

Zitkala-Sa

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Gertrude Simmons Bonnin

(February 22, 1876 - January 26, 1938), better known by her pen name, **Zitkala-Sa** (Lakota: pronounced *zítkala-šA* (sha), and translates to *Red Bird*), was a Native American writer, editor, musician, teacher and political activist. She was born and raised on the Yankton Sioux Reservation in South Dakota by her mother, Ellen Simmons, whose Yankton-Nakota name was Taté Iyòhiwin (Every Wind or Reaches for the Wind). Zitkala-Ša



Zitkala-sa

lived a traditional lifestyle until the age of eight when she left her reservation to attend Whites Manual Labor Institute, a Quaker mission school in Wabash, Indiana. She went on to study for a time at Earlham College in Indiana and the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. A considerable talent, Bonnin co-composed the first American Indian grand opera, *The Sun Dance* (composed in romantic style based on Ute and Sioux themes), in 1913.

After working as a teacher at Carlisle Indian Industrial School, she moved to Boston and began publishing short stories and autobiographical vignettes. Her

autobiographical writings were serialized in *Atlantic Monthly* from January to March of 1900 and, later, published in a collection called *American Indian Stories* in 1921. Her first book, *Old Indian Legends*, is a collection of folktales that she gathered during her visits home to the Yankton Reservation. Much of early scholarship on her life comes from *American Indian Stories* and, more recently, from Doreen Rappaport's biography titled *The Flight of Red Bird*. For other reliable scholarship, see the work of P. Jane Hafen.

Her life has recently received more attention after the so-called "canon wars." This new influx of

scholarship from ethnic groups who have been largely excluded from the traditional American literary canon has brought attention to writers who told the other side of the American story. Thanks to scholars like Dexter Fisher, Agnes Picotte, Kristin Herzog, Doreen Rappaport, P. Jane Hafen, and Dan Littlefield, Zitkala-Sa's voice has been returned to the public. A crater on Venus has been named in her honor.

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Writing career

Zitkala-Sa had a most fruitful writing career, throughout her life, that can be seen as chronologically

separated into two publishing periods. The first period, which began at the turn of the century, is from 1900 to 1904, and it is mainly comprised of legends and autobiographical narratives. She continued to write during the following years, but she did not publish. These unpublished writings along with others including the libretto of the *Sun Dance Opera* have been collected and published in *Dreams and Thunder* by P. Jane Hafen. The second period is from 1916 to 1924, and this period is almost exclusively made up of political writings. In this period, she moved to Washington D.C. and published some of her most

influential writings including:
American Indian Stories and a pamphlet that she co-authored with Charles H. Fabens of the American Indian Defense Association and Matthew K. Sniffen of the Indian Rights Association while she was working as a research agent for the Indian Welfare Committee and the General Federation of Women's Clubs, *Oklahoma's Poor Rich Indians: An Orgy of Graft and Exploitation of the Five Civilized Tribes, Legalized Robbery* (1923).

American Indian Stories

American Indian Stories offers an account of the hardships she and

other Native Americans endured when they were removed from their reservation life and put into boarding schools that were designed to “civilize” the Indian children. The autobiographical writings describe her early life on the Yankton Reservation, her years as a student at boarding schools, and the time she spent teaching at Carlisle Indian Industrial School. Carlisle Indian Industrial School was the first and most well-known of manual labor boarding schools for Native Americans. It was founded by Richard Henry Pratt whose famous slogan offers the philosophy of the manual labor educational program in a nutshell; “*Kill the*

Indian and save the man!" (Peyer 284).

Her autobiography contrasts the charm of her early life on the reservation with the "iron routine" that she found in the assimilative manual labor schools off the reservation. Zitkala-Sa spoke about her own account in her autobiography by saying: "*Perhaps my Indian nature is the moaning wind which stirs them [schoolteachers] now for their present record. But, however tempestuous this is within me, it comes out as the low voice of a curiously colored seashell, which is only for those ears that are bent with compassion to hear it*" (67-8).

Impressions of an Indian Childhood

As a child, Zitkala-Sa described herself as a free and innocent young girl. All of the older Yanktons treated her with love and respect. Even when she mistakenly made coffee out of ashes instead of ground coffee beans for a visitor while her mother was away from their dwelling, she was not scolded or even given the notion that she had done anything wrong. When she was with her friends they were free to run after their shadows and the shadows of the clouds. In the evening, she listened to the stories of the elders while she gazed out

into the open universe above her. She was surrounded with people she could trust, and she had no reason to mistrust the people of her tribe.

School days of an Indian girl

When Gertrude Simmons was eight years old, "paleface" Quaker missionaries who famously lured the Yankton children with stories of the "Red Apple Country" were visiting her reservation. Young eight-year-old Gertrude was strongly lured by the promises of apple orchards. Having never been deceived, she trusted them despite her mother's warnings. The young child's innocence led her to desire

the apple orchards and to choose to be educated by the missionaries. Taté Iyòhiwin finally gave in. She knew that it would be a hard transition for her child from innocence to experience, but she also believed that her child would need the education when there were more Euro-Americans than Native Americans.

