

Scholar@UPRM

Narratives of the boarding school era from victimry to resistance

Item Type	Essay
Authors	Kelsey, Penelope
Publisher	Centro de Publicaciones Académicas, Facultad de Artes y Ciencias, Universidad de Puerto Rico en Mayagüez
Download date	2025-02-15 11:07:28
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11801/3408

NARRATIVES OF THE BOARDING SCHOOL ERA FROM VICTIMRY TO RESISTANCE

Penelope Kelsey

Boarding schools supplied a major episode in the larger era of forced assimilation and acculturation of American Indians. Colonial efforts to educate and convert Native Americans are found as early as the seventeenth century, but by the mid-nineteenth century, administrators and educators were becoming increasingly frustrated with their endeavors in on-reservation day and boarding schools. "Efforts to raise up the child during school hours, it was argued, were obliterated at night by the realities of camp life," observes historian David Adams (Adams 29). Beginning in 1875, Captain Richard Henry Pratt conducted a grand experiment, relocating Cheyenne, Arapaho, Kiowa, Comanche, and Caddo prisoners-of-war from the Indian wars to Fort Marion in St. Augustine, Florida and subjecting them to a regime of Euroamerican military-style education and indoctrination. When Pratt's efforts showed early success through student religious conversions and their employment in the surrounding community, in 1879 he was able to convince bureaucrats to fund a larger project in the abandoned Carlisle Army Barracks in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, with the goal of assimilating Native American children who, separated from their homes for a period of several years, would be especially susceptible to his efforts. Pratt's example incited a major policy change, and by the turn of the century, there were well over twenty-five off-reservation government boarding schools.

Criticisms of these boarding schools and their precursors, on-reservation day and boarding schools run by churches, are so widespread that an adequate, yet brief description of their scope is a challenge. Student testimony and some official records reveal that boarding schools were often deficient in every manner possible: students were underfed and poorly clothed; facilities were unheated firetraps with group hygiene areas that encouraged the spread of

disease;¹ administrators were sometimes remiss in communicating students' illnesses and their severity to parents; the education received was often outdated and ill-suited to a reservation setting; schools were perennially understaffed by poorly trained and often abusive instructors; students faced punitive measures for speaking their language or practicing tribal religion; and students were separated from their families for periods as long as three to five years and denied leave to visit home during vacations. Concerns about the result of this colonial experiment proliferate, and beyond the emotional damage and cultural disruption created by it, scholarship suggests that tribal communities continue to suffer from the educational methods employed in boarding school settings.²

Recent studies by indigenous scholars, such as historian Brenda Child and anthropologist Tsianina Lomawaima, seek to highlight the agency that students and their families exercised in the face of federal policy. In *Boarding School Seasons*, Child examines letters written during the boarding school era by American Indian parents and students, and she successfully demonstrates how students and their families "resisted and frequently triumphed over [the] bureaucracy" and "used government boarding schools for their own advantage" (Child 8). Similarly, Lomawaima criticizes the predominating narrative of boarding school history that "begins with *federal* as the subject and encodes *Native American* or *Indian* as its object, mirroring the crusade even as it strives to delineate it" (Lomawaima xii). Certainly, American Indian students resisted acculturation in a variety of ways, from subtly subverting arbitrary school regulations regarding dress to setting fire to buildings to the outright rejection of running away;³ in addition to these actions, students also transformed the

¹ Brenda J. Child observes that "students shared not only pencils and books but also soap, towels, washbasins, beds, and even bathwater. Students who complained of sore and oozing eyes [from trachoma, a common disease in boarding schools] could be found working in the school's laundries, preparing food in kitchens, and milking the school's cows" (58).

² Recent studies on the Blackfeet show that the method of English instruction commonly used in boarding schools, forbidding the use of any native languages in the school, has created a major handicap in Blackfeet tribal members' linguistic skills. Reading skills have been severely harmed as a result of this practice.

