



Zitkala SA's American Indian Stories, a Native American Women Voice

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الملخص :

كتابة السيرة الذاتية هي الأداة التي يمكن للكتاب المهمشين فيها أن يكشفوا عن ثغرات في تجاربهم التي تجاهلتها الثقافة المهيمنة. النص الذي تعالجه هذه المقالة (القصص الهندية الأمريكية) للكاتبة زيتكالا سا. تتناول السيرة الذاتية للأمريكيين الأصليين مسا ئل مثل الهوية وإعادة كتابة التاريخ. لكن من المهم أن نلاحظ أنها تختلف اختلافا كبيرا عن النموذج الأدبي الأوروبي الأمريكي، وبدلا من ذلك تقدم تعريفا جديدا لهذا النوع الأدبي. ، زيتكالا سا تعتبر أمريكية أصلية كتبت على هوامش الثقافة الأمريكية المهيمنة تعرض في سيرتها الذاتية استراتيجيات ثورية تهدف ليس فقط بقصص حياتها بل قصص مجتمعها أيضا. إن اختيارها للتركيز على مجتمعها من خلال خلط الألوان الأدبية والأصوات في رواياتها يكشف عن اعتقادها بأن الذات لا يمكن التعبير عنها بمعزل. اتخذت لغة المستعمر كأداة و سلاح، وجعلتها خاصة من خلال الجمع بينها و بين ثقافتها الأصلية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العرقيات الأدبية – الأجناس الأدبية- الأمريكيون الأصليون- السيرة الذاتية.

Abstract:

Autobiography has been recognized as the tool with which marginalized writers can reveal gaps of experience ignored by hegemonic culture. The text under study is Zitkala Sa's *American Indian Stories*. The Native American autobiography addresses the issues as identity and history re-writing. However, it is important to note that it differs significantly from the Euro-American model and instead offers a new definition of the genre. As Native American women who wrote from the margins of American dominant culture, Zitkala Sa's autobiography exhibits subversive strategies designed to tell not only her life story but that of her community as well. Her choice to focus on her community by mixing genres and voices in her narratives reveal her belief that self cannot be expressed in isolation. Zitkala Sa has taken the colonizer's tool—writing—and made it her own by combining it with her Native culture.

Key Words: Ethnic Literature, Native American Autobiography, Zitkala Sa,

Introduction

Autobiography is a literary genre that particularly predominates American literature.

For a long time, the question of how to define it has caused many debates in the

academia, notably on questions about the form, content, selfhood and the distinction between fiction and fact. However, despite the efforts of critics to establish a theory of autobiography, they could not eventually agree on one single definition. Critic James



Olney, for example, concluded: “Definition of autobiography as a literary genre seems to me virtually impossible” (Olney, 1972, p. 38).

In ethnic literatures, autobiography has become the means to assert one’s identity and history. This article sets out to analyze Zitkala Sa’s *American Indian Stories*, an interesting and unusual autobiographical text. This writer defies traditional meaning of autobiography by subverting both its form and content. Her purpose is to further her own political goal: the assertion of her Native American identity and the survival of her tribe.

Many critics asserted that indigenous people were too primitive to have a sense of the self and to be able to represent it in autobiography. Others believed that autobiography is originally a Western genre and therefore Native Americans were not interested in using it as they preferred to transmit their stories orally (Sweet Wong, 1992, p. 126). However, critics like Gretchen Bataille, Kathleen Mullen Sands, David Brumble III and Arnold Krupat, even they recognize that autobiography as a Western form; they still argue that Native American writers use the genre by modifying it and introducing cultural dimensions like tribal history, myth and oral tradition. Kathleen M. Sands calls them “acts of narrative resistance” (Sands, 2001, p.136). They are texts of resistance because even though Native Americans used the autobiographical genre, a Euro-American genre in itself, they were subverting it by incorporating Native American stories, songs, rituals and beliefs that were part of their oral traditions.

In his seminal essay, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography” (1956), Georges Gusdorf’s concept of autobiography is focused on the model of the self that is essentially western and individualistic, arguing that autobiography does not exist in cultures where “the individual does not oppose himself to all others; [in cultures where] he does not feel himself to exist outside of others, and still less against others” (Olney, 1980, pp. 29-30). He also believes that a culture which did not encourage individualistic image of self would not provide proper soil to autobiography. He asserts that in ancient civilization of the East the genre could not flourish at all because of the rejection of ego by those civilizations on metaphysical plane and whatever scattered autobiographical work was done in those countries was dismissed by him as nothing but “cultural transplant” (29) .

The cultural precondition for autobiography, Gusdorf argues, is “a conscious awareness of the singularity of each individual life,” a self-consciousness that is “the late product of a specific civilization”, by which he means the Western societies (29). This individualistic model of the self is not applicable to minorities in general and to Native Americans in particular because Native Americans did not see themselves individually.

