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Zitkala-Ša:

“Neither a Wild Indian, nor a Tame One”

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Abstract

Literature written in English encompasses a large number of literary works, written by authors of different origins. However, the canon studied generally focuses only on those written by white male authors and from anglophone countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States or Ireland. One of these multicultural literatures¹ is made up of those literary works written by Native Americans in the last centuries, among which the Sioux author Zitkala-Ša is not only a pioneer voice but she also has become a respected author.

The purpose of this Undergraduate Thesis is, first, to explain the situation that many Indian children suffered in the so-called “boarding schools,” created by the US government to make them assimilate into the Western culture. Secondly, the aim of this essay is to study Zitkala-Ša’s literature and trying to prove that she was able to keep attached to and be proud of her roots, at the same time she became one of the most important indigenous rights activists and writers.

In an attempt to analyse how her literary work shares her passion as an advocate for the cause of Native Americans, this paper will focus on close-reading analysis of three of her autobiographical essays, “Impressions of an Indian Childhood,” “The School Days of an Indian Girl,” and “An Indian Teacher Among Indians,” all of them published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1900 and compiled in *American Indian Stories* in 1921.

First, on Chapter One, I will provide a brief introduction about the Indian boarding schools and how they have operated from its inception in the late 1890s to the late 1970s. Then, the focus will be put on Zitkala-Ša and her biography, followed by a detailed analysis of the features of her literature, as well as the reception her work has received

¹ Multicultural literature is defined by Boyd et al. as “literature other than that associated with the predominant ethnicity, race, or culture prevalent in the community.”

had during her lifetime and up to more recent times. Finally, Zitkala-Ša's autobiographic stories mentioned above will be studied in detail.

The result of this research aims to demonstrate that, throughout history, as the case of Zitkala-Ša's proves, literature has been an important weapon of social denunciation for the defence of Native Americans' human rights. But not only that, we will try to evince how Zitkala-Ša has been able to overcome the main and explicit objective of the boarding school system —"kill the Indian, save the man" or, in this case, "save the woman"—. By remaining rooted to her cultural origins despite her profound and painful feeling of alienation, she will be recognized as one of the most important indigenous writers and activists of the last century.

Introduction

For Spanish and other international historians, scholars and public in general, it is a well-spread fact that when the Spanish arrived in today's Latin America, both the culture and numerous tribes living there were annihilated.

Much has been written about this process of extermination that began in the 15th century with the arrival of Cristobal Columbus and continued with the settlements of numerous Spaniards who, during the following centuries, became fascinated by the “sonder of the New World” and what they called “the marvellous possessions.”² The taking of that territory was followed by the unstoppable arrival of men belonging to different social classes and educational backgrounds, who exploited and abused the indigenous population³.

A similar pattern took place in North America, where other clans of different Indian tribes have been settled there for centuries and they were the native population. It all started in the 17th century, when British people sailed to America on board the Mayflower (1620), due to religious persecution and both economic and political reasons.

As with the Spaniards from the 15th century on, both British and French colonizers and settlers have also been accused of mistreating the indigenous people. These massive human invasions provoked that everything European (such as their culture, religion, political practices, and traditions) became the norm and the centre, while the sheer variety and richness of Latin and North American's cultural and social manifestation were

² This is taken from Harvard University Professor Stephen Greeneblatt, who meditates on the different ways that Columbus and others after him manipulated the European Age of Discovery to the service of colonial appropriation of “the wonders of the New World.” See, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonders of the New World* (U of Chicago P, 1991).

³ <https://es.unesco.org/courier/aout-septembre-1977/desacreditando-leyenda-negra>. This is a study from UNESCO that deals with a critical approach to the historical presence of Spain in Latin America. It goes under the title “Discrediting the Black Legend.”

relegated to the “periphery” or, using a postcolonial term, they were perceived as ‘the Other.’

Even though, these controversies are still prevalent among the general public and the international scholars who have been dealing with this subject, one still finds personal and cultural manifestations that keep this double and antagonist interpretation of the Native American presence and the ways they have been historically mistreated, defamed, and exterminated.

Just to show an example, we have recently read that some traditional festivities, such as Columbus Day and Thanksgiving, have become quite controversial among the Latin and Native Americans population. Cultural critics also consider that there is little to celebrate giving a common history of penetration, appropriation of the land and the people, and the erasure of their own and varied indigenous cultures. This, coupled with the recent discovery of thousands of indigenous children's bodies buried in Canada and the US this year, has brought the study of the process of the colonization of North America into the spotlight and has made the headlines.

Nonetheless, it was thanks to the subject of *Literatura Norteamericana 2* when I heard for the first time about boarding schools —unfortunately, yet another form of this process of indigenous assimilation and elimination— and the impact they have had on native American children through the last two centuries. Thus, I thought it could be a very interesting topic for my Undergraduate Thesis, since there is not much information about it among the Spanish population, while, at the same time, the issue of the Indian/Native American Boarding Schools system is becoming a recurrent presence in the mass media today, especially after the recent terrible discoveries. More than anything, what has called my attention was getting to know that Zitkala-Ša was one of these children that did

survive these awful experiences. I was also interested in her work, not only as an Indian activist, but also as a feminist writer.

After having studied English, Irish or North American mainstream literature, I am interested in getting acquainted with literary works written by non-White people —what might be less well-known, but just as interesting and important. Also, the fact that Zitkala-Ša was a woman who not only fought for Native Americans' rights, but also a feminist, makes of her a very interesting figure to study.

In the recent decades, thanks to the development of feminist and postcolonial literary criticism, writers such as Zitkala-Ša and their literary works have started to be analysed. However, many of these articles, such as those written by Dexter Fisher, Stanley Kumamoto, or Dorothea M. Susag, focus mainly on her biography and her labour as an activist. Therefore, in this project, I will try to study the literary work of one of these Native American writers, Gertrude Simmons, best known as Zitkala-Ša, in order to demonstrate how her literature shows a fascinating literary discourse at the same time she also plays an important social role for her community.

To begin with, on Chapter One, I offer a brief introduction about what boarding schools were and how they worked, using the work by Ward Churchill *Kill the Indian, Save the Man* (2004) as the main source of information. Then, the focus will be put on Zitkala-Ša and her biography, followed by a detailed analysis of the features of her literature, as well as the reception her work has received during her lifetime up to more recent times. As one of the main sources used for this biographical work, I rely heavily on the work of Dexter Fisher, the most important scholar dedicated to this subject. The paper also includes a section devoted to the literary characteristics of her autobiographical work, which differs from the Euro-American canon, as well as a section that refers to the way her work has been received both by the authors of her time as well as by critics.

After this, I focused on the proper close reading and literary analysis of the three autobiographic essays by Zitkala-Ša: “Impressions of an Indian Childhood,” “The School Days of an Indian Girl,” and “An Indian Teacher Among Indians.” These chapters seek to demonstrate how through them, Zitkala-Ša has denounced the situation of indigenous children in these boarding schools as she has been both a first-hand informant and a privileged witness. Thus, her works have served both to show the author's own experience, and to denounce the consequences this traumatic experience has had on her later life —as it is the case with thousands of little young Native Americans, both male and female.

Besides, there exist some valuable visual material that proves the existence of institutions of learning that were created to steal and penalize the childhoods of thousands of Native Americans at the same time they were responsible for the desecration and eradication of their ancient culture. I think these graphic documents complement the personal story of Zitkala-Ša. Therefore, a selection of representative images is included in the Annexes section. These images present a “before” stage —when the Native American child/man/woman were caught— and the “after” stage —that shows the “polished” image of the same protagonist after having spent years in the Indian Boarding Schools, where they have forcibly assimilated the American white’s appearance, and speaks volumes about the pernicious effect of the creation and development of the Indian Boarding School System.

Taking all this into account, my aim is to show how Zitkala-Ša managed to physically survive her experience in the boarding schools, and, ironically, how she was able to maintain her culture and her traditional Indian roots. Thus, she became an important activist for the defence of the rights of indigenous peoples using her traditional Sioux literature as her only weapon and her Western education to create a bridge between

her native culture, always present both in her life as a Native American, and her new life within the White American society.

Far from aggrandizing her figure, my intention is to present Zitkala-Ša as an ordinary Sioux woman. As such, she felt an unbearable sense of alienation during her whole life —she felt she could not be part of her whole culture, nor could she totally embrace the White American education where she has excelled. However, her at times contradictory “double consciousness” does not prevent her from writing great literary works where she fiercely defends Native Americans’ culture and rights and, at the same, joins her two different cultures and literary traditions.

Chapter One: What do we Know about Indian Boarding Schools?

After the end of the Indian Wars in 1890, the US together with the Canadian government began a process of elimination of the culture and way of living of the Native American survivors. In other works, as Churchill puts it: “the object of assimilation policy was from the outset to eliminate all American Indians culturally recognizable as such” (12). When dealing with this process, we must talk about residential schools, or boarding schools as they were called in the US. That is, these centres where aboriginal children were taken, after being removed from their home in the off-reservations, and where, echoing Churchill’s words, they were held for years in a “self-state sponsored ‘educational’ facilities, systematically deculturated, and simultaneously indoctrinated to see her/his own heritage” (13).

