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Preserving Words

Zitkala-Ša's Natural Appeal to an Environmentally Concerned America

Emily Hopwood Durney

In a time when Beatrix Potter narrated the adventures of a mischievous rabbit who lived under a fir tree, and Jack London's Buck "felt compelled to turn his back upon the fire and the beaten earth around it and to plunge into the forest" (72), Yankton Sioux writer Zitkala-Ša published "School Days of an Indian Girl" in the *Atlantic Monthly*. The turn of the twentieth century brought about iconic, conservationist literature such as London's *The Call of the Wild* and Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* that coincided with a progressive movement in full swing with the election of conservationist President Theodore Roosevelt. The public's increasing concern about "protecting national parks [and] preservation of 'wild' areas" (Tyrell) provided a common value between Native American culture and the White American political climate.

While analyzing Zitkala-Ša's "School Days of an Indian Girl," which describes the author's reservation childhood and federal Indian boarding school experience, Jennifer Ladino asserts that the style of Zitkala-Ša's "exemplary counter-nostalgic literary narrative" (91) uses ideas of nature to confront "Eden ideology" (89) with the truth that the wild frontiers were in fact inhabited and not discovered. Similarly, Ruth Spack suggests that Zitkala-Ša uses "a rhetorical move characteristic of European American captivity tales . . . [she] represents her captured character as both a sympathetic

victim and as a shrewd, courageous, and resilient resistor" (216). Although Spack and Ladino highlight the author's ability to effectively address her audience's personal ideology and modes of storytelling in "School Days of an Indian Girl," it is important to address that Zitkala-Ša's rhetorical use of organic language simultaneously preserves her own mode of storytelling and displays nature's importance to her as a Yankton Sioux woman.

Zitkala-Ša references nature in more complex ways than simply describing landscapes—in "School Days of an Indian Girl" she explores the question of what is truly wild or civilized, exposes themes of captivity and animalistic qualities in humans, and uses playful, natural imagery as an appeal to children and conservationists alike. Because of American society's reignited interest in the natural world, Zitkala-Ša's use of natural themes engages an audience who would have otherwise been indifferent to her cause of addressing the consequences of cultural assimilation and erasure. She accomplishes this by describing her connection with nature romantically and contributing renewed ideas of the importance of preservation. Contemporaneous literature and political movements broadcasted messages of conservation, and Zitkala-Ša's writing can help readers understand the importance of this cause as she poignantly describes how her personal relationship with nature was damaged.

Not only does Zitkala-Ša utilize organic language as a rhetorical move, but her work precedes the previously mentioned conservationist, nature-themed works which have gained status as classical literature. The timing of "School Days of an Indian Girl" displays Zitkala-Ša's genuine intentions as well as her awareness of the social and political climate in 1901; she did not simply follow other popular works. The content that she shared attracts a more environmentally conscious audience to be interested in both their shared natural environment and her distinct Yankton Sioux cultural environment. By appealing to the public's interest in conservation, Zitkala-Ša highlights boarding schools' efforts to erase Indigenous cultures and languages equally worthy of conservation.

Within popular literature and politics of the time, Zitkala-Ša presents nature through three different lenses: conservation, children's education, and the idea of freedom versus civilization. When Theodore Roosevelt entered the presidency in 1901, he led the United States as an advocate of conservation. Concerned with the extinction of various species of wildlife, the president set land-resource conservation as one of his highest priorities.

During this time, natural imagery was not only a popular literary trope, but it was also associated with politics. The United States Forest Association was created, and President Roosevelt established numerous national parks and monuments. While discussing the formation of national parks, Ian Tyrell stated that “forests, waterfalls, and glaciated valleys were, the society argued in a quite conventional argument derived from Romanticism and the idea of the sublime, great ‘undenominational cathedrals’ of physical and educational value ‘and, in a broad sense, religious’” (17). Although Tyrell is referring to nondenominational Christians, Zitkala-Ša’s idea of spirituality is shown to be synonymous with the natural world as she describes her Yankton-Sioux background in “School Days of an Indian Girl,” which creates a common ground between paganism and ideals of Christianity during that time that helps widen her audience.

