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Zitkala-Sa and the Assimilation of Cultures

Zitkala-Sa, also known as Gertrude Bonnin, was well known as a Yankton Sioux who was part of a generation of Indians who were educated in boarding schools such as the White's Manual Labor Institute that were designed to remove her from her native culture. She underwent extreme trials as the administration attempted to snuff out her culture, choosing to "kill the Indian to save the man". After leaving boarding school, now educated according to the Anglo-Saxon society's standards, she was heralded as an "example of assimilationist success" (Newmark 69). However, as she grew older she began to rebuff this image of the perfectly assimilated Indian girl, countering the actions of assimilationists through political movements and strong, persuasive writing. Washburn describes it best as: "She became visible, vocal, intrusive, and aggressive in pursuit of her own development and the legal, and cultural rights of other native Americans" (273). She pushed back against the role that was forced upon her, choosing to hold on to her cultural values as a Yankton Sioux, as well as fight for the right of fellow Native Americans to embrace their cultures as well.

Yet her background as a Yankton Sioux educated by white society caused her to feel at odds with both groups, never truly feeling entirely at home with one culture because of her experiences in the other. Her time in Christian society led to her knowledge of English and allowed her to broadcast her voice through her writing, but cost her dearly as she struggled to see eye-to-eye with her mother at times. Her time in Anglo-Saxon society was difficult as well, as she suffered discrimination because of her upbringing, regardless of her education. Despite the

hardships, she used what she experienced in this limbo between cultures to try and find a balance between two sides that were failing to see eye to eye. She was exposed to both Yankton-Sioux and Christian culture, and her experiences shaped her opinions on Native American treatment and the process of assimilation. This exposure to dueling societies allowed her to act as a bridge between the two, sharing and understanding their perspectives. Her personal beliefs on assimilation of these two cultures is seen in her writings, most notably in "The Great Spirit". She argues that the method of assimilation she experienced as a young girl was harmful to both the Anglo-Saxon and her native Sioux culture. Through her juxtaposition of cultural descriptions and creation of situational irony she calls for an end to the current assimilation process, and then offers a new way to blend the two cultures while acknowledging their differences through the cultural symbolism of "A Dream of Her Grandfather" and persuasive writings of "Americanize the First Indian".

In "The Great Spirit," Zitkala-Sa highlights the negative consequences of attempting to force one culture onto another through her juxtaposition of the Great Spirit and Christianity. As she describes the feeling of the Great Spirit, she uses anthropomorphism in her descriptions of the nature around her. She calls attention to "cloud shadows in their noiseless play" and the "soft cadences of the river's song", saying that they "bespeak with eloquence the loving Mystery round about us" ("The Great Spirit" 114). Her descriptions expand on the life and serenity in nature, showing the elements of nature playing and singing. Yet she makes sure to maintain a degree of elegance or nobility in the description, calling to mind the divinity of nature. As Washburn indicates, "[this] first part celebrates God as embodied in nature, which she holds up as the Indian belief in spirituality without directly describing the ceremonies of particular Native peoples" (281). Her descriptions are crafted in such a way as to show the positive energy in

nature to show how accepting the Great Spirit is beneficial in her life. This use of anthropomorphism allows her to make sure that the audience understands that she can feel the life around her when she is thinking of the Great Spirit.

In comparison, when she arrives back in the village, she uses inanimate objects to describe the people that she is living with. She describes men as “ivory keys” and calls the village a “mosaic of human beings”(“The Great Spirit” 115). Zitkala-Sa also refers to natives as “creatures”, dehumanizing those that are converted to Christianity(115). It is a harsh change from previously where she is bringing life into inanimate objects. Instead, in this section she is drawing life *out* of actual people. These descriptions were a purposeful choice in order to juxtapose the effects of accepting each religion. The Great Spirit offers life, while a Yankton Sioux who turns to Christianity loses something of themselves. As a reader, one is often able to read about inanimate objects describes as humans without any red flags, yet this does not apply to when we read of humans described as inanimate objects. Describing a human as an inanimate object drains the life out of them, which leads to reader to see them as a “dead” human. The concept of death is unpleasant to many, and so this reminder refuses to sit well with readers. Therefore, through her comparison, Zitkala-Sa could associate life with the Great Spirit, while aligning Christianity with death, most notably the death of her fellow Native Americans.

In addition to the disadvantages that Zitkala-Sa saw with forced assimilation, she also took notice of the effect it had on Native Americans as their native culture was replaced. Zitkala-Sa argues that “[those] who are for a time mere echoes of another's note are not unlike the fable of the thin sick man whose distorted shadow, dressed like a real creature, came to the old master to make him follow as a shadow”(“The Great Spirit 115) She claims that abandoning the culture

that they grew up with for the one that was forced upon them dehumanizes them, leaving a shell of the person instead.