Why were these “educational” boarding schools created? This system was created and supervised in 1879 by Captain Richard Henry Pratt, an army officer. As he himself claimed in 1895, the aim of these boarding school systems was “[to] kill the Indian, [and] save the man,” a claim that Zitkala-Ša tried to overcome through her activism and

literature. As this slogan shows, the clear objective of this new system was to totally eradicate any hint of Indian cultures from an early stage to later turn former “Indian” children into *tabula rasa* people who have been indoctrinated as followers of the victimizer’s white culture and, hopefully, assimilate the American way of living.

As it might be expected, the children’s families opposed to this forced separation, not only for personal and emotional reasons, but also because such a process soon turned out to be perceived close to a genocide crime. However, in 1891, the US Commissioner of Indian Affairs was authorized to “make and enforce ... such rules and regulations as will ensure the attendance of Indian children of suitable age and health at schools established and maintained for their benefit (*Status at Large of the United States* qtd. in Churchill 16). Those who did not agree to cede their children to the State would suffer the consequences, such as the enchantment of their property. Also, the use of violence was not infrequent.

Once children arrived at the boarding schools, were subjected to a process of elimination of any physical traits derived from their culture. For example, boys were forced to shave their heads, a great offence to their culture, due to the importance of long hair among indigenous men. They were also stripped of their property and traditional clothes and many of them were even renamed with Christian names. In order to make the procedure more effective, the children were not only completely isolated from their families, but they were also forbidden to speak their own languages and were forced to communicate in English.

These schools were similar to military centres and the life of the children in them was little different from military training. Children’s lives were completely scheduled by rigid timetables, and they were also forced to parade in a military manner on multiple occasions. Furthermore, they were instilled into a strong sense of patriotism towards

America which, at the same time, reminded them that the true citizens of the country were the descendants of European ancestors, presenting, once again, the true natives as non-Americans.

Conditions were not only terrible from a moral point view; children lived in inhumane conditions and, in many cases, due to the low budget allocated to schools, there were cases of malnutrition. Also, the spread of diseases, such as tuberculosis, was common. In fact, as Scott complains “fifty percent of the children who passes through these schools did not live to benefit from the education they received therein” (qtd. in Churchill). This, together with the forced labour, made the experience similar to a concentration camp. For Kizer, “[Indian] students not only laboured in the laundries, dairies and gardens of the schools, they also built and repaired many of their campus buildings” (qtd. in Churchill).

On many occasions, families were not informed of their children’s death, and they were buried in communal cemeteries in the schools. This is illustrated by the recent discovery in 2021 of 215 corpses in a mass grave at the Kamloops Indian Residential School, closed in 1978, a piece of news that has once again highlighted the appalling conditions in the schools and revived criticism of such practices.

It was also very common that, among those children who managed to survive and reach adulthood, there were cases of mental illness, such as anxiety, depression, alcoholism, or low self-esteem. As a result, many Native Americans are still stigmatized and marginalized in American society today. This problem has been called “Residential School Syndrome” (RSS), which includes all the symptoms mentioned above, and they can easily be transferred from parents to children.

Also, in many of these patients it has been noticed a “permanent variation of the so-called Stockholm Syndrome” (Churchill 70). Following Churchill reports, many of

them rejected their own peoples and traditions, being more interested in the new Western lifestyle. However, the author adds that “a much larger group [...] consists of people among whom the ‘neutralizing’ symptomatology of RSS predominate” (71). As it is the case of Zitkala-Ša’s herself, many of them felt a sense of “in-betweenness,” not feeling part of any of both societies (Native Indian and foreign American) and could easily suffer from an identity conflict. This will be clearly shown and denounced in Zitkala-Ša’s literary work, as it will be seen in next chapters.

Therefore, in many cases, the boarding schools did succeed in killing the Indian, but, unfortunately, they failed to save the man, despite the brutal indoctrination experienced by Native Americans. Examples such as that of Zitkala-Ša, who —after her traumatic experience in the schools decided to defend the rights of indigenous tribes through activism and literature— show that the feeling for their cultures and roots were sometimes more important than the terrible experiences they had suffered as children in those schools.

Boarding Schools and its Survivors’ Nowadays Situation

As it has been mentioned, in recent years, hundreds of graves of indigenous children have been found in the cemeteries and mass graves of the boarding schools they attended. The terrifying news have been broadcasted worldwide. Thus, “more than 1,000 unmarked children's graves and remains have been identified at former Indigenous residential boarding schools in Canada” (Weisberger).

The discovery of 215 bodies of children, some as young as three years old, at the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in Tk'emlúps (Canada), has been followed by many others. The finding of 751 anonymous graves at the Marieval Indian Residential School in Saskatchewan, operated by the Catholic Church from 1899 to 1997, is

noteworthy, while “a recent search at the site of the former St. Eugene's Mission School — another Catholic institution in British Columbia, open from 1890 to 1970 —uncovered another 182 unmarked, shallow graves holding children's remains” (Weisberger).

As indicated, the sanitary, hygienic, and nutritional conditions in the boarding schools were appalling, leading on many occasions to death — Zitkala-Ša herself refers to this in one of her essays, as will be seen in the following chapters—. Thus, Canadian and the US governments denied not only the children's right to live according to their customs, but also their right to a dignified death.

As the existence of these mass graves demonstrates, after the death of the children, their remains were not returned to the families, mainly to save the costs of removal. Moreover, they were not even included in the state registers, so that even today it is difficult to keep a reliable record. Pauline Boss refers to this horror as an “ambiguous death,” “a loss that remains unclear because there is no document certifying the death and no official verification of the loss: no resolution, no closure” (qtd. in Coburn, translation mine).

Most of these discoveries have been possible thanks to the investigations carried out by many Indigenous tribes and associations, such as the Penelakut Tribe, the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc Nation, or the Lower Kootenay Band, which seek public knowledge of the terrible events their people have been subjected for the last century, as well as a public apology and an easing of the pain of the relatives, by being able to name the many victims.

Numerous associations and institutions such as Indigenous Foundations or the Aboriginal Healing Foundation have been founded because,

despite the efforts of the residential school system and those who created and maintained it, Indigenous Peoples largely escaped complete assimilation and continue

to work to regain what was lost, while also seeking justice for years of wrongdoing.
(Hanson et al.)

In the same vein, the Indian Residential School Survivors Society was formed in 1994 to provide support for survivors and communities throughout the healing process and to educate the broader public: “the Survivors Society provides crisis counselling, referrals, and healing initiatives, as well as acting as a resource for information, research, training, and workshops” (Hanson et al.).

Thanks to the labour of these institutions, the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement was signed in 2005 between Canada and nearly 80,000 survivors. It guaranteed “individual compensation for Survivors, additional funding for the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, and the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission” (Hanson et al.).

Thus, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada has published a report in 2015 where it informed that “student deaths over decades numbered in the thousands” (Weisberger). More recently, between 2021 and 2022, the Interior Department of the US Government has undergone an investigation, whose results show

that between 1819 and 1969, the federal system of boarding schools for American Indian children consisted of 408 federal schools in 37 states or what were then regarded as territories, including 21 schools in Alaska and seven in Hawaii. The investigation has identified marked and unmarked burial sites at 53 schools and says that more are likely to emerge. (Jiménez)

The recent findings, especially in Canada, have provoked a wave of outrage, both among the indigenous population and the white society. But not only that, also Prime Minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, Pope Francis, or the US Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland —first Native American to hold office—have apologized, expressed their deep

condolences, and shown their solidarity with the victims and their families. Meanwhile, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples have made several interviews to the survivors, which demonstrate the degrading treatment existing in the Native American Boarding School System, discussed in this chapter and for which redress is now being sought through the treaties and partnerships mentioned above.

Chapter Two: An Introduction to the figure of Zitkala-Ša

Living straddling two worlds, Zitkala-Ša was born among a Sioux tribe in the Yankton Reservation of South Dakota, as the child of a Sioux woman, Ellen Simmons, whose Lakota name was Taté I Yóhin Win, and a white French man, named Felker, who abandoned the family. As she explained in her “Impressions of an Indian Childhood,” she lived in the reservation for the first seven years of her life, before leaving to attend the White’s Manual Institute in Wabash, Indiana⁴. After spending three years in the schoolhouse, she returned home in 1887, but left again to finish her studies, first at the Santee Technical School in Nebraska and at White’s Manual Institute, and then at Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana, between 1895 and 1897, where she graduated.

It was during this period when she began writing different essays and poems in the school paper, *The Earlhamite*. Even though her wish to be educated had brought her into trouble with her mother, in these first papers she defended her culture and shows

⁴ The misión of this institution was to educate Native American children —both boys and girls— as part of a government contract that run from 1882 to 1895. It was founded in 1850 by Josiah White, a Pennsylvania Quaker. After the death of his three sons, and together with his only daughter, Rebecca, they put into practice the creation of school where “poor children, white, coloured and Indian could have access to a religious education.” For more information, see: <https://sites.rootsweb.com/~ialqm/White%27sInstitute.html>

serious feelings of hatred against Whites. Given her position of “in-betweenness,” Zitkala-Ša uses “the language of one to translate the need of another” (Fisher 233).

