




4-2018

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Brantley, Adam R, (2018) "A Slowly Starving Race: Land and the Language of Hunger in Zitkala-Ša's "Blue-Star Woman"," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol11/iss1/13>

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A Slowly Starving Race

Land and the Language of Hunger in Zitkala-Ša's "Blue-Star Woman"

Adam Brantley

In 1927, the prominent Lakota author and activist Zitkala-Ša spent much of her time writing to Natives across North America imploring them, despite their financial difficulty, to hold on to their inherited reservation land at all costs. In one such letter to Alaskan Native S. G. Davis, she wrote "it is imperative for us to join hands, unite our forces, to save our race from dying out, by actual starvation and landlessness" (Letter to S. G. Davis). This desperate plea contains echoes of sentimentalism, a rhetorical tactic that privileges passionate (and sometimes exaggerated) appeals to emotion rather than reason. Indeed, the same kind of sentimentalism that inspired this letter can also be found in her earlier and much better-known autobiographical work.

As Native studies critics including P. Jane Hafen and Susan Bernardin have shown, Zitkala-Ša's conscious use of sentimentalism mirrored popular literary trends of her day, and was useful for bridging cultural gaps and educating non-Natives about issues such as cultural assimilation. Though scholars continue to explore this aspect of her work, contemporary criticism has given much less attention to one of the most important realities of this sentimental rhetoric: the fact that it was intimately connected to the ongoing fight for indigenous land rights. This is best seen in her 1921 short story "The Widespread Enigma Concerning Blue-Star Woman," wherein

she draws a link between starvation and the loss of Native American lands by employing the same sentimental language she used later in her letter (*American Indian Stories* xxvii). In this story, Zitkala-Ša addresses the catastrophic consequences of federal land policy by examining it through this sentimental lens. By highlighting contrasting cultural attitudes about the value of land, she more powerfully communicates sentiments about land ownership and sovereignty to her primarily non-Native audience. This sentimental language of starvation allows Zitkala-Ša to reframe the conversation surrounding Indigenous land, shifting the debate's focus away from mere legality to emphasize more nuanced and personal dimensions of indigenous land ownership. Her work in "Blue-Star Woman" exposes the harm inherent in addressing Native land disputes without a correct understanding of those lands' cultural significance, and warns that the careless treatment and appropriation of Native land leads to cultural starvation, atrophy, and death.

The intended function and actual effect of Zitkala-Ša's grounding in Western sentimentalist tradition have been widely explored. American Indian literature specialist Susan Bernardin describes Zitkala-Ša's sentimentalism as a sort of literary vessel, designed to carry Indian agendas past the defensive reflexes of non-Natives by packaging them in a familiar and attractive format. Taos Pueblo critic P. Jane Hafen concurs, but also notes in Zitkala-Ša's literature the "complexity of popular sentimentality *mixed* with [Native] oral tradition and political indignation" (32; emphasis added). According to Hafen, Zitkala-Ša's use of sentimentalism is more than pretty wrapping paper for her challenging Indian narrative, or even a conscious stylistic choice; it is inextricably connected to her Native American identity. As she argues, "despite high emotion and the sentimentality of popular culture, Bonnin remains faithful to the Yankton sources of her work, presenting an amalgam of traditional culture and contemporary accommodations [while] her commitment to Indian issues continued throughout her life" (40). In other words, Zitkala-Ša's sentimentalism transcends the usual social scope of the genre by presenting and emotionalizing real issues. With sentimentalism as her background, she can address crucial questions pertaining to Native American identity, culture, and even survival.