³ In *American Indian Children at School, 1850-1930*, Michael Coleman differentiates between student resistance, which meant "those forms of pupil opposition to the school and to the staff that were compatible with continued attendance, often compatible with impressive achievement as a student," whereas rejection denotes student actions that disrupt attendance, such as running away, setting fire to the school, or simply refusing to participate (146).

institutions themselves, as Lomawaima argues for the case of Chilocco,⁴ creating a unique student culture and indigenizing aspects of school identity and practice.⁵ Both scholars agree that compelling factors, such as poverty or the illness or invalidism of a parent, might have brought otherwise indisposed parents to send their children to the school for such pragmatic reasons as receiving sufficient food, clothing, and education; when possible, parents were selective as to when and where their children attended schools. Like these students' parents, Ellen Simmons consents to send her daughter, Gertrude Simmons, to boarding school in Indiana because she "will need an education when she is grown, for then there will be fewer real Dakotas, and many more palefaces" (Zitkala-Ša 44).

Writing Self, Writing Culture: Tribalized Sentimentalism and Regionalism

In 1899, soon after her departure from a teaching position at Carlisle Indian Industrial school, the first off-reservation Indian boarding school, Zitkala-Ša quickly wrote three autobiographical essays, "Impressions of an Indian Childhood," "The School Days of an Indian Girl," and "An Indian Teacher Among Indians," firmly criticizing the boarding school system in general and Carlisle specifically; she published them as individual pieces in January, February, and March 1900 in *The Atlantic Monthly* [hereafter *TAM*]. Nearly two years later, in December 1902 in *TAM*, she published "Why I Am a Pagan," another autobiographical piece, which can be read as the ending to Zitkala-Ša's autobiography (Velikova 49).⁶ Incurring the wrath of the Carlisle founder and head administrator, Capt. Richard Henry Pratt, Zitkala-Ša flippantly dismissed his irate assessment of her work as "trash" (Spack 26), feeling assured her criticism of the school was

⁴ Chilocco Indian Agricultural School, a federal off-reservation boarding school, opened in 1884 and enrolled students from over twenty-four tribes, although the Five Civilized Tribes predominated. Using student testimony, Lomawaima studies how students indigenized the institution and used it to their purposes, subverting the larger federal agenda where possible.

⁵ Francis LaFlesche's *The Middle Five*, his memoir of his education in a Presbyterian mission school for the Omaha, particularly exemplifies student creation of a "third culture."

⁶ "Why I Am a Pagan" resolves many of the issues of spiritual and cultural dislocation that "The School Days of an Indian Girl" and "An Indian Teacher Among Indians" raise. Zitkala-Ša actually renamed this essay "The Great Spirit" and changed its ending to symbolically address American Indians' right to vote when she republished it in *American Indian Stories* in 1921 (Velikova 61).

well-deserved. Perhaps Pratt's dismay was particularly acute given the publication of the essays in *TAM*, a sophisticated journal that "enabled her to engage a nationwide, middle-class readership, including those most involved with Indian policy" (Bernardin 216).⁷

Literary critics such as D. K. Meisenheimer, Laura Wexler, and Susan Bernardin, have used a variety of frameworks for understanding the Euroamerican heritage of Zitkala-Ša's writing, favoring the genres of regionalism and sentimentalism in their analyses. Regionalism, a mode of writing that was most popular from 1865 to 1895, emphasized the characters, customs, geography, and dialect of a specific region; sentimentalism is a strategy commonly employed by writers in the nineteenth century to provoke excessive emotion in the reader. The following passage from "The Cutting of My Long Hair" exemplifies this sentimentalist influence:

I cried aloud, shaking my head all the while until 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. Since the day I was taken from my mother I had suffered extreme indignities. People had stared at me. I had been tossed about in the air like a wooden puppet. And now my long hair was shingled like a coward's! In my anguish I moaned for my mother, but no one came to comfort me. (Zitkala-Ša 55-56)

Regarding sentimentalism and regionalism, Meisenheimer's summation of Zitkala-Ša's motivation for using these Euroamerican modes most accurately describes the sophistication of her syncretism, or bicultural fusion: "she ... learns to manipulate the received literary tradition ... by operating in its blind spots" ("Regionalist" 117). In contrast, at least one critic has suggested that "by the time she came to write these autobiographical stories, Zitkala-Ša's self-conception had been so effectively ensnared within the codes of sentiment that there was no Indian in them that was left untouched by Western codes" seems problematic (Wexler 179). This construction of an authentic "Indian" core of Zitkala-Ša's identity that is somehow contaminated by her Euroamerican education is troublesome. Furthermore, numerous critics have diagnosed Zitkala-Ša as suffering from an "increasing inability to straddle the contradictions

