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Toni Aguiar
Brigham Young University, taguiar@byu.edu

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“Painted as Political”
The Cultural Significance within Zitkala-Sa’s Boarding School Narratives

Toni Aguiar

As a young girl growing up on the Yankton Sioux Reservation at the turn of the twentieth century, Zitkala-Ša’s life was completely centered on her Dakota mother who taught her religion, moral values, and the importance of Dakota Sioux cultural practices and traditions. In her story “The Beadwork,” Zitkala-Ša reflects on one specific tradition she learned from her mother. While reflecting on her mother’s artistic beadwork, Zitkala-Ša proclaims she is proud to wear the moccasins her mother “worked upon . . . for her small daughter” (73). Later, the moccasins her mother made for her were confiscated and replaced with shoes as she entered the White’s Indiana Manual Labor Institute, one of the many Native American boarding schools in the United States. The forceful transition from moccasins to shoes was but one of many instances where a significant part of her Dakota identity was physically stripped from her at the boarding school. Like other Native American children entering the federal Indian boarding school system throughout the United States, Zitkala-Ša’s clothing, hair, language, and religious practice were forcefully taken from her.

Because of these affronts to her cultural identity, Zitkala-Ša naturally reacted in distress, and often rebelled against the wishes of her teachers. The autobiographical accounts of her boarding school experiences, outlined in
her 1900 collection “School Days of an Indian Girl,” reveal repeated examples of her resistance. Her instances of rebellion have been frequently framed as a conscious political rebellion against colonial forces (Terrance 623) or as emotionally charged reactions positioned as a “critique of settler colonialism” (Yu 33). Ernest Stromberg, among others, suggests that Zitkala-Ša could not have been a political actor in her childhood and advocates against labeling Zitkala-Ša as assimilationist. Both those who argue that Zitkala-Ša was politically aware as a student in boarding school and those who argue that her actions are not assimilationist have entrenched the critical conversation surrounding her childhood in the type of analysis more consistent with her adult life of political activism: whether she is pro- or anti-assimilation. Despite Zitkala-Ša’s Dakota upbringing pointing toward a desire for cultural preservation as the primary motivator for her rebelliousness in her youth, the constant focus on rebellion within the conversation still centers colonialism.

As one of many scholars involved in analyzing Zitkala-Ša’s time at boarding school, Laura Terrance draws on Zitkala-Ša’s boarding school experiences to argue that Zitkala-Ša was aware enough in her childhood to be resistant to assimilation. Terrance inspects Zitkala-Ša’s reaction to the violation of having her hair cut in boarding school by accounting for the cultural influence of Zitkala-Ša’s Dakota background, saying that “because shingled hair signifies cowardice, [Zitkala-Ša’s] political consciousness, culturally informed, resists the stigmatization and impels her to struggle” (623). Despite Terrance’s acknowledgement of the cultural aspects of Zitkala-Ša’s resistance, she designates Zitkala-Ša’s “political consciousness” as the resistant factor to the cutting of her hair and not the desire for cultural preservation, both implying that the child Zitkala-Ša was aware enough to hold a distinctly political determination and that her determination was decidedly against the colonialist mindset. When Zitkala-Ša is first taken away to boarding school in her narrative “The Land of Red Apples,” separated from everything she knows, her first impulse is to yearn for solace in the familiarity of her culture, and by extension, her mother. Zitkala-Ša remarks that during her first night at the boarding school, she “was tucked into bed with one of the tall girls, because she talked to [her] in [her] mother tongue and seemed to soothe [her]” (89). That night, Zitkala-Ša cries herself to sleep because her “mother was [not] near to wipe [her] tears away” (89). Zitkala-Ša’s clear longing for her mother and culture contextualizes the rest of her stories, ones rife with resistance, as deeply grounded in her desire...
Terrance identifies Zitkala-Ša’s childhood struggle against being separated from other vital parts of her heritage as intertwined with her Dakota culture, yet this necessary further examination of Zitkala-Ša’s writings reveals that her “culturally informed” struggles are personal, rather than political.

Unlike those who frame Zitkala-Ša’s boarding school resistance as a political decision, Stromberg argues that ignoring the context in which Zitkala-Ša exists is equally as unfair as expecting her to take a political stance in childhood. In his article, Stromberg analyzes the rhetoric of Zitkala-Ša’s childhood experiences, exploring irony in her texts that demonstrates appeals to her audience’s “pathos, pity, and indignation for the abuses and isolation” she experienced in boarding school (104). He asserts that her use of “sentimental literary tropes” in her autobiographical writings allows her to better critique colonialist stances, implying that references to her home and mother are useful to Zitkala-Ša as literary weapons (108). At the conclusion of his analysis, Stromberg makes a disclaimer:

I would argue that the problem in terms of understanding figures such as Zitkala-Ša . . . arises from a neglect of the specific historical situation from which [her] writings emerge. [Zitkala-Ša was] thrust into educational systems over which [she] had no control. To label [her] as ‘assimilationist’ reduces the complexity of what [she] actually wrote. (Stromberg 107)

Exploring the “historical situation” from which Zitkala-Ša operates is important, yet should be done simultaneously with an examination of Zitkala-Ša’s more specific and personal cultural context; otherwise, the narratives of childhood resistance within her texts become politicized as conscious rebellion against colonialist assimilation.

