

# MASTERING ENGLISH AS RESISTANCE TO COLONIZATION IN ZITKALA-ŠA'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING

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**Abstract.** The three autobiographical essays that open Zitkala-Ša's *American Indian Stories* present the Yankton Sioux narrator's experiences in early life, focusing on major issues that have shaped her journey to adulthood, among which the most prominent is her relationship to the English language. The present study demonstrates that the American Indian subject traces an intricate process of language acquisition from the first reactions to the new idiom to the tedious learning and mastering it. Even if the imposition of English was supposed to suppress her native identity, it actually enables her to resist colonization and express herself in terms that can be understood by the mainstream public. In "Impressions of an Indian Childhood" the writer portrays the original cultural context in which the child got accustomed to specific practices and teachings in her mother tongue while in "The School Days of an Indian Girl" she deals with the boarding school education away from home and the important role English plays in the drastic shift from the native environment to the dominant culture. The narrator's tribulations as a young woman in charge of guiding children's minds are analyzed in "An Indian Teacher among Indians".

Gertrude Simmons Bonnin (1876-1938), also known as Zitkala-Ša, is an American Indian writer who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, publishes autobiographical writing, essays and traditional tales, which are later gathered under the title of *American Indian Stories*. The first three texts included in the volume are considered one of the first American Indian autobiographies completed without the aid of an interpreter or editor.

Zitkala-Ša's autobiography is characterized by the creativity and flexibility typical of any other work by an American Indian woman autobiographer. The analysis in *American Indian Women Telling Their Lives* by Gretchen M. Bataille and Kathleen Mullen Sands details the relationship between the author, her representation in the text and the material narrated:

The incidents are not told exactly as they occurred but are imagined and reshaped in terms of all that has led to the telling. An act of imagination and creative evaluation, critical in nature, has been imposed on each incident, and on the convergence of events that becomes the content of the narrative. The narrator selects the order of

event and incident, including or omitting detail, restructuring greatly or subtly the course of her life. The result is a dramatic persona. (16)

So accepting the consideration and terminology here, the speaking self in Zitkala-Ša's autobiographical writing will be called narrator throughout the present discussion.

The opening pieces of *American Indian Stories* present the Yankton Sioux narrator's experiences in early life, focusing on major issues that have shaped her journey to adulthood. In "Impressions of an Indian Childhood" the writer portrays the original cultural context in which the child got accustomed to specific practices and teachings in her mother tongue. Dealing with the boarding school education away from home, "The School Days of an Indian Girl" seems to consider the English language one of the elements with an important role in the drastic shift from the narrator's native environment to the dominant culture. Further consequences of the reading and writing skills acquired in school among which her becoming a guide for young minds are analyzed in "An Indian Teacher among Indians".

Thus from the first reactions to the new idiom defined as an "unknown tongue" (52) to the tedious learning, improving and finally mastering English or turning it in the substance of the "magic design" (76) of her successful speeches, the narrator traces an intricate process of language acquisition which does not succeed in suppressing her native identity, but which enables her to resist colonization and express herself in terms that can be understood by the mainstream culture. According to Ruth Spack's demonstration in *America's Second Tongue. American Indian Education and the Ownership of English 1860-1900*, Zitkala-Ša goes against English and its significance from within, or otherwise she "appropriates English to expose the (linguistic) violence and explode the myth of European American superiority that language has perpetrated" (Spack, 2002: 149). This superiority is directly connected to assumptions about the superiority of the written word over the oral tradition and of Christianity over the native systems of beliefs. Dismantling the claims of the English language implies a subtle reinterpretation of the other two assumptions as in her autobiographical writing, Zitkala-Ša also refers to the subject's relation to writing and to the religious education she received.

In the presentation of early childhood enjoyed by the side of her mother, the narrator points to the sense of unity and coherence that language granted her world: "I knew but one language, and that was my mother's native tongue" (39). An initial

sign of identity, language is used to transmit not only stories and teachings, but also types of behavior. Interestingly enough, the narrator chooses to recount the children's habit of imitating their parents: "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 our sympathy" (22). The episode clearly shows that connection to one's context and further acquisition of parental behavior and modes of speaking depends on closeness to the models that is to the family and community who revere the spoken word.

Any disruption of this natural course of action seems to result in loss of cultural identity as well. In a critic's terms "Zitkala-Ša portrays a type of Eden – a world of perfect peace and cooperation between humankind and nature" (Cutter 1994: 34) since the readers of her writing need to find imagery they can relate to. The arrival of the missionaries is seen as a threat to the primeval harmony described and this is done through the theme of language again. While confessing her being persuaded by the newcomers' promises, the narrator cunningly warns about the imperfect nature of the people that tempt her away from home.

She points to the white translator's incapacity to speak her native tongue fluently when introducing him: "a young interpreter, a paleface who had a smattering of the Indian language" (41). Even if the commentary upon the translator's superficial knowledge of the language seems innocent in the text, a closer consideration points to the narrator's conscious attempt to expose the missionary's lack of profound interest in the native culture on the basis of prejudice. Zitkala-Ša's intuition is confirmed by the researcher's conclusions drawn from linguistic studies that clarify tendencies that have been around for centuries: "once English colonists had learned enough of an indigenous language to guarantee survival, they no longer felt compelled to draw on Native sources for language" (Spack, 2002: 3).

Although they are either unwilling or incapable to master the native language, the whites do not go through the humiliations suffered by the Indian children because of the inability to speak English in the beginning of the boarding school years. Actually, the mother who is aware of "the white man's lies" does not insult the guests by disclosing their hypocrisy in their face. She treats them respectfully and reserves her judgment only for her daughter warning her that "their words are sweet, but ... their deeds are bitter" (41). In the section to follow the child

will experience the rightness of her mother's premonition about the gap between discourse and reality, even if it is too late for her and she can't revert her decision of joining the white school.

The description of the very first day at the boarding school from "The School Days of an Indian Girl" opens with a detailed account of the disquieting noise the newcomers could hear upon waking up. Even if the language spoken far away is not the most aggressive of the sounds, it clearly increases the discomfort and fear the girl feels as she remembers: "The constant clash of many harsh noises, with an undercurrent of many voices murmuring an unknown tongue, made a bedlam within which I was securely tied" (52). Here the essence is the unknown, and therefore strange, character of the new idiom, which prevents her from relating to the environment in which she is thrown with no possibility to escape.

Soon, when the students go to their first meal, the language is clearly foregrounded turning into an imperative reality since only one man's voice is discerned "at the end of the hall" (53). The singularity of his position becomes the only hint available to suggest authority. To the uninitiated little girl his words, most probably a prayer of thanks for the food given at the table, which would have required a certain behavior such as standing and bending one's head seem quite useless and meaningless "mutterings" (53).

Further the school representatives continue to act in total ignorance of the children's needs and fail to introduce them to the rules or explain what is in store for them through an interpreter. In the scene on cutting the girl's hair, the temporary salvation is delivered by a friend who "knew a few words of English" (54) and was able to give a warning. The speaker resists by hiding as long as she can before being forced to comply with an imposed regulation that she finds offensive and humiliating when looking at it through her own culture's perspective: "Among our people, short hair was worn by mourners, and shingled hair by cowards" (54).

The significance of understanding English is proven once more in the snow episode. In the absence of a well-structured method of learning English, Judewin, the friend who has some knowledge of the foreign language, tries to help the others to the best of her abilities. She assumes that the way to avoid punishment is to say "no" to the person who would probably want to know if the offence will be repeated in the future and she teaches this word to the girls. Her advice is based on pragmatics, as

she must have been saved before by giving this correct answer to similar questions coming from the center of power.

The inherently unpredictable nature of a speech act is disclosed to the girls the moment the English-speaking authority does not produce the expected question but a different one: “Are you going to obey my word the next time?” (58) and the negative reply leads to violence. The comments on the event narrated through the eyes of the young girl vividly show that for a person unable to decipher a foreign language, the message remains a void: “We were all still deaf to the English language” (57) or, in the best of cases, a chain of sounds with meaning given only by tone: “Her words fell from her lips like crackling embers, and her inflection ran up like the small end of a switch. I understood her voice better than the things she was saying” (58).

As the children seem to make a beyond-human effort to understand what is never rendered to them in an easily decodable way, the educators disregard the obvious barriers posed by the English language in transmitting their orders and discipline their pupils through absurdly harsh punishments. To the mature speaker looking back on the past, situations as the one mentioned seem “ridiculous” and the consequences “unjustifiable” (59) and rightfully so.

The next step in the acquisition of the foreign language is the basic performance level: “within a year I was able to express myself in broken English” (59) which is used for revenge. The simple order of “mashing the turnips” is taken to the extreme and she mashes turnips and jar together causing damage without having disobeyed the order. This time there is satisfaction in receiving punishment as the trickster spirit of the young girl outwitted her oppressor while “obeying the word to the letter, finding an outlet for her hostility in a deliberate linguistic misinterpretation” (Cutter, 1994: 39).

Interestingly enough, English-speaking becomes the means to measure emancipation among the young people who return home to their native communities. The social interaction is conducted in the acquired language: “At these gatherings they talked English” (72). A clear proof of estrangement from one’s mother tongue and native culture, this habit cannot be easily judged from the outside since it demonstrates the youth’s capacity for adaptation to a new order and thus defies the accusations that using English among themselves is a self-imposed alienation.