According to Olney, autobiographies were expected to hold what he characterizes as the “naive three fold assumptions about the writing of autobiography”: “first that the bios of autobiography could only signify ‘the course of a lifetime’...second, that the autobiographer could narrate his life in a manner at least



approaching an objective historical account...and third, that there was nothing problematic about the *autos*, no agonizing questions of identity, self-definition, self-existence, or self-deception” (Olney, 1980,p. 20).

When we examine early Native American Autobiographies, we can see that they went back and forth in time and dealt heavily with other people’s or groups’ lives. Secondly, Native American autobiographies were not as concerned with facts. Early Native autobiographers, however, felt pressured to give as many details (dates, names, places) as possible, but the oral tradition from which they came was not one that focused heavily upon such details. Lastly, like all minorities, native autobiographers faced many questions of identity because not only they were caught between two cultures, but like all autobiographers, they struggled to express their identities through writing.

Contemporary native autobiographies, on the other hand, often slip outside the margins instead of stretching those margins from within, and most of the time, they are not even considered as autobiographies. Indeed, critics could not decide whether to expand the Euro-American’s definition of autobiography or to rename such ‘unusual’ autobiographies. Those who want non-traditional autobiographies to be labeled as autobiographies know that another term will not carry the weight of “autobiography.” Bataille and Sands argue, “Creative imagination, invention in adaptation and flexibility in form have been accepted as essential characteristics of poetry and fiction, but the respectability and existence of these qualities are controversial in autobiography. They lead to descriptions like ‘personal memoir,’ ‘reminiscence,’ or ‘social narrative’” (Bataille and Sands, 1984, p.15). In other words, they lead to labels that are viewed by many to be more simplistic than the genre of autobiography.

The Native American Autobiography Development

Critics have divided the development of Native American life writing in different ways. The most coherent is presented by Swann and Krupat in the introduction to their collection of autobiographical essays by Native American Writers. According to them, the first Native American autobiographies were written by Christianized Indians. The earliest was written by Samson Occom (Mohegan) in 1768 where the author revises his childhood, conversion to Christianity and his work among Indians. In 1791, Hendrick Aupaumut, known as Mahican, included much autobiographical material in his *Journal of a Mission to the Western Tribes of Indians* (1827). However, neither of these early texts was published in its author’s lifetime (Swann & Krupat, 1987, p. ix).

Among Christian Indians, the first to produce a full-length autobiographical text, and the one that was widely noticed, was the Reverend William Apes, a Pequot, a Methodist and an activist. Apess’ *a Son of the Forest: the Experience of William Apes, a Native of the Forest, Written by Himself* was published in 1829. Apess dedicated his autobiography to highlight the inconsistencies of the Christian discourse and practice.

The second period of autobiographical writing was spurred with the increased American awareness of the Indians’ wars. Called collaborative autobiographies, these



life writings were carried out mostly by editors, who either had a genuine interest in the Indians' stories or were simply gaining profits. The earliest example is *The Life of Black Hawk* (1833), a story narrated by Black Hawk, translated by a mixed-blood interpreter Antoine Le Claire and edited by J.B. Patterson, a young Illinois newspaper editor. Black Hawk was a Sauk chief who knew little of English and who saw in the enterprise an opportunity, in his words, “to make known to the world, the injuries his people have received from the whites-- [and] the causes which brought on the war on the part of his nation” (Swann and Krupat, x).

The third period emerged again from the dynamics of the general context of the relationship between the Indian tribes and the federal policy towards the “Indian problem”. At the end of the century, with most of the territory already occupied by Euro-American immigrants, Indians were more and more confined to reservations, their numbers dropping at astounding speed due to wars and diseases. Fearing the disappearance of whole cultures, a new generation of ethnologists set out to record myths, customs, life stories so as “to preserve, in the museum or library, traces of lives and cultures that could not have a continuing existence anywhere else” (Swann and Krupat, pp. x-xi).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a new generation of Indians was already returning from boarding schools, literate and respectful of their own traditions and were able to establish a distinct Indian voice, even if still cloaked in Western literary conventions. In their autobiographies, these writers sought to preserve the traditional values of their tribes, while at the same time they accepted some positive elements from Euro-American civilization such as education. The best known life writers of this period were Luther Standing Bear (Lakota), Charles Alexander Eastman (Santee Sioux), Mourning Dove (Okanagan), Gertrude Simmons Bonnin (Zitkala- Sa ; Dakota).