As Stromberg alludes to in his analysis of Zitkala-Ša’s inclusion of sentimental references to her home and mother within her boarding school narratives, Zitkala-Ša re-telling of two distinct and contrasting experiences preparing food within “Impressions of an Indian Childhood” and “School Days of an Indian Girl” highlight how her own cultural identity contextualizes her experiences as attacks or affirmations of her humanity as a Dakota child. “Impressions of an Indian Childhood,” which chronologically precedes Zitkala-Ša’s time in boarding school, provides a wealth of cultural background that contextualizes Zitkala-Ša’s later rebellions at school, making it a necessary text to consider in conversation with “School Days of
an Indian Girl.” In the first pre-boarding school childhood narrative, “The Coffee Making,” Zitkala-Ša joyfully and excitedly imitates her mother’s cultural work as she attempts to prepare coffee for an old grandfather. As the man waits for Zitkala-Ša’s mother to return to their tepee, Zitkala-Ša begins to prepare refreshment unprompted: “At once I began to play the part of a generous hostess. I turned to my mother’s coffeepot (78).” She then proceeds to mix coffee grounds with warm river water and “boil” the mixture over a pile of dead ashes. Although the result is far from a perfect, or even acceptable, cup of coffee, the grandfather takes care to act as if nothing is wrong, “respecting [Zitkala-Ša’s] special status as a child, as well as conforming to the doting relationship commonly found between Dakota grandparents and grandchildren” (Kelsey 133). Zitkala-Ša’s attempts to fulfill the role as hostess are clumsy, yet happy imitations of her mother, once again solidifying her mother’s importance in her life and constructing a picture of Dakota culture—both in the ways women behaved, and in the loving and affirming relationships between elders and grandchildren. “The Coffee Making” is in direct contrast to the end of her boarding school story, “The Snow Episode,” wherein Zitkala-Ša is reprimanded for something trivial and sent inside to prepare turnips for the children’s dinner, exemplifying how the influence of her culture motivates her resistance. In a departure from her earlier willingness to “play the part of a generous hostess,” Zitkala-Ša instead maliciously obeys the order to mash the turnips, “grasping the handle with both hands” and “bend[ing] in hot rage over the turnips. . . work[ing] [her] vengeance upon them” (78; 93). When the White authority figure, her teacher, comes to pick up the jar of turnips, the teacher finds that Zitkala-Ša’s aggressive mashing has shattered the bottom of the jar when “the pulpy contents [fall] . . . to the floor” (Zitkala-Ša 94). Although Terrance claims that Zitkala-Ša’s “parody of the command, indeed resistive, asserts her . . . political consciousness” (624), Zitkala-Ša’s extreme revulsion for the command and the turnips seems to instead evoke a yearning for her culture when contrasted with how delicately and graciously she prepares coffee for the grandfather. In both stories, Zitkala-Ša prepares food, yet in “The Coffee Making,” Zitkala-Ša is embraced in a loving familial environment where the duty of hostess is not a burden to her, while in “The Snow Episode” the preparation of food is used as a punishment within a harsh, unfamiliar space. With the stories’ stark differences in mind, Zitkala-Ša’s rebellion becomes illuminated with cultural insight; while she was using malicious compliance
to rebel against her teachers, that rebellion stemmed from the recognition
that the turnips and the task were affronts to her culture. The turnips acted as
a foreign replacement for her diet on the reservation, and the task attempted
to replace the role she held within her tribe.

Defense of the child Zitkala-Ša from claims that she is an assimilationist is
necessary, but this defense remains incomplete without shifting from a colonial
mindset to a Dakota one. Penelope Kelsey contributes a Native American
cultural awareness to the discussion of Zitkala-Ša’s autobiographical works,
asserting that the Dakota genres Zitkala-Ša uses inform her accounts of her
boarding school experiences and point to a motivation in her writing that
goes beyond simply problematizing assimilationist agendas (127). Kelsey
provides the background necessary to view Zitkala-Ša’s rebellious or resistant
actions in “School Days of an Indian Girl” as additional “educational tales,
which indigenize the genre, as well as affirm Dakota cultural continuity and
sovereignty” (132). For example, Kelsey illustrates how important mothers’
roles, habits, and opinions are to Native daughters, including Zitkala-Ša:
“The girls model their speech on their own mothers’ narratives” expressing
how “kinship relations. . .form the core of Dakota society” (134). In Zitkala-
Ša’s “The Cutting of My Long Hair,” the importance of her mother’s opinion
is strikingly apparent. Her main fear with having “shingled hair” is being
seen by her Dakota mother as a “coward” or “unskilled warrior” (90). The
fear created by her loss of autonomy over her own body prompts her to
“moan . . . for [her] mother,” the same mother who impressed upon her the
dignity and importance of preserving one’s hair (90). By highlighting the
integrality of strong Dakota familial relationships and emphasizing Zitkala-
Ša’s attachment to the cultural knowledge and practices her mother taught,
Kelsey contextualizes Zitkala-Ša’s distress at her teachers’ forcible attempts
at divorcing her from her culture as Zitkala-Ša’s desire for cultural continuity.

Kelsey’s cultural context prompts a reexamination of Zitkala-Ša’s
stories, specifically focusing on the connection she displays to her mother,
and by extension, her culture. Within “Impressions of an Indian Childhood,”
Zitkala-Ša repeatedly reflects on ‘impressions’ she gained from her mother:
traditions, bits of knowledge, skills, and memories. Each of these ‘impressions’
shows the deep reverence Zitkala-Ša attributes to her mother, but her
reflection on learning beadwork is distinct: “I became intensely interested in
[my mother’s] designing. With a proud, beaming face I watched her work .
. . It took many trials before I learned . . . My mother required of me original
designs for my lessons in beading (73-74). Zitkala-Ša’s pride in her mother’s work motivates her to pursue her own cultural learning within the moment of the story, and, later, contributes to the poignancy of the confiscation of her beaded moccasins at boarding school. Margot Reynolds also gives further insight into what Zitkala-Ša’s mother’s strict requirements for beading reveal about Dakota culture: “seemingly trivial details of beading are important indicators of values like consistency, honesty, and hard work . . . these values aid in our contemporary understanding of Native American life, where living a useful life is extremely important for the continuance of tribal traditions” (182). From a critical focus on the cultural background of Zitkala-Ša’s story, readers can extract implicitly stated Dakota values which contribute to the emotional severity of the boarding school’s forced assimilation tactics Zitkala-Ša delineates.

Further demonstrative of Zitkala-Ša’s determination to refute attacks on her culture, “The Cutting of My Long Hair” displays a culmination of Zitkala-Ša’s reverence and yearning for her mother rather than a rebellion against colonialism. As Zitkala-Ša first arrives at the boarding school, she realizes, with insight from her friend Judéwin, that she will soon be forced to have her hair cut short. Judéwin tells Zitkala-Ša that they will “have to submit because [the palefaces] are strong,” to which Zitkala-Ša replies: “‘No, I will not submit! I will struggle first’” (90). Her aversion to this assault on her autonomy is not simply a matter of personal physical appearance—it represents an affront to her tribal heritage: “Our mothers had taught us that only unskilled warriors who were captured had their hair shingled by the enemy. Among our people . . . shingled hair [was worn] by cowards!” (90). In her panic, Zitkala-Ša reflects on what she had learned from her mother, valuing her mother’s teaching as an immutable fact; indeed Zitkala-Ša “resists the stigmatization” of shingled hair, not because of a political imperative informed by her culture, but because of the weight she places on Dakota values themselves (Terrance 623). Immediately after the teachers cut Zitkala-Ša’s hair, her desire to return to her native culture becomes even more evident as she moans for her mother in anguish, yearning to be “reasoned quietly with . . . as [her] own mother used to do” (91). Zitkala-Ša’s repeated references to and longing for her mother within “The Cutting of My Long Hair,” alongside her moments of resistance and rebellion, illustrate that her struggle was deeply personal; being faced with the erasure of her cultural and familial influence as a young child, Zitkala-Ša’s rebellion is illuminated.
as a culturally informed ‘fight’ response to a threatening situation.

