



1-22-2021

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Lund, Amanda (2021) "Victory of the Brave in Zitkala-Ša's The Sun Dance Opera," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol13/iss2/6>

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Victory of the Brave in Zitkala-Ša's *The Sun Dance Opera*

Amanda Lund

The 1913 *Sun Dance Opera*, a collaboration between Dakota Sioux Zitkala-Ša and white music professor William Hanson, is unique in its attempt to merge two cultures. The music is undeniably Westernized, but the story itself remains distinctly Dakota: the young Dakota brave Ohiya (named after Zitkala-Ša's son) must prove his worth as a brave at the sacred Dakota Sun Dance, so that he may win his beloved Winona from the treacherous outsider Sweet Singer. As such, it qualifies for critical analysis as a piece of Dakota literature. Today the opera is seen more as an instrument of civil rights; literary critics such as Jason Murray and Jane Hafen suggest that Zitkala-Ša's ulterior motive for producing *The Sun Dance Opera* was to give Utes an opportunity to perform their sacred dances, which at the time had been outlawed on grounds of violence and indecency. "Zitkala-Ša," says Murray, "develops a strong desire to preserve threatened aspects of American Indian culture such as spiritual beliefs, oral narratives, and traditional ceremonies" (76). While I agree with this statement and believe that the cause to preserve American Indian culture is noble, this should not overshadow the opera's modern critical reception. The opera qualifies as a literary work because it expresses Zitkala-Ša's cultural beliefs as the rest of her writing does, which

arguably does as much for Native American culture as allowing the Utes to perform their Sun Dance. Through analyzing *The Sun Dance Opera* as a literary work, one finds not only her dedication to American Indian expression, but also a mouthpiece for her distinctly Dakota views on masculinity.

For First Nations across North America, American Indian masculinity has been forced to adapt to the modern world from its traditional form, in which “martial presence [brings] cultural family and community” for “Indians, specifically Indian men” (Gercken 44). The adaptation of American Indian masculinity into the modern world has caused the traditional form to grow more distant from its cultural origins and become appropriated by pop culture. As Becca Gercken puts it, contemporary Indian writers deal with “constructing Indian manhood in an age where the most common enemies are failed federal policies, poverty, and alcohol” (38). But what did masculinity mean to Zitkala-Ša, who wrote *The Sun Dance Opera* a century ago, and to her contemporary audience? Being what in modern times could be called a feminist, particularly in Ruth Spack’s analysis of Zitkala-Ša’s personal letters to Carlos Montezuma, Zitkala-Ša’s works are analyzed for their bearings on womanhood and female power, not the role of men. Yet Spack discovers in those selfsame letters that she indeed had her opinions on what was good and desirable in a man, for “Zitkala-Ša comes to the conclusion that she cannot attach herself to a man who wants to live a European American lifestyle and turns instead to ... a Yankton Sioux whose life’s mission is to work among and serve Native people.” (Spack 184) I argue that a close reading of the opera’s story structure is a further manifesto of Zitkala-Ša’s opinions on the power and role of men, which to her and her culture are defined by personal acts of bravery. This core tenet is what makes Dakota masculinity distinct from the male gender role in white America, which tends towards self-aggrandizement and often results in what is modernly known as toxic masculinity. Zitkala-Ša compares these two definitions of masculinity by symbolizing them in her protagonist and antagonist in *The Sun Dance Opera*, and, just as she chose a proudly Native man over one who was mentally colonized, ultimately she asserts the Dakota definition over the white.

This is not to say, however, that the white America contemporary to Zitkala-Ša scorned Native masculinity because it was different and even superior to their own; often they admired and romanticized it in their written media. The issue is that, because popular white culture did not look deeper into Native masculinity, the meaning behind it—personal bravery—was

more often than not lost on them. One article contemporary with Zitkala-Ša, “The Making of a Chief,” demonstrates this in the way that it never explores the Native definition of bravery that is given by Chief Horse Eagle. Published in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1927, it is a story about a white outpost in the West that decides to use the traditional tests of the local Native Americans to determine who will be their own chief. With a brilliant rhetorical question, “What is pain in proof of courage?” (Callahan L9), the chief offers a doorway into his peoples’ understanding about how their way of life prizes acts of courage as triumphs of personal integrity. But the story skims over this in favor of the action, proceeding immediately to “What is the third test?” (L9) of becoming chief. Even here, the white man is thinking only of the physical action, not of the inner purpose or motivation.

