The Boarding School Narratives of Zitkala-Ša: Biculturalism, Adaptability, and Writing as Agency

by

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A thesis

presented to

The University of Guelph

In partial fulfillment of requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

English and Theatre Studies

Guelph, Ontario, Canada

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ABSTRACT

THE BOARDING SCHOOL NARRATIVES OF ZITKALA-ŠA: BICULTURALISM, ADAPABILITY AND WRITING AS AGENCY

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University of Guelph, 2021

This thesis primarily examines the representation of agency in three short narratives from Zitkala-Ša’s (Dakota Sioux) collection *American Indian Stories*. This study evaluates Zitkala-Ša’s sense of her own voice and agency as a writer, and the agency which she ascribes to the narrator in her written works. Close readings of the narratives were performed, in addition to the application of theoretical and critical secondary sources. The analysis demonstrates that Zitkala-Ša used language and written narrative as a form of empowerment to express agency; to represent an inclusive range of boarding school experiences; and to expose the true intentions of cultural genocide in the boarding school system, as well as the falsehoods of education which it presented.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Christine Bold. I am truly appreciative of your commitment to this project. It would not have been possible without your invaluable guidance, support and insight.

I would also like to sincerely thank Dr. Martha Nandorfy, for being the second reader of this thesis. The critical feedback with which you provided me has been important to the development of my work, and for this, I am grateful.

Thank you to Dr. Kim McLeod for your participation on the Examination Committee, and Dr. Gregor Campbell for acting as the Chair of the Examination Committee.

Finally, I want to pay special regard to the Department of English and Theatre Studies at the University of Guelph. I am thankful to have been given the opportunity to study and learn at such a renowned institution.
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Chapter 1: The Uncovering of Mass Graves at Former Residential School Sites

At the time that I sit here writing this preface, the current number is approximately 1308 (Hopper). This is the number of individual bodies of Indigenous children who were once taken from their communities, forcibly put into schools where they were subjected to assimilation efforts, and later buried in unmarked, mass graves at the moment of their untimely deaths, which have only been uncovered recently. At the beginning of May, precisely at the time that I embarked on my journey of writing this thesis, members of the Tk’emlups te Secwepme First Nation found the bodies of 215 Indigenous children in an unmarked mass grave site at the location of a former residential school in Kamloops, British Columbia, which was controlled by the Roman Catholic Church until 1969 (Dickson & Watson). This initial finding of a mass grave was followed by numerous others across Turtle Island, or what is now commonly referred to as North America. As the sites of former residential and boarding schools were searched using ground-penetrating radar by members of Indigenous communities, thousands of bodies were added to this initial count of 215.

As I sit here and write this in Waterloo, Ontario, I am conscious of my proximity to the Mohawk Institute, located in Brantford, Ontario, which became the first residential school in what is now referred to as Canada. The school was opened in 1828, and did not close its doors until 1970 (University of British Columbia). In that time, thousands of Indigenous children were removed from their homes and forced to attend the school. This method of separation was modelled after the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania—the first established boarding school in what is now commonly referred to as the United States, which served as an example by which other schools were modeled after. While the official, stated
objective of the boarding school system was the acculturation of the Indigenous population, it operated according to the hidden agenda of cultural genocide. I have previously visited the Mohawk Institute. In the third year of my undergraduate degree at the University of Waterloo, I was invited on a field trip with an Indigenous studies class to the school grounds. I remember the eerie feeling that washed over me as I drove up the long, straight driveway. Even at that time, I understood that many children who were transported up that driveway did not return home to their families. I was not able to physically enter the school building—it was being partially reconstructed as part of a campaign the community had started to save the evidence of the assimilationist activity that previously took place within the school. The Six Nations community had decided to keep the school intact by working to preserve its structure. Instead of destroying the building and thereby erasing the evidence of the cruelty that had taken place there in the name of civilization, the Indigenous community at Six Nations decided to prolong the stance of the building. As I sit here, just over an hour away in driving distance, I am aware of the grim presence of the school for Indigenous communities across Canada as the first residential school on these lands, and more specifically, for the Six Nations community, where many children would have been removed from to attend the school in Brantford. As the structure of the school still remains intact today, it serves as a grave reminder of the horrific conditions that Indigenous peoples were subjected to according to colonial notions of inferiority and savagery, which is a significant part of Canada’s history and the colonization of these lands that is not to be overlooked.