⁷ Citing Frank Mott's *A History of American Magazines*, Margaret Lukens also notes that the *Atlantic Monthly* "through the mid-1890s ... began to include politically and socially controversial material" and "to 'approach ... that wide interest in the problems of the modern world which characterized the magazine under later management'" (163-164). Zitkala-Ša apparently enjoyed creative freedom in composing her three autobiographical pieces for their publication in the *Atlantic Monthly*, as then editor Bliss Perry's "typical approach was to let writers design their own projects, and he gave them final say over his editorial comments" (Spack 28).

between the two societies [Euroamerican and American Indian],” an assertion which smacks too much of tragic mixedblood imagery (Wexler 179). Finally, the suggestion that her Native American identity is annihilated by Western codes seems to uncomplicate Zitkala-Ša’s position as the deployer of *two* cultural traditions.⁸

As Susan Bernardin argues in “The Lessons of a Sentimental Education,” Zitkala-Ša does seem to mindfully employ sentimentalism as a methodology for speaking to her readers’ sensibility and drawing their attention to concerns in Indian country (Bernardin 217): “a careful playing of her white audience’s expectations and pre-existing world view” (Diana 155). Of particular interest is the intersection between her use of sentimentalism, a mode gendered in specific ways by popular women writers of the nineteenth century, and her adaptation of Dakota forms of self-narration, several of which are gender-specific genres. The popular white authors upon whom Zitkala-Ša models her work made the mother/child relationship a centerpiece in their writing and referred to their own female identities as a source of moral authority. According to Bernardin, Zitkala-Ša mimics these strategies in her repeated use of themes of “mother-loss” and “mother-hunger” in her autobiography (Bernardin 223). More specifically, Bernardin observes that:

By structuring her story around domestic concerns of home, family, and mother-daughter relations, Zitkala-Ša explicitly casts her life story as a variant of popular nineteenth-century sentimental fiction. At the same time, her autobiography subversively engages with the indoctrination of sentimental ideology in boarding schools and on reservations. (Bernardin 218)

While Bernardin contends that Zitkala-Ša’s deployment of sentimentalism is subversive because of her exposure of the boarding school’s destruction of the mother/child relationship that her readership holds dear, I suggest that this subversiveness also has roots in Dakota familial and gender norms that Zitkala-Ša includes in the text. As a result, many of the Dakota genres that Zitkala-Ša uses become gendered vis-à-vis the sentimentalist mode. Moreover, because the extended family, or *tiošpaye*, is the central structure of Dakota national identity, I would argue that by centering her narrative around domestic issues of home and family, Zitkala-Ša intentionally places

⁸ I present these concerns not to critique Wexler in particular, but to show some of the common pitfalls to which scholars have been susceptible in their examinations of the presence of Euroamerican elements in Zitkala-Ša’s writing. A thorough inventory of the body of critical work on Zitkala-Ša’s writing will illustrate these troublesome assumptions as a general tendency.

her autobiography within a larger discussion about Dakota nationhood and sovereignty.

The discourse around family that Zitkala-Ša borrows from the Euroamerican sentimental tradition merges with or supports pre-existing Dakota values about family, but Dakota values also challenge the Euroamerican ideal of the hierarchical, nuclear family. As kinship, in concert with the extended family, is a vital concept for understanding Dakota societal relationships, so, too, is the Dakota reverence for children, which might be thought of as a specific expression of kinship. Thus, Zitkala-Ša's employment of sentimentalism works to express just this cultural truth while simultaneously performing a cutting critique of Indian policy. Because Zitkala-Ša is tricked by the Quaker missionaries into leaving her mother, the fiber of the Dakota nation is metaphorically torn, but because her mother figuratively dominates elements of the boarding school experience, such as her triumph over the Devil in Zitkala-Ša's dream, the autobiography affirms the continued survival and resistance of the Dakota.