In American Indian Stories she said, "It was next to impossible to leave the iron routine after the civilizing machine had once begun its day's buzzing; and as it was inbred in me to suffer in silence rather than to appeal to the ears of one whose open eyes could not see my pain, I have many times trudged in the

day's harness heavy-footed, like a dumb sick brute" (66). As one example of this disconnect, she described a scene titled "The Cutting of My Long Hair." During the breakfast of her first day at the Quaker school, her friend Judewin told her that their hair was to be cut by the teachers that day. Zitkala-Sa wrote, "when Judewin said, 'we have to submit, because they are strong,' I rebelled. 'No, I will not submit' I will struggle first!" She then snuck upstairs and found a place to hide under a bed so that they could not find her and "shingle" her hair. They found her. Zitkala-Sa wrote, "I remember being dragged out, though I resisted

by kicking and scratching wildly. In spite of myself, I was carried downstairs and tied fast in a chair” (55). In the Native American culture that she came from, cutting or shingling one’s hair was symbolic of shame and/or mourning.

In 1887, after three years of schooling at White’s Manual Labor Institute, Gertrude was allowed to return home to see her family. She stayed home for four years. During this time she felt increasingly alienated from her tribal heritage. In *American Indian Stories* she said, “*during this time I seemed to hang in the heart of chaos, beyond the touch or voice of human aid.*” She

felt alienated within Euro-American culture due to her heritage, but she began to feel alienated within Native American culture due to her education. In 1891, after her "four strange summers", she returned to her education in the Euro-American culture. received her high school diploma and went on to college at Earlham College in 1895.

While attending Earlham, she entered an oratorical contest at the college and won first place. Then, in 1896, she entered the Indiana State Oratorical Contest as the representative from her college. She won 2nd place in the statewide competition regardless of the overwhelming prejudice of the

audience. People at this contest not only made racist comments to her, but some members of the audience also waved a flag ridiculing her and her college with the picture of a “forlorn” Indian and the word “squaw” on the flag. She felt a sense of victory and accomplishment in the face of a Euro-American audience when the flag was lowered at the announcement of her award. Her speech, “Side By Side”, was published in *The Earlhamite* in March 16, 1896.

An Indian teacher among Indians

Zitkala-Ša went to Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Carlisle,

Pennsylvania to teach in 1897. During her first summer at Carlisle, she was sent her to her birthplace at the Yankton Reservation to recruit students for the next school year saying, “*I am going to turn you loose to pasture!*” (85). After returning home, seeing her mother, and the encroaching settlement of Euro-Americans on the reservation, Zitkala-Ša decided that she should not continue teaching at Carlisle. When she stayed with her mother, at night, the nearby hills around Taté Iyòhiwin’s reservation home were peppered with the “*twinkling lights*” of the settlers. Her mother had become even more jaded against the Euro-American settlers

as they encroached more and more upon the reservation. During her stay, Gertrude found out that her brother had lost his job on the reservation as a government clerk.

Performance of opera

The premiere performance of *The Sun Dance Opera* was presented in February 1913 at Orpheus Hall in Vernal, a town in northeastern Utah. The production featured members of the Ute Nation living on the nearby Uintah and Ouray Indian Reservation.

Writings by Zitkala-

Ša

- *Old Indian Legends*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985
- *American Indian Stories*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985.
- Zitkala-Ša, Fabens, Charles H. and Matthew K. Sniffen. *Oklahoma's Poor Rich Indians: An Orgy of Graft and Exploitation of the Five Civilized Tribes, Legalized Robbery*. Philadelphia: Office of the Indian Rights Association, 1924.
- Zitkala-Sa. *Dreams and Thunder: Stories, Poems, and The Sun Dance Opera*. Edited

*by P. Jane Hafen. Lincoln:
University of Nebraska Press,
2001. ISBN 0803249187.*

For a more comprehensive listing of all her writings see the **American Native Press Archives** maintained by the **Sequoyah Research Center** at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock accessed at [1].

Scores

- Hanson, William F., and Zitkala-Sa. *The Sun Dance opera* (romantic Indian opera, 1938-1962?). Photocopy of the original piano-vocal score, from microfilm (227 pp.). Held in the library of

Brigham Young University in
Provo, Utah.

References

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- Review*, vol. 12, no. 2
(Autumn 1997), pp. 31-41.
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 - Peyer, Bernd C. (1997) *The Tutored Mind: Indian Missionary-Writers in Antebellum America*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
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Frontier: Zitkala-Sa, William F. Hanson, and the Sun Dance Opera." *Women & Music*, January 2001.

External links

- Gertrude Simmons Bonnin (Zitkala-Sa) from *Voices in the Gaps*
- Works by Zitkala-Sa at Project Gutenberg
- Essays by Zitkala-Sa at Quotidiana.org

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