Zitkala-Ša’s work also created common ground and natural connections with her audience because of the emergence of other popular naturalist literature of Jack London and Beatrix Potter. Potter wrote popular stories that appealed to children through nature by presenting her studies of art and observations of various flora and fauna. Her endearing illustrations and animal stories provided readers with an intimate view of nature. Drawing and writing about all of nature was not done simply for aesthetic pleasure, but as a part of Potter’s scientific studies. Her whimsical stories provide children with educational experiences and have been impactful because of nature’s ability to make people care. Although published a year after Zitkala-Ša’s debut in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild* is another product of the time which reflects the quandaries and interests of American society specifically. The main dog, Buck, is constantly conflicted and stretched between a life in the wild and a life as a sled dog, which makes the reader ponder the virtues of a wild, natural state versus that of a “civilized” one. Similarly, Potter’s main characters are animals who have their own world of societies and adventures. These stories resulted from Potter’s personal experiences with nature; she was inspired by her outdoor surroundings, and through her stories, she encourages her readers to look for the same wonder and beauty she captures in her words and illustrations. Potter and London explored the relationship between animals and humans, or wilderness and civilization. Potter occasionally introduces humans who are antagonistic and predatory, which paints the picture of a troubled

relationship between humans and the natural world—a theme also found in Zitkala-Ša's writing.

Problematically, while much was written and discussed about these conservation movements of the time, Native Americans were often excluded from the narrative. This significantly reveals that the value of nature was separated from the people who originally inhabited and still inhabit those lands, and Zitkala-Ša serves as a welding link between these two concepts. Although Ladino emphasizes the fact that Zitkala-Ša's style was counter-nostalgic and disagreed sometimes with the president's perspective on land, Zitkala-Ša capitalizes off of this newfound concern shown by Americans for land and creatures. By describing herself through organic imagery and describing the boarding school as industrial, Zitkala-Ša creates a binary of freedom and civilization that reveals the harshness and confining effects of boarding schools. Since the United States government had been the source of the boarding schools, Zitkala-Ša's strategy of tracing back and appealing to political views ultimately received attention and aid to the issues she addresses in her writing.

As a political advocate for the Native American people, Zitkala-Ša offered encouragement and guidance concerning treatment of land, as in this 1931 letter to Chief Frank Salatsee. The chief had originally written to the author seeking advice in regard to whether he and others should sell their land for gain and for the sake of easing tensions. In her response, Zitkala-Ša entreats him to value his land and to realize that "once it is gone, you cannot get it back." Zitkala-Ša makes land a priority by setting stark contrasts between the land she grew up on and the boarding school she attended. Her description of the boarding school creates a foil for the outdoor, full-of-life home that she came from. The boarding school's "glaring light . . . whitewashed room . . . [and] bare wooden floor" (Zitkala-Ša 88) display the author's ability to help the reader associate the industrial, unnatural feel with the negative attributes of the school. Traveling to the boarding school, Zitkala-Ša envisioned her destination as a paradisiacal "land of red apples" (86). Ironically, this expectation of abundance and life leads to disappointment as Zitkala-Ša observed the trees turning into telephone poles on the side of the road. This teaches the reader that being drawn to nature is natural, and Zitkala-Ša demonstrates that man-made elements can be a disappointment and a cheap replication compared to nature.