The late twentieth-century generation of “Native American Renaissance writers” introduced an innovative and experimental kind of Native American autobiography. Among the most prominent are the writers are N. Scott Momaday's autobiographical works *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969) and *The Names: A Memoir* (1976), Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller*, (1981), Gerald Vizenor's *Interior Landscapes: Autobiographical Myths and Metaphors* (1990), Diane Glancy's *Claiming Breath* (1992) and Linda Hogan's *The Woman Who Watches Over the World: A Native Memoir* (2001) to name just a few.

In short, many Native Americans have been producing remarkable autobiographies, whose aim is to articulate the diversity and creativity of Native Americans by mixing the individual stories with cultural myths and histories, recreating their Indian identity, and emphasizing the continuity of their oral traditions.

Native American Women Autobiographers

Speaking about Native American women's autobiography, prominent critics of Native American women's autobiography, Bataille and Sands, argue that it may “best



be addressed and analyzed in terms of the process of its creation rather than an established genre” (Bataille & Sands, 1984, p. 3).

Paula Gunn Allen foregrounds the importance of autobiographical writing. She notes: “Native women must contend with yet a third fact, one more difficult to notice or tell about: if in the public and private mind of America Indians as a group are invisible in America, then Indian women are non-existent” (9). Indeed, Early Native women’s autobiographies were all written by women in order to help improve the conditions of Native Americans in general and/or their particular tribes. As part of a culture that was seen as savage, Native American women sought to show their culture best side, while reminding and telling of the reprehensible treatment they had and were still receiving.

Because of the bad conditions facing the Native Americans, these autobiographies also had to be protest documents that would make non-natives take steps to change specific laws concerning Natives. The results were autobiographies that work for Native Americans being written for white audiences.

Early Native autobiographies struggled to add the autobiographical genre to their other modes of expression. Their Euro-American education varied, but all Native American women autobiographers were joining a tradition that did not fit with their belief systems. Not surprisingly, their early works, including Zitkala sa’s *American Indian Stories* do incorporate many elements of oral storytelling traditions.

Zitkala Sa’s *American Indian Stories*

Gertrude Simmons, later renamed herself Zitkala-Ša (Red Bird in the Lakota dialect), was an extraordinary multi-talented Native American woman. Besides being the first Native American woman who wrote her autobiography without the intervention of white people. She was an excellent musician, an exceptional teacher and a charismatic political activist.

Zitkala Sa was born in 1876 a Sioux of the Yankton Band on her mother’s side, and a white on her father’s side. Her father, Felker, left the family before she was born, and she lived with her Mother and an older brother on the Yankton reservation.

Ellen Simmons raised and instructed her daughter in the Dakota way, expecting her to transmit to her children the same Dakota tradition as Ella Deloria would later articulate in *Waterlily*:

The ultimate aim of Dakota life, stripped of accessories, was quite simple: One must obey kinship rules; one must be a good relative. No Dakota who has participated in that life will dispute that. In the last analysis every other consideration was secondary—property, personal ambition, glory, good times, life itself. (x)

Missionaries visited her family, convincing Gertrude’s mother, Ellen Tate Iyohinwin, to send her daughter away to school. However, the first essay “Impressions of an Indian Childhood”, might suggest the young Zitkala Sa made her own decision to



attend the boarding school: a “wonderland” where the Indian children “could pick all the red apples” they could eat. Zitkala Sa employs allusions to the story of the fall from grace and exile from the Garden of Eden. In fact, her friend Judewin was tempted by the big red apples and convinced the young Zitkala Sa into following her lead: “Judewin had told me of the great tree where grew red, red apples; and how we could reach out our hands and pick all the red apples we could eat” (46).

In the *Magazine of Western History* (1990), Michael Coleman explains the motivations of young Indian children to go to boarding schools during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He notes: “Ignorant of English and with emotions and motivations ranging from obedience to fear to curiosity to desires for white goods and an easier life, they set off into an almost totally alien world” (*A Powerful Literary Voice*, 4).

Native Americans first received their education at the hands of British missionaries in 1617, following King James’s advocacy of schooling Indians to promote “civilization” and Christianity. After the American Revolution, missionary societies were organized with the intent of evangelizing native peoples among them the American Society for Propagating the Gospel among the Indians and Others in North America (1787) and the New York Missionary Society (1796) (*If We Get the Girls*, 221-222). Thus, schooling became the principal means of persuading young Native Americans to seek conversion and to reject tradition. Colonel Pratt advocated for the establishment of off-reservation industrial boarding schools. In fact, he developed his philosophy through an experiment he led on a group of Kiowa, Comanche, and Cheyenne prisoners at Ft. Marion, Florida. He cut the prisoners’ hair, dressed them in army uniform, drilled them like soldiers and began to teach them to speak and read English.