After winning the second place in the Indiana State Oratorical Contest of 1896 — an announcement that took the white audience by surprise and caused some outrage—, she published three more autobiographical papers in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1900: “Impressions of an Indian Childhood,” “The School Days of an Indian Girl,” and “An Indian Teacher Among Indians.” In the years that followed, and while working as a teacher in the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, she published the short stories “The Trial Path” and “The Soft-Hearted Sioux” in the *Harper’s Magazine*, and “A Warrior’s Daughter,” in *Everybody’s Magazine*.

In 1899, she left her job at the boarding school to study music and violin at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. The most important reason to quit teaching has to do with her dissatisfaction with the conditions and practices used in the Native American boarding school system. It was during this period that her career as a writer was starting to take off and she “experienced a flurry of literary publicity and recognition” (Davidson and Norris xviii). However, her newfound career declined later on, coinciding with her marriage to a Sioux man, Raymond T. Bonnin, in 1902. Before that, during those three years, several essays and short stories had been published in different magazines.

She spent fourteen years in Utah with her husband, who worked at the Ute Indians, and her son, Raymond Ohiya Bonnin. During this period, she taught school and developed a community centre for Indigenous people, but, even though she continued writing, “some scholars mark this move as the putative end of Zitkala-Ša’s literary career” (Fisher 234).

It is also relevant to mention that Zitkala-Ša composed, in collaboration with William F. Hanson, the first native American opera, *The Sun Dance* (1913), thanks to her

knowledge of music and her violin playing skills. It was premiered in Vernal, Utah, that year, before being staged in 1938 by the New York Light Opera Guild⁵.

The couple moved to Washington D.C. due to her designation as secretary of the Society of the American Indian (SAI), where she led different activities aimed at the Indians and worked as editor for *The American Indian Magazine*. Apart from tribal self-determination concerning, the SAI focused on issues of education, assimilation, and citizenship. Once the SAI dissolved in 1919 because of pressures of internal disagreement, Zitkala-Ša continued to work in defence of Indian citizens' rights, achieving improvements in education, health care, and the preservation of the Indian culture. It is at this point in her life when her literary career gets some impetus after carefully collecting all her works: "As a part of her work for the 'Indian cause,' Zitkala-Ša collected her previously published fiction as well as some new material into *American Indian Stories*, [...] in 1921" (Davidson and Norris xxvii).

Between 1926 and her death in 1938, she became the founder and president of her own political organization, the National Council of American Indians, where, thanks to her education and oratorical skills, she tried to "create increased interest in behalf of the Indians, and secure for them added recognition of their personal and property rights" (*Indian Truth*, qtd. in Fisher 235). Also, her long-life interest in feminist issues further escalates during the 1920s, when "she became involved with the General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC), an umbrella organization for mostly white women's advocacy and suffrage groups" (Davidson and Norris xxvii).

At sixty-one years old, Zitkala-Ša died in 1938. The hospital's *post-mortem* report describes her as "Gertrude Bonnin from South Dakota—Housewife," which is a great

⁵ See Annex. The paper clip, albeit brief, highlights the musical quality of the production. Significantly, Zitkala-Sá wears her Sioux costume for the premier. Picture is included in press clip.

misrepresentation of all her long-life devotion to the defence of the Native Americans' cultures, her writing and published work, as well as her long-life concern with finding the most suitable teaching method for her peoples.

Gertrude Simmons, Zitkala-Ša, became throughout her whole life an important Indian activist. Despite being rejected by her mother and people due to the distance of their Sioux culture and the rapprochement towards Western society, Zitkala-Ša used her knowledge acquired in the boarding schools to defend the rights of the Indians. Consequently, and despite her exclusive education, she never lived as a truly White-educated woman, since she never forgot her roots and the culture and language of her origins.

Unlike other Native American children who also were forced to attend to feared boarding schools and became indoctrinated by the ways of the white folks, Zitkala-Ša resisted the recurrent brainwashing exerted by the leaders of that despiteful institution. Contrary to Mr. Pratt's heinous pedagogical slogan "kill the Indian, and save the man," Zitkala-Ša did revisit and revive the Indian cultures and traditions. In doing so, after a life devoted to propagating the richness of an ancient culture, she helped to save herself and her peoples.

Overall, we could say that Zitkala-Ša made use of her excellent Western formal education, her unique social position in defence of the Indian tribes, and her crafted writings to try to find a balance between the two worlds, despite the sense of alienation she suffered during her whole life.

Chapter Three: Zitkala-Ša's Literature and its Reception

As it has just been mentioned, Zitkala-Ša used the knowledge she had acquired in the boarding school to reach a balance between her Sioux origins and the White culture

that had been imposed on her. Throughout her autobiographical essays, she tries to reaffirm her culture and indigenous roots, to revalue them in the eyes of the White society, the dominant group in the US. Conscious of the richness, abundance, and variety of the existing Indian folklore, Zitkala-Ša writes a letter to Carlos Montezuma, dated in 1901, where she shares her eagerness to put those stories into writing:

This place is full of material for stories, but I am so uncertain... I am quite well and hope I may soon find a good writing mood —to do justice to the abandoned material around me. (qtd. In Davidson and Norris, xiv)

Zitkala-Ša created her own literary strategies for her work, presenting her real autobiographical experiences in an original way. As Kumamoto asserts in her essay “Claiming a Native American Identity: Zitkala-Ša and Autobiographical Strategies”:

Zitkala-Ša enacted her own autobiographical strategies, rejecting, on the one hand, the predominant assimilationist autobiographical mode of her time -Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*- as well as, on the other hand, the nostalgic stance of Western ethnographers who would view the Native American as a dying race, representing the prelapsarian noble savage. (1)

Even though some ethnic autobiographies and literary works has tended to get a reconciliated voice between both cultures, thus, adapting themselves to the White standards, Kumamoto highlights that Zitkala-Ša “raised her voice to challenge the values of the dominant culture” (2). In doing so, through her work, Zitkala-Ša’s literary works revalued the legends, language, and culture of the Sioux tribes, in order to disseminate them among the Euro-American readers. As a matter of fact, Herzog vindicates that “Zitkala-Ša [...] serve[d], through her writing, as a link between the oral tradition of an indigenous tribal culture and the written tradition of the literate colonizers” (qtd. in Kumamoto 2).

On her part, Susag pays attention to the many ways Zitkala-Ša empowers her native culture while she gives voice to female Indian protagonists who, like her, have struggled to humanize a people and a culture. In Susag's own words:

Zitkala-Ša's essays demonstrate the way her Native heritage of spiritual power and story works to overcome forces that would suppress the feminine Indian voice, to articulate Zitkala-Ša's personal and tribal experience, and to indict those who had victimized her people. (4)

Furthermore, her writings stand out due to her powerful voice, her concern for her people, and denouncement of the pains inflicted on them. As Kumamoto firmly sustains:

Zitkala-Ša not only fought for the rights of her people, but also sought to recover and affirm her people's cultural contributions – as she states, “to transplant the native spirit...into the English language, since America in the last few centuries has acquired a second tongue. (qtd. In Bezjak 4)

It has already been mentioned the writer's intention to use her writings as a sort of bridge that communicates two separated cultures —the Native American and the mainstream American. In the same thread of thought, Yoshida argues that “to make these stories accessible to non-Native American readers, Zitkala-Ša showed her readers similarities between white and Native American cultures, using beliefs from the Bible” (20). As I would try to demonstrate in the next chapters of this paper, Zitkala-Ša drew on her Christian knowledge acquired during her stay in the Quakers' boarding school to make her autobiographical experiences more palatable to the uninformed American reader. As Yoshida claims in her essay “Storytelling and Native American Agonies in Zitkala-Ša's Tribal Short Stories:”

Zitkala-Ša found similarities between Native American and white cultures and uses these similarities in her works. It makes non-Native American readers regard Native

American figures as human like them. For this reason, she wrote her stories which have Christian and Native American features. (20).

Through the teachings and the strict discipline found in boarding schools and other different methods, the white colonizers tried to “kill the Indian, but save the man [and woman].” Being seen as savages or innocents, the Indians were no longer considered and there was a wish of assimilating and incorporating them within the white American society, eliminating their culture, their past and their roots. Zitkala-Ša tried to break with all of this, claiming her own voice as the voice of the Indian tribes and Native American identity.

In fact, a sign of this was the change of her birth name from Gertrude Simmons to Ziktala-Sa, that means ‘Red Bird’ in her Sioux language. Beziak refers to and welcomes the writer’s personal choice when she argues that “by reclaiming her Indian name, she also reclaimed her position in American society which is marked by diversity of nations that live together in the same place” (13).

Despite living between two cultures, that is, as a Native American who has been partially Americanized, Zitkala-Ša shows through her autobiographical essays how she never forgot her roots as a member of the Sioux tribe. In this project, I will try to proof, through the reading of “Impressions of an Indian Childhood,” “The School Days of an Indian Girl,” and “An Indian Teacher Among Indians” how she became one of the most important Native American activists.

Zitkala-Ša’s life and literature remained unknown for many decades until Dexter Fisher published his article “Zitkala-Ša: Evolution of a Writer” in 1979. However, much interest could be seen during her lifetime among the American White population, who were attracted by her exotism and the novelty of her literature. According to Yoshida,

when Zitkala-Ša published this story, the memory about [Wounded Knee Massacre was] fresh for non-Native American readers because of the timing. For that reason, Zitkala-Ša's works attracted a lot of non-Native American readers because of Native Americanness in her stories. (34)

Davidson and Norris also refer to the exotism of the first Native American writer when it is stated that “one reason for the publication of Zitkala-Ša, then, may be that *Atlantic Monthly* editors deemed her and her material exotic, and of interest to their readers” (xxxiv). In fact, *Harper's Bazar* refers to talks Zitkala-Ša highlighting, first, her beauty, her young age, to later refer to her early years spent in the reservation where adjectives such as “savage” and “wild” are associated with her life in freedom:

A young Indian girl, who is attracting much attention in Eastern cities on account of her beauty and many talents, is Zitkala, [...] Zitkala-Ša is of the Sioux tribe of Dakota and until her ninth year was a veritable little savage, running wild over the prairie and speaking no language but her own [...]. She has also published lately a series of articles in a leading magazine [...] which display a rare command of English and much artistic feeling. (qtd. in. Fisher 229-230)

Much can be said about this inappropriate but common vision of indigenous people. Although the magazine decided to publish and valued her work, it did so, as it can be seen, from a racist and paternalistic point of view. Would not surprise today's reader that she is treated as a “savage,” who, surprisingly, was able to “overcome” her condition as an indigenous person —thanks, of course, to the boarding schools she had attended—. The fact that a Native American woman could write a good literary work and “had a rare command of English” —which is considered the only possible language to do so, because of the devaluation of their own language— is highlighted in her introduction as a novel writer, showing how native cultures and people were considered inferior by

white society. This is a position that, thanks to the Postcolonial and feminist literary approaches, is trying to be overcome.

Despite the above presentation, her autobiographical stories published in the *Atlantic Monthly* and later compiled in *American Indian Stories* received a lot of interest, both from critics and from the public. In 1901, she also published “The Trial Path” and “The Soft-Hearted Sioux” along with her book, *Old Indian Legends*, where she tried “to teach non-Native American readers about Native American cultures, customs and traditions” (Yoshida 19). While *Old Indian Legends* received much acclaim, her two short stories, which were less idyllic than her previous three short stories, received some harsh criticism.

Among her literary works, in “Why I Am a Pagan,” first published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1902, Zitkala-Ša fully explains her contradictory religious beliefs. During this period, “society was accustomed to and expectant of Native American essays about conformations to Christianity” (“Voices from the Gap”). Therefore, she was, at the same time, highly criticized because “many felt she showed no gratitude for the kindness and support that white people had given her in her education” (“Voices from the Gap”). In fact, as she explains in a letter to Montezuma, “the conservative General Pratt wrote in *Red Man and Helper* that the story was ‘trash’ and its author ‘worse than a pagan’” (Davidson and Norris xix).

Nowadays, thanks to postcolonial approaches to literature, that revalue the work of many writers out of the Western canon, Zitkala-Ša’s literature has been analysed by different critics and scholars. They all have concluded that Gertrude Simmons Bonnin has “used the tool that the dominant culture gave her, and she turned it into her benefit” (Bezjak 7). In the process, she might have lost part of her original American Indian

identity, but she nevertheless “built herself a new one —the identity of post-Indian warrior of survivance” (Bezjak 4).

Chapter Four: “Impressions of an Indian Childhood”

“Impressions of an Indian Childhood, first published by *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1900,” is the first part of Zitkala-Ša’s *American Indian Stories*, a compilation that saw the light in 1921. It is presented as a semiautobiographical work, which is melded with “stories of other Native Americans who have been sent away to boarding school” (Davidson and Norris xxix) and with the teachings of the legends of her people. Divided into seven chapters, the young first-person narrator, Zitkala-Ša herself, presents to the reader her early memories in the Yankton reservation where she lived with her mother until she was eight.

Each chapter presents a lesson that the eight-year-old child can draw from certain memories of her childhood, and which can be related to different Sioux legends. What the author wants to achieve through her literature is, apart from introducing to the American White population the values and traditions of Native Americans, to provide a denounce of the cultural assimilation process that her peoples had to suffer during the period the boarding school system was in vogue (1869-1978), which also includes forced and traumatic to abandonment of an idyllic way of life.

The first chapter, called “My Mother,” begins with a description of Zitkala-Ša’s mother, who plays a very important role in the life of the writer because, as Lukens notes, “despite the realities of friction between [Zitkala-Ša] and her mother, ... [she is presented] as a nearly prophetic voice of truth (qtd. in Kuncce 75). All the lessons that young Zitkala-Ša receives through the seven chapters of the “Impressions” are related and presented by

her mother, who, at the end, will completely oppose her daughter's decision to leave for a boarding school.

Therefore, in keeping with the biblical parallels that the author tries to create in this work, her mother would be playing the role of God in her daughter's life, acting as the voice of truth, wisdom, and teaching. However, Kuncce adds that "a clear comprehension that she granted her mother the status of God would have triply outraged an early-twenty-century white audience, for her god is Indian, female, and human" (76).

After this description, where her mother is "often ... sad and silent" (67), the narrator talks about herself, being "as free as the wind that blew [her] hair, and no less spirited than a bounding deer," to conclude that she was "[her] mother's pride" (67). From the very beginning, we see how Zitkala-Ša presents the memories of her life in the reservation as something positive that would be eliminated with the arrival of the missionaries who will become the cause of her mother's sadness.

Zitkala-Ša's literature urges to denounce what the so-called "palefaces" have done to her people. And this statement is already presented in the first chapter, where she refers to the first lesson her mother teaches her. When young Zitkala-Ša asks her who "this bad paleface" (69) is, her mother presents them as "a sham, a sickly sham!" while "the bronzed Dakota is the only real man" (69).

Thus, the "Impressions" are built upon some kind of circular structure, beginning with her mother's statement against the White men and finishing when they get what they wanted. That is, to take Native children away from the reservation and causing her mother to cry. Eventually, the White missionaries manage to convince Zitkala-Ša, even though, she seems to be fighting against her desire to leave and her pain at her mother's sadness when she claims that she "hate[s] the paleface that makes [her] mother cry!" (69).

Therefore, after this beginning and through the presentation of the following memories of her childhood, she is trying to make the reader “reconsider the norms not of Native American society but of White society” (Davidson and Norris xxxi). What is going to be told in the following chapters is the norm, while what Zitkala-Ša will experience in “Schools Days of an Indian Girl” is the barbarism and violence that, from the point of view of white society, was associated with Native Americans. As it is said in the “Introduction,” written by Davidson and Norris, to *American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings*,

what makes Zitkala-Ša such a unique and masterful writer is her ability to portray the perceptions, assumptions, experiences, and customs of the Sioux while also making the reader rethink the perceptions, assumptions, experiences, and customs of white, middle-class Americans. Moreover, by presenting the stories through the voice of a young girl, the author manages to get a lot of readers on their side, who sympathise with their misfortunes and with their stories. From that moment on, apart from presenting her childhood life as completely normal, she will show to the readers the different lessons she learns, especially from her mother, whose mention usually opens each chapter. (xxxii)

In the second chapter, “The Legends,” the reader learns about the relevance of these oral stories that have been passed from one generation to the next. They also show how much the Indian elders are respected because they are the ones who have that particular knowledge, and they are generous enough to share their teachings. In fact, many of these legends were the ones that encouraged Zitkala-Ša to write and have served as the basis for many of her stories.

Also, even though the story *per se* is not told, the traditional character of the Iktomi is mentioned in this chapter. The Iktomi is a traditional trickster figure in Dakota legends, who first shows a face of benevolence to later retract his promises and becomes violent.

This legend clearly mirrors the role the White missionaries play in the lives of the indigenous people —they steal them, but with a broad smile, to later make them go through a traumatic experience of forced assimilation. Thus, interestingly enough, the White missionaries are related to this trickster figure.

In “The Beadwork,” “The Coffee-Making,” and “The Ground Squirrel,” other events are presented that break with the white society’s view of the American Indians. As we have recently mentioned, Whites perceive Native Americans as complete savages who need whites in order to become educated and laborious. In “The Beadwork,” as well as showing one of the traditional Sioux chores, our author shows how her mother teaches her to be patient and persevere with her goals, by making her repeat: “I had to finish whatever I began” (74).

The importance of being hospitable to visitors, especially to older people, is shown in “The Coffee-Making,” where the young girl makes coffee to one of the men of her tribe, while her mother is absent. However, it is not only the Sioux hospitality that is shown, but also the respect people have to each other within one’s ethnic community. This is why the man does not laugh at her when she offers him a bad coffee. Instead, he takes it, thus, showing the importance of gratitude.

Finally, in “The Ground Squirrel,” in addition to presenting one important character in the last chapter, her aunt, the narrative voice shows the respect that Sioux people have for nature. But not only that. This story is relevant because it indirectly claims that it is the white missionaries the ones who spoil their land and break the peace treaties that have existed before the arrival emphasizing and denouncing that “before the invasion of missionaries, Zitkala-Ša enjoyed an Edenic existence, marred only by her mother’s memory of white barbarity” (Kunce 74), Or, as Cutter puts it, “a word of perfect peace

and cooperation between humankind and nature” was put to an end once the white missionaries arrived (qtd. in Kuncce 74).