The Yankton word for children is *wakanheza*, meaning "they, too, are sacred" or "sacred beings," and Marla N. Powers underscores the status of children among the Dakota in *Oglala Women: Myth, Ritual, and Reality*:

The concept of illegitimacy was inappropriate in Lakota culture. All children were cared for. Neglect was unknown, and technically there was no such thing as an orphan. (Powers 57)

Thus, children themselves were revered members of the tribe,⁹ a fact that Zitkala-Ša alludes to often in her autobiographical essays, such as the description of her shock upon being tossed about like a doll by a school matron or her warm memory of a grandfather who avoids criticizing her childish mistakes. In light of the revered position of Dakota children and adults' responsibility to respect children's eminence, Zitkala-Ša appears not simply to manipulate the sentimental gender-role of white protectress of the home, in order to critique the boarding school system, but, rather, to selectively employ a

⁹ Samuel Pond, a nineteenth-century missionary, further describes children's roles among the Dakota: "Parents did not commonly treat either their sons or their daughters harshly, and both boys and girls were taught to cultivate a self-reliant, independent spirit. Infants were tenderly cared for.... There was no efficient family government among the Dakotas, and severe measures were seldom resorted to for the maintenance of parental authority. The parents gave advice to their children, but fathers did not often lay their commands upon them....Fathers rarely, if ever, inflicted corporal punishment on their children. The mothers chastised them only when so provoked as to lose all command over their temper" (142-143).

Euroamerican gendered literary identity offered by sentimentalism to underscore her Dakota gender identity as a caretaker of same-sex children, which she foregrounds primarily through her mother and aunt's nurturing her as a child.¹⁰ Her mother comforts her when she is scared; her mother educates her in Dakota women's work and behavior norms; and her aunt functions as a second mother, playing the expected kinship role of a mother's sister in Dakota society. Furthermore, Zitkala-Ša's use of tribal forms of self-narration, which she genders with her own Dakota identity, underscores this subversiveness by proposing a competing school of "femininity" to the Euroamerican ideal. For example, in her collection of autobiographical essays, Zitkala-Ša includes a variety of traditional forms of self-narration that are gender-specific in origin or that she genders in significant ways; these forms include the landscape narrative, the educational tale, honorific speech, and the dream narrative, genres within which she "encodes the lessons of collective tribal identity" (Bernardin 221).¹¹

Refashioning "her traditional feminine Dakota role of cultural propagator" (Heflin 137), Zitkala-Ša adapts the oral traditional form of the landscape narrative to the written Western autobiographical genre and imparts tribal history as a critical part of her story of self, embedding a firmly resistant narrative of Dakota history in her self-fashioning. Furthermore, like Lomawaima's study of Chilocco boarding school, Zitkala-Ša's use of "placemaking" seeks to encode American Indians as the subjects, not the objects, of a narrative history of federal Indian policy; she claims subjectivity through her exercise of narrative control while still acknowledging the victimization of the Dakota. Zitkala-Ša implements the landscape narrative in "My Mother," the beginning chapter of "Impressions of an Indian Childhood," revealing the imbrication of land and community in her formulation of self. In his study of place names and landscape

¹⁰ While the mother/child bond was certainly important to the Dakota, I do not want to de-emphasize the centrality of men in parenting, particularly because traditional education was imparted primarily through same sex instruction.

¹¹ Articulating the commonalities between these gendered forms of narration should not lead to a conflation of Euroamerican and Dakota women's gender roles, as they differed in significant ways. Paula Gunn Allen neatly summarizes the tension that Zitkala-Ša must have felt between these differing norms: "The delicacy of the ladies of privilege whom she knew must have been in stark contrast to the ideals of womanhood she had been raised with, and for which her life, and that of her mother, must have been models" (*Spider* 30). Zitkala-Ša encodes this cultured and classed difference into her writings through the physical freedom that Dakota women and girls enjoy, as well as the bodily labor they perform.

narratives among the Western Apache, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, Keith Basso introduces the term “placemaking,” which he defines as “an adventitious fleshing out of historical material that culminates in a posited state of affairs, a particular universe of objects and events—in short, a *place world*, wherein portions of the past are brought into being” (Basso 6). There are two major instances of this form of placemaking in Zitkala-Ša’s autobiography, and she uses them as a venue for investigating how colonialism has complicated her tribe’s sovereignty and as a method for asserting a Native geography that supercedes colonial bounds.