In the mother's eyes the ultimate aim of the education away from home is getting the language skill that would permit her daughter to relate to invading settlers and thus protect herself and her family. In her reply to the girl's request for permission to continue her studies, the mother reveals her limitations: "She called my notice to the neighbors' children, who had completed their education in three years. They had returned to their homes, and were then talking English with the frontier settlers" (75). The daughter chooses to go her own way having acquired a different kind of insight into the world she would have to face later on.

In college the declared purpose of continuous hard work is the mastering of the English language expressed in the following metaphor: "by daylight and lamplight, I spun with reeds and thistles, until my hands were tired from their weaving, the magic design which promised me the white man's respect" (76). As she prepares for an oratorical contest, the young woman realizes that her voice can be heard and respected only if the audience stops being "deaf" to her plight. Her earlier experience had taught her that the first step in putting across one's message is making one's use of language understood.

The process through which she toils with her speaking and writing skills in order to put together the text of her speech is compared to the weaving of a magic design. The metaphor is more than an intuition since the word "text" comes from the Latin verb "texere" meaning "to weave" (Neufeldt 1994: 1384) and the assimilation of the two images has often been used in literature. Yet, beyond the mere creative act and its magic result clearly described, Zitkala-Ša's phrasing also involves purpose as well as careful planning encoded in the word "design" and, on the other hand, flexibility as well as pain rendered by the words "reeds and thistles" (76).

While the narrator chooses to keep silent about the exact message she rendered through her speech, the attention is drawn to the outstanding effect of her mastery of the English language i.e. the first prize in the contest. Her second victory later on emphasizes the fact that articulated speech is the way to people's minds and hearts and the way to defy prejudice. In her trajectory as an activist for American Indian rights, Zitkala-Ša herself proved that she can use English effectively to achieve means of her own: "Forbidden to speak her Native language, she learned to read and write English, and she used these new skills to celebrate her traditional culture" (Hafen 2001: 128).

Even if printed, the autobiographical writing under scrutiny here paradoxically testifies to the efficiency of her oral native culture in “Impressions of an Indian Childhood” and cherishes the impact of her direct spoken words in “The School Days of an Indian Girl”. Thus, though rendered in written English, the ideas Zitkala-Ša puts across argue for a reconsideration of orality as not inferior in comparison to writing.

Using the very language meant to Christianize the Indian children, the narrator further opposes the religious intentions behind English teaching when she discusses the Bible or “the white man’s papers” (73). As boarding schools clearly admitted, many were motivated by “missionary zeal” (Spack, 2002: 158). Ironically, the young student can’t get away from the forced conversion even when going back home. In an attempt to comfort her troubled spirit while there, her mother offers her the Bible. The young woman reacts violently within while hiding her feelings from her mother: “my enraged spirit felt more like burning the book, which afforded me no help, and was a perfect delusion to my mother” (73). The contempt for the written word that tries to replace her ancestors’ beliefs is subtly expressed through positioning the book “unopened on the floor” (73) and the moment is dramatized as follows: “The dime yellow light of the braided muslin burning in a small vessel of oil flickered and sizzled in the awful silent storm which followed my rejection of the Bible” (73). The scene itself is a tentative presentation of the “significant resistance to conversion” (Spack, 2002: 159) that is put forward in “An Indian Teacher among Indians”.

The effects of her education become clearer to the mature narrator when she is faced with having to perpetuate the same type of schooling for kids that are mirror images of herself. She describes her struggle in harsh terms:

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. I made no friends among the race of people I loathed. Like a slender tree, I had been uprooted from my mother, nature, and God. (97)

The dark note in these lines is meant to remind the readership of the results of the education in English and to convince them that there is no justifiable reason for throwing a human being in such spiritual torment. However, one should not ignore the fact that once again the author is using rhetoric to demonstrate that no

religion is superior to another and to determine a course of action in her audience. Zitkala-Ša's life actually demonstrates that she could accommodate Christianity in a tolerable way: "Christian doctrines simply became additional layers of beliefs that her Sioux worldview enabled her to mediate" (Hafen 2001: 132) since she passed from Catholicism to being a Mormon during her lifetime.

Zitkala-Ša's conviction at the time of her autobiographical writing that English had an important role in the shaping of her identity as an individual for better or for worse and that it represented the subtler, rhetorical way of resistance to the dominant culture has further effects. It obviously prompted her to embark on the difficult task of putting down on paper the story of her life impregnated by comments meant to persuade the contemporary readers that mainstream culture needs to change its policies towards her people and American Indians in general.

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