In thinking about my scholarly engagement with the boarding school narratives of Zitkala-Ša (Yankton Dakota Sioux, 1876-1938) at this time when Indigenous communities are unearthing mass graves at the sites of former residential schools, it is important to consider how
the prevalence of such “stories of discovery” in the media are impactful to my analysis of the work of Indigenous writers. In thinking about my intention to examine some of the earliest published narratives that document life in the boarding school system, I feel that it is especially important to point to the historical dimension of my focus and articulate my position here as a non-Indigenous reader. I feel a great sense of responsibility in my handling of early boarding school narratives, and in the portrayal and place of my voice as a non-Indigenous reader. As I write, I will remain sensitive to the fact that I am performing an academic analysis of early boarding school narratives, which not only document the individual experiences of Zitkala-Ša as a student, but which also create literary representations of attempted acculturation and the vulnerability of Indigenous children in the residential school era. In the introductory chapter of this thesis, I will unpack some of the consequences of my position as a non-Indigenous reader, by outlining the specific principles and reading practices I will follow. A question that I will keep in mind as I progress with my analysis is: what does it mean to engage in a scholarly study of early boarding school narratives as a non-Indigenous student at a time when the innumerable deaths of Indigenous children at boarding schools across Turtle Island are being widely acknowledged? By thinking about this question, and considering my ethical engagement with the works of an early Indigenous writer, I am seeking to create a literary analysis that is both impactful to the academic reception of Zitkala-Ša, and simultaneously mindful of the social context and historical moment in which I am writing.

While I regard the written narratives of Zitkala-Ša to be works of literature, I also do acknowledge that many of the experiences of the narrator in her stories were lived realities for Indigenous children. I will note here that my study is focused strictly on the literary works of Zitkala-Ša, and will not seek to represent wider boarding school experiences in Indigenous
communities. My analysis does not seek to capture, analyze, or in any way, minimize, the true experiences of residential school students and survivors beyond the literary texts I have selected here. Maintaining an awareness of my non-Indigenous identity as I write, and thereby my exclusion from this space of grief, and my shallower understanding of the emotional and intergenerational trauma that has accumulated in Indigenous communities, will be central to my thought process here. As I write, I will remain aware of the fact that many Indigenous children who entered the boarding school system, unlike the narrator in Zitkala-Ša’s texts, never returned to their communities. The Indigenous children who were placed in boarding schools experienced separation from home, family, community, land, culture, and language. The Indigenous children whose bodies are now being found in mass unmarked graves were subjected to the process of assimilation according to the colonial government’s view of the inferiority of Indigenous peoples and cultures. So, I write this thesis with an acute sense of the very real essence of early boarding school narratives, of their foundation in a system which operated on stolen lands by settler governments for the purpose of eradicating Indigenous cultures and harming Indigenous peoples. I write with a solemn remembrance of the Indigenous children who were denied their childhood according to notions of savagery and ideals of civilization. I write with remembrance of the Indigenous children who were subjected to assimilation policies, and experienced many forms of bodily, familial, and cultural loss as a result. I write with remembrance of the children who never made it home.

As I write, I anticipate that the number of bodies of Indigenous children located in mass graves on the grounds of former residential schools will continue to rise. I acknowledge that such grim findings will continue to leave Indigenous communities with a profound sense of grief—yet it is my hope that this will continue to alert the nation to the importance of history and education.
As the effects of colonial systems and policies of acculturation continue to emerge today on the lands that have been called “Canada” and “The United States,” this historical moment represents an important opportunity for the process of truth-gathering and reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous peoples.
Chapter 2: Situating Zitkala-Ša’s Work within the Twentieth Century: 
Historical Scholarly Interpretations and the Social Atmosphere of the Time Period