In this chapter, the setting is the hills of present-day Greenwood, South Dakota, along the banks of the Missouri, where the girl and her mother, Ellen (Tate I Yohin Win or Reaches for the Wind), gather water: this landscape is the occasion of Ellen’s story. Zitkala-Ša’s mother suffers from melancholy, but she refuses to share her feelings with her daughter. Eventually, the seven-year old compels her mother to reveal what troubles her; Ellen Simmons struggles with the weight of history. Pointing to a nearby hill where the child’s uncle and older sister are buried, her mother retells the history of white theft of Ihanktowan (Yankton) land in Minnesota and South Dakota and their band’s forced removal westward. As a native audience hearing the story of the sadness and pain of this camp move, so does Zitkala-Ša give her readers the vision to understand the difference: the band travels “not in the grand, happy way that we moved camp when I was a little girl, but we were driven” (Zitkala-Ša 10). Ellen paints a vivid picture of her daughter and brother’s sickened state on the forced march and their eventual demise: her daughter’s throat is “hoarse with crying,” her body is “feverish” and “burning hot,” and her throat is “swollen and red” (Zitkala-Ša 10). Through this placemaking, Zitkala-Ša critiques the policy of forced removal and sets the stage for her mother’s empowerment in the landscape.

This presentation of this landscape narrative in the autobiography’s first chapter is complemented in the penultimate chapter, “My Mother’s Curse upon White Settlers,” by the closing presentation of a second narrative by Zitkala-Ša’s mother. This story empowers her mother and affirms indigenous agency. Sitting by the river, this time at night, Zitkala-Ša and her mother reflect upon the lights of white squatters who live in the caves across the river, and her mother interprets their presence on the landscape as an incursion upon their land rights. Her mother decries the “white beggars” who “make claims on those wild lands” (Zitkala-Ša 93) and who hypocritically offer the Bible and the bottle in the same breath

(Zitkala-Ša 94). Her mother warns Zitkala-Ša against the whites “who caused the death of your sister and your uncle” (Zitkala-Ša 93), referring again to the hill from her earlier story. As yet another fire-light appears on the bluff opposite them, Zitkala-Ša’s mother, rather than being paralyzed by the wrongs perpetrated against her, as she was at the autobiography’s beginning, takes revenge against her violators, casting a curse:

Raising her right arm forcibly into line with her eye, she threw her whole might into her doubled fist as she shot it vehemently at the strangers. Long she held her outstretched fingers toward the settler’s lodge, as if an invisible power passed from them to the evil at which she aimed. (Zitkala-Ša 94)

As a sign of her mother’s empowerment, Zitkala-Ša portrays her mother’s insertion of herself into this narrative and affirms her agency in the context of colonial history. The landscape narrative’s relationship to sovereignty becomes entirely clear: by asserting narrative mastery over the land, indigenes are able to claim literal mastery of it. Through this use of traditional, material forms of narration, Zitkala-Ša refashions the Western autobiography to her purposes and affirms the survival of the Dakota through the continuance of this cultural practice.

At the same time, this affirmation is uncomplicated by Ellen Simmons’ marriages to three white men, one of whom, a man named Felker, was Zitkala-Ša’s father. In the first landscape narrative, Ellen laments, “There is what the paleface has done! Since then your father too has been buried in a hill nearer the rising sun” (Zitkala-Ša 10), which, Ruth Spack argues, “exoticizes him [her father] as a victim of white oppression” (Spack 29). Other possible readings, however, suggest that placing her father in the tribal burial grounds more neutrally renders him a racial other or, at the least, allies him with Indians. Certainly, Zitkala-Ša’s choice to portray herself as a full-blood glosses over her own hybridity and, necessarily, raises questions about her motivations for the choice. One obvious benefit she receives is the ability to showcase to her Anglo audience, her primary readers in the 1900 *Atlantic Monthly* publication, an indigenous identity that is uncomplicated by the bare facts of colonial history. The duality of this approach accords with the melodramatic elements in her text; furthermore, Zitkala-Ša, quite aware of negative stereotypes of mixed-bloods as somehow degenerate, may have actively sought to limit the range of racial fantasy she had to address. Similarly to African American writers’ struggles with the tragic mulatto stereotype, had Zitkala-Ša included her father’s identity, she would have been compelled to address literary conventions of the

tragic mixedblood, engaging a discourse that might not have served her agenda around sovereignty. Finally, claiming a Yankton father seems fairly pragmatic for two reasons: Zitkala-Ša's father left her mother before she was born; hence, his influence was minimal at best. Second, the overwhelming tendency of many Native Americans to identify primarily with their tribal background, despite racial hybridity, probably contributed to the author's decision.¹² Thus, we need to consider how the author constructs a self for her reading audience, as well as herself.