Zitkala-Sa's firm belief in culture preservation was showcased by her focus on preserving the stories from her tribe. In 1901, she wrote to Carlos Montezuma-- a Yavapai Indian who was a member of the Society of American Indians-- and explained one of her trips to her Yankton Sioux community, claiming that "I do not mean to give up my literary work—but while the old people last I want to get from them their treasured ideas of life...the old folks have a claim upon us. It is selfish and cruel to abandon them entirely"(“Montezuma Papers”). With the value placed on the native culture, it makes sense that she would choose to describe those who give up their culture as those who become a shell of their former self. Without those “treasured ideas of life”, one loses a part of what defines themselves. As we examine her stance on native culture, we can see that she even used her writings of Native American short stories to preserve the culture that she grew up with. Most tales were traditionally shared orally, but in order to secure the tales in the shrinking Yankton Sioux community she used the writing skills she learned in white society to preserve her native American society. Rather than let the boarding school lessons “kill the Indian to save the man,” she used those lessons to protect her culture and store the lessons on the Yankton Sioux in writing. The stories were preserved and translated into English, so they could be stored in the written format of the Anglo-Saxon that offered greater longevity. She turned the idea of the boarding schools on its head by protecting the Indian and preserving her traditions within Anglo-Saxon customs.

As is typical of her writing, she did not criticize Christianity itself in "The Great Spirit"; rather, she argues against the method that is forcing it on others. We can see this in her reactions towards the pastor and the pugilist. She has previously called this pastor a shadow of a man, yet

she doesn't argue with him as one might expect. When he claims of "some great power" in the Bible, she agrees and says "Cousin, I have relished it" ("The Great Spirit 116). Rather than mock or critique the religion, she speaks as one who also experienced the same religion at a previous time in her life. While there is no form of antagonism towards the Christian religion itself, Zitkala-Sa does voice her opposition to those who call themselves "Christian" while simultaneously pushing for assimilation. She calls out "a 'Christian' pugilist [who] commented upon a recent article of mine, grossly perverting the spirit of my pen" ("The Great Spirit 117). She is directly calling out Colonel Richard Henry Pratt, a previous colleague who was highly critical of her "pro-Indian" writings. She also uses quotations around "Christian" as she describes him to make the title ironic. It creates a feeling of she is mocking him by using a title that he doesn't deserve, or that it doesn't mean the same as the traditional definition of Christian. In either way she is distancing him and his comments and actions from the figure of Christ. In addition, she soon comments after that "Still, I would not forget that the pale-faced missionary and the hoodooed aborigine are both God's creatures, though small indeed their own conceptions of Infinite Love" ("The Great Spirit 117). Washburn points out that "in her mild reproach of the "'Christian" pugilist' and her comment that both he and she are children of God, she emphasizes that, in her paganism, she is exhibiting the Christian value of forgiveness" (281). By showing how a pagan is able to embody Christian values more than a declared Christian, she is able to criticize and subvert the actions taken by others while still supporting the values of each culture.

This strategy was a common tactic that she used in her public writings. In the *Friends Intelligencer*, she wrote an article pleading with the readers: "Please, oh America, send Christian statesmen to Congress Demand justice for our Indian today!" ("What it Means"). She chose to describe statesmen as Christian here in order to call traditional Christian values to mind. She was

not calling for statesmen who called themselves Christians, as the majority of the nation identified as Christian, and there were therefore many in Congress at this time who called themselves Christian. Rather, in calling out for Christian values, she was looking for people who could offer fair treatment of her people, who could offer support like the Good Samaritan. As she writes this, she offers a subtle jab at the current Senators, since she is claiming that there are not enough actual Christians in Congress and that they need to send people over instead. Once again, she is not attacking the values of Christianity, but the hypocrites who claimed that they lived Christian lives. Between her mockery of “Christians” in “The Great Spirit” and her call to action in the *Friends Intelligencer*, she shows how she cares much more about actions than a title. In her piece she suggests that the struggles the Native Americans are fighting against would stir up a real Christian to fight for them and join their cause.