Evidently, one of Zitkala-Ša's aims was to pull upon that innate desire that humans have to care about their habitat. Although the purpose of her writings is not an environmentalist's call to action, she gives herself and her native life natural descriptions to make the environmentalist reader realize the existence of common ground and values. While Beatrix Potter's character, Mr. McGregor, chased a curious rabbit with a garden hoe, innocent indigenous students were severely punished for playing in the snow and not understanding English. Instead of having a wild Peter Rabbit being lost in a structured garden full of fences and gates, a young Zitkala-Ša's "blazing" and like "the moaning wind...tempestuous" (Zitkala-Ša 97) spirit was crushed as she was made to feel like an outsider in structured, cold walls. These descriptions demonstrate how forceful restriction, confinement, and attacks are fundamentally unnatural and morally wrong. Zitkala-Ša recognized society's newfound urgency to protect and preserve, and she appealed to that empathy to increase cultural preservation efforts—especially concerning educational issues.

Zitkala-Ša valued children and their education and recognized that some of the most powerful messages are most effectively preserved and given a voice through children: the impressionable future of society. As president of the National Council of American Indians and secretary of the Society of American Indians, Zitkala-Ša and these organizations "sought to educate Native and non-Native children about American Indian history, traditions, and rights" (Suhr-Sytsma 137). Knowing that one of Zitkala-Ša's aims was to educate children, it is evident that natural imagery in her stories is also appealing to children who can learn and relate to her descriptions and language. Although it is doubtful that children were her sole audience when being published by *Atlantic Monthly*, her connections to children through nature are visible in her texts. Her "School Days of an Indian Girl" and "Old Indian Legends" were included in the curriculum of grade schools. In a letter to Ginn and Company in 1930, Zitkala-Ša stated, "It has been my pleasure to be told by children here in Washington and others in Virginia that one of my stories is in the school reader they are using today." Playing in the snow, in fields, or feeling trapped in the walls of a school with intimidating teachers, distant from any form of nature, are events familiar to most grade school students. Like Suhr-Sytsma states, Zitkala-Ša builds connections with child readers by being relatable and inclusive. Phrases such as "our little lives" and descriptions of dreams of being outdoors with "unlassoed freedom"

cause impressionable young readers to be exposed to Native American legends and traditions (Zitkala-Ša 93, 96). They can then sympathize with and understand the little girl who experienced so much pain and change in her boarding school environment.

While appealing to non-native children, Zitkala-Sa's intention to specifically write to Native American children is supported by her other writing and correspondences. Her writing demonstrates her philosophy that communication between White and Indigenous Americans needs to exist to overcome cultural gaps; however, speaking to her people and giving them a voice was her priority. When responding to Mr. Waddie Gibson in 1931 in regard to citizenship of Native American youth, Zitkala-Ša asserted that "to be a 'citizen' does not make any Indian a 'white man,'" but citizenship gives children the opportunity to have a voice in future decisions. This is evidence that while her writing's natural imagery appeals to children of all backgrounds, she has always been an advocate for the involvement of Native American children. Since she signed many of her correspondences "Yours for the Indian Cause," it is natural that her creative and autobiographical works would preserve her culture and storytelling for the younger generations. Zitkala-Ša also draws on this connection to younger Native readers in "Four Strange Summers" when she describes the discomfort of returning home to the reservation and her family for the summer. She states that "even nature seemed to have no place for me" (Zitkala-Ša 96). Through her writing, Zitkala-Ša relates to Native American youth who have been submitted to assimilation and discrimination. She uses her stories as a tool to help readers find a place in nature again and to describe their common experiences.

As Zitkala-Ša makes clear appeals to native and non-native children through nature, she also presents a paradigm shift, challenging common misconceptions and stereotypes of Indigenous people possessing beastly qualities. Through analyzing civilization and captivity diction in Zitkala-Ša's stories, Ruth Spack noticed the way Whites refer to Zitkala-Ša in animalistic terms. She is told to "[turn] loose to pasture" when she is sent to recruit other Native Americans to attend the boarding school (Zitkala-Ša 106). She also describes feeling like she "was only one of many little animals driven by a herder." However, when first traveling to boarding school in Indiana, Zitkala-Ša surprisingly uses almost animalistic descriptions as she had some of her first up-close and personal interactions with White people outside of the reservation. For example, as she describes that "large men, with heavy

bundles in their hands, halted nearby, and riveted their glassy blue eyes upon us," an image of a slow, burdened ox comes to mind instead of a human (Zitkala-Ša 86). This use of animalistic natural imagery changes the narrative that was frequently used against Native Americans by labeling White people as wild. Turning the tables by using childlike, natural observation, those who are "civilized" are identified through their animalistic characteristics.