In her autobiography, Zitkala-Ša also includes educational tales, which indigenize the genre, as well as affirm Dakota cultural continuity and sovereignty. Here I will read three instances when Zitkala-Ša employs the educational tale, all of which are variations on a theme about right relationship. As kinship relations form the center of Dakota society, these tales have the effect of normalizing Dakota identity to her readers and creating a counter-narrative about national identity and norms.

Traditionally, educational narratives were told to audiences, particularly children, in order to instruct them in proper behavior. We know that "for some autobiographical narratives the primary purpose was educational. A wide range of Indian education could be provided in this way. Don Talayesva remembers that even sex education was managed autobiographically" (Bumble 40). In a tale about coffee-making, however, Zitkala-Ša retells her foibles to a non-Indian audience, instructing them in this traditional generic form about the status and education of children in Dakota society, as well as how children become gendered. One day when Zitkala-Ša is left alone in the dwelling by her mother, an elderly grandfather drops by to visit. While he awaits her mother's return, the young girl assumes the role of hostess, serving him her version of coffee with unleavened bread; her enactment of a tribal gender role, however, is sound in appearance but not in result. Not knowing how to make coffee or start a fire, she puts warm river water into her mother's coffeepot and places it in the cold ashes of the fireplace: "I offered them to him with the air of bestowing generous hospitality" (Zitkala-Ša 28). Nonetheless, the grandfather does not pierce her pride by criticizing the quality of her food; in fact, he acts as if her behavior is completely normal, so as

¹² Marla Powers describes this tendency in *Oglala Women*: "The terms 'full blood' and 'mixed blood' are cultural rather than biological designations; that is, they are based not on blood quantum but rather on the group a person identifies with socially and culturally" (144). Given her history as an activist for Native Americans on reservations, surely Zitkala-Ša identified as full blood using this definition.

not to embarrass her. Here Zitkala-Ša's desire to play the role of hostess properly is more important than how she performs it; the grandfather refrains from laughing at her, respecting her special status as a child, as well as conforming to the doting relationship commonly found between Dakota grandparents and grandchildren.¹³ She reflects that her mother and the grandfather "treated my best judgment, poor as it was, with the utmost respect. It was not till long years afterward that I learned how ridiculous a thing I had done" (Zitkala-Ša 29). Zitkala-Ša uses this incident via the form of the educational narrative to hybridize the autobiographical genre as well as to instruct her audience in the upbringing traditionally afforded to Dakota children: this affirming atmosphere serves as a dramatic counterpoint to the later episodes in boarding school, such as the incident in which a teacher exacts good behavior by telling Zitkala-Ša "that little girls who disobeyed school regulations were to be tortured" by the Devil (Zitkala-Ša 63). Furthermore, this incident includes a subtext about national identity, as the reason for the grandfather and many others' visits to her home rests upon her uncle's accomplishments as "one of our nation's bravest warriors" (Zitkala-Ša 12). With accomplishment in Dakota society came a heightened sense of responsibility: men who performed well in war and the hunt and earned respect as leaders were expected to extend hospitality to all who requested it of them. Thus, in visiting Zitkala-Ša's home and receiving her hospitality, both the grandfather and grandchild are performing a type of national identity that is constituted in right relationship.

Bonnin also acknowledges the Dakota women's form of self-narration through honorific speech by including an incident of imitative play from her childhood that incorporates it. She uses this episode to illustrate indigenous forms of education (i.e., imitation), to assert Dakota national identity, and to establish norms of children's conduct to contrast with the later boarding school section.¹⁴

After abandoning her "confining lessons" in beadwork, another expression of material culture that sometimes occasioned

¹³ This relationship is explained by traditional Dakota people as owing to children and the elderly's close ties to the spirit world, as a result of their proximity to birth and death.