As an early figure of the Indigenous literary tradition, Gertrude Simmons Bonnin’s identity as a former boarding school student and teacher, and as a woman writer and activist, informs the complexity of her writing. Gertrude Bonnin, also commonly known by her Lakota name, Zitkala-Ša, was a Dakota writer raised on the Yankton Sioux reservation in what is now commonly referred to as the United States. At the age of eight, Bonnin was “tempted by missionaries’ stories of boundless apple orchards and an exciting train ride. She left her mother’s teepee by the Missouri River for White’s Manual Labour Institute, a Quaker-run boarding school in Wabash, Indiana” (Lewandowski, “Red Bird” 11). After three years of boarding school, in 1887, at the age of eleven, Bonnin returned to the reservation, where she continued her studies at a Presbyterian school for a year and a half (“Red Bird” 20-21). In 1889, Bonnin became a student at the Santee Normal Training School, but returned home soon after (“Red Bird” 20-21). After her years at boarding school, Bonnin found it challenging to integrate into the lifeways on the Yankton Sioux reservation. As Lewandowski notes, Bonnin was torn between traditional Sioux cultural norms and her training at boarding school, and she experienced alienation from her surroundings, including in her relationship with her mother (“Red Bird” 21). At the end of 1890, Bonnin left again for White’s Manual Labour Institute. As a mature student, Bonnin was recognized for her excellence in writing, oration, and music (“Red Bird” 21). After teaching at Carlisle for just one month, Bonnin was sent to the Yankton reservation to recruit students (“Red Bird” 31). Following her short career at Carlisle, “Zitkala-Ša’s later life was marked by the political activism initiated in her early autobiographical essays” (Enoch 120). Bonnin was
politically involved in the Society of American Indians, and co-founded a political organization with her husband, Raymond Bonnin (Sioux), which they called the National Council of American Indians, wherein she used her platform to campaign for Indigenous citizenship, employment, settlement of tribal land claims, and eradication of peyote use (Enoch 120). As Bonnin spent time on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, she was motivated by what she viewed as the “wonderful work” of the Catholic priests and nuns on the reservation, and she converted to Catholicism (“Red Bird” 69). When she returned to Utah, Bonnin became invested in introducing and converting the Utes to Catholicism (“Red Bird” 70). While Bonnin’s conversion to Catholicism certainly complicates her identity, and may seem contradictory to the spirit of resistance in her semi-autobiographical narratives, it is important to note that the Catholic church often opposed federal Indian policy in the early twentieth century (Lewandowski 70). Thus, Bonnin found a point of relation within her activism work involving Indigenous peoples on reservations and the Catholic religion.

When Bonnin began her journey to the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in 1897 to begin her teaching career, the school had been in operation for eighteen years (“Red Bird” 28). The school’s founder, Richard Henry Pratt, established the school in 1879 as a “beacon of hope” for the Indigenous population in what had become the United States of America (“Red Bird” 28). The education system at Carlisle was designed for the purpose of eradicating Indigenous cultures and practices, and assimilating Indigenous peoples (“Red Bird” 28). As Jennifer Bertolet notes, “Pratt envisioned Carlisle as an industrial school to teach young Indians how to earn a living among civilized people by practicing mechanical and agricultural pursuits and the usual industries of civilized life” (615). As Tadeusz Lewandowski writes, “the school’s narrative […] judged all that was Christian and white as good, and all the attributes that marked Indigenous
peoples as constituting heathenism (“Red Bird” 29). The staff at Carlisle used a number of methods to attempt to strip the students of their Indigenous identities. To achieve assimilation, Indigenous students were renamed; forbidden from speaking their mother tongues; convinced that their cultures and customs were inferior to that of whites; denied their traditional clothing; and had their long hair cut (“Red Bird” 29-30 & Bertolet 615). In consideration of the assimilation strategies used at Carlisle, Tadeusz Lewandowski describes that “Pratt persisted in his conviction that total immersion in white culture offered the most humane course to ‘civilization,’ economic independence, and religious rebirth for the ‘Red Man’” (“Red Bird” 30).

As a result of her experiences as both a student and a teacher within the boarding school system, Zitkala-Ša wrote a series of three semi-autobiographical narratives which “[lament] cultural upheavals forced upon Indian children at government boarding schools, taