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# ZITKALA ŠA (GERTRUDE SIMMONS BONNIN)

## 1876–1938

Born Gertrude Simmons on February 22, 1876, Zitkala Ša (pronounced “shah”), or Red Bird, as she also called herself after she graduated from college, became a writer, musician, and important Native American political activist. According to the standards established by the dominant patriarchy of the time, as a poor mixed-blood born on an Indian reservation she was supposed to have been invisible, silent, segregated, and submissive; instead she achieved notoriety through her writing, oratory, and musical skills and was highly vocal and aggressive in pursuit of her own development and the legal, economic, and cultural rights of Native Americans.

Bonnin's biological father was a white man named Felker who deserted the family; her mother, a Yankton-Nakota Sioux named Ellen Tate Iyohinwin (She Reaches for the Wind), married John H. Simmons, also a white man, who gave his name to the

girl. When she was eight years old, Bonnin left the reservation against her mother's advice to attend White's Manual Labor Institute in Wabash, Indiana, one of many Quaker missionary schools whose self-appointed role was to "save" Indian children from the alleged savagery and paganism of tribal cultures by converting them into "civilized" Christians. After three years in Wabash, Bonnin went back to the reservation for several years before she returned to complete her pre-college schooling at White's Institute. In 1895-96 she was a scholarship student at Quaker-run Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana, where she developed her talents as a debater and as a violinist. Her musical abilities also won her a scholarship to the New England Conservatory of Music. In 1898 she became a music teacher at the Carlisle Indian School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where she performed frequently with the school band; when the band visited the Paris Exposition in 1900 Bonnin was featured as a soloist. She was fired from her position at Carlisle when she began to publish the autobiographical essays reprinted here.

These essays first appeared in the prestigious *Atlantic Monthly*. The contrast between Bonnin's secure and happy life as a child and her painful and confusing initiation into the Christian work ethic is explored in the first essay. The second and third essays detail the devastating disorientation of being caught between cultures. The profound sadness expressed in these essays would have been unexpected by an audience accustomed to success stories absent of all but temporary setbacks. This is only one way in which Bonnin's autobiographical narratives deliberately subvert traditional Eurocentric conventions of self-representation. It should also be clear from these narratives that Bonnin disapproved of the school's harsh physical discipline and its attempts to eradicate students' native languages, customs, and cultures—typical of such schools for another half century.

It was while she was teaching at Carlisle that Bonnin began to write in English some of the stories she had first listened to as a child in the Nakota dialect of the Sioux nation. Several of these fourteen legends feature Iktomi, a trickster figure common to the oral traditions of many cultures (and resurrected by such contemporary writers as Louise Erdrich, Ishmael Reed, Toni Morrison, Gerald Vizenor, and Maxine Hong Kingston). The legends were collected and published as *Old Indian Legends* (1901). In her preface, signed Zitkala Ša, the author ironically observes that she has "tried to translate the native spirit of these tales—root and all—into the English language, since America in the last few centuries has acquired a second tongue."

In 1902 Zitkala Ša married Yankton-Nakota Sioux Raymond Talesfase Bonnin, whom she had met on the reservation where she had spent her childhood. He had served as a captain in the U.S. Army and was employed by the federally funded Indian Service. Their son, Raymond O. (Ohiya, or Winner), was born a year after their marriage, and they spent the next fourteen years at various Indian reservations. In 1913, while living on the Unitah-Ouray reservation in Utah, she collaborated with composer William Hanson on the opera *Sun Dance*, for which she wrote the libretto and lyrics. Although it was well-received in small towns by whites and Native Americans, it was not performed by a professional opera company until 1937.

The Society of the American Indian, the first of its kind to be managed exclusively by Native Americans, was established at Ohio State University in 1911, and starting in 1916 Zitkala Ša served as its secretary and the family moved permanently to Washington, D.C., where her husband secured a position as a law clerk. She also edited the society's *American Indian Magazine* (1918-19) and promoted legislation to change the federal government's treatment of Native Americans. In 1924 (the year Native Americans were granted citizenship) Bonnin co-authored *Oklahoma's Poor Rich Indians: An Orgy of Graft, Exploitation of the Five Civilized Tribes, Legalized Robbery*, an exposé of the violence and political chicanery that took place after oil was discovered on Indian-owned land. Zitkala Ša later organized the National Council of American Indians (1926), which she served as president until her death.

Critic Mary Young observes that Zitkala Ša's most effective reform work was done with the General Federation of Women's Clubs, which she had persuaded to establish an Indian Welfare Committee. This committee was instrumental in improving treatment of American Indians and preserving Native American cultures. Zitkala Ša traveled around the country giving lectures on behalf of the committee, often dressed in traditional Sioux costume. Organizational work, lobbying, lecturing, and other obligations associated with her efforts on behalf of Native American causes left little time for imaginative writing, though Zitkala Ša did manage to bring together in one volume her autobiographical essays and some additional firsthand accounts of the painful experiences of other Native Americans. Published as *American Indian Stories* (1921), this collection may further help to distinguish Native American from Eurocentric autobiography: in *American Indian Stories*, the self whose life is being written is what Susan Friedman characterizes as a "relational" self or what Arnold Krupat describes as a "dialogic" self. The emphasis in Native American autobiography, they point out, is on communal rather than individual experience—frequently the reaction of Native Americans to the relentless attempts by Europeans to destroy their cultures. As Leslie Marmon Silko, among other contemporary Native American writers, has insisted, the capacity to tell stories linking the personal to the tribal is often what sustains cultures threatened by extinction. It is just this ability to tell stories in many forms (poetic and polemical) that led to the revival of interest both in Zitkala Ša and in the cultures she represented as a writer and as an activist.