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Lainey Wardlow
Brigham Young University

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“Nourished by My Mother”

Zitkala-Ša and the Indian Sterilization Project

Lainey Wardlow

Despite the United States’ claims that the Indian Education Program was created to pay back Indigenous people who had been uprooted and displaced by the government, the underlying ideology was much more insidious. At the heart of this operation was General Richard Pratt’s admonition to “kill the Indian, and save the man” (Peterson). However, rather than resort to physical extermination—which was no longer a politically viable option—the United States government implemented a series of American Indian boarding schools. These were intended to teach Native children to forsake their culture and become so-called civilized members of society. The boarding schools sought out young Indian girls in particular, theorizing that if they were to indoctrinate the young Native women with Victorian ideals of femininity, the girls would then raise their own children accordingly and thereby extinguish Native culture (Devens 219).

In her series of autobiographical essays, “Impressions of an Indian Childhood” and “School Days of an Indian Girl,” Zitkala-Ša combats the boarding school’s assimilation efforts through her connection to her mother, her ultimate symbol of Native womanhood. She highlights her mother as a figure of Native fertility and power and contrasts her with the cold, sterile images of the Indian boarding school. In doing so, Zitkala-Ša both establishes

the Indian Education Program as a cultural sterilization project and resists the assimilation efforts of the boarding school by remaining connected to her own identity as an Indigenous woman. In this paper, I will first examine the physical and cultural sterilization efforts of the US government against the Indian race and culture. I will then explore the ways in which Zitkala-Ša both rebukes and resists these assimilation efforts through her connection to Native womanhood.

The Indian Health Services and the Sterilization of Native Women

Although Zitkala-Ša's autobiographical essays focus exclusively on the *cultural* sterilization efforts of the Indian Education Program, they foreshadow a later, more physically violent discovery: the Indian Health Services' sterilization of Native women without their consent or knowledge. Jane Lawrence, an Indigenous studies scholar, writes that the Indian Health Services targeted Native American women in particular because their birth rates were about twice as high as those of the average white woman (402). This is significant because the sterilization of Native American women presumably began in 1970, and within a decade the number of children per Native American woman dropped by 1.99 children. This was nearly half of what it was previously (402). Although sterilization is only one possible explanation for this decline in birth rate, the greatness of the decline is suspicious, especially considering that the decline in birth rate for white women, which was only .28 children per woman, was about eight times *less* than the decline for Native women.

Additionally, according to investigative records from Planned Parenthood during that same time period, over 3,000 Native American women were sterilized between 1973 and 1976 (3). Considering that Native American women made up only a fraction of a percent (.025%) of the American population, the sterilization of 3,000 Native women accounts for 6 percent of the entire Native female population at the time, and an even greater percent of Native females of childbearing age ("1940 Census" 9). Comparatively, if the US government had sterilized 6 percent of the entire *white* female population, it would have sterilized over 5.2 million white women. This is especially concerning considering the methods the Indian Health Services used to sterilize Native American women. According to records from Planned

Parenthood, the Indian Health Services used several deceptive methods. These included a lack of basic information regarding procedures, a lack of information regarding rights to withdraw consent, and insufficient time between consent and procedure (2). In one case, a young Native American woman had been told that her hysterectomy was reversible, only to be told years later that there was “no such thing as a womb transplant” (Lawrence 400).

On the one hand, these results provide evidence that Native women were being sterilized through deceptive methods, and that these methods very likely contributed to the Native childbearing rate being cut in half. On the other hand, they also point to a troubling history of aggression from the United States government against Native peoples. Using deceptive methods, the Indian Health Services effectively sterilized six percent of the entire Native female population within a period of three years. This indicates a clear intent by the US government to covertly continue previous attempts to eliminate the Indian race.

The Indian Education Program and the Sterilization of Native Culture

Prior to physically sterilizing women in efforts to eliminate the Native American race, the US government also implemented a series of boarding schools that sought to assimilate Native American peoples to white culture. According to Carol Devens, a scholar of Native Women’s Studies, the Indian Education Program sought out young Native girls specifically in order to convert them from their Native traditions to Victorian ideals of femininity (228). This is presumably because the US government was aware of the significant role of women and female kinship relations within Native communities. According to Paula Gunn Allen, Laguna Pueblo poet and scholar, “traditional lifestyles are more often gynocratic than not” (29). By teaching young Native girls to forsake their culture’s traditions in exchange for “higher” traditions of submissiveness, piety, and domesticity, the Indian Education Program was essentially teaching the young girls how to assimilate the next generation of Native children to white culture.

