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# Recognizing Freedom

## Zitkala-Ša's Fight for Native Citizenship

*Camille J. Karpowitz*

Before The Indian Citizenship Act of 1924, the topic of citizenship for Native Americans was debated among the Native community, Congress, and citizens of the United States. Zitkala-Ša (a Native American author, educator, and activist) strongly favored citizenship for Natives, as evidenced by her membership and involvement in various political organizations—including the General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC), Society of American Indians (SAI), and the National Council of American Indians (NCAI). Scholars place her as a key player during the 1920s movement for Native rights and citizenship as she helped make people aware of and act on the issue. Zitkala-Ša believed that Natives could gain freedom through citizenship rather than trying to separate themselves from the United States further. As a result, modern critics have labeled Zitkala-Ša, as Tadeusz Lewandowski notes, as either an assimilationist or someone who “lives a painful, liminal existence” by not being able to fully connect with either Native Americans or citizens of the United States (36).

Elements of Zitkala-Ša's argument for citizenship are addressed by scholars including P. Jane Hafen and Cathleen Cahill, who analyze her speeches, which are more direct in their petition; however, these critics overlook the same themes in her poetry. When her poetry is overlooked, we miss a fuller picture of her vision of what citizenship would entail, and also neglect how she uses the structure of her poetry as a form of literary activism itself. Zitkala-Ša's

literary activism for Native citizenship does what other minorities (or otherwise oppressed groups) have done before when seeking equal rights: uses the familiarity of content through the sampling of American texts to both place their group within the American identity and show how white Americans (or those in power) have not been living up to their ideals or values in their treatment of minorities. Zitkala-Ša uses the strategy of familiarity to argue for Native rights through early speeches like “Side by Side,” which narrates the differing ways of life for European-Americans and Natives, and then expands on these ideas in her poem “The Red Man’s America.” In this poem, Zitkala-Ša samples the format of “My Country Tis of Thee” in order to show both white and Native audiences that citizenship for Natives is the best step forward. Throughout her poem, Zitkala-Ša works within the often-contradictory notions of individualism and civic engagement to explore the possibilities of freedom as a balance of self-governance and participation in government that would both be enjoyed through citizenship.

Written in 1896, “Side by Side” begins Zitkala-Ša’s activism for Native rights and overall better treatment of Natives. Even at a young age, she understood her audience, both white Americans and Natives, and the importance of appealing to the former by using familiarity to catch their attention. Her speech begins by praising the United States, declaring that “America [is] a nation of free men and free institutions,” and continues by describing the grand features of industry that Americans would take pride in like the “gigantic enterprises, great factories, commercial highways” (Zitkala-Ša 222). But quickly after she depicts the America that is familiar, she introduces the “great wilderness,” the America that Natives knew before Europeans came along. She tells of “the hills [that] resound with the hunter’s shout” or how “the river glides his light canoe” and even that “by gleaming council fire brave warriors are stirred by the rude eloquence of their chief” (223). These descriptions of the land show how the American land Natives knew and loved had been sacrificed for this new America; the Native way of life has been erased. However, this claim could have fallen on deaf ears if Zitkala-Ša had not first spoken of an America that was familiar to non-Natives. In fact, when the SAI was created over a decade later, the members “understood that [Natives] existed in a world which inevitably included European Americans and that their self-definition could not exist without some interaction with the latter and that Native American identity could not exist apart from white society” (Patterson). While Native identity should remain true to its roots, in order for positive change to happen, the use of familiarity was important to bring

outsiders into the cause.

Activists used familiar language to motivate the white American audience in a way that would draw them to the cause. Most notably in “Side by Side,” Zitkala-Ša refers to the Declaration of Independence, saying, “America entered . . . with the declaration that ‘all men are born free and equal’” (Zitkala-Ša 226). But she simultaneously points out the failure to create equality by asking the question, “can you as consistent Americans deny equal opportunities . . . to an American people in their struggle to rise from ignorance and degradation?” (226). Zitkala-Ša refers to this important American text to show how the ideals and values espoused in the document are not being met. In other words, Zitkala-Ša confronts white Americans with the disconnect between their profession of equality and the plight of Native peoples.

