Mediation and Progress within Zitkala-Ša’s “Side by Side”

As America has become a more integrated and multi-cultural place, many people from different cultures have expressed discomfort in trying to reconcile their heritage with white American culture. This cultural dissonance can lead to an incongruity in the way people view themselves, a phenomenon that social psychology has termed “dual identity.” W.E.B. DuBois, an African American writer during the Harlem Renaissance, calls this “double consciousness,” a constant feeling of one’s “two-ness” and of being stuck with “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings” (531). While “Native American” isn’t necessarily a multi-racial label, Native scholars such as James Gray have argued that “to be a Native American today is to be, in some metaphorical if not literal sense, a mixed blood” (148). Though he and other such scholars have limited the scope of this brand to modern-day Native Americans, Zitkala-Ša, an early twentieth-century Dakota author, also fits under this “mixed blood” label. She spent much of her life split between two different cultures—growing up with her Dakota-Sioux tribe, but choosing to spend her adolescence and young adulthood at a white boarding school; writing as a Native activist, but doing so in the oppressor’s tongue. Even her name comes in two different forms: her assigned, Anglo-Saxon name “Gertrude Bonnin” and her hand-picked, Dakota name “Zitkala-Ša.”

Many critics and theorists have examined Zitkala-Ša’s complicated identity in terms of her autobiographies. For example, multi-racial literary scholar Martha Cutter argues that Zitkala-Ša remains just enough within the formal norms of an autobiography to “[gain] her audience’s
attention,” but still “undermines these forms by refusing to fulfill their generic criteria,” thus subverting white structural ideals while still maintaining identification with both cultures (33). Though there has been a substantial amount of conversation surrounding Zitkala-Ša’s conflicted identity in her autobiographical writings, few scholars have considered how she wields this identity in her speeches and political activism. In this paper, I explore this gap, looking in particular at Zitkala-Ša's 1896 speech, "Side by Side," which is arguably her first foray into political activism. Through my research, I found that Zitkala-Ša uses her dual identity to mediate between her two cultures, not only to avoid ostracizing her white listeners but to argue for Native rights in a way that the dominant culture can understand and appreciate. Using this power of mediation, Zitkala-Ša shows the flaws in contemporary American civilization and suggests that Native inclusion is the best way to bring about a fully realized American society. This understanding of mediation as a mode of activism reframes the conversation surrounding Zitkala-Ša’s biculturalism, arguing for a more negotiatory approach to understanding her self-representation and realizing her goals go further than advocating for Native rights alone.

In order to understand the significance of Zitkala-Ša’s speech, it is first important to establish the context. Zitkala-Ša gave the speech “Side by Side” on two separate occasions, first at her college’s oratory contest and second at a state-wide oratory competition. While she experienced some opposition from the audience, such as racist remarks and crude banners, she undermined the expectations of her primarily white audience by taking home a medal at each competition (“Schools Days” 102-103). This speech, as multicultural literature scholar Barbara Chiarello points out, “represented the start of Zitkala-Ša’s political career” (1). In fact, Zitkala-Ša herself admits in her autobiography that this “little taste of victory” did not satisfy her “hunger” to do more to advocate for her Native people (103). This was the first time Zitkala-Ša had to decide
how to present her dual identity within the public eye, and thus this speech set the precedent for the rest of her political career. It is from this viewpoint, with “Side by Side” as the beginning of Zitkala-Ša’s Native activism, that it becomes important to look at her self-presented identity and how she uses this identity to negotiate between her two cultures.

Zitkala-Ša had a unique ability to choose how to present her identity, as she had large portions of herself entrenched in both Native and white culture. Zitkala-Ša utilizes both parts of her identity to speak across the Native-white divide in a process that Native literature scholar James Ruppert calls “mediation,” a term that I will both appropriate and extend in this paper. As before stated, between her time living with both cultures, her complex relationship with the English language, and her distinctive names, Zitkala-Ša leaves her cultural identity up for interpretation. This is also true for her self-representation in her writing; as Native literary critic Ron Carpenter states, in her autobiographies, Zitkala-Ša “avoids defining herself prescriptively according to either Yankton or Anglo culture” (1). Thus, by lingering between the two groups, connected to both but restricted to neither, Zitkala-Ša secured the ability to construct, or at least proportion, her identity when she entered the public sphere with her political writing and advocacy. In this way, using her dual identity, she gave herself the power of “mediation,” what Ruppert defines as a “stance which uses the epistemological framework of native American and white cultures to illuminate and enrich each other” (321). In other words, with Zitkala-Ša’s cultural “two-ness,” she is able to use the structure and schemas of white-American culture to express the virtues of Native culture in a way that her white audience can understand and accept.

Zitkala-Ša particularly utilizes this ability in her political writings such as “Side by Side,” using elements of western civilization to appeal to her white audience and put them in a state where they are more likely to accept her arguments for Native rights. For example, at the beginning of
her speech, Zitkala-Ša gives a detailed account of white American history, referencing respected
documents such as the Magna Carta and the Declaration of Independence and describing how the
white Americans’ ancestors held “tenaciously” to the principles therein (222, 226). While she
could have presented the sentiments of these sources in broad terms, Zitkala-Ša chooses to mention
these documents specifically in order to establish her own credibility and, subsequently, her ability
to mediate between the two cultures. By invoking sources that are near-sacred to many of her
listeners, Zitkala-Ša invites her audience to participate in this Native activism, claiming that the
dispute rests on many of the principles that Americans value so highly. Ruppert makes the
argument that, with the process of mediation, a Native American writer can “use the
epistemological structures of one [culture] to penetrate the other” (325). This is exactly what
Zitkala-Ša does, using cultural and historical artifacts that hold significance for her predominantly
white audience to invoke sentiments that she knows will be essential in her advocacy on behalf of
Native peoples. Thus, by pulling from sources that white Americans are extremely familiar with,
Zitkala-Ša gives herself the opening she needs to introduce Native rights as a bicultural endeavor
and discuss the potential for equality in a future America.

Having established her dual identity and subsequent authority to speak to and about both
cultures, Zitkala-Ša portrays America's failure to live up to the ideals that its citizens claim to value
most. She begins with a seemingly complimentary opening, what Chiarello calls “celebrating the
dominant society in its own terms” for the end purpose of “lulling her mainstream audience into a
narcissistic trance” (4). While this reading may be true in part, it ignores the criticism that Zitkala-
Ša imbeds into her so-called “celebration.” For instance, when describing the Anglo-Saxons, the
forefathers of contemporary Americans, Zitkala-Ša emphasizes their “progressive blood,” praising
their “development of freedom and justice” and “training” toward Christian virtues (224). The
process words the author uses in this description—progress, development, training—create a degree of separation between the ideals that the country strives for and the unfolding reality. To further this, when Zitkala-Ša speaks of the American ideal of equality, the idea that “the divine spark in man shall be the only test of citizenship,” she acknowledges this only as a “dream of future history” rather than any present actuality (225-226). While this doesn’t necessarily negate the praise—progress towards a goal can be a virtue unto itself—Zitkala-Ša includes these qualifiers in order to show where America has failed to measure up without ostracizing her white audience, thus fulfilling her role as a mediator. In using these familiar American values, Zitkala-Ša doesn’t simply “placate her audience through incorporating Euroamerican resources” (Carpenter 5); rather, she puts the criticism in terms that her listeners can understand and recognize for themselves as valid. In this way, Zitkala-Ša proves to her audience that something is absent from the current culture, thus creating a space in which she can later insert Native people as the solution.

After establishing American virtues as a work in progress rather than a current condition, Zitkala-Ša further displays the disparity between the country’s ideal and present state by undermining the American process of progression. Throughout the speech, Zitkala-Ša discusses the “tardiness” of America’s “paths to progress” and the country’s “tardy justice” (225-226). As acknowledged before, advancement toward a goal would certainly be better than stagnation in vice; however, the author claims here that the very process of growth has been stunted. Though Zitkala-Ša doesn’t explicitly state what is responsible for this curb of progress, in both cases she discusses the spurned attempts of the Native Americans to claim their “birthright” of “equal opportunity” in the sentence immediately prior (225, 226). Zitkala-Ša juxtaposes these ideas to suggest that it is the rejection of Native peoples as fellow countrymen that is hindering America’s development. The author even casts doubt on the American process of attaining virtue, calling the
impulse a “germ of progress” (222). This word choice implies that, even when the process is moving forward, there is something negative or afflicting about the procedure. This idea is corroborated by English professor Tiffany Aldrich MacBain who asserts that Zitkala-Ša uses a “rhetoric of disease” to expose “distortions in dominant cultural views of self- and nationhood” (55). With this rhetoric, Zitkala-Ša claims that American civilization isn’t flourishing in its current state. Between this and the examples of “tardy justice,” Zitkala-Ša suggests that any attempt to advance without an acknowledgement of Native equality will ultimately hurt American civilization rather than mend it. With these ideas of afflicted progress, Zitkala-Ša proposes that Native participation is the stimulus of growth that the country needs in order to fulfill its potential.

In contrast to her complicated and distanced way of praising America for only its possible future virtue, Zitkala-Ša builds up Native culture with ideals of simplicity and consistency in order to suggest that they have what America is currently lacking. When she discusses the basic beliefs, routines, and desires of the Native people, she does so with short, uncomplicated sentences that replicate the idea of peaceful simplicity that she is trying to express: “He loved his family and would defend them. He loved the fair land of which he was rightful owner. He loved the inheritance of his father, their traditions, their grave . . . He loved his native land” (224). In each of these sentences, Zitkala-Ša keeps the sentence structure clean and direct, utilizing the same beginning several times in a row and giving it an almost child-like quality that upsets the traditional view of the brutal savage. The sentiments expressed in these short phrases are also simple and tangible, foregoing difficult-to-grasp concepts in favor of the basics that make up a life—family, home, tradition, etc. By placing these descriptions near the characterization of the white man that is “training” in the abstract virtues he attempts to claim, Zitkala-Ša depicts an unadulterated, simple elegance to the Native way of life that is lacking in her characterization of American civilization.
These depictions do not necessarily favor Native lifestyle over the white American culture; rather, Zitkala-Ša’s juxtaposition of these descriptions suggests the superior civilization that could come from combining the realization of white American ideals with the beautiful simplicity of Native life. In this way, Zitkala-Ša provides a mediation between the two cultures that “appropriates” her white audience’s discourse and provides them with her own “cognitive reorientation” to see the potential for unification with Native peoples in a future American civilization (Ruppert 335).

In the conclusion of her speech, Zitkala-Ša outlines the Native pursuit of white American traits, showing both their ability to merge with society and their earned right to participate in the country the two cultures share. During the final sentences of her speech, Zitkala-Ša repeatedly describes how the Native Americans are “seeking” the “‘White Man’s ways,’” emphasizing the attribution of these traits to her white audience with the use of the second-person pronoun “your”—“your skill,” “your laws,” “your noble institutions,” etc. (226). With the repetition of this pronoun, Zitkala-Ša pleads directly to her audience, imploring them to acknowledge the effort that Native peoples are making to be recognized as constructive members of American society. This emphasis also asserts that only the Native peoples are adjusting to meet the expectations of white America, rather than both communities adapting to fit each other. As Gray argues, within mediation, authors “try to effect in their readers the same processes of cultural disorientation and readjustment experienced by their protagonists” (148). Zitkala-Ša uses a similar strategy in her speech, using the Native American body as her protagonist and trying to persuade her predominantly white audience to empathize with the efforts of the Native Americans and strive for the future that both groups are pursuing. Zitkala-Ša furthers this by claiming that the Natives are “seeking by a new birthright to unite with yours our claim to a common country,” arguing that both groups have a right to the country and to the affirmation of their place within society (226). With the emphasis
of the Native American’s “new” birthright, rather than their age-old right to the country they were born to, Zitkala-Ša simultaneously chastises American civilization for not acknowledging the prior rights of Natives while still offering another chance to combine to meet this ideal. In this final plea, Zitkala-Ša appeals for recognition of the Native people’s ability to productively contribute to an integrated American civilization.

As Zitkala-Ša pursued her advocacy on behalf of Native peoples, she continued to use the pattern of mediation established in this speech. While she often used mediation to argue for Native rights by appealing to white Americans, as in the case of “Side by Side,” she applied this tool in reverse as well, arguing for a more generous view of the white people to her fellow Native Americans. For example, in a later speech at the Monhonk Conference, Zitkala-Ša is careful to emphasize that the problems in the white Indian administration are “not due to wicked men, or even exceptionally stupid men,” as there have been white men “of intelligence and of the highest integrity” in office (Bonin 1). In this situation, Zitkala-Ša isn’t trying to put white culture above that of the Natives; rather, she is trying to bring the two cultures together by coaxing her audience into a more forgiving perspective on the white Americans in power. Native scholar James Gray calls this moderation of each group “a process of harmonizing,” in contrast to trying to force the two cultures to match pitch (148). With this mediation, Zitkala-Ša works to bring two various types of “American” into an equal partnership, setting them “Side by Side,” where each brings their individual strengths into the creation of a better country. While Zitkala-Ša establishes the pattern of mediation in “Side by Side,” she continues utilizing this tool in her political career in order to bring about what she feels is the best possible version of America.

Within her speech “Side by Side,” Zitkala-Ša mediates between the two aspects of her dual identity, striving to convince her predominantly white audience to unite with their Native comrades
to create a better America. This mediation both invites her audience to participate in the conversation surrounding Native rights and frames the arguments in a context that white American society can recognize and internalize. With this approach established, Zitkala-Ša juxtaposes her depiction of an American civilization that is unable to realize its convictions with a simple, unadulterated Native culture, suggesting that a country that utilized the talents of each culture could actualize the American dreams established during the country’s founding. This analytical approach extends James Ruppert’s contemporary Native American concept of “mediation,” applying it to an earlier generation of Native writers and showing how Zitkala-Ša navigated this method of persuasion in her political writings. Though this speech had a small audience, it maintains significance with its implications for Zitkala-Ša’s future political career: as her first foray into Native activism, this speech created a precedent of mediation, of talking to and through one culture in order to advocate for another, that Zitkala-Ša continued to use throughout her political career.
Works Cited

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