Foremost among these Native issues is unquestionably that of land. Cherokee writer and Native Studies expert Thomas King succinctly identifies this problem, which lies at the heart of all disputes between Natives and non-Natives: "If you

understand nothing else about the history of Indians in North America, you need to understand that the question that really matters is the question of land.” He goes on to point out land’s importance as “a defining element of Aboriginal culture,” citing its inextricability from language, ceremonies, livelihood, tradition, water, shelter, food, etc. He then contrasts this with non-Natives treatment of land primarily as an economic commodity (218). According to King, land is to Native Americans much more than a means to some financial or political end. To them, land is in fact sacred, vital, and inseparable from culture. Zitkala-Ša understood this connection all too well, and she wrote “Blue-Star Woman” under constantly mounting pressure as more and more Native American land was sold to and seized by Westerners. This is why it is crucial to examine her sentimentalism in the context of the fight for land rights; to remove any of Zitkala-Ša’s work from this context is to fail to recognize the most immediate concern that she faced in her day.

Zitkala-Ša’s personal correspondences confirm that she was preoccupied with starvation, the loss of Native American land, and the way in which they are both literally and symbolically connected. In the previously cited 1927 letter, she wrote impassionedly about saving Native Americans from both “actual starvation and landlessness.” The words “actual starvation” in this sentence imply the coexistence of a metaphorical starvation—in this case, the landlessness she mentions. She thus indicates that not only are the two issues are connected, but that the survival of all Native American people hangs on that connection. This overt concern with landlessness and starvation propelled Zitkala-Ša’s political agenda as well her personal correspondence. She composed another letter in the same year, this time addressed to the Chairman of the government’s Committee on Indian affairs, describing the issues plaguing Native American communities. She writes that “a casual visit on most any reservation [is enough to] see the Indians living in huts and rags and half-starved,” using her own experience to call for the immediate revision of U.S. government Indian policy (Letter to Lynn G. Frazier). Such claims by Zitkala-Ša are not hyperbole. Not only did she observe reservations and their hardships firsthand during her extensive travels as an activist, but she also received letters from correspondents who continually informed her of the horrific conditions there (LaPointe). The urgency of her political entreaty combined with that of the previous letter suggest that Zitkala-Ša’s priorities centered on these two issues, and, as she attempts to convey

to Native and non-Native allies alike, addressing both is essential to their correction. These ideas were fully-formed by 1927, but it is in “Blue-Star Woman” that Zitkala-Ša’s sentimental treatment of them is most evident.

Zitkala-Ša establishes hunger as a sentimental metaphor for dispossession very early on in “Blue-Star Woman.” The very first paragraph features the eponymous protagonist frying a traditional cake, and as the plot progresses the same cake is mentioned repeatedly in different contexts. First, the elderly Blue-Star Woman reflects on her Native friend’s generosity in saving her from starvation by donating the ingredients she needed for the cake. Later, corrupt salesmen determined to obtain her land for themselves devour most of her food, leaving her with barely a scrap for herself (144, 147). Both details exemplify instances in which food and hunger are related to some aspect of land ownership and communal culture, grounding the general symbolism in social reality. Unlike that of other sentimental literature, Zitkala-Ša’s emotionally-charged language addresses specific, concrete concerns about land and politics. The hunger she describes also sentimentalizes—and thereby legitimizes—the urgency with which Native Americans still lobby for land rights, allowing her non-Native readership to vicariously experience attitudes about land different from their own. The motif of starvation is remarkably consistent throughout “Blue-Star Woman,” and Zitkala-Ša uses it to establish a context in which she engages readers emotionally while also serving as a cultural window through which to examine the complexity of Native land-related issues. In doing so, she not only evokes sympathy, but also informs non-Native readers about the real significance and value of land in Native American culture.

Zitkala-Ša further emphasizes the importance of Indigenous land by describing the abandonment of traditional values as a side effect of its dispossession. In “Blue-Star Woman,” she writes from the perspective of an old Indian chief who sees in his own tribe “a slowly starving race . . . growing mad.” The observation that leads him to this chilling pronouncement is the cultural shift he perceives in the younger generation, for “those days were gone when moral cleanliness was a chief virtue; when *public feasts* were given in honor of the virtuous girls and young men of the tribe” (emphasis added). With this statement, Zitkala-Ša compares positive Native American cultural values to feasts and abundance. She then proceeds to contrast that prosperity with the imagery of “the pitifully weak sell[ing] their lands for a pot of porridge” a few lines later (151). She portrays her characters—and

by extension the Sioux communities they typify—as so desperate with starvation that they are willing sell their birthright of land in exchange for scraps of food. This is a problem because, though actual starvation is certainly a pressing concern, the cultural starvation that arises as a result of abandoning traditional values doesn't only threaten individuals; it threatens the continuity and integrity of the entire race. Through this symbolic contrast of feasts and hunger, Zitkala-Ša warns that the values of traditional Native American life that promote abundance and sustain identity are lost as a direct consequence of the loss of tribal land, thereby underscoring land's broader importance in the lives of all Natives.