Throughout Zitkala-Ša’s “Impressions” the author refers to her mother as God, as the voice of truth, but the connections with the Christian religion are not limited to that. In the chapters "The Dead Man's Plum Bush" and "The Big Red Apples" there are two clear references to the forbidden fruit of the Eden. In the first of these chapters, her mother warns Zitkala-Ša not to eat from some plums, because “its roots are wrapped around and Indian’s skeleton. A brave is buried there” (80), thus teaching her the importance of the sacred and of honouring the dead. Her mother, the Indian God of her “Impressions of an Indian Childhood,” manages to prevent the author from eating from that sacred bush, contrary to what will happen in the next chapter, where God is represented by the white missionaries.

The apple is the symbol of seduction and disobedience in the Bible and its appearance in “The Big Red Apples,” according to Davidson and Norris, “links her tale of temptation and seduction with the lure of assimilationism” (xxx). It is only when the White missionaries appear that Zitkala-Ša falls into temptation. In that way, the author wants to show that the White malevolence and cruelty, which are clearly related to the biblical Serpent, is the only thing that can separate the young girl from her mother, her God, and her Edenic land (Kuncce 77).

Through this last chapter, Zitkala-Ša portrays the way native children were separated by force from their families and taken to schools in the East, even though in this case the men do not use violence but alluring and inviting words to convince the inexperienced and naïve girl. The mentioning of the forbidden fruit is enough to convince the children to separate from her parents and move to the whites’ new land where “the great tree where grew red, red apples ... [that they] could reach out [their] hands” (84).

This event marks the beginning of “the first turning away from the easy, natural flow of [her] life” (83). Her mother, against her wishes, but knowing that education will be needed “for then there will be fewer real Dakotas, and many more palefaces” finally gives in (85-6).

As it has been said throughout this analysis of “Impressions of an Indian Childhood,” its main goal is to present to the White reader the traditional lifestyle of Sioux through the eyes of a young Indian girl, breaking with the typical “double consciousness” that appears in other literary works. This literary postcolonial concept, coined by Du Bois in *The Sould of Black Folk* (1903), refers to the internal conflict experience by subordinated or colonized groups in an oppressive society. They see themselves through the eyes of White people—and this was, in fact, the aim of the boarding school’s system, finally achieved, as the story “School Days of an Indian Girl” shows.

Therefore, especially in this essay, Indian themes, traditions, and customs, that had not yet found a native voice are introduced for one of the first times in the English language. Furthermore, Zitkala-Ša blames white people for destroying their lives and lands, making readers feel guilty for what their society does to Native Americans, turning them into savages themselves, and making them feel empathy for the narrator, just an 8-year-old girl, and her people.

Chapter Five: “The School Days of an Indian Girl”

The second part of *American Indian Stories*, “The School Days of an Indian Girl” is divided into seven sections and begins with the young narrator travelling in “the iron horse” [the train] from the East to the West to attend the boarding school assigned to her—White’s Indiana Manual Labor Institute in Wabash, even though the name is not mentioned. What should have been a pleasant journey, “under a sky of rose apples

[where] we dreamt of roaming as freely as happily as we had chased the cloud shadows on the Dakota plains” (87), becomes a foretaste of what will be found in the “Red Apple Country.”

The Indian children soon become the “attraction” of White people’s curiosity in the train, a behaviour that already demonstrates the rudeness of white society, which will only increase during her stay at school. Therefore, once they arrived at the boarding school, young Zitkala-Ša begins to cry for she misses her mother, but one of the older children advised her to “wait until [she is] alone in the night” (89) thus anticipating the suffering that their new life will represent.

Typical of boarding schools was the use of military methods and way of life, which the narrator finds the very first day, as a “lang bell rang for breakfast” (89), and they “were placed in a line of girls who were marching into the dining room” (90), as it is shown in the second section of the essay. Apart from presenting the strict regulations at mealtimes, here we see that one of the first steps in order to “kill the Indian” has to do with the physical transformation of the children, by styling and dressing them following the Western style, and stripping them of their traditional dresses —no long and wild hair was allowed. The use of blankets and moccasins was forbidden too, and replaced by hard and uncomfortable shoes that hurt their feet— used to the naked touch of the grass and the earth.

Therefore, while in the “Impressions,” the author tries to defend and present as completely acceptable the Indian lifestyle, here she seeks to show the white society as the savage one, as they brutally suppress the Native American’s culture in order to further imprint their own Western and more “decent” ideas.

As early as their first day, as it can be seen in “The Cutting of My Long Hair,” Zitkala-Ša and her companions suffer this offence, as their hair is cut off and their Indian

clothes are removed, a gesture that is extremely humiliating for her peoples. The fact that the title itself highlights this event shows the great importance Indian culture give to long hair, since “among [their] people, short hair was worn by mourners, and shingled hair by coward” (90).

The way Zitkala-Ša manages to overcome the wishes of the whites, while remaining true to her roots, is already shown on her arrival at the boarding school. Once she hears about the cutting of her hair, she hides, trying to avoid it at all costs. However, despite her brave resistance, her furious kicking, biting, scratchings and screaming, Zitkala-Ša long hair was cut and she “lost [her] spirit.” No wonder then that “for now [she] was only one of many little animals driven by a herder” (91).

Through this section, the narrator presents in chronological order the lives of Zitkala-Ša and her Indian friends at the boarding school, where “the different culture and rules made her found a lot of misunderstanding” (Paryanti n.p.). As she gets used to her new routine, she also finds “unjustifiable frights and punishments” (93) since she was forced to do things contrary to her beliefs and customs.

“The Snow Episode” presents another important event that shows, not only these continuous irrational punishments, but also how Indian students were forced to communicate in English, a language that was not their mother tongue, while their traditional languages were banned. In fact, bilingualism was considered a problem for those responsible by the assimilation of the Indian children (Susag 3).

In this chapter, Zitkala-Ša and her Dakota friends, Judéwin and Thowin, were playing in the snow, marking their impressions on it, something that was also forbidden. As they “were all still deaf to the English language” (92), Judéwin, who was the only one who knew some words in English, advices her friends to answer “no” to all the questions the teacher might ask them. Obviously, this brings them into trouble, which shows once

again the inferior situation in which Indian children found themselves. This is the reason why, when Zitkala-Ša was able to express herself in what she calls broken English, “a mischievous spirit of revenge possessed [her]” (93).

Throughout history, the Christian religion has been imposed in all the territories European people conquered and settled in. The same process will take place in North and South America, where boarding schools were an important place to spread Christianity, a religion that was foreign for the children. At the boarding schools, Native American children were forced to forget their traditional religious beliefs and adjust to the Christian faith which “puzzled Zitkala-Ša because she knew only Native American religion” (Yoshida 41):

I heard a man’s voice at one end of the hall, and I looked around to see him. But all the others hung their heads over their plates. [. . .] The man ceased his mutterings, and then a third bell was tapped. Every one picked up his knife and fork and began eating. I began crying instead. (90)

“The Devil” presents the teaching of the Christian religion through the figure of the devil, a figure that the children associate with “a bad spirit.” Zitkala-Ša shows her puzzlement when she writes:

I never new there was an insolent chieftain among the bad spirits, who dared to array his forces against the Great Spirit, until I heard this white man’s legend from a paleface woman. (94)

Zitkala-Ša talks about the inculcation of Christian religion through the devil, “the king o evil spirits” (94). She introduces him with a clear and detailed description where she highlights his horrible features, which frighten her. This, coupled with the threats that “little girls who disobeyed school regulations were to be tortured by him” (94), shows how all teaching in the school was done through fear and violence, even those related to religion.

Zitkala-Ša dreams with the demon. He even finds her home in the Yankton reservation, where her mother and her aunt are. She is terrified by this figure, who “did not know the Indian language” (95), a feature that highlights the strangeness of this religious character who is outside their culture and who intrudes into their dreams, just as Western religion and culture intrudes into their lives. The next day, Zitkala-Ša “took [her] revenge upon the devil” (95), by “scratching out his wicked eyes” (95) in the book *The Stories of the Bible*. Once again, Zitkala-Ša shows her rebelliousness and discontent with the imposition of a forced foreign religion on the indigenous children, as she will later do in her adult life as an activist.

As it has been explained in Chapter One, “mortality rates in the schools were, from the beginning, appalling,” due to “the rampant spread of contagious diseases” (Churchill 35 and 35), caused by the poorly conditions the children lived in, added to the forced labour they all were obliged to do. This is precisely what Zitkala-Ša wants to denounce in “Iron Routine,” where, apart from referring once again to the rigid routines they experience, she presents an episode of general illness in the school that ends with the life of one of Zitkala’s closest companions. She blames the “hard-working, well-meaning, ignorant woman who was inculcating in [their] hearts her superstitions ideas,” showing, not only the causes of the disease situation, but also denouncing —once again— the imposition of the Christian religion over the Native American beliefs.

After denouncing the terrible conditions Indian children experience on a daily basis in the boarding school, in the chapter “Four Strange Summers,” Zitkala-Ša is back to her mother’s and her reservation life and this coming back is clearly mark by the consequences of her fatal experience in the boarding school. It is in this section where the author becomes both melancholic at times, but she also experiences some confusion while she “roamed again in the Western country through four strange summers” (97).