Pratt founded Carlisle in 1879. It was the first and most successful Indian educational institution, and it immediately became the prototype for all other off-reservation schools in the country (Hoxie 190). Pratt argued that taking Indian children from their homes on the reservation and transplant them to Carlisle was the only way for them to become civilized individuals. In his autobiography *Battlefield and Classroom*, he reveals the philosophy behind this system of education :

I suppose the end to be gained, however far away it may be, is complete civilization of the Indian and his absorption into our national life, with all the rights and privileges guaranteed to every other individual, the Indian to lose his identity as such, to give up his tribal relations and to be made to feel that he is an American citizen. If I am correct in this supposition, then the sooner all tribal relations are broken up; the sooner the Indian loses all his Indian ways, even his language, the better it will be for him and for the government and the greater will be the economy to both. . . . To accomplish that, his removal and personal isolation is necessary (qtd in *Learning to Write Indian* 4).



Pratt's philosophy was obviously shaped by social evolutionism that was marked by a hierarchical relationship among races. Pratt also believed that education would completely transform students from tribal savagery to Western civilization, that they would lose their Indianness as they gained knowledge from the Western culture.

To meet these objectives, Pratt established two newspapers : *the Indian Helper* and *the Red Man* (Indian Helper, 1 March 1895). Through these newspapers, he created his own system of propaganda which worked to convince readers of both the necessity and effectiveness of the off-reservation schools. The newspapers were addressed to white readers and Indian students, teachers, and alumni. Pratt even sent these papers to every member of Congress, all the Indian agencies and military posts, and the most prominent American newspaper to ensure patronage (Enoch 122).

From 1884 to 1888 Zitkala Sa studied at White's Manual Labor Institute in Wabash, Indiana. Then, from 1889 to 1890 she studied at the Santee Normal Training School founded by Alfred Riggs (in 1870), by this time it had become a center of education for all Sioux After only a few brief visits home, she went away again to study at Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana from 1895-1897. Her Sioux family and tribe viewed her choice of an education in the white man's world as tantamount to betrayal.

Not long after graduation, Bonnin began teaching at the Carlisle Industrial Training School in Pennsylvania, (1897-1899). However, she found herself at odds with the school's founder and headmaster, Richard Pratt, and by 1900 she relocated to Boston, where she studied violin at the New England Conservatory.

Zitkala Sa was born in a transitional era in white-Indian relations of the 19th and 20th centuries, and witnessed major events. Some of these events form the setting for her stories.

In fact, the date of her birth coincides with the Battle of Little Big Horn, and with the beginning of the violation by the U.S government of the 1868 Treaty of Laramie. The treaty established the "Great Sioux Reservation" which included the sacred Black Hills.

In 1874, gold was found in the Black Hills and the government offered to buy the land, but the Sioux tribes refused the offer. By 1876, aggressive assault by the U.S Army against the Sioux reached its climax and by 1877, all Sioux except for some Hunkpapas led by Sitting Bull and Oglalas led by Crazy Horse had surrendered.

That same year, Congress passed laws that reduced the Great Sioux Reservation from 134 million acres to 15 million. In 1887, the government adopted a massive assimilation policy: the Dawes Act divided tribal lands into allotments for individual Indians and reservation schools were replaced by government-run Indian boarding schools that broke apart families and installed curriculums and disciplinary structures intended to eradicate Indian traditional culture. Moreover, the massacre at Wounded Knee and the murder of Sitting Bull occurred while young Gertrude was at home on a school break. At this time, the Ghost Dance religion was very popular among the Sioux. The Ghost Dance was based on the idea that through dance and rituals, the massacred Indians would come back to life again and white aggressors would disappear, bringing



peace and prosperity to Indian tribes in the region. Fearful that the Ghost Dance would mobilize the Sioux politically, the U.S Army killed at least 300 Sioux men, women and children and the Ghost Dance religion, in essence, died (Davidson and Norris, 2003, pp. xi-xii).

An Analytical Study of Zitkala Sa's *American Indian Stories*

American Indian Stories was published in 1921. It is a combination of personal narrative, western autobiography, essayistic explorations and storytelling. Much of this work was published separately by Zitkala-Ša for *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's Magazine* in the first years of the twentieth century. Two new pieces, "A Dream of Her Grandfather" and "The Widespread Enigma Concerning Blue-Star Woman" were added, along with the political essay, "America's Indian Problem". Parts of which were taken from an article she wrote for *Edict Magazine*, with her own added commentary.

According to Patricia Okker Zitkala-Sa satisfied the "popular fascination with the 'exotic Indian'" and points out that her essays and stories were intermediate between racist and stereotypical writings about American Indians (*Revisioning Sioux Women* 28). According to Sedgwick, in the twentieth century, the *Atlantic* "capitulated both to genteel squeamishness and to the lure of popular commercial success" in its selection of texts (28). Bliss Perry, who assumed editorship in 1899, chose not to limit "the voices and images of America" to "upper-middle class Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture and one of his earliest editorial decisions was to accept Zitkala-Sa's work (28). Even though he had a great missionary audience that might take offense at her attack on Christians, Perry encouraged Zitkala-Sa to submit more writing (28).

