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The Indian and “The Man”: Double Consciousness by Community Identity in Zitkala-Ša’s “The Soft-Hearted Sioux”

Concerning the assimilation of Native American peoples into the culture of White America, Richard Henry Pratt declared that it would be necessary to “kill the Indian[,] and save the man.” Pratt, a driving force behind the methods of assimilation applied during Zitkala-Ša’s lifetime, suggests that it is possible, and even beneficial, to separate the metaphorical soul and body of individual Native Americans. This supposed duality of being, when considered in combination with W.E.B. DuBois’s concept of “double consciousness,” lends a new perspective on Zitkala-Ša’s narratives, as well as her own views on bicultural¹ identity. A state of double consciousness is achieved when a colonized individual maintains dual perspectives of his identity, stemming from the competing forces of both his native and colonizing cultures. This principle has already been discussed extensively in relation to the identity determination of colonized groups and peoples, such as Native Americans. However, many of Zitkala-Ša’s writings allow for a deeper conversation on double consciousness as experienced by Native Americans by suggesting that their perspectives on individual identity are defined by their sense of community belonging, and are only surmountable by the successful development of a bicultural identity. John Gamber described this sense of community identity in the following

¹ My definition of bicultural, as used in this article to discuss Zitkala-Ša’s bicultural identity and narratives, has been provided by Ron Carpenter in his article “Zitkala-Ša and Bicultural Subjectivity.” My treatment and discussion of biculturalism within this paper largely draws from Carpenter’s description of Zitkala-Ša as “irreducible to either culture [Anglo or Native American] and alienated from each” (1).

way: “many Native people side with the assertion that Native identity is not so much based on what community an individual claims, but on what community claims that individual” (177). “The Soft-Hearted Sioux” provides a unique opportunity to analyze this concept in conversation with the larger principle of double consciousness, especially as it contains a metonymic representation of Native and White cultures as the conflicting body and soul referenced by Pratt; this representation serves to express skepticism that the assimilated identity desired by Pratt can be attained by the creation of such a dichotomy, given Native Americans’ formation of individual identity by community affiliation.

The manner in which Zitkala-Ša represents double consciousness and bicultural identity within “The Soft-Hearted Sioux” provides a counter-point to much of today’s critical conversation surrounding her work, which praises her narratives for their successful biculturalism. While discussing Zitkala-Ša’s narration of her childhood in “School Days of an Indian Girl,” Amanda Irvin observed:

Like many colonized peoples Zitkala-Ša/Bonnin lives on the cusp of two conflicting ideologies, simultaneously grounding herself in the narration of each. The movement between these two ideas is indicative of the way Zitkala-Ša/Bonnin reconciles these oppositional views in her own life: by simultaneously aligning herself with both.

However, the double consciousness that only colonization can bring comes with a price that is normally paid with the cultural values of the colonized people. (82)

Irvin claims that Zitkala-Ša has successfully cultivated a bicultural identity that balances elements of both White and Native American culture, though certainly losing a measure of her native culture as in any case of assimilation. As opposed to the semiautobiographical stories on which Irvin was commenting, however, “The Soft-Hearted Sioux” does not provide evidence for

a successful bicultural resolution; the protagonist finds it impossible, and ultimately fatal, to attempt balancing the precepts of the two cultures. While Zitkala-Ša herself may have been able to form a new bicultural identity that melds and balances aspects of the two cultures, as described by Irvin, in this story she seems to be expressing skepticism that this is a common outcome under her time's approach to Native American assimilation. Her protagonist, instead of "simultaneously aligning [himself] with both," alternates between his two allegiances as he feels them pull upon him. He does not sacrifice only "the cultural values of the colonized people," but also the values which he gained from his colonizers. Zitkala-Ša's representation of double consciousness within "The Soft-Hearted Sioux" does not exemplify the formation of a bicultural identity, but rather the destruction of an individual caught in the trap of double consciousness. This difference in the narrative's resolution demonstrates Zitkala-Ša's disdain for the assimilationist methods utilized by the United States government during her career as a school teacher and writer.

This interpretation is corroborated by Zitkala-Ša's political essay "Our Sioux People." In this essay, Zitkala-Ša writes concerning the challenges faced by the Sioux tribe in their interactions with the federal government. After describing difficulties faced on the reservation by students returning from White boarding schools and readjusting to their native culture, she asserts that "man's discernment of unity in multiplicity must lead ever toward reconciliation" ("Our Sioux People" 11). This "unity in multiplicity," or the state of a whole made up of individual parts, can only be truly unified in a man's discernment by "reconciliation." Without the reconciliation of creating a bicultural identity, Native Americans who have been exposed to, and claimed by, White culture can never overcome their state of double consciousness. Zitkala-Ša's call for greater power in unifying and reconciling cultural identities implies the necessity of

drastic adjustments to the government's approach to assimilation. By discussing double consciousness in terms of unity and reconciliation, Zitkala-Ša presents biculturalism as a solution for double consciousness. She does so even while leading her audience to consider the current plight of Native Americans who suffer the adverse effects of cultural double consciousness², claimed by both their native tribes and the nation's federal government.