In contrast, Zitkala-Ša appeals to her White audience by calling on typical Native American imagery that would have been fairly stereotypical. Describing a summer at home, she describes the Dakota prairies' "tall grasses, over which the wind blew and rolled off in long, shadowy waves" (Zitkala-Ša 98). She describes a pony ride through this terrain as she embraces freedom and a sense of smallness in the vastness of nature. Although her descriptive storytelling has a different form than the oral histories that she grew up hearing, her storytelling maintains the same vision and purpose. Ladino describes how Zitkala-Ša is one of the first Native American authors to make the jump from oral tradition to the written words. Stylistically, she is writing in a way that causes the reader to imagine Zitkala-Ša personally relating these experiences. Zitkala-Ša strove to balance writing in a style true to herself and to oral tradition with the need to appeal to the masses so that her work would actually be considered by mainstream readers. Ladino discusses this tension as "negotiating . . . between traditional Indian culture and the expectations of assimilation into White America" (98). Although it has been debated whether this was successfully done, natural language uniquely played the role of a bridge between the cultures. Since nature was a necessary and central element to her life before boarding school and a priority to readers in the early 1900s, Zitkala-Ša is true to herself in her writing while drawing upon public fascination.

Perhaps most poignantly, Zitkala-Ša uses nature to cause her American readers to feel sympathy as they witness the conflict that Native Americans have suffered when they are caught in a lonely, confusing no-man's-land between their natural homes and the industrial federal schools. In the section "Retrospection" in "An Indian Teacher Among Indians," Zitkala-Ša places her damaged relationship with nature as equally grief-inducing and significant as her damaged relationship with her mother and the Great Spirit, her deity. By showing this deterioration as a direct result of her assimilative schooling and "civilized" surroundings, Zitkala-Ša creates a call for empathy and understanding from the early twentieth-century reader who can expand

his or her concern for “the wild” to a concern for those whose home had been in “the wild.” This is effective because of her “[reliance] on nature as a moral authority—a source of cultural righteousness and original beauty that she sets in opposition to excessive civilization” (Ladino 99). Likening herself to a “cold, bare pole” in comparison to a tree that she once was, Zitkala-Ša’s imagery does much more than create a concern for nature (112). The idea of loss draws the reader to evaluate what kind of loss had taken place to go from a natural to an industrial state. However, acting more than just a whimsical reference to nature and a paradise lost, being “shorn of branches” creates an image of bareness, cold, and lack of connection. This natural imagery references back to her early observations of telegraph poles juxtaposed by the fields and nature surrounding them. A White reader in the 1900s or in twenty-first century America may not exactly understand the significance of a natural home or the Yankton-Sioux culture in which Zitkala-Ša was raised, but they can understand the look and feeling that comes along with a shorn tree.

Zitkala-Ša used natural, organic imagery because she recognized it as a bridge between what is precious to her early twentieth-century audience and what is understandable to her readers timelessly. Ladino, Spack, and Suhr-Sytsma have recognized the persistent presence of children, the captivity rhetoric, and the importance of nature in Zitkala-Ša’s writing. However, organic imagery is the enabling rhetorical tool that makes her stories and the concepts they put forth graspable to the reader. By effectively exposing assimilative procedures in boarding schools as industrial and confining, she displays resilience in preserving her voice and the voice of her people organically through the written word. Zitkala-Ša intentionally played upon the public’s desire to preserve the nostalgic landscapes in the United States by successfully motivating the reader to similarly support and preserve her people and culture.

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