Because the work is called stories, not autobiography, many readers may not have distinguished between the autobiographical essays and the autobiographical fiction.

Critics all agree that the first three essays are autobiographical in nature, but disagree as to whether the work as a whole should be classified as autobiography. In 1983, Paula Gunn Allen calls the work an autobiography: "Among the very few autobiographies of Indian women during this period is that by Zitkala-Ša [Gertrude Bonnin], *American Indian Stories*. ,essays originally published between 1900 -1902, Zitkala-Ša recounts her girlhood and school experiences and retells traditional stories" (Allen Gunn, 1983, p. 302). Allen implies that the traditional stories are part of the autobiographical whole. On the other hand, in 1984, Bataille and Sands in their *American Indian Women Telling Their Lives* do not speak of the whole work as autobiography; they speak of Zitkala-Ša's "youthful recollections in a series for *Atlantic Monthly*" (12).

In 1988, David Brumble includes Zitkala-Ša's work in his list of autobiographies, but doesn't discuss her work in details. Then, in *The Voice in the Margin* (1989) Arnold Krupat does not mention *American Indian Stories*.

In *Native American Women's Writing 1800-1924 , an Anthology* (2000), Karen Kilcup includes parts of *American Indian Stories*, but the introduction to the section of



Zitkala-Ša's writings makes a distinction between the autobiographical works and the stories (295). Another recent critic, P. Jane Hafen in 2001 calls the work an "anthology" and a "compilation," suggesting that it is not a unified whole (ix).

Recent critics tend to split up the work and call the pieces of *American Indian Stories* by the Euro-American names: autobiographical essays and fictional stories. Cathy Davidson and Ada Norris in the introduction of *American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings* explain, "Zitkala-Ša's *American Indian Stories* takes some basic autobiographical material, melds it with stories of other Native Americans who have been sent away to boarding school, then shapes it into a narrative" (xxix).

Zitkala-Ša's work can easily be classified with the contemporary communo-biographies of Native American writers which, as J. Browdy Hernandez explains in "*Writing for Survival: Continuity in Four Contemporary Native American Women's Autobiographies*," is "like sitting with a group of storytellers, each whom pick up the thread of a different story and bind it into a whole" (44). Readers learn about Zitkala-Ša "obliquely, through the narratives of others who 'compose' her" (44). *American Indian Stories*, mixes genres, is episodic with no overt transitions between parts. Even though the three beginning sections are placed in a linear sequence and work as a whole, they do not cover all her life or reveal what parts are true or fiction. Readers, however, can come to know Zitkala-Ša through an autobiography that has more in common with the oral tradition than any other early Native American women's autobiography.

Zitkala Sa published her autobiography under herself given Lakota name. By choosing a Lakota name and using the English language in her text, she reminds readers that she has replaced « the narrow mono-cultural Euro American lens with a more inclusive bicultural lens through which they can now view the life of an American Indian woman » (Spack, 1980, p. 28)

Even Zitkala-Ša's presentation of herself extends to the cover image of her work, a work she called the "blanket book" because the cover image upon publication was that of a Navajo blanket. According to Davidson and Norris "back to the blanket" was a colloquial saying for "students who rejected their boarding school education and returned to their reservation" (xxvii). Zitkala-Ša was not Navajo, but she picked and chose among tribal representations. In a published photograph, Zitkala- Ša does not wear Sioux dress and is criticized for her choice.

The three autobiographical essays that begin *American Indian Stories* are placed in chronological order from her life as a child, to her life in school, to finally her life as a teacher. These essays, have very little positive to say about Whites. She presents a polarized Euro-American picture: Indian vs. "paleface, civilized vs. Savage and Dakota spirituality vs. Christian theology and practice. According to Davidson and Norris: "With an anthropologist's acuity in dissecting a foreign culture, Zitkala-Ša documents the aberrations of white culture, putting readers into the position of having to judge harshly the very culture of which the reader is a part" (xxx).



In “*Impressions of an Indian Childhood*”, Zitkala Sa describes her childhood among Native Americans on the Pine Ridge reservation. She recalls when she was seven:

I was a wild child of seven. Loosely clad in a slip of brown buckskin, and light-footed with a pair of soft moccasins on my feet, I was as free as the wind that blew my hair, and no less spirited than a bounding deer. These were my mother’s pride, —my wild freedom and overflowing spirits. She taught me no fear save that of intruding myself upon others.

From this first essay, Zitkala Sa begins dismantling the linguistic structures of English by altering the Anglo meaning of the word “wild”. In this paragraph she insists that by “wild” she only means free, because she perfectly knows that for her white audience being wild could only mean being savage and lawless. She goes on by depicting her family, her tribe and everyday life in the reservation. She reveals the values of her tribe, which are, above all else, hospitality, respect, and sensitivity. In another scene, because the mother is absent, the little Zitkala Sa tries to prepare some coffee for an old man of the tribe.

She pours unheated muddy water over used coffee grounds. The old man politely sips the “coffee” (or pretends to) until the mother returns. Zitkala-Sa remembers “neither she nor the warrior . . . said anything to embarrass me. They treated my best judgment, poor as it was, with the utmost respect” (42-43). Obviously, the teachings of her mother stand in sharp contrast to the treatment the young girl will receive at the hands of whites when she later goes off to a missionary boarding school.

Unlike many Indian writers, Zitkala Sa does not seem to be interested in ethnography. In the episode of “The Dead Man’s Plum Bush,” for example, she tells us she was on her way to a feast to honor a “strong young brave who had just returned from his first battle, a warrior” (79-80). However, she does not provide any details and instead she notes: “The lasting impression of that day, as I recall it now, is what my mother told me about the dead man’s plum bush” (81).

Zitkala Sa’s decision to join the school breaks the harmony of the family. It was the first time she has ever purposely imposed her will on her mother and “refused to hearken to [her] mother’s voice” (46). When she left, she remembered :

a sense of regret settled heavily upon me. I felt suddenly weak, as if I might fall limp to the ground. I was in the hands of strangers whom my mother did not fully trust. I no longer felt free to be myself, or to voice my own feelings. The tears trickled down my cheeks, and I buried my face in the folds of my blanket. Now the first step, parting me from my mother, was taken, and all my belated tears availed nothing.” (47).



Zitkala-Sa's description of her departure for boarding school characterized the experience of thousands of young boys and girls in the nineteenth century. Most left no written record of their years in school.

Readers learn in chapter 2, "The School Days of an Indian Girl," that Zitkala Ša and the other Native children are basically abused at school for three years. She was tied down and her hair was cut off, and she was forced to work even when she was sick. The hair-cutting scene emphasizes the dehumanizing nature of the practices and the policies of the school that did not consider the individual. Zitkala Sa depicts a world where the established laws and regulations were more important than the students. Martha J. Cutter describes "School Days" as "a scathing indictment of a dominant ideology which forces acculturation at the expense of self" (*Zitkala-Sa's Autobiographical Writings*, 36).

However, after her first year "a mischievous spirit of revenge" takes hold of her; this spirit coincides with her ability to communicate in "broken English" (93). She "whooped in [her] heart" after she mashes turnips so fiercely that she breaks the jar and crushed glass mixes with the turnips, making them unable to be served at dinner (94). Later she scratches out "the wicked eyes" of the devil in a illustration in the Bible (95). English becomes her tool of revenge against Whites during her school days and in her writings, but it also changed her in such a way that she felt compelled to attend college.

From the very beginning, the young Zitkala Sa is aware that the goal of this system was not only to educate children, but that is rather designed to strip the children of their native culture and replace it with a "white" American way of life. She calls this "civilizing machine" and relates the depressing impact that the frenetic school regime had on pupils and teachers :

A loud-clamoring bell awakened us at half-past six in the cold winter mornings. . . . There were too many drowsy children and too numerous orders for the day to waste a moment in any apology to nature for giving her children such a shock in the early morning. . . . A paleface woman, with a yellow-covered roll book open on her arm and a gnawed pencil in her hand, appeared at the door. Her small, tired face was coldly lighted with a pair of large gray eyes. She stood still in a halo of authority. . . . It was next to impossible to leave the iron routine after the civilizing machine had once begun its day's buzzing. (190).

Zitkala Sa depicts education at the school as overwhelming and yet she finds the willpower to resist and to refuse the new identity the school wishes to impose upon her. The first struggle the young Zitkala Sa has to contend was language. She recalls that when she left the reservation she knew only one language :her mother's native tongue, but she quickly understands that learning English was necessary in this foreign world. Her desire to learn English was rather out of fear of the repercussions of not learning it. This fear is illustrated in « the Snow Episode » where three Dakotas were caught falling lengthwise to see their own impressions in the snow. Meaning to help them,



Judewin teaches them to say, "No," when questioned. So, a child is physically punished for saying "no" to a woman in authority when she should have said "yes."

Actually, the girl does not know English and does not understand the woman's questions. When she realizes her mistake, she hides her weapon, the "half-worn slipper," and strokes the child's "black shorn head."

Zitkala-Sa recalls that "misunderstandings as ridiculous as this one . . . frequently took place, bringing unjustifiable frights and punishments into our little lives" (188).

A Yankton Reservation Agent, J. F. Kinney, summarized the US Government's manipulative scheme to eliminate the tribal and cultural identities of Indian peoples:

Education cuts the cord which binds them to a pagan life, places the Bible in their hands, and substitutes the true God for the false one, Christianity in place of idolatry, civilization in place of superstition, morality in place of vice, cleanliness in place of filth, industry in place of idleness, self-respect in place of servility, and, in a word, humanity in place of abject degradation. (1887 Annual Report 143) (qtd in *Powerful Literary Voice*, 16)

Indeed, the two main goals of Indian education, according to this agent are to Christianize and Americanize the children. This also indicates his opinion of the Indian children before they are "civilized": they are foolish, sinful, filthy, lazy, servile, and less than human.

Zitkala Sa's autobiography conforms to the expectations of a "conversion narrative" as it relates her life from a traditional Sioux childhood in the West to her conversion to Christianity, then to her American education and concludes with her residence in an eastern city. However, she disrupts readers' expectations by constantly denouncing the hypocrisy of the American institutions. Indeed, while acknowledging her acquisition of literacy and other markers of civilization, the autobiography also shows Zitkala-Sa's ambivalence toward boarding schools educational approach. In a correspondence with Carlos Montezuma, for example, she recognizes that vocational training at Carlisle was intended to relegate students to the status of slaves; she notes:

I do not wish to see them drudges for that is worse than their own condition. ... I will never speak of the whites as elevating the Indian! . . . Until Colonel Pratt actively interests himself in giving college education to Indians I cannot say his making them slaves to the plow is nothing other than drudgery! And drudgery is hell- not civilization! (Bernardin, 1997, p. 219). It is also interesting to note that the chapter, titled "Retrospection" is not actually an account of her achievement, but rather a record of all the things she lost along the way :

For the white man's papers I had given up my faith in the Great Spirit.
For these same papers I had forgotten the healing in trees and brooks. On account of my mother's simple view of life, and my lack of any, I gave her up, also. I made no friends among the race of people I loathed. Like a



slender tree, I had been uprooted from my mother, nature, and God. I was shorn of my branches, which had waved in sympathy and love for home and friends (112).

“The Great Spirit,” chapter 4, was originally titled “Why I am a Pagan.” Within months of the original *Atlantic Monthly* 1902 publication, Zitkala-Ša and her husband Raymond Bonnin became Catholics (Hafen, 2005, p. 131). Later she practiced Mormonism. Hafen explains:

Native religions were not generally exclusive. Indeed, they welcomed additional sources of spiritual power. Instead of standing in opposition to her “paganism,” Christian doctrines simply became additional layers of beliefs that her Sioux worldview enabled her to mediate...; her spiritual world had room for all. She exhibited this inclusiveness when she retitled “Why I am a Pagan,” [to “The Great Spirit”] mitigating the diametrical opposition of ‘paganism’ and Christianity implicit in the original title (p.132).

Zitkala-Ša chose to include “The Great Spirit” in her autobiography because in it she once and for all rejects organized religion. In this provocative article, she favorably compares the traditional spirituality of her people, which she refers to as “paganism” to Christianity. “I prefer to their dogma my excursions into the natural gardens where the voice of the Great Spirit is heard in the twittering of the birds, the rippling of mighty waters, and the sweet breathing of flowers” (117). While Zitkala Sa was rather harshly criticized by Pratt and his newspapers, she was being celebrated by high literary society. In a letter to Montezuma, in 1901, she writes :

In contrast with Carlisle’s opinion of my work-Boston pats me with no little pride. The « Atlantic Monthly » wrote me a note in praise of the story. An intelligent literary critic says my writing has a distinguished air about it-. Others say I am concerning myself with glory !Ah- but so many words ! What do I care- I knew that all the world could not take a liberal view of my work-But in spite of other varied opinions I am bound to *live* my own life (qtd in Davidson and Norris xix).

In “The Soft-Hearted Sioux” Zitkala-Sa explores the negative impact of Christianity upon the lives of the Native Americans, and the incongruity of a white education for those returning to a traditional lifestyle through the protagonist.

The protagonist of the story is a young Native American who is facing with the dilemma of choosing between living in the traditional way of his community or the white man’s way. He notes :

...I did not grow up the warrior, huntsman, and husband I was to have been. At the mission school I learned it was wrong to kill. Nine winters I hunted for the soft heart of Christ, and prayed for the huntsmen who chased the buffalo on the plains.



In the autumn of the tenth year I was sent back to my tribe to preach Christianity to them. With the white man's Bible in my hand, and the white man's tender heart in my breast, I returned to my own people.