Zitkala-Sa made sure in her writings to avoid directly criticizing one culture, rather choosing to critique the actions themselves by showing the situational irony of their actions contradicting their beliefs. Colonel Richard Henry Pratt, When Zitkala-Sa first published her essay in 1902, it went under a different title in response to criticism from Colonel Richard Henry Pratt, the head of Carlisle Indian School where she had previously worked as a teacher. Zitkala-Sa and Pratt had differing views on assimilation, and when her short stories like “Impressions of an Indian Childhood” and “School Days of an Indian Girl” began to appear in print, he had a negative reaction. “Pratt was furious that she wrote favorably of traditional American Indian culture as opposed to the ‘civilizing’ influences of Christianity and that she indirectly criticized the boarding school methods by describing her childhood trauma.” (Washburn 281) In his public comments, he had called her a pagan, which led her to entitle her essay “Why I am a Pagan.” After her essay was released, she received even more criticism, such as in the school newspaper,

which called her "ungrateful" and a hindrance to Native American education(Dexter). After this critical reaction, it would be easy to reject this culture whose people were belittling her. Instead, she worked to find a middle ground in her essay that allowed her to respect both cultures and their differences.

In addition to bringing attention to the downfalls of the assimilation process, Zitkala-Sa also worked through her writing to promote a new method of blending white and Sioux cultures, such as her use of symbolism in "A Dream of Her Grandfather." In the short story, the main character dreams of a chest given to her by her grandfather. The grandfather was a medicine man "known for his successful healing work" as well as a delegate of the Indian people in Washington D.C.("A Dream" 141). While the main character dreams, she sees a chest, described as "clean, strong, and durable in its native genuineness"("A Dream" 141). Once she opens the chest, she sees a vision of the Indian childhood that she remembers. The chest stands as a symbol of her Indian heritage, which is supported by the fact that it is passed down to her through her family. By using the symbolism of the chest, Zitkala-Sa is able to describe the Indian culture "strong and durable", which Ron Carpenter calls attention to in his analysis of Zitkala-Sa's writings(4). He claims that Zitkala-Sa is promoting a new type of Indian, which he refers to as a bicultural Indian. "Zitkala-Sa's bicultural Indian negates the stereotype of the exotic other whose culture is antithetical to Anglos. She accepts that Anglos influence her lifestyle, and her narrator incorporates elements from her Christian education in her representation of reservation life" (Carpenter 6). In this story, the main character copies Zitkala-Sa by embracing both the Native American and Anglo-Saxon culture. She knows English and works in Washington D.C., and yet she still has memories of her Grandfather as a medicine man. While she is living in white society, she keeps her native culture close to her heart.

Similar to “The Great Spirit”, there is no antagonism of either culture, rather an acceptance of the values that both can offer. The grand-daughter even calls her grandfather’s medicine-man garb “regalia”, which is a word that is often used to describe valuable clothing (“The Great Spirit” 141). In addition to the chest, the grandfather is a symbol himself. He is described as a medicine-man who is known for his healing. He also offers the chest, which gives the grand-daughter “glad tidings” and “new hope for her people” (“The Great Spirit” 142). He represents the way that Zitkala-Sa believes is the best way to work towards blending two cultures together. Instead of fighting back against the Christian culture through force, he is able to “heal” the division between the cultures through his diplomatic approach.

This healing of divisions through diplomacy embodies Zitkala-Sa’s plan for moving forward and blending the cultures together. In her piece “Americanize the First Indian: A Plan of Regeneration”, she diplomatically toes the line between Native American and white society, never outright blaming the white society as a whole, choosing to focus on coming together for a common cause. For example, she describes a case that she heard where thousands of Sioux were unable to find medicine during the winter, causing many to die. She does point out the lack of supplies that were available to doctors, but rather than blame the government for the injustice, she adjusts her stance. She claims that “It is a tragedy to the American Indian and the fair name of America that the good intentions of a benevolent government are turned into channels of inefficiency and criminal neglect” (“Americanize”). Though she felt very passionately about the plight of the Indians, she knew that pointing fingers would not change the widespread opinions. Therefore, rather than blame white society, she relegated blame to a select few, and appealed to the society as a whole through the writing skills that she learned. In her writing, she wanted to

give a strong sense of brotherhood between the societies, even going as far as to place the poem “Brotherhood” by Edwin Markham in the middle of her arguments (“Americanize”).

In Zitkala-Sa’s quest for the blending of cultures, she eventually advocated schooling that would allow Indians the same opportunities that she did, without the struggles. She advocated for business schools for the Native Americans, in order to give them an opportunity to have a voice in white society. She realized that if she did not have the knowledge of white society or the skills school endowed her with, she would not be in a position to make her voice heard throughout the country. Even with the terrible experiences that she suffered at boarding school, she felt that schooling was still necessary. She called for a school in order to “Give them freedom to do their own thinking, to exercise their judgement, to hold open forums for the expression of their thoughts, and finally permit them to manage their own personal business. Let no one deprive the American Indians of life, liberty or property without due process of law” (“Americanize”). In addition to this, she also worked to give those Native American students a voice, so that they would not share the same experience that she did. She called for a voice in the administration that could share the concerns of the students, something that she never had as a child (“Americanize”).