Although boarding schools cut her long hair and removed other physical reminders of her Dakota identity, Zitkala-Ša reasserted her autonomy and continued to preserve her Dakota identity throughout her life by returning to cultural traditions as an adult. For instance, Zitkala-Ša grew out her hair after leaving boarding school, and in many images of her as an adult, she is seen with long, braided hair. By reclaiming her long, heavy hair, Zitkala-Ša continued to hearken to her mother’s words, ensuring that nobody would think her an unskilled warrior or coward (Zitkala-Ša 90). Her desire for cultural continuity extended to her apparel as well; she is often photographed in traditional Dakota regalia, wearing moccasins rather than the shoes the boarding school forced upon her. In a pamphlet entitled “The Year-Which-Renews-Life,” Zitkala-Ša appears as a featured contributor relating a Dakota cultural practice that occurs in the year after the death of a loved one. The document also includes a photograph of her wearing long braids and Dakota regalia (see fig. 1). Not only does this photograph demonstrate how she reclaimed a form of culturally specific self-representation, but it also communicates how her culture was vital to her public image; Zitkala-Ša wanted to represent herself as a proud Dakota woman. When she had the power to physically reclaim her identity in adulthood without the interference of an authoritarian, assimilationist boarding school, she seized the opportunity. Zitkala-Ša’s culture is a driving force and motivation in her life—a power present in her childhood that extends throughout her life and literary works. While Zitkala-Ša reclaimed her dress and hair as outward expressions of her cultural background, she also sought to preserve her community’s traditions internally. During
boarding school, Zitkala-Ša and her peers faced the erasure of their native language as teachers reprimanded them for not speaking English, causing many “misunderstandings” that brought “unjustifiable frights and punishments into [their] little lives” (Zitkala-Ša 93). After leaving boarding school, Zitkala-Ša was faced with navigating the harsh reality of her life as a Dakota woman who had endured forcible language-based assimilation. Although the reconciliation of her identity came “through a new tongue and a new understanding of the world, . . . that understanding did not denote a rejection of Dakota values” (Spack 51). Zitkala-Ša returned home to record stories from Dakota elders in Dakota as she sought to compile her book, Old Indian Legends. In addition to simply recording Dakota legends, Zitkala-Ša originally hand-wrote the stories in the Dakota language. One of these handwritten legends, “The Squirrel Man and His Double,” is pictured above (see fig. 2). Zitkala-Ša also maintained frequent correspondence with others through personal letters written in Dakota. Throughout her accounts of boarding school, and then into her adult years, Zitkala-Ša’s desire for cultural preservation remains an active priority. In her adult life, personal letters written in Dakota and her efforts to transcribe Dakota legends and publish her community’s wealth of cultural knowledge illuminate her devotion to cultural preservation. Although efforts like writing and recording legends in Dakota contribute to a clear life-long pattern of cultural preservation, scholars’ tendency to maintain a view centering a colonial perspective as the default has led to a misrepresentation of the child Zitkala-Ša. Evidence from Zitkala-Ša’s childhood before and during boarding school, paired with knowledge of how influential Zitkala-Ša’s mother was in instilling cultural values, illuminates Zitkala-Ša’s perspective as steeped in tradition while apolitical. Although many in the current conversation focus on Zitkala-Ša’s boarding school days with an emphasis on colonialist powers, where some assert her “political consciousness” or defend Zitkala-Ša from being painted an assimilationist, others have shifted the spotlight onto how Zitkala-Ša’s culture informs her experiences. Kelsey and Reynolds especially focus on how Zitkala-Ša’s mother influences Zitkala-Ša’s actions in her stories; Kelsey gives background on familial structures within Dakota culture, while Reynolds emphasizes that Zitkala-Ša’s writings “show Zitkala-[Š]a’s childhood as privileged in the context of her mother’s traditions” (177). Specifically, within Zitkala-Ša’s story about her mother’s beadwork, Zitkala-Ša’s respect and admiration for her mother compels a culturally informed reading of her
reactions to assimilation at boarding school. When reading Zitkala-Ša’s texts with the awareness of her cultural background and influence, her motivations for resistance during boarding school become clearer. Zitkala-Ša’s experience making coffee for a grandfather provides a stark contrast to her later tale about preparing turnips for dinner. “The Coffee Making” tells of a Zitkala-Ša who is happy to fulfill her cultural role as a hostess, and who takes pride in the food she prepares; however, when Zitkala-Ša is made to mash turnips for dinner at boarding school, she rejects the command and the food because they hold no cultural significance. Zitkala-Ša’s resistance to having her hair stolen demonstrates a yearning for her mother and a fight against the cultural consequences of short hair.

Zitkala-Ša’s resistance to her teachers within “School Days of an Indian Girl,” when viewed with her Dakota cultural context in mind, and especially when considering the importance and influence of her mother, is illuminated as culturally rather than politically informed. Her desire to preserve and practice the culture of her mother is evident within her texts, both in “Impressions of an Indian Childhood” and in “The School Days of an Indian Girl.” Furthermore, the truth of her cultural preservation is bolstered by her continued efforts at maintaining Dakota influence throughout her life after boarding school, including wearing traditional regalia and hand-writing oral stories in Dakota. Her lifelong prioritization of Dakota identity and culture challenges readers to recognize that the perceived rebelliousness within her boarding school days communicates a desire for cultural continuity as her primary response to colonial assimilation.