Zitkala-Ša illustrates this perception of Native American double consciousness, and its roots, by metonymically reducing Native and White cultures to representations of body and soul. The conflict raging between these two cultures within the protagonist is demonstrated by his vacillating adoption of spiritual and physical priorities. Zitkala-Ša represents the Native Americans as physical beings, whose priorities and perspectives are largely those favoring life through health and strength. The Whites, however, are portrayed as spiritual beings who desire justice and salvation for the soul. The Sioux brave himself is not aligned with either of these forces but experiences his sense of identity as belonging to both of these cultures; he is forced to confront his allegiances to both cultures throughout the narrative in an effort to resolve his sense of double consciousness. By showcasing the brave's struggle with his competing cultural obligations, Zitkala-Ša equivocates his dilemma between the spiritual and the physical with the principle of double consciousness.

The first side of Zitkala-Ša's forced dichotomy portrays Native American culture and characters as centered on the Body and the physical, and this characterization is best exemplified by the author's treatment of the Native American medicine man. She describes this tribal leader

² Additional critical commentary on the unique experience of Native Americans when confronting double consciousness can be found in Noreen Lape's article referenced below. Her article provides a similar discussion to mine concerning another Native American author, Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, and shaped much of my approach to Zitkala-Ša's portrayal of double consciousness by community affiliation.

as “tall and large,” “strong,” and with “long strides” (“The Soft-Hearted Sioux” 120, 122). He is the only character in the story that represents the ideal physicality of a strong, healthy man that provides for his family and followers. Though Native medicine would have incorporated both physical treatment and spiritual guidance, Zitkala-Ša elects to portray the medicine man almost exclusively by his work as a physical healer. This choice allows the Whites to hold the monopoly on spirituality within this story and builds the contrast between the two factions’ natures and priorities. The medicine man also expresses the expectations which the brave’s Native culture has for him as a member of their society, such as when he derides the brave as “a foolish man who could not defend his people because he fears to kill, who could not bring venison to renew the life of his sick father” (122). By accentuating the failure of the young man to fulfill the tribe’s expectations, he is emphasizing the obligations and duties which the Native community imposes upon its members. In this way, the tribal medicine man represents the culture and identity of the Native Americans in this narrative by both fulfilling these expectations himself and by seeking to instill them in others which the community has claimed.

As opposed to the clear and detailed presence of the ideal physicality in the Native medicine man, the author provides little description of any White character; this absence of a physical presence becomes the best embodiment of the White’s spiritual ideals. The brave’s White educators, who presumably could have served as their culture’s physical embodiment, only enter into the story through their doctrines and teachings. We, the audience, have no description of their stature or of their bearing, only of their influence on the philosophies of the young Sioux. Their absence is significant as it clearly sets them apart from the very present medicine man and his Native ideologies. The other white men which have a place in the text, such as the farmer and the prison guard, are not described physically to the same extent as any

Native character. Instead, Zitkala-Ša describes them simply as “figure[s]” (“The Soft-Hearted Sioux” 125). For most of the story, no mention is made of their height, their strength, or any other physical attribute; this lack of physical description reemphasizes the Whites’ spirituality over their actual physical nature. Additionally, though the brave’s White educators do not physically enter into the story, or even have any direct dialogue, we can glean the impositions which they make upon the brave through his own commentary: “At the mission school I learned it was wrong to kill. . . In the autumn of the tenth year I was sent back to my tribe to preach Christianity to them” (119-120). Zitkala-Ša’s description of those adaptations made to the brave’s actions and behaviors, such as changing his belief of what is “wrong,” highlights the cultural ideologies which the educators have instilled in him. Additionally, the brave’s own recognition of being “sent,” which denotes a master-servant relationship between the brave and his educators, reinforces the influence which White culture has over him by claiming him as a member of their community. By such narration, Zitkala-Ša uses the absence of a White embodiment of spirituality within the story to express the culture’s expectations for, and impositions upon, the Sioux brave.

However, even given this clear dichotomy between Native American physicality and White spirituality, there are choice moments in the story in which Zitkala-Ša describes physical beings as spiritual and spiritual beings as physical; these moments further serve to demonstrate the brave’s loss of identity through double consciousness. In the first instance, the Sioux acts under his White consciousness to pursue a spiritual objective, his entire purpose in returning to his tribe: the conversion of his native people to Christianity. Once he begins to preach, the embodiment of Native physicality, the medicine man, appears and thwarts his pursuit. In so doing, this tribal leader shows a spiritual side for only a moment when he labels the brave as

“false. . . to the Great Spirit who made him” (Zitkala-Ša, “The Soft-Hearted Sioux” 122).