It is at this time when her “homecoming” makes her feel a sense of “in-betweenness.” That is, as a result of her previous indoctrination process, she does realize, in shock, that she does not feel part as part of either the Indian reservation or a member of the American society. In fact, as she summarized this bitter-sweet moment, she describes herself “as an eleven-year-old child returning to the Yankton Reservation with the Whiteman’s clothes and the white-man’s words,” to sadly add that “she was forbidden to claim the only home she had ever known” (Susag 7).

This breaking with her roots and customs affects not only her, but many other members of the reservation who have returned from the boarding schools. Note how Zitkala-Ša narrates this coming back home that is charged with the negation of her culture and traditions: “they were no more young braves in blankets and eagle plumes, nor Indian maids with prettily painted cheeks. They had gone three years to school in the East and had become civilized” (99). The way these young men wear Western fashion, as well as the fact that they speak English among themselves, shows that the American government seems to have achieved their ultimate goal because they have truly “killed the Indian” in them.

The last chapter in “The School Days of an Indian Girl” shows the circular structure of this section. It starts with a scene where Zitkala-Ša is going back to the boarding school and complete her studies in the East, against her mother’s wish. She had expected that her daughter “have better give up [her] slow attempt to learn the white man’s ways and be content to roam over the prairies and find [her] living upon wild roots” (101). However, she does not listen to her mother and begins to attend college, to “convince herself and her mother that the bit of education she had received made it impossible for her to fit comfortably back into the traditional customs of her tribe” (Fisher 232).

Zitkala-Ša 's words together with her mother's insistence to forget about the world of the whites, influence the writer's psyche who clearly perceives her own cultural dichotomy and ambivalence when she does not seem to fit in none of the two cultures: "I was [...] neither a wild Indian nor a tame one" (97). Since that moment onwards, the relationship with her mother —and thus, with the reservation life and her Indian culture— will be problematic and quite uncomfortable. Fisher elaborates on Zitkala-Ša 's sense of unbelonging in the following terms:

to her mother and the traditional Sioux on the reservation where she had grown up, she was highly suspected because, in their minds, she had abandoned, even betrayed, the Indian way of life by getting an education in the white man's world. (Fisher 230)

In fact, Fisher adds, even though she will be truly connected with her roots, as being "one of the most vocal spokesmen of the Pan-Indian movement [...] Zitkala-Ša was never reconciled with her mother" (233).

"Zitkala-Ša felt split between her Indian world and the white world, which led to a major identity crisis" (Cuenca 296, translation mine). Furthermore, she will not be either completely integrated in the college's society either, where she is seen as an outsider. In fact, racist episodes are common, even though she was one of the best students. This is exemplified at the end of the chapter, when she represents her college for the Indiana State Oratorical Contest and suffers some verbal abuse on the part of her own classmates as well as the rest of the competitors which shows the existing racism as well as "was a strong prejudice against [her] people" (102).

Other explicit manifestation of rejection occurred when her name was called as the winner of the competition and "some college rowdies threw out a large white flag, with a drawing of a most forlorn Indian girl on it, [...] with bold black letters words that ridiculed the college which was represented by a 'squaw'" (102-3). Apart from this clear manifestation of racial prejudice and lack of education, Zitkala-Ša was further humiliated

by forcing her to accept the second position in the context —instead of that of the winner, as she fully deserved.

Thus, “The School Days of an Indian Girl” shows how her experience at a boarding school has half disconnected her from her roots, a fact that she openly denounces. However, it proves that Zitkala-Ša “remained connected to her Native heritage” (Susag 6), since it was this sense of “in-betweenness” and this estrangement from her culture and roots what which led her to work for the rights of the Indians and to search for a connection between the Indian oral culture and the written literature (Cuenca 295-6).

Therefore, always a defender of Indian rights, with her “The School Days of an Indian Girl,” she makes a clear denunciation of the subhuman conditions in which Indian children lived in boarding schools. In addition, it does not only present her own experience as an Indian student who was part of the Indian boarding school system, but it also shows the consequences that this forced and brutal assimilation process into Western culture produced in her: the uncomfortable feeling of occupying a shaking “third space” both within her own culture and the culture of the white colonizers and, most importantly, the breaking of her relationship with her mother.

Chapter Six: “An Indian Teacher Among Indians”

Zitkala-Ša begins this new chapter by explaining the reasons why she quitted her studies and began to work as a teacher at the Carlisle Industrial School, the one directed by Captain Richard Henry Pratt. Once again, her mother’s presence in absence appears right from the beginning of this new chapter: “though an illness left me unable to continue my college course, my pride kept me from returning to my mother” (104).

In this short episode, we see how she meets the director in “My First Day,” where an example of subtle racism on the part of her director is clearly shown:

“Ah ha! So, you are the little Indian girl who created the excitement among the college orators!” he said, more to himself than to me. I thought I heard a subtle note of disappointment in his voice. (105)

However, one of the most important events from this story is included in the second chapter “A Trip Westward,” where Zitkala-Ša sets out on a journey to the reservations with the aim of recruiting new children for the boarding school, just as she was recruited by the missionaries in her early years. In the words of the superintendent: she was “going to [be] turn[ed] out loses to pasture!” (106). This statement exemplifies just one instance of racism suffered as a teacher that she includes in “An Indian Teacher Among Indians.” Paradoxically, Zitkala-Ša also found teaching jobs among white schools—and was highly criticised by her own people, who felt betrayed.

During this trip, she pays a short visit to her mother. This encounter only makes her suffer from a recurrent sense of alienation. In fact, when she arrives accompanied by a white man, her mother only manages to utter the following question: “My daughter, what madness possessed you to bring home such a fellow?” (108). It is important to highlight here that her mother has not been able to overcome her sheer rejection of the white man—especially, since she seems to have been raped and/or forced into unwanted sex with the white man and the biological father of her daughter. For Zitkala-Ša’s mother, her wound is still open and bleeding when she associates the word “madness” with the presence of “such a white fellow,” who turns to be Zitkala-Ša’s own white driver.

What is also important in this chapter is the writer’s insistence on denouncing the terrible conditions Indian people live in in the reservations. Zitkala-Ša is also taken aback and quite surprised when she notices the appalling state of the house where her mother

lives, and she asks her: “Mother, why is not your house cemented? Do you have no interest in a more comfortable shelter?” (108).

In a more direct way, Zitkala-Ša blames the President of the United States for having abandoned the Indians. Her mother explains to her that their territory has become some kind of heaven for white thieves, and the government is not looking for a solution. Despite her age, her mother is not shy to denounce everything that the whites have done to the Indians. Furthermore, her mother’s simple, straightforward, but quite articulated speech makes the reader feel sympathy for and empathize with the indigenous people:

My daughter beware of the paleface. It was the cruel paleface who caused the death of your sister and your uncle, my brave brother. It is this same paleface who offers in one palm the hoy papers, and with the other gives a holy baptism of firewater. He is the hypocrite who reads with one eye, ‘Thou shalt not kill,’ and with the other gloats upon the sufferings of the Indian race. (110)

Moreover, in the last section of “An Indian Teacher Among Indians,” “Retrospection,” Zitkala-Ša deals with a disturbing identity crisis that prompted her to leave her job as a teacher. This is her reflection on the effects of the presence of the white man in her life and the mistaken paths she has taken:

For the white man’s papers, I had given up my faith in the Great Spirit. For these same papers I had forgotten the healing in trees and brooks. On account of my mother’s simple view of life, and my lack of any, I gave her up, also. Like a slender tree, I had been uprooted from my mother, nature, and God. (112)

As mentioned above, many of the children transferred to boarding schools suffered from serious physical and psychological consequences in later life. As Churchill denounces, Native Americans—including Zitkala-Ša’s among them—have been cheated by the superiority of the white man’s culture. All of them have been

deculturated to the point of being unable to participate fully in their own societies, and congenitally barred by the race codes upon which North America's settler societies continue to function from fitting into them either, [being] trapped in a perpetual limbo of conflicted identity, personal unfulfillment and despair. (71)

According to Yoshida's "The role of Zitkala-Ša's Autobiography: illustrating Native American Life Through a Native American Point of View," Zitkala-Ša was well aware of the damage caused by the white's forced imposition of their culture on thousands of native people who felt unprotected and vulnerable:

to solve the problem, she decided to be a writer and preserve Native American beliefs, tradition and culture. It was one of the reasons that she wrote these essays about her life. (46)

From that moment on, Zitkala-Ša starts a new life between the two cultures she feels both part and alienated. She becomes one of the most important activists in the defence of American Indian rights by using, paradoxically, the white education that she had received in the boarding schools that have caused a most excruciating sense of alienation in her and in many other Native American children.

Conclusions

Throughout this work, the aim has been to show a connection between a forgotten part of American history and its literature. The author chosen is Zitkala-Ša, a Native American Indian writer, who illustrates one of the most terrible and shameful episodes in the history of the US: the implementation of boarding schools for Native American children.

As this study shows, Zitkala-Ša was able not only to overcome the boarding school traumatic experience, but also to use it to speak out against the precarious social situation of the Indian people and to defend their rights.