Wearing a foreigner's dress, I walked, a stranger, into my father's village (119-120).

Because the young man has never learned to become a hunter, he cannot meet the needs of his family and his sick father dies from starvation. He ends up stealing cattle from a ranch. He kills a white man and is sentenced to death.

The repetition of 'tender heart' is rather ironic as the story mocks America's supposed tenderness and explores the negative impact of missionary schools upon the lives of the Native Americans, asking how high a price these latter must pay for assimilation.

Zitkala Sa provoked Colonel Pratt's exasperation. He denounced the story as "trash" and her as "worse than pagan". He places Zitkala Sa's essay in the front-page of the paper *Word Carrier* and prefaces it:

All that Zitkalasa [*sic*] has in the way of literary ability and culture she owes to the good people, who, from time to time have taken her into their homes and hearts and given her aid. Yet not a word of gratitude or allusion to such kindness on the part of her friends has ever escaped her in any line of anything she has written for the public. By this course she injures herself and harms the educational work in progress for the race from which she sprang. In a list of educated Indians we have in mind, some of whom have reached higher altitudes in literary and professional lines than Zitkala Sa, we know of no other case of such pronounced morbidness (Katanski, 2005, p. 128)

"The Trial Path" is framed around the role of the storyteller in a traditional Native American community. However, instead of using a traditional trickster tale as the centerpiece, Zitkala-Sa has chosen a fictional account which illustrates the lifestyle of the Sioux and portrays the attributes of compassion and forgiveness; in fact, she paints them as opposite from the stereotypical "bloodthirsty savages." Zitkala-Ša does not, however, reveal this ceremony to her white readers, maybe because she did not know the details of the ritual. Indeed, at the end of the story the granddaughter has fallen asleep. The grandmother is upset, saying "I did wish the girl would plant in her this sacred tale" (131). Zitkala-Ša was a Native American who spent so much time away from her tribe that she likely did not know many of the specifics of Sioux rituals and traditions; therefore, she is like the granddaughter.

"A Warrior's Daughter" enunciates the important and powerful role of women in their tribe. The story portrays a female rescuing her lover who is held captive after a raid upon the enemy village. We assume that Zitkala-Ša's mother would not have neglected to tell her tales of powerful women and of Native women's power and importance in their tribe. "A Warrior's Daughter" reveals that Zitkala-Ša is proud to be



part of a culture that acknowledges women's power, and its presence in her work is a critique that such power is not accepted in Euro-American culture.

"*The Widespread Enigma Concerning Blue Star Woman*" uses unconventional narrative structure to introduce themes related to Dakota cultural traditions, U.S. federal policies toward Native Americans, and the potential political power of women as a united group. It is a tale of deceit and chicanery in which helpless Native Americans are cheated out of their land rights by lawyers and bureaucrats, including two young Native American lawyers, who manage to trick two elderly Sioux out of a great deal of land.

The last essay "America's Indian Problem" includes selections from a report from the Bureau of Municipal Research, which Zitkala-Ša lets speak for itself. She introduces the report using first-person pronouns, "Let us be informed by facts, then we may formulate our opinions" (156). Among other things, the report claims that the Bureau of Indian Affairs offers only "sham protection" of Native Americans, that the government owes Natives "many millions of dollars," and "that Indians who have acted in self-protection have either been killed or placed in confinement" (160). Zitkala Sa naively believes that citizenship will stop Indians "suffering from malnutrition" (156).

If the three autobiographical essays show Zitkala-Ša moving from a child to a student to a teacher, and the two essays show her as a grown woman comfortable in her spirituality and self-assured in her beliefs, the autobiographical fiction of the work reveals the importance of the community to Zitkala-Ša, the depth of the influence of the oral tradition on her, and her own personal beliefs and dilemmas in a different light.

Thus, from Zitkala-Ša's Native American perspective, if one were to ask her to tell her life, she would just as likely tell one of these fictional stories; they would in her mind fulfill the request.

Conclusion

Zitkala Sa's *American Indian Stories* is indeed an unusual autobiography. As an autobiographer, she rejects the literary conventions of Euro-American genres, because these conventions have historically served to maintain and propagate ideologies of domination over Native American cultures. Zitkala Sa constructs a sophisticated autobiographical text that subverts the Euro-American model of autobiography by infusing it with elements of Native American traditions like storytelling and myth. Thus, she strategically employs the autobiographical genre to further her own (sometimes unstated) political goal: the survival of her tribal culture alongside of the mainstream culture. Thus, her life, her tribe and her culture are inseparable and are revealed in the content and the form of her autobiography.

Considering how much writers like Zitkala Sa transform the genre of autobiography, one may conclude that it is indeed a genre that is currently being rediscovered and continuously redefined.

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