Though in all other instances the medicine man expressed concerns only for the physical well-being of his people and promised physical hardships to the brave for his traitorous actions, in this discourse he shows that he also harbors spiritual perspectives. The medicine man’s uncovered spirituality shows that, though he is independent of the spiritual culture of the Whites, he still has enough spirituality to guide his people. The brave, on the other hand, who is brought into conflict with the medicine man by virtue of his professed spirituality, does not have the spiritual strength to overcome him. By allowing the brave to be barred from his spiritual objective by a physical character, Zitkala-Ša shows to the reader the frailty of the brave’s spiritual identity, a result of his continued double consciousness

As the inverse of the Sioux’s conflict with the medicine man, the brave’s prioritization of his Native consciousness and successive attempts to care for his family physically are resisted by the white farmer, a spiritual being who accosts the brave physically. This is the only moment in which a spiritual being is described as physically interacting with the brave, attempting to secure him with his “rough hand” (Zitkala-Ša, “The Soft-Hearted Sioux” 124). This physical interaction serves to solidify the brave’s abandonment of his spiritual nature by forcing him to kill the farmer in an effort to preserve the physical survival of his family. However, the physical altercation between the farmer and the brave delays the young man enough that, upon returning, he finds his father dead. Just as the medicine man, a physical character, had the spiritual strength necessary to defeat the brave’s spiritual mission, the farmer, a spiritual character, had sufficient physical strength to make the brave’s physical objective fail. These two episodes show that, even though the young man ought to be the most spiritual of the Natives, and the most physical of the Whites, by virtue of his dual nature and experience with each opposing side of the dichotomy, he

becomes less (not more) capable in both of these realms because of his split identity. Zitkala-Ša highlights the brave's loss of all identity and strength through assimilation by stripping from him even those strengths which it is most reasonable to believe that he ought to have gained from his involvement with both of the two cultures.

Furthermore, this artificial dichotomy of spirituality and physicality allows Zitkala-Ša to highlight the brave's perception of identity by community; this process of identity formation is represented as the driving force behind the protagonist's sense of double consciousness. As shared previously in this paper, Gamber asserts that "many Native people side with the assertion that Native identity is not so much based on what community an individual claims, but on what community claims that individual" (177). The double consciousness of the Sioux brave, then, stems from being simultaneously claimed by both the Native community and the White community. Such community belonging brings with it expectations of conformity and perpetuation of ideals. The Sioux attempts to conform and fulfill the expectations of both his tribe and his educators, as exemplified within the two instances of conflict above discussed. As a result of his conflict with the medicine man, the brave has failed to perpetuate the ideals of his White religion and has been disowned by his Native tribe. As a result of murdering the farmer, the brave has failed to fulfill the expectations of his Native tribe and has been declared an outlaw by White justice. As both cultures to which the brave owes allegiance have rescinded their membership from him, the Sioux is left to consider his own identity and belonging as distinct from either of these communities.

The brave, however, seems to be incapable of considering his identity as an individual when separated from these communities. As the brave prepares for his execution, he ponders: "Yet I wonder who shall come to welcome me in the realm of strange sight. Will the loving Jesus

grant me pardon and give my soul a soothing sleep? or will my warrior father greet me and receive me as his son? . . . Soon, soon I shall know” (Zitkala-Ša, “The Soft-Hearted Sioux” 125–6). It is worth noting that, in line with Gamber’s observation, both of the brave’s questions consider his fate as pertains to the acceptance of a community. Either “loving Jesus” will pardon the brave and accept him or his “warrior father” will receive him. There is still, in the mind of the brave, the belief that his identity and ultimate fate is dependent upon the acceptance of a community which espouses either White or Native ideals. Yet there is no firm resolution of the brave’s own identity, either in relation to these communities or separate from them. His assimilative experience has rendered him so doubly conscious of both his Nativeness and his Whiteness that he is powerless to choose one system of belief over another. He instead declares simply, “I go” (Zitkala-Ša, “The Soft-Hearted Sioux” 126). He has, in effect, suffered assimilation; so unsure of his own identity as to render him incapable of preference or action, he submits to the larger forces of whichever community lays a stronger claim over him. As these quotations come from the final paragraphs of this narrative, this is the note on which Zitkala-Ša leaves her audience: a young man who has lost his own individual identity by attempting to reconcile the opposing ideals of Native and White cultures.

While the concepts of double consciousness and identity by community have been explored and discussed separately in the field of Native American literature, the writings and ideologies of Zitkala-Ša provide ample support for the consideration of these principles’ interaction. Zitkala-Ša, by way of metonymically reducing Native and White cultures to dueling embodiments of physicality and spirituality within “The Soft-Hearted Sioux,” showcases the protagonist’s struggle with double consciousness brought on by his sense of identity formation by community obligation. Even though Zitkala-Ša was (and is) considered an individual capable

of successfully creating a bicultural identity for herself, she elected to portray a negative outcome in this brave's attempt to navigate his own double consciousness. Considering this work, as it represents the interaction of double consciousness and identity by community, allows for a deeper understanding of the effects of assimilation on the destruction of individual Native identity. Zitkala-Ša's portrayal of the brave's disastrous attempts to forge a bicultural identity and conform with two cultures' conflicting expectations shows the author's concern for the practices which claim that such an uncommon result is to be consistently achieved with ease. After all, the brave's struggle is not purely fictitious, but represents the crisis of identity faced by all who undergo any form of assimilation, not excluding the author herself.

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