The first two chapters of this essay have been devoted to providing necessary information about the history of boarding schools and the author's background. From there on, an analysis of Zitkala-Ša's three autobiographical essays, "The Impressions of an Indian Childhood," "The School Days of an Indian Girl," and "An Indian Teacher Among Indians," has been offered.

It has been possible to prove how these three literary works are an important source of information about the Native American Boarding School System, and denunciation of the brutal and discriminatory policies suffered by thousands of indigenous children for the past two centuries. Also, and related to her work as a Native American Indian activist, Zitkala-Ša questions not only the terrible conditions that Indian children lived in the boarding schools, but also the poverty of Indian reservations. Through all this, together with her work as an activist and a teacher, she sought to improve the living conditions of her people.

Like Zitkala-Ša herself, many of the Native American children were forced to live between two cultures, thus, feeling a sense of alienation. However, Zitkala-Ša was able to overcome the trauma of acculturation —albeit not entirely— and to turn it into a recurrent literary topic in her work of fiction.

Finally, Zitkala-Ša uses her literary work to create a bridge between her two cultures, presenting the Indian customs, traditions, and lifestyle to the White population of the United States. In doing so, she not only denounces the processes of assimilation carried out against her, but she also sought to highlight her Indian roots and present them as being as valid as the Western way of life.

Therefore, throughout the elaboration of this paper, two assertions have been proven. On the one hand, this work has also served to demonstrate to what extent literature might become an important social weapon. Not only as a document to record historical facts, but also as an element of denunciation and defence of social rights—in this case the rights of the Native American people.

On the other hand, it has been shown that, contrary to the experience of many other indigenous children, it has not been possible to “kill the Indian” in her. Despite the forced imposition of Western customs, such as the use of English language itself—for which, she was strongly criticised by her mother and her people—Zitkala-Ša has always remained proud of and attached to her Native American roots.

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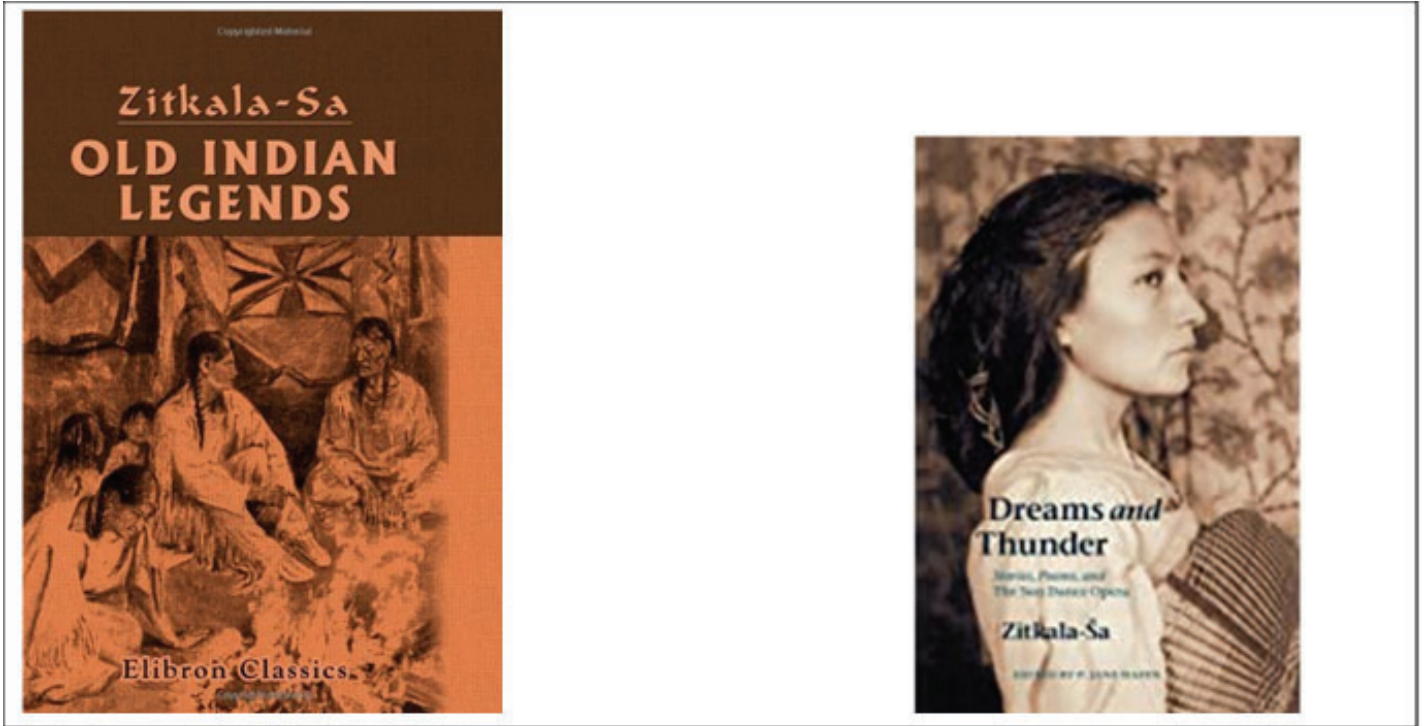
Annexes



Picture 1: Zitkala-Ša with the Indian Traditional Dress



Picture 2: Zitkala-Ša with Western Outfit



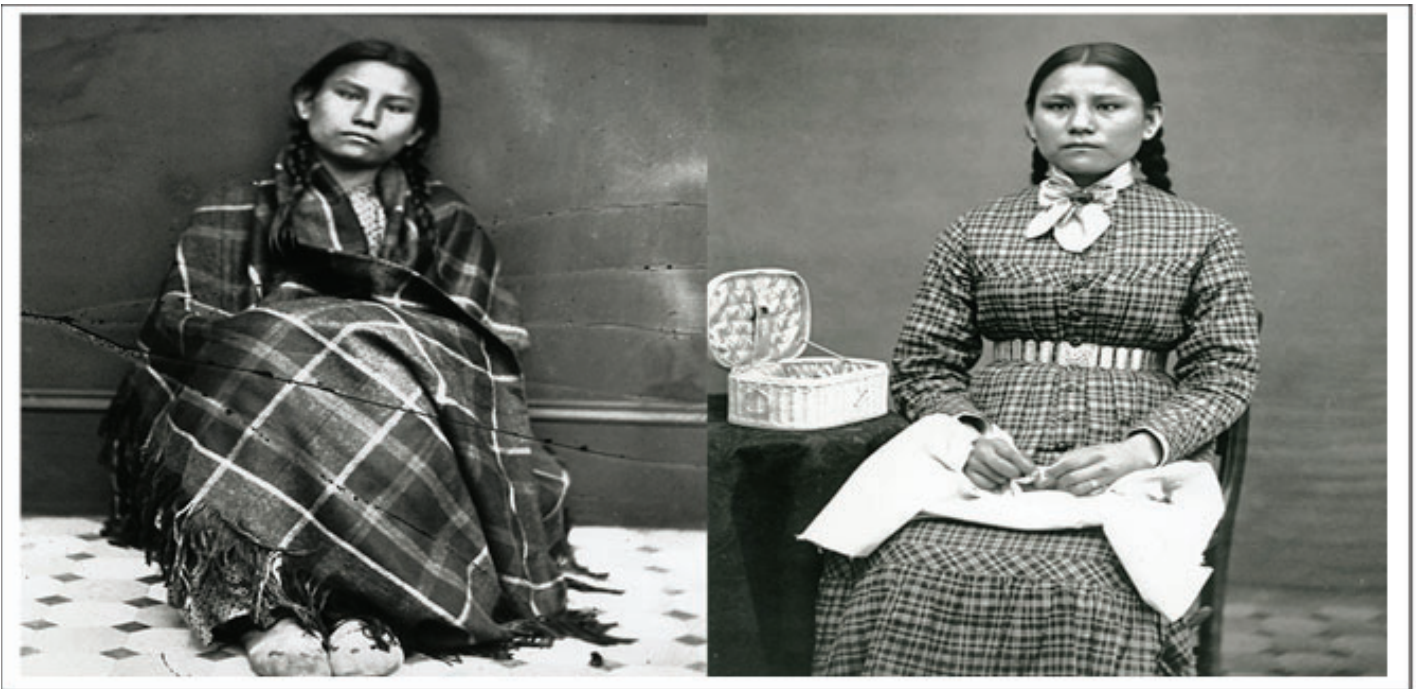
Pictures 3 and 4: Covers of Her Literary Works