Zitkala-Sa consistently argued against the assimilation process that she experienced because she believed that the method caused only harm. She saw firsthand what attempts to erase their culture did to Native Americans. Yet even with all the harm, she valued what she had learned while in white society. Her writings consistently argued that creating bicultural Indians through blending of teaching cultures was the best hope for a united country. Giving Indians the benefits of education would ensure that their voice was heard, while maintaining a firm hold on their native culture would ensure that the stories of those whose voice wasn’t loud enough would

never be forgotten. Zitkala-Sa used her two different cultures to become a voice for her people through her writing, and fought for the right of all Native Americans to have the same opportunity.

Works Cited

Bonnin, Gertrude Simmons. "A Dream of Her Grandfather." *American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings*, Edited by Cathy N. Davidson and Ada Norris, Penguin Books, New York, NY, 2003, pp. 141–142.

A Dream of Her Grandfather embodies the idea of a bicultural Indian that Zitkala-Sa was attempting to argue for. The granddaughter works in Washington D.C., in the center of white society. Yet while she fully accepts and embraces white society, she still holds her native culture dear to her heart, which we can see in the chest her grandfather gives her.

---. "The Great Spirit." *American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings*, Edited by Cathy N. Davidson and Ada Norris, Penguin Books, New York, NY, 2003, pp. 114–117.

The Great Spirit is one of the key pieces that I am using in the paper to show Zitkala-Sa's stance on assimilation. It shows how she struggled between the two cultures, and also how she felt about Native American's forgetting their native culture.

Bonnin, Gertrude Simmons. *Americanize the First Indian: A Plan of Regeneration*.

This bound packet of writing is extremely useful because it shows what Zitkala-Sa eventually chose to fight for. It shows how she believed in education, and how she thought that it just needed to be implemented correctly. It also shows in her writing how she was attempting to connect with white society, rather than reject it.

(Bonnin), Gertrude Simmon. "Montezuma Papers." Received by Carlos Montezuma, 13 Apr. 1901.

Zitkala-Sa's letter to Carlos Montezuma shows how much value she put on her native culture. She left her job for a while in order to preserve what she could of the stories that

her elders had. She used writing, which was a skill from being in white society, to preserve her native society, which really embodies what my focus in the paper is about.

Bonnin, Gertrude Simmons. "What It Means to Be an Indian Today." *Friends Intelligencer*, 19 Jan. 1929, pp. 46–47.

This piece in the newspaper is a good example on how she uses her rhetoric to try and connect with her readers. In this piece she is calling attention to the issues that she still sees, and reaches out to the readers, saying that they can help make a change. It also shows how much time she put into political activism with the Society of Native Americans.

Carpenter, R. "Zitkala-Ša and Bicultural Subjectivity." *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 16.3 (2004): 1-28. SCOPUS. Web. 1 Nov. 2016.

Carpenter argues that Zitkala-Sa has a bicultural identity in her writing that she uses to reconfigure the Native American culture. His arguments to identify the character in "A Dream of Her Grandfather" as a bicultural Indian as coined in this essay.

Dexter, Fisher, and Zitkala-Sa. "Introduction to American Indian Stories." *American Indian Stories*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE, 1985.

This section gives the example of the criticism that Zitkala-Sa received for attempting to still hold on to her native culture. Her coworkers in white society could not understand

why, and so they chose to call her out in the school paper, calling her names and saying that she was obstructing the education of Native Americans.

Newmark, J. "The Pluralist Imagination from East to West in American Literature." *The Pluralist Imagination from East to West in American Literature.*, 2015. 1-151. SCOPUS. Web. 1 Nov. 2016.

In Newmark's writing, he argues against the homogeneous community that he says comes from the "American Melting Pot". His argument is that pluralism of cultures strengthens a community through people of different cultures coming together to share experiences. I can use his stance to support my thesis that Zitkala-Sa was fighting for pluralism rather than assimilation.

Washburn, F. "Zitkala-Sa: A Bridge between Two Worlds." *Their Own Frontier: Women Intellectuals Re-Visioning the American West.*, 2008. 269-302. SCOPUS. Web. 1 Nov. 2016.

Her thesis is that Zitkala-Sa's stance was centered on the value of treating everyone as individuals, which led to different actions depending on the time and circumstance. While it is useful to use this one to give context for some of my arguments, it is even more useful showing how she could work between the two cultures and sometimes had to choose one or the other. This also includes context for many of her writings.

