boarding-School Experience and American Indian Literature

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BOOK REVIEWS

Learning to Write "Indian": The Boarding-School Experience and American Indian Literature. By Amelia V. Katanski. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005. xiii + 274 pp. Map, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95.

In a twist on assimilation, many boarding-school students used the English language, a primary tool of colonization, to "talk back" to the system. As surely as the boarding-schools' inventors understood that language is the vessel of culture, none of them gave much thought to the ways in which Native Americans would use English to critique the schools into which many of them had been unwillingly enrolled.

Their writings, examined by Amelia Katanski, indicate that the boarding-school students were unwilling to surrender as victims. *Learning English* describes how Native American students in boarding schools often forged new identities, taking a degree of authorial control even as they were victimized by an intense campaign to deny them indigenous language, culture, and identity.

This book will surely evoke comparisons with Ruth Spack's *America's Second Tongue: American Indian Education and the Ownership of English, 1860-1900* (2002). Spack's book is a formidable presence, having won the Modern Language Association's twenty-third Mina P. Shaughnessy prize for an outstanding research publication on the teaching of English, awarded in November, 2003.

Katanski is aware of this probability and goes to some rather exacting pains to make a

case that her book is different. Katanski mentions Spack's work twice in her introduction, saying that Spack "engages the topic through ESL [English as a Second Language] theory and practice," and "is particularly attentive to what the narratives reveal about English language education." Katanski writes that Spack (and others) have "a very great influence . . . [but] a consideration is still very much needed of the artistry of the texts coming out of the boarding-school experience."

Katanski's work is not a clone of Spack's, however. She does an outstanding job of describing conflicts between Native writers and the system's creators. For example: Zitkala Ša, who was both a student in and a teacher at boarding schools, wrote critically enough in the *Atlantic Monthly* during 1900 and *Harper's* in 1901 to embarrass William Henry Pratt, who attacked her writings in retaliation. She took up English, writes Katanski, to "wage a linguistic rebellion against the boarding-school ideology."

Learning English's jacket copy asserts that the book is "unique in that it looks at writings about the schools as literature, rather than as mere historical evidence." The unfortunate phrase "mere history" will not endear the work to historians. Any publicist concerned with breadth of audience could have done better.

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