¹⁴ Although David Brumble has presented the argument that references to imitation in Dakota works, notably Eastman's *Deep Woods*, reflect an internalization of Social Darwinist theory that associates primitive peoples with imitation, I would contend that the prevalence of Dakota authors' mention of imitation seems to suggest that it truly was a staple of traditional education.

autobiographical stories,¹⁵ Zitkala-Ša escapes with her friends to play in the hills. They gather sweet roots that grow nearby and delight “in impersonating our own mothers” who gift beaded clothing to each other and praise the recent accomplishments of their relatives (Zitkala-Ša 21):

We talked of things we heard them say in their conversations. We imitated their various manners, even to the inflection of their voices While one was telling of some heroic deed recently done by a near relative, the rest of us listened attentively, and exclaimed in undertones, “Han! Han!” (yes! yes!) whenever the speaker paused for breath, or sometimes for sympathy. As the discourse became more thrilling, according to our ideas, we raised our voices in these interjections. (22)

The girls model their speech on their own mothers’ narratives, recounting stories of their relatives’ exploits. To Bonnin, honorific speech seems an expression of self in the context of kinship relations, which form the core of Dakota society.¹⁶ Hence, honorific speech exemplifies Hertha D. Wong’s concept of communo-bio-oratory, couching self-identity in the esteem of community. Furthermore, because honorific speech praises masculine war exploits, in this instance, it is also entwined with a traditional understanding of sovereignty.

In her autobiographical essays, Zitkala-Ša also includes a dream narrative that asserts the primacy of a Dakota cosmology. During her stay at White’s, Zitkala-Ša receives from a school matron an individual lesson regarding the Devil and his punishment of bad girls: “Out of a large book she showed me a picture of the white man’s devil Then I heard the paleface woman say ... that little girls who disobeyed school regulations were to be tortured by him” (Zitkala-Ša 62-63). As a result of this storytelling, she has a nightmare in which the Devil chases her around her mother’s home on the reservation. Her mother does not see the Devil; thus she has not learned to identify his presence. At the last moment, however, as her knees are buckling under her, her mother reaches for Zitkala-Ša and saves her from the Devil. Thus, although she is subject to the violence of the boarding school experience, the Dakota worldview can “save” her from the victimization of Protestantism.

Ruth Spack contends that instances like this one, as well as

¹⁵ Women occasionally would gather in the council tipi to give their quill counts, in which they would recount the items that they had quilled or beaded.

¹⁶ See Ella Deloria’s *Waterlily* and *Speaking of Indians* for an extended explanation of the function of Dakota kinship.

Zitkala-Ša's portrayal of her father, are exoticizing, presumably because "the idyllic traditional Sioux life Zitkala-Ša has been describing is a fiction" (Spack 31), I contend that they serve the larger purpose they serve of affirming Dakota cultural equality and survival. More importantly, the notion that Zitkala-Ša intends to create an "idyllic traditional life" is problematic in itself. Surely, Zitkala-Ša's portrait of her mother's troubled colonial state on the reservation assumes a history of Euroamerican contact and predation, dismissing the possibility of perfection in this life or a cultural vacuum, and the fear that Zitkala-Ša feels of different community members, such as Wiyaka-Napbina, "a tall, broad-shouldered crazy man" (Zitkala-Ša 25), suggests an emotional complexity that precludes the creation of an idyll. Although the representations of American Indians that Zitkala-Ša offers are largely complimentary, her characters are still imperfect in certain respects. To assess Zitkala-Ša's childhood world as idyllic is to overlook significant intra- and extra-tribal concerns that the author raises.