Zitkala-Ša's use of starvation as a metaphor for dispossession is a useful critical lens through which to read "Blue-Star Woman," but in the same story she shows how literal starvation also plays a role in the dispossession of Indian land. In so doing, she demonstrates the injustice inherent in contemporaneous Indian land policy. Zitkala-Ša published "Blue-Star Woman" thirty-four years after the implementation of the infamous General Allotment Act of 1887, which broke up, privatized, and redistributed communal reservation land to individual Native Americans. She highlights one of the allotment system's problems when she describes Blue-Star Woman's reaction to it. Early in the story, the lawyers who wolf down her cake offer to help Blue-Star Woman obtain her legal share of land—but only in exchange for fifty percent of the total property. She is persuaded by the phrase "wouldn't you rather have half a crust of bread than none at all?" She agrees, thinking to herself that "a little something to eat [is] better than nothing" (147). Zitkala-Ša sets up a hopeless predicament; while her character is certainly entitled to much more than "half a crust of bread," her age, her inexperience with government policy, and her legally unverifiable ancestry leave her unable to lobby for that right. Through this fictional case study, Zitkala-Ša confirms one of the manifold negative consequences of the allotment program; though it theoretically guaranteed every Native American a plot of land somewhere, circumstances prevented them from claiming and retaining those lands.

If plots of allotment land are comparable to crusts of bread, then "Blue-Star Woman" paints a bleak picture of Natives turned against each other to fight over crumbs. Indeed, one of the most devastating side effects of the Allotment Act was the way in which it pitted individual tribes and families against each other in land issues, undermining tribal cohesion and weakening communal solidarity. In an analysis of a similar piece of Native literature

set in the allotment era, multicultural studies specialist Dr. Janna Knittel confirms that “whereas once land was held communally and members contributed to each other’s survival, the Dawes [Allotment] Act encouraged competition” instead (195). Although the characters in “Blue-Star Woman” never reach full-scale feud like the those in the subject of Knittel’s study, they face comparable quandaries. Though the chief and his tribe acknowledge that helpless, homeless, and starving Natives like Blue-Star Woman deserve to be taken care of, they are understandably infuriated that the government would “without their knowledge and consent [give] their property . . . to a strange woman.” Everyone agrees that of course Blue-Star Woman deserves a plot of land somewhere, but it is “certainly not here” (149). Zitkala-Ša shows that, in a privatized land system where resources are scarce to begin with, Natives simply don’t have the means to provide for themselves—let alone for others. In short, the privatization of land forces Native Americans to prioritize either their own economic needs or those of the community. There are, after all, only so many crusts of bread to go around. This traps traditional Indians in a disastrous paradox because, to them, personal stability is a natural extension of communal well-being.

Zitkala-Ša addresses the importance of this communal solidarity more directly in “Blue-Star Woman” by showing how it keeps the titular characters from both physical and metaphorical starvation. Though Blue-Star Woman herself owns very little land and few resources, her kindly neighbor provides her with materials she needs to eat well, and, Zitkala-Ša says, it is this liberality “that had often saved her from starvation” (144). When the word “starvation” is read as a metaphor for loss of land and the resulting loss cultural identity, this exchange between Blue-Star Woman and her neighbor represents her reliance on other members of the Native community in maintaining that identity. Alone, Blue-Star Woman is a penniless old woman in need of firewood and food (148). With the support of her community, however, she is capable not only of feeding herself but also providing and caring for other members of her community (147). In other words, Zitkala-Ša shows that a strong sense of community and willingness to be generous to one another—even and especially in concerns about land ownership—greatly increases the chances of the culture’s survival.

This lies in stark contrast to the passage following it, wherein Zitkala-Ša shows how hunger and loss of land can also sow communal discord. In it, she tells of an Indian chief whose own family’s tribal land is confiscated

and handed to Blue-Star Woman, who is not of his tribe, when she files independently for a land claim. Affronted, he protests, “I thought we made good treaties on paper, but now our children cry for food . . . We cannot give even to our own little children” (150). Here, Zitkala-Ša reconnects hunger to the loss of land and shows that taking from one hungry child to feed another does nothing to solve the problem of starvation—it merely shifts the problem’s locality. In doing so, she emphasizes that land is a communal asset and that the issues of land ownership cannot be solved by simply funneling all Indigenous nations into one generalized “Indian” and then indiscriminately redistributing land between tribes. By calling attention to the physical hunger of people already struggling to survive on inadequate plots of land, Zitkala-Ša warns of the damage that such futile government intervention causes, again emphasizing that cultural factors must be considered when discussing Native land ownership.

With her poignant depiction of Indians’ post-allotment struggle with starvation, Zitkala-Ša asserts the importance of treating land disputes individually, based on the culture and values of those involved. In her article on how Zitkala-Ša’s work influences legal discussions surrounding Native Americans, law scholar Kirsten Matoy Carlson argues that laws do not exist in a cultural vacuum, and that legal matters cannot and should not be approached uniformly because, where cultural pluralism is involved in land disputes, there will always be differing opinions about what constitutes just compensation. What is merely an economic commodity to some may represent food and livelihood to others, and that which appeases one community may be inadequate or inappropriate to another. For example, a \$1.3 billion-dollar settlement in exchange for land confiscated over a hundred years ago would seem like more than a fair deal to most Westerners. But, incredibly, Natives rejected that same settlement when offered in 2011. They showed unequivocally that they valued the sacred Black Hills of South Dakota—the same land that now hosts the Mt. Rushmore monument—more than even such a staggering sum of money. This is even more impressive considering that these were the poorest American Indians in the United States (Carlson 685). Clearly, Natives and non-Natives approach land from completely different directions. Though fictional, Zitkala-Ša’s “Blue-Star Woman” effectively demonstrates these differing value systems in action. Zitkala-Ša reminds her readership that land holds greater cultural significance for aboriginals than it does for Westerners, and that making assumptions about

land's legal treatment based on Western ideas of justice would, ironically, be unjust. In using the language of hunger in "Blue-Star Woman," Zitkala-Ša breathes vitality and urgency into an issue that is sometimes marginalized as one of mere legality.

Though Susan Bernardin and P. Jane Hafen have produced excellent scholarship on the value of Zitkala-Ša's sentimental literature, its usefulness in developing arguments for Native land rights has yet to be fully acknowledged. Despite its publication in the early twentieth century, Zitkala-Ša's "The Widespread Enigma Concerning Blue-Star Woman" expands contemporary discussion about the importance of land in Native American culture and politics by reminding readers of land's necessity to the survival of indigenous cultures, as well as pointing to specific failings of past federal land policies. Her narrative of hunger presents a unique and passionate Native perspective affirming that Native land is still inextricable from Native identity. As evidenced by her fervent letter to S.G. Davis, the same concerns addressed in "Blue-Star Woman" went on to inform not just her fiction but her political activism as well, laying the ideological groundwork for arguments she would make for years to come. Though today's Native Americans face somewhat different concerns than Zitkala-Ša did in the immediate wake of the Allotment Act, there is no question that land disputes continue to dominate contemporary Native and non-Native relations. In fact, even the Native rallying cry at recent and well-publicized Standing Rock land dispute controversy declared that "water is life," reaffirming Zitkala-Ša's claims about land's role in survival and nourishment of Indian culture (Medina). Even today, Zitkala-Ša's sentimental framework of landlessness and starvation remains valuable because it provides a useful and timely lens through which to approach Native land issues.

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