The immense influence of Native womanhood on Native culture is of significant interest in contemporary scholarship on the subject. According to Mary Jo Tippeconic Fox, Eileen Luna-Firebaugh, and Caroline Williams,

all of whom are Native American scholars, “leadership in education is seen as congruent with the role of woman as caregiver and nurturer” (Fox 87). Devens describes the significance of female kinship relations within Indigenous communities when she writes that the Native woman’s role in her community is to “ins[truct] the child in both the practical and ritual activities that . . . shape her life as an adult within the community,” and “[white] schooling removed a girl from the warmth of her kin’s care, left her with no one to teach, comfort, or guide her as they would at home” (232). Thus, not only did the Indian Education Program seek out young Native girls in order to remove them from their mothers and the root of their culture, it also altered the girls’ future roles as leaders to serve its own agenda. In other words, knowing that the young girls would grow up to be leaders and teachers of culture and tradition within their communities, the Indian Education Program created boarding schools to assimilate the young girls to white culture. This ensured that they would one day lead their own children in the same way. In doing this, the Indian Education Program sought to metaphorically sterilize Native people of their culture.

Zitkala-Ša’s Rejection of Cultural Sterilization and the Indian Education Program

Although the Indian Education Program was in part successful at separating many Native American children from their culture, many children in these programs were resilient to its efforts. For example, Zitkala-Ša was once considered the success story of white assimilation tactics, but she ended up leaving the boarding school and is now a renowned Native author and Indian rights activist. Additionally, in her series of autobiographical essays, “Impressions of an Indian Childhood” and “The School Days of an Indian Girl,” Zitkala-Ša presents her mother as the epitome of Native womanhood and power. She does this by contrasting her mother against the cold, sterile imagery of the boarding school. By doing this, Zitkala-Ša rebukes the boarding school’s sterilization efforts *and* remains connected to her Native female identity by presenting her mother as a Native hero that provides refuge or rescues her from white culture. Thus, Zitkala-Ša renders the boarding school’s assimilation tactics ineffective.

One of the first instances in which Zitkala-Ša contrasts the fertility of her mother and culture with the sterility of the boarding school is in her story “The Cutting of My Long Hair.” This is one of the first traumatic experiences she

suffers at boarding school, in which a white woman cuts off her long, thick hair. She writes, "Our mothers had taught us that only unskilled warriors who were captured had their hair shingled by the enemy" ("School Days" 90). It is important to note that immediately upon hearing that her hair might be cut off, Zitkala-Ša remembers her mother. Rather than write that her *people* had taught her to associate shingled hair with weakness, she writes that it was her mother who taught her this. Not only is her mother her ultimate example of biological fertility she is also a symbol of cultural fertility because Zitkala-Ša looks to her as the ultimate example of what it means to be a Native woman.

Zitkala-Ša's depiction of this instance also sets up the white oppressor as a literal object of cultural sterility. When describing the cutting of her hair, Zitkala-Ša writes, "I felt the cold blades of the scissors against my neck, and heard them gnaw off one of my thick braids. Then I lost my spirit . . . in my anguish, I moaned for my mother, but no one came to comfort me" (91). This passage is significant for two reasons. First, rather than referring explicitly to the white woman, Zitkala-Ša accuses the "cold blades of the scissors" of cutting off her hair. She does this not to set up the scissors as the enemy, but to use them as a metonym for the woman using the scissors. Rather than regarding the white woman as a human female, she equates her to a pair of scissors: a cold, sharp object without form or gender. This passage is also significant because in contrast to the unwanted presence of the white woman, Zitkala-Ša expresses a mournful desire to be in the warm presence of her mother. In setting up her mother as the quintessential Native feminine ideal and contrasting her with the sterile description of the white woman, Zitkala-Ša reveals her feelings of being literally and metaphorically cut off from her culture, thus demonstrating the cultural sterilization underlying the boarding school program.

In this story, Zitkala-Ša doesn't present her mother as a hero who comes and saves her from the humiliation of having her hair cut, but as a figure from whom she derives the strength to endure the situation. For example, in the midst of the experience, Zitkala-Ša remembers the safety of her mother's presence and longs to be with her. Thus, this passage not only depicts the boarding school as a sterile, cold place through the description of the white woman, it also depicts Zitkala-Ša's mother as a source of warmth and refuge from that sterility. By contrasting the boarding school and her mother this way, Zitkala-Ša remains connected to her source of Native womanhood and thereby resists the boarding school's assimilation efforts.

In “The Cutting of My Long Hair” as well as in “The Land of the Red Apples,” Zitkala-Ša also symbolically rebukes the cultural sterilization of being separated from her mother through her descriptions of her moccasins. In “The Land of Red Apples,” when Zitkala-Ša begins her descent out East, she describes her experience on the train in which “[white] children . . . pointed at [her] moccasined feet” (87). Embarrassed to the point of tears, she writes, “Their mothers, instead of reproving such rude curiosity, looked closely at me, and attracted their children’s further notice to my blanket” (87). According to Ruth Spack, scholar of Native American studies, the beadwork designs involved in making moccasins is a domestic task within Indigenous communities that “represent[s] a type of power that [is] uniquely female” and “brought prestige and wealth to the woman and to her family” (31). It is no surprise, then, that Zitkala-Ša felt so deeply hurt by the white mother and children’s gawking on the train; to disrespect her moccasins was to invalidate her skills and role as a young Native woman.