Zitkala-Ša utilizes honorific traditions of speech and the dream narrative, as well as the educational tale genre in her autobiographical essays; she uses these forms to adapt the Western autobiographical form to her purposes of redressing stereotypes of American Indians and raising public awareness of indigenous issues. In addition to the landscape narrative, Zitkala-Ša uses these traditional self-narrative forms in a mindful way, effecting a literary sovereignty called for by such contemporary scholars as Elizabeth Cook-Lynn and Robert Allen Warrior. She chooses genres, as well as tropes, that work to create a Dakota sovereignty analogous to the one she sought as an activist, whether she is remaking Euroamerican or American Indian literary conventions. Surely, Zitkala-Ša anticipates just these concerns in the formulation of her autobiographic writings and insightfully elects to employ either Euroamerican or Native American traditions where most politically and artistically expedient: she foresees the type of "intellectual sovereignty" that Warrior prizes and that twenty-first-century scholars still strive after. Alice Poindexter Fisher has said of Zitkala-Ša that:

she struggled toward a vision of wholeness in which the conflicting parts of her existence could be reconciled. *That she did not fully succeed is evident in her work*, which is a model of ambivalences, of oscillations between two diametrically opposed worlds, but is also a model of retrieved possibilities, a creative, human endeavor that stands at the beginning of many such endeavors eventually to culminate in the finely crafted work of contemporary American Indian writers [*emphasis mine*]. (Fisher 26-27)

Perhaps what Fisher senses as Zitkala-Ša's movement between poles of the reservation and the eastern United States should be thought of as a strategic enactment that revises the terms of honorific speech and sentimentalism, educational narrative and regionalism, through autobiography. This complex heritage results more accurately in a successful critique of colonial policy, rather than a failed autobiography in Fisher's estimation. Zitkala-Ša asserts the Dakota right to narrate tribal history on tribal terms, and while she employs Euroamerican genres in her narration, we should not victimize her in our glossing of her texts by presuming the totalizing force of those rhetorics. She clearly advocates for the Dakota by appealing to a Euroamerican sensibility, as she simultaneously remakes autobiography in an indigenous fashion through her use of Dakota genres and their concomitant worldview.

Works Cited

- Adams, David Wallace. *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928*. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1995.
- Allen, Paula Gunn. *Spider Woman's Granddaughters: Traditional Tales and Contemporary Writing by Native American Women*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989.
- Basso, Keith H. *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996.
- Bernardin, Susan. "The Lessons of a Sentimental Education: Zitkala-Ša's Autobiographical Narratives." *Western American Literature*. 32.3 (1997): 212-238.
- Brumble, H. David, III. *American Indian Autobiography*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988.
- Child, Brenda J. *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families, 1900-1940*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998.
- Diana, Vanessa Holford. "'Hanging in the Heart of Chaos': Bi-Cultural Limbo, Self-(Re)presentation, and the White Audience in Zitkala-Ša's *American Indian Stories*." *Cimarron Review*. 121 (1997): 154-172.

- Fisher, Alice Poindexter. *The Transformation of Tradition: A Study of Zitkala Ša and Mourning Dove, Two Transitional American Indian Writers*. Diss. City University of New York, 1979.
- Heflin, Ruth. *"I Remain Alive:" The Sioux Literary Renaissance*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000.
- Lomawaima, K. Tsianina. *They Called It Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994.
- Meisenheimer, D.K., Jr. "Regionalist Bodies/Embodied Regions: Sarah Orne Jewett and Zitkala-Ša." *Breaking Boundaries: New Perspectives on Women's Regionalist Writing*. Eds. Sherrie A. Inness and Diana Royer. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997. 109-123.
- _____. *Uncovering the Western: The Politics of Rootedness in Twentieth Century Western American Writing*. Diss. University of Minnesota, 1999.
- Powers, Marla N. *Oglala Women: Myth, Ritual, and Reality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.
- Spack, Ruth. "Re-visioning Sioux Women: Zitkala-Ša's Revolutionary American Indian Stories. *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers*. 14.1 (1997): 25-42.
- Velikova, Roumiana. "Troping in Zitkala-Ša's Autobiographical Writings, 1900-1921." *Arizona Quarterly*. 56:1 (2000): 49-64.
- Wexler, Laura. "Tender Violence: Literary Eavesdropping, Domestic Fiction, and Educational Reform." *The Yale Journal of Criticism*. 5.1 (1991): 151-187.
- Wong, Hertha Dawn. *Sending My Heart back across the Years: Tradition and Innovation in Native American Autobiography*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Zitkala-Ša. *American Indian Stories: Foreword by Dexter Fisher*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979.

Penelope Kelsey
Rochester Institute of Technology
United States of America