The rhetorical leap from Chief Horse Eagle’s question to the values of Native men is not a difficult one, it is simply never made. The arguably obvious connection between Native masculinity and personal valor is lost on the white audience of the *Los Angeles Times*. An implicit comparison between Native masculinity and white masculinity arises in the outpost’s decision not to use the first trial, deeming it too painful (L9). The story offers plenty of opportunity for insight into Native American masculinity which is never taken, and that oversight is culture-wide. This is what makes Zitkala-Ša’s *The Sun Dance Opera* critical, because the opera is a rare instance of Native manhood being told to white audiences, not by a fellow white but by a Native. The opera is an opportunity for her to use the interactions of her protagonist and antagonist, both male, to help her white audience finally make the connection between honor and Dakota masculinity.

Zitkala-Ša uses her antagonist, Sweet Singer, as the antithesis to Dakota male honor. Sweet Singer is the first character the audience meets and is handcrafted to be despicable, a disgrace to the Dakota meaning of manhood that Zitkala-Ša touts. Zitkala-Ša opens the entire opera with a chant by Sweet Singer, exposing both the predicament he has gotten himself into, and the cowardly course of action he takes to get out of it. His overwhelming question in this miniature soliloquy is “How can I hide the shame of stealing from our medicine men, the sacred love leaves?” and the answer he comes up with is to “hie to the land of the Sioux” (Zitkala-Ša 131). Rather than face the punishment for his sacrilege, he flees to the Sioux, abusing their hospitality, to escape the rightful consequences of his actions. Sweet Singer’s decision flies in the face of what Gercken calls “a specifically masculine interpretation

of Indian identity that, though it risks being futile and defeated, offers the possibility of being productive and triumphant” (43–44). By this definition, Zitkala-Ša’s antagonist can hardly be called a Native brave, because he would rather make a safer and more duplicitous decision than follow an honorable path with a chance of negative consequences for him. He allows his fear of losing face for his dishonorable actions to override his commitment to personal integrity. Sweet Singer not only perpetrates evil deeds and thoughts, but *hides* them. In Dakota culture, where a man’s external deeds are to match his internal bravery, Sweet Singer’s kind of deceit is outrageous.

On a subtextual level, I argue that Sweet Singer is Zitkala-Ša’s personification of white masculinity. After all, his decision to abandon the Shoshone Maid bears striking resemblance to the American trope of the man of the house abandoning his family. Zitkala-Ša would not have to look far in her life for an example of how prideful white masculinity could be. She could stop at William Hanson, her collaborator on the opera, who “[took] over, making the opera and ritual his own through a sentimental colonialism” (Hafen 109), or at Col. Richard Henry Pratt, who was once a close colleague of hers but “went on the attack, printing caustic articles” (Spack 186) about Zitkala-Ša’s anti-assimilationist writings. The conceit and backbiting exhibited in these white men sound much like Zitkala-Ša’s antagonist, who is met with defeat in her opera. Zitkala-Ša had plenty of sources in her life from which to draw inspiration from for Sweet Singer, her antagonist and symbol of white masculinity’s toxicity.

The way Zitkala-Ša reveals that Sweet Singer symbolizes the white interpretation of manhood is through the specific situations she has him operate in. She gives him plot roles that resemble historic white relations towards Natives, too closely to be coincidental. Firstly, his very status in the opera is as an outsider, a “gossip boastful stranger,” a “Shoshone, a stranger in [their] village.” (Zitkala-Ša 132) The motif of a stranger bearing secret ill intentions and potential harm, taken also with the fact that the Dakotas are honor-bound to show him hospitality, is easily interpreted as an allusion to the initial white settlers of America, and to their dealings with Natives ever since. Notice also the scene where Sweet Singer takes it upon himself to be a teacher of Sun Dance songs, thinking he has an opportunity to beguile more Dakotas with his voice. This mirrors a situation more contemporary and personal for Zitkala-Ša and others of her people: the white man’s attempt to ‘civilize’ and ‘educate’ Native Americans with his own culture,

which sounded noble enough but was truly motivated by pride. Over and over, Sweet Singer is placed in the role not of a proper Dakota brave, but of an oppressor that echoes white treatment of Natives both in tactic and motivation. Therefore, while Zitkala-Ša certainly wrote *The Sun Dance Opera* to give the Utes some religious freedom, she also used it to subtly assert Dakota manhood over the conceited masculinity espoused by white America.

In contrast to Zitkala-Ša's antagonist, Sweet Singer, her protagonist, Ohiya, is pure-hearted and a paragon of Dakota masculinity. Ohiya displays true Dakota masculinity through his actions, which are motivated by his love for Winona and performed with his respect for the Dakota ways. He proclaims in his duet with Winona that "Love is for valor, not for empty words" (Zitkala-Ša 132). Afterwards, he follows through on his statement; he does not reappear until two scenes later because he is busy carving a flute for Winona, and when he does, it is to serenade her with it. Hafen claims that in the opera, this serenade was played on "a traditional Native flute that Raymond [her husband] had given Gertrude [Zitkala-Ša] as a wedding gift" (104). This deeply personal touch in the opera reinforces that Ohiya's upholding of tradition is motivated by both honor and true feeling, which to Dakota Zitkala-Ša is everything that manhood should be. Ohiya follows the Dakota courtship traditions with religious dedication, because in his mind, winning Winona fairly is the only way to win her at all, and the only way she would approve of. Zitkala-Ša does not give him overmuch dialogue because she does not need to; it is the youth's heartfelt acts that display his inner bravery and ergo his Dakota masculinity, to the acclaim of both Native and white audiences.

The most profound of Ohiya's acts is Ohiya's climactic trial, the Dakota religious event that Zitkala-Ša centers the entire opera around: the Sun Dance. The fact that it is Ohiya and not Sweet Singer who actually performs the Dance, reinforces the association of Ohiya with true, traditional Dakota masculinity. The Sun Dance is an opportunity for braves to make vows and seek spiritual aid in fulfilling them, but such favor must be earned—braves who take it on must dance for five days straight with no food, rest, or water. At this point in the opera, Utes would then perform the illegalized Sun Dance itself, which as Murray notes was the high point for a white audience. "Somewhat ironically," he writes that Zitkala-Ša makes, for herself and for the Utes, an opportunity to circumvent white authority "in front of and also to the acclaim of non-Indian audiences" (76). However, not only

does Zitkala-Ša use the opera to circumvent white oppression, but as Murray describes it, she uses it to ‘ghost dance’ around white masculinity with her own Dakota version.

As it relates to the plot structure of the opera, the grueling Sun Dance tests Ohiya’s endurance to the utmost, metaphorically representing his capacity for commitment both to Winona and to the vow he has made to her. The acts of Ohiya are motivated by honest love and personal valor, and in keeping with the Dakota male gender role, his fair-won success is how Winona knows he is worthy of her. When Winona’s father declares, “At the close of the Sun Dance . . . I shall give my daughter to him who answers my requirements of a man” (Zitkala-Ša 146), he is not merely referring to the physical endurance tested by the dance. To him, that physical endurance only signifies as a manifestation of personal integrity, of Native American determination and loyalty—in this quote, he may as well be a direct mouthpiece for Zitkala-Ša. Zitkala-Ša crafts Ohiya to be the perfect Dakota brave, a marriage of physical strength and strength of character. The moral stipulations for a male in white culture are comparatively few and shallow, and Zitkala-Ša makes it clear that she finds this a grave failing, given how much of Ohiya’s character development revolves around honor.

It is Ohiya’s moral character that, despite the odds, allows Zitkala-Ša to give him victory, thereby empowering the Native man against the white. Because Sweet Singer stands for white manhood and Ohiya for Dakota manhood, the triumph of Ohiya over Sweet Singer is Zitkala-Ša’s assertion of her culture and people over white domination. On the last day of the dance, braves have collapsed all around Ohiya, exhausted by Sweet Singer’s relentless voice, but Ohiya, though he almost falters, finishes the dance on his feet. Zitkala-Ša did not create an infallible protagonist, but she did create one who upholds the Dakota definition of manhood: courage, honor, and determination. This definition is one that Zitkala-Ša has internalized, as shown in her letters to Carlos Montezuma. Ruth Spack’s analysis of these letters makes mention of how at one point, when Montezuma claims that it was the white man’s education that made him successful, “[Zitkala-Ša] exhorts him to reconsider this view and to recognize that it was his own character that led to his success.” (Spack, 196) The idea Zitkala-Ša expresses here, that moral strength leads to victory, was inherited from her Dakota culture. She makes this personal belief manifest in Ohiya’s triumph: his virtues, honesty, and courage made him strong enough to succeed over

Sweet Singer. The plot resolution of *The Sun Dance Opera* is a demonstration of the traditional Dakota belief that a man needs strength of soul to perform true deeds of bravery.

Just as Zitkala-Ša's protagonist succeeds because of his bravery, her antagonist is simultaneously damned for his foul play, a kind of karma that reflects Zitkala-Ša's pride in Dakota manhood. Because of the sacredness of the Sun Dance, Zitkala-Ša chose to have Sweet Singer's justice served to him then, in the form of the Shoshone Maid that he jilted before the opera began. Now a witch, the Shoshone maid interrupts the Sun Dance to spirit Sweet Singer away, as she swore earlier, "With immortal witchery his heart to win away . . . he'll die for me that day." (Zitkala-Ša 149) The perfidious actions that Sweet Singer makes throughout the opera, motivated as they are by self-aggrandizement, lead directly to his death at the Sun Dance. Through the timing and method of Sweet Singer's demise, Zitkala-Ša has effectively made an example of him and of the white masculinity he symbolizes. Culturally and in the context of the Opera, the Sun Dance is a religious celebration of Dakota masculine valor; it is then that the inner man becomes the outer man, and Sweet Singer's inner man is damnable. The decision to have it be the Shoshone maid who kills him is of import as well, for given that Sweet Singer is symbolic of dominant white masculinity, her revenge on Sweet Singer belongs not just to her but to any woman or Native American betrayed by a white man. Because of the symbolism of these characters established in the opera up to this point, Ohiya's victory over Sweet Singer is in reality Zitkala-Ša's conviction that a Dakota man is superior to a white man.

In contrast to Zitkala-Ša's Dakota values, white American masculinity only has to do with bravery so far as it can be applied to showing off. In comparison, Dakota manhood is a profound fusion of bravery and honor, which culminates in physical deeds but is not defined by them. Zitkala-Ša upholds the Dakota male gender role by causing the opera's events to favor Ohiya and bring justice upon Sweet Singer, because Ohiya is obedient to that role and Sweet Singer scorns it. In terms of plot structure, it satisfies Zitkala-Ša's audience to have Ohiya win, because Sweet Singer thinks only of protecting and aggrandizing himself, while Ohiya truly loves Winona and wins her by honor. Therefore, Ohiya becomes Zitkala-Ša's personification of the Dakota's ideal man.

Zitkala-Ša uses *The Sun Dance Opera* not only to demonstrate Dakota manhood, but to assert it over white manhood. She turns Sweet Singer

into a symbol for white masculinity, in that his primary concern is not with maintaining honor, but with the self-aggrandizing illusion of honor. When Ohiya triumphs over Sweet Singer, that victory represents the triumph of male Dakota valor over male white vanity. This subversive tactic is effective because Zitkala-Ša's symbol of white masculinity is not white at all, making it difficult to realize how nationalistic Zitkala-Ša is being in her usage of that symbol. While Zitkala-Ša was certainly being subversive in writing the opera in the first place, given the situation with the Utes' Sun Dance, she was also being subversive literarily. She declared her conviction that her culture's interpretation of manhood is superior to the dominant one, in the face and under the nose of that dominant culture.

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