In addition to Natives using or referring to the Declaration of Independence, this same literary technique has previously been used in times throughout American history. The familiar and traditional American texts demonstrate and reflect the importance of new movements for neglected and oppressed groups in the United States. One example which came during the women’s suffrage movement leading up to 1920 was the “Declaration of Sentiments,” in which Elizabeth Cady Stanton used the format and similar wording of the Declaration of Independence in order to make the argument for women’s equality and voting rights. Scholars recognize that Zitkala-Ša and other native activists “seized on ratification [of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment] to remind recently enfranchised white women that many of the ‘First Americans’ still lacked citizenship,” (Cahill 48) so we could also recognize that Native authors used many of the same tactics in creating a dialogue specifically about Native citizenship. The NCAI also created a petition similar to the Declaration of Sentiments that uses the same language as the Declaration of Independence. In her analysis of the petition, Hafen points out that “the echo of the Declaration of Independence is certainly intentional and consistent with assuming the audience’s familiarity and reverence for the original document” (Hafen 207). Zitkala-Ša also, on behalf of the NCAI, wrote to Senator King, talking specifically about land and property rights and using the language of “redress of grievances,” once again emphasizing the connection to the language of the Declaration of Independence and its values (Letter to Senator King).

Despite Zitkala-Ša’s direct criticism of the United States’ and their treatment of Natives, she, for the purposes of gaining citizenship for Natives (and therefore further rights), attempted to demonstrate how Natives have supported

the United States. In *The American Indian Magazine*, where her poem “The Red Man’s America” was first published in 1917, Zitkala-Ša and other editors wrote about how Natives are able and willing to provide military support saying, “The Cherokee Indian nation has volunteered its services to the country in the event of war,” and “Indians contributed over \$7,000 to war funds” (*American Indian Magazine*). Amy Foley analyzes such political strategy by asserting, “Zitkala-Ša views American nationalism, by way of economic and military support, as the primary way for Indians to obtain equality and freedom” (Foley 16). While labeling her political strategy as nationalism is highly debatable, the point of the appeal remains; Zitkala-Ša is showing how Natives have contributed to the country in various ways, attempting to include them in the national identity.

The poem itself further underscores this emphasis on patriotic contributions. By parodying the song “My Country ‘Tis of Thee,” the audience can immediately recognize and understand the patriotism that the parody is meant to demonstrate. For example, in the original song “My Country ‘Tis of Thee,” the word liberty comes up repeatedly. With the lyric “Author of liberty,” European colonists take center stage in establishing freedom in America. The use of the word continues with “Sweet land of liberty,” which also highlights the American continent as the land of opportunity and freedom. Following the mentions of liberty and freedom, the lyric “all who breathes partake” demonstrates the belief of the American people that anyone can participate in the freedoms that the country provides. The power of Zitkala-Ša’s parody “The Red Man’s America” is that she still has patriotic elements while simultaneously being able to criticize the failure to live up to such patriotic values when it comes to encountering Native issues.

Additionally, Zitkala-Ša exposes a disconnect between a belief in freedom and the realities of government and colonist interference in the lives of Natives. By borrowing the structure of the song while altering key features of the poetic content, Zitkala-Ša seeks to change the narrative that the American land belongs to white Europeans who have since become citizens, focusing instead on the fact that it has been the Native people’s land all along. For example, she reframes a line by saying “land where OUR fathers died” (Zitkala-Ša 173). This reclaims America as the home and the land of the Natives and reestablishes that the Native people have suffered and sacrificed their lives and freedoms at the hands of colonists. In particular, the capitalization to emphasize the word “OUR” acts as a reminder that the Natives’ history has been forgotten about and erased.