Furthermore, in “The Cutting of My Long Hair,” Zitkala-Ša writes that “the annoying clatter of shoes on bare floors gave [her] no peace” and that “the constant clash of harsh noises . . . and bitter cold . . . made a bedlam within which [she] was securely tied” (89). In this passage Zitkala-Ša reveals the insensitivity of white culture towards her own by describing the boarding school with words like “bare,” “bitter cold,” and “annoying,” contrasted with her own noiseless moccasins and her memory of “unlassoed freedom” back West (96). By doing so, she introduces the boarding school as a sterile place that not only disrespects her culture but also disconnects her from it.

Although in this part of the story Zitkala-Ša does not explicitly declare her mother as the source of deliverance from cultural sterilization, she does so *implicitly* through the symbolism of her moccasins. After hearing from her friend Judewin that her hair will be “shingled by the enemy,” Zitkala-Ša declares that she “will not submit” and goes upstairs to hide (“School Days” 90). However, Zitkala-Ša recognizes that she is unable to sneak effectively because of her “squeaking shoes,” which had replaced her moccasins (91). It is symbolic here that Zitkala-Ša chooses to foreshadow her capture and subsequent defeat (the cutting of her hair) with the removal of her moccasins. Although Zitkala-Ša never states that her mother rescues her from the boarding school, she indicates that “the weakening of female power is tied to the encroaching white world” by foreshadowing her traumatic hair-cutting experience—a symbol of defeat and weakness within her community—with the removal

of her soft moccasins, which symbolize Native domesticity and womanhood. Thus, Zitkala-Ša expresses that Native womanhood and values—specifically those taught to her by her mother—are capable of protecting her against the cultural sterilization efforts of the boarding school system as long as she remains tethered to them.

Zitkala-Ša's account of a biblically charged nightmare in "The Devil" presents the same idea. In this dream, she is pursued by "the white man's devil," and eventually rescued by her mother. Zitkala-Ša contrasts her culture's approach to evil spirits with white culture's approach to the devil, which is to instill fear and obedience. Comparing these approaches between the two cultures, she writes, "The old warriors used to tell me . . . of evil spirits. But I was taught to fear them no more than those who stalked around in material guise" ("School Days" 94). Conversely, she writes about being taught about the Devil from "a paleface woman," who said that he "roamed loose in the world, and that little girls who disobeyed school regulations were to be tortured by him" (94). The difference between the two cultural approaches is important in that Zitkala-Ša is taught at home not to fear evil, but is taught at the boarding school that she should be fearful of evil, especially if she doesn't abide by school regulations. This communicates that she must not only forsake her culture and assimilate to white culture but that if she fails to do so, she will be tortured by the devil, a fundamental symbol of fear and control within white Christian culture.

Because the devil embodies white culture's attempts to eliminate Native culture, he and Zitkala-Ša's mother also act as opposing figures of *physical* sterility and fertility. In Zitkala-Ša's dream, the devil, which she describes as "the king of evil *spirits*," lacks a body and lacks form, thus missing the organs necessary for reproduction. As such, he is literally sterile. In direct contrast, Zitkala-Ša presents her mother, who rescues her from the devil, as an emblem of Native fertility in that she has not only created children but also in the sense that she is powerful enough to save Zitkala-Ša from the "white man's devil" (94). The comparison that Zitkala-Ša draws between the threat of the sterile, white devil and the fertile avenger that is her mother is powerful because it presents her mother as a God-like figure who, like the God of Christianity, is more powerful than the devil and provides salvation for her child. Catherine Kuncie, scholar of Native literature, writes, "before the invasion of missionaries, Zitkala-Ša enjoyed an Edenic existence . . . with her mother presiding as God" (74–5). Additionally, Kuncie

describes the white missionaries as a representation of evil who, like Lucifer of the Old Testament, tempt God's creation—in this case, Zitkala-Ša—away from a paradisiacal existence with God: her mother (78).

These images are significant not only in that they depict white missionaries and white culture as a source of cultural sterilization for Native peoples, but also because they present Zitkala-Ša's mother—a Native woman—as a replacement for the God of Christianity. By describing her mother as a god-like figure that saves her from the white devil, Zitkala-Ša depicts her mother, the embodiment of Native femininity, as a superior, overpowering force against the boarding school system and white culture. Thus, Zitkala-Ša's depiction of her mother communicates to the reader that the boarding school acts as a cultural sterilization project. Just as important, it demonstrates that despite these attempts, Zitkala-Ša views her connection to her mother—and her own identity as a Native woman—as the things that will fortify her against the sterilizing boarding school program.

In her writings, Zitkala-Ša both uncovers and combats the boarding school program's attacks against her culture and race through her celebration of Native womanhood and her rejection of white assimilation tactics. She exposes the anti-Indigenous agenda underlying this system through her opposing symbols of sterility—embodied by white culture—and fertility, embodied by her Native mother. In remembering and honoring her mother as a symbol of Native power and femininity, Zitkala-Ša remains connected to her own Native identity, thereby rendering the boarding school apparatus ineffective. Through her reverence towards Native womanhood throughout her stories and her rejection of the Indian school system's sterilization efforts, Zitkala-Ša lays the groundwork for current Indigenous female resistance to assimilation.

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