Picture 5: Piece of News about Her Opera



Picture 6: Zitkala-Sa and her husband



Pictures 6 and 7: Sioux Man and Young Woman: before and after boarding school



Picture 8: Three Lakota Boys ca. 1900: Before and After Boarding School



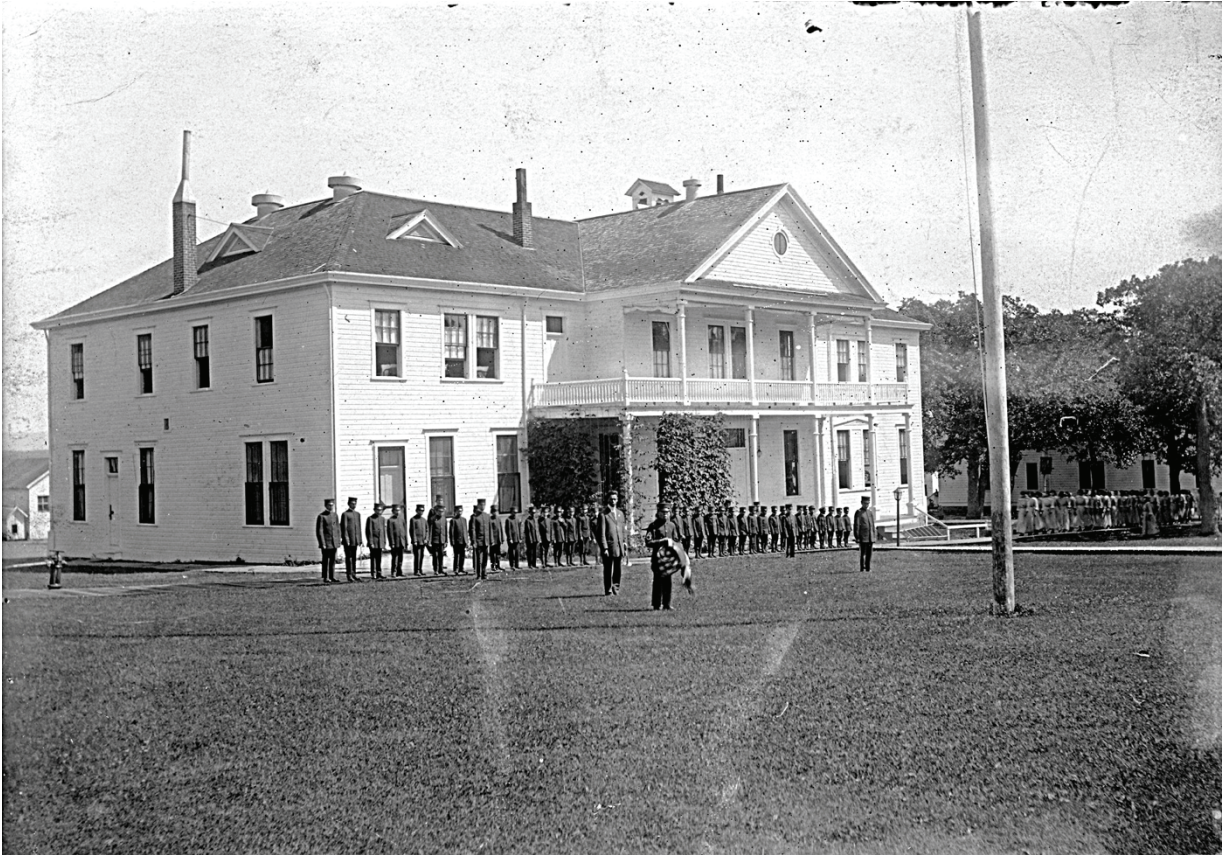
Picture 9: Indian Boys and Girls at the Boarding School



Picture 10: Indian Children Praying Before Bed Time



Picture 12: Classroom at a Boarding School



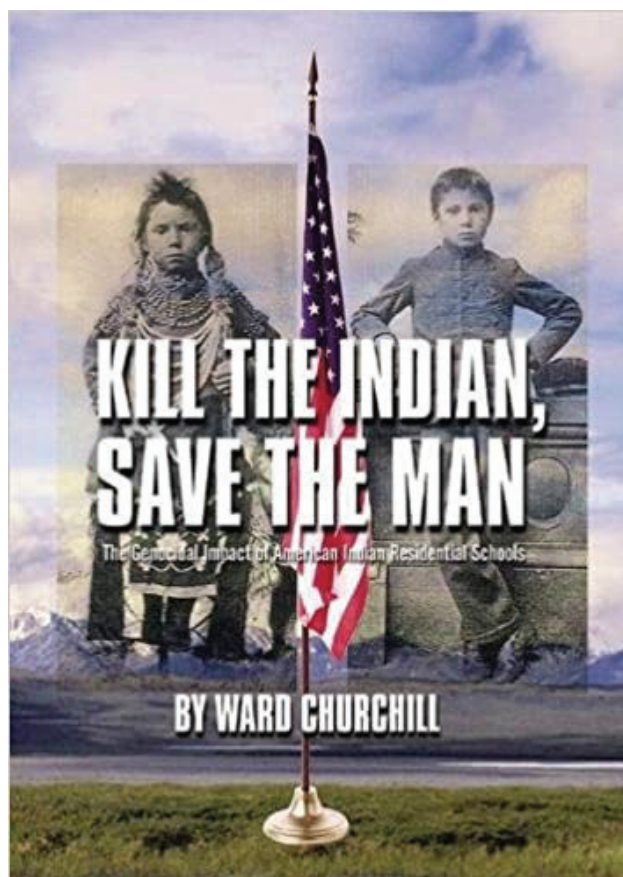
Picture 13: Indian Boys Marching in a Military Mode



Picture 14: Children Doing Forced Labour



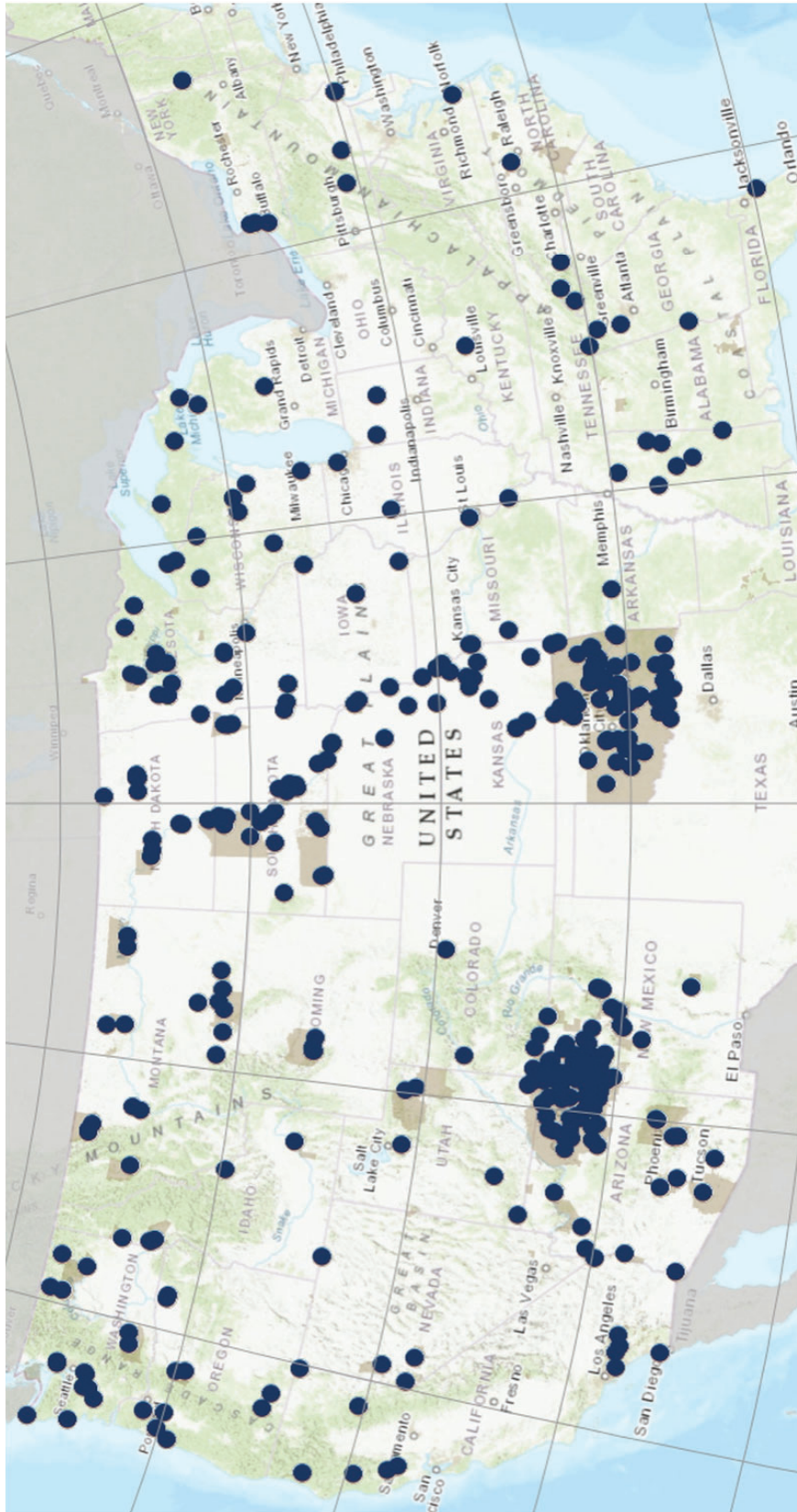
Picture 15: Lieutenant Richard Henry Pratt (1840-1924)



Picture 16: Cover of Churchill's Book



Picture 17: Distance From Yankton Reservation to Zitkala-Ša 's Indian Boarding School



Picture 18: Map Showing the Location of Boarding Schools for Indian children in the United States (excluding Alaska and Hawaii).



Picture 19: Sioux Indian Girl's Grave



Picture 20: Tribute to Indian Children Dead at Boarding Schools