Due to the interference in Native lands, many Natives were concerned with the idea of turning to the United States for legitimacy when the government had continually taken away their land. Scholar Mishuana Goeman points out Native authors who discuss the issue of Native belonging and identity as “symbolic relationships and obligations rather than inherent rights bounded through nation-state models of borders and citizenship” (Goeman 299). Goeman looks to writer Esther Belin, who sets aside the need for citizenship because she asserts, “Land and Human beings are one, bound together” already, meaning there is little need for formal, government-recognized citizenship when there is already a natural tie to the land (qtd. in Goeman 299). But rather than using the fact that America is Native land as a reason to push the government out, Zitkala-Ša departs from other activists’ beliefs and pushes Natives into the American identity.

Coupled with concerns about the government not respecting tribal land, there were further concerns about seeking help from the government, given the Native experience with government oversight. Prior to citizenship for Natives, Native tribes existed under a legal status called wardship, which placed them under the supervision of the federal government but denied them any of the benefits that come from citizenship. While Zitkala-Ša, like other Native authors and activists, strongly opposed wardship, saying “government inherited its legal victims, the American Indians, whom to this day we hold as wards, not as citizens of their own freedom loving land” (Zitkala-Ša 155), she remained an advocate for citizenship, unlike other native activists. Laura Kellogg, a founder of the SAI, for example, “was less certain than her peers . . . that US citizenship was the solution to the problems facing Native people” (Cahill 43). Instead, Kellogg asked, “Why could Native nations not coexist with the United States while maintaining their sovereignty and land base?” (qtd. in Cahill 44). As Cahill explains, Kellogg thus advocated for tribally held property. While only one example, Kellogg demonstrates the tension and talks that were happening about citizenship within Native activist circles. Zitkala-Ša, in contrast to those that may have opted for a different type of citizenship or none altogether, maintained that citizenship was important. By reclaiming the American identity through both the land and the people, her poem places Natives back in the fabric of the nation making it easier to advance the argument for citizenship.

Despite these concerns from some Natives, Zitkala-Ša maintained her belief in the importance of citizenship. Her understanding of citizenship seems to parallel how scholar Evelyn Glenn illustrates both the benefits and

difficulties of the topic when she writes that “citizenship . . . has been a key nexus for creating both equality and inequality” (1). She continues by explaining that citizenship creates equal status and equal treatment under the law, but “defining membership . . . entails drawing distinctions that create the category of ‘non-citizens’ who are not entitled to the same rights” (1). This insight helps acknowledge why people thought it was important for any previously excluded group in America to be citizens of the United States: citizenship would be the first step to being seen as equals. But in order to make progress on the front of equality, there had to be confrontation to acknowledge the lack of Native rights and citizenship. Zitkala-Ša’s changes to the original song in her poem fundamentally shift the writing from patriotism to petition. For example, she rewrites the first line from “’tis of thee” to “’tis to thee” (173). The change demonstrates that the poem will not be a praise of the country but rather a call for action and attention when it comes to Native issues. It is a petition to the government and the American people as a whole to listen to Natives and the “pleas I bring” (173). From the pleas and petitions, Zitkala-Ša takes steps in trying to get others to acknowledge the issue and the lack of equality that Natives currently have from not being citizens.

Along with the inequality of Natives not being citizens, the petition also explains what freedoms citizenship would provide. A common way we view freedom and liberty is by defining it as a lack of government interference and a focus on individualism; Zitkala-Ša recognizes the importance of this type of freedom for Natives throughout both her speeches and her poetry. In her poem, she points out that “Thy Red man is not free” to show there is currently a lack of freedom in the sense of individualism, followed by the line “political bred ills” (173). Through this line, she addresses the colonial mentality of the American government and how it has caused harm and a lack of freedom. This sentiment is also found in her works like her 1921 essay “Bureaucracy Versus Democracy,” which is more commonly cited by scholars in understanding her views on citizenship. For example, scholars recognize how “she contrasted Natives as federal wards controlled by government agents (bureaucracy) with the exercise of self-governance (democracy)” (Cahill 46). Cahill points out themes of needing a less restrictive government to allow for freedom. In Zitkala-Ša’s speech, she says, “official power . . . have been augmented, impinging upon the liberty-loving Indians of America” (245). Zitkala-Ša shows through both writings how freedom *from* government—in particular government oppression—is important because past government action has shown a lack of respect for the rights

of the Native people. Zitkala-Ša advocated for an individualistic type of freedom and wanted self-governance.

While individualism is important to maintain, and the prioritization of individual freedoms is also crucial to American values and American politics, Zitkala-Ša simultaneously asserts that a complete absence of government is not the solution. Instead, she maintains that if Natives became citizens, these individual freedoms would be better protected and the ability for self-governance would be better recognized and respected. In other words, only through the rights of citizenship that other American citizens enjoy, will Native peoples achieve liberty. Critics have noticed how Zitkala-Ša advocates for citizenship while at the same time calling for more native rights and freedoms, saying “despite her . . . advocacy for US citizenship—[Zitkala-Ša] was a fierce defender of Native peoples” (Lewandowski 44). Critics label the balance as a “rhetorical tightrope walk” (Foley 18). However, those ideas are not mutually exclusive and instead can work together.

Zitkala-Ša understands citizenship to allow more freedom from government, but additionally, she tells how with citizenship would come government responsiveness to the needs of Native peoples. Zitkala-Ša writes about how it was, at the time, challenging for the government to be incentivized to do anything for Natives despite their pleas. In her poem, she states, “let Congress, silence break” (173)—in other words, the inaction of Congress and other government entities are not allowing for freedom and does not help Native peoples. However, Zitkala-Ša still recognizes that the government can make way for freedom—specifically, you can have freedom *through* government action. Believing “citizenship had the potential to solve tribal injustices” (Clow 36), Zitkala-Ša sees that the government can create the conditions needed for people to live how they would want. In a pamphlet entitled “Information Services for Indian Citizen Voters on Scattered Indian Reservations,” Zitkala-Ša continues the rhetoric of Natives helping themselves *if* given the tools to do so, even after they gained citizenship. She advocates educating Natives on government issues so they can make informed voting decisions; in this example, Native freedom is facilitated by government action to ensure better access to voter information. This idea is expanded to other issues as well, as Zitkala-Ša shows that when government creates the conditions necessary, Natives can have more freedom.

At a time when calls for Native citizenship were met with internal resistance from those who worried it would merely constrain Native freedom—as they would now belong to the same government that initially took away their



traditions, land, and lives; Zitkala-Ša stands as an activist to express that there is actually more freedom to be had as a citizen of the United States. While some critics understand Zitkala-Ša as someone who wants to work within the limitations of an oppressive government, other scholars see her as an activist who speaks to the importance of citizenship. These scholars look to her speeches but tend to overlook how citizenship is addressed in her poetry. When we ignore the symbolism and structure of the literary choices in her poetry, we miss how she (like other minority groups before) has taken familiar American language and values and converted them for her cause, which she has done since the beginning of her activist writings, as demonstrated through her speeches like “Side by Side” and through her work in the *American Indian Magazine* and other informational texts. In her poem, “The Red Man’s America,” Zitkala-Ša demonstrates how Natives value key American principles like freedom, while also explaining to Native audiences that freedom can include both individualism and civic engagement. Reading Zitkala-Ša’s poems, and especially reading them through the lens of these themes, creates a greater understanding among both white and Native audiences, that citizenship is central to the achievement of equality for all people and freedom in every sense, both freedom from and through government. This balance of individualism and civic engagement does not stop at Native issues, but instead reflects the tension that is within the United States government structure which has been felt throughout the country’s history. By demonstrating how Natives are working through this balance, Zitkala-Ša once again places Natives in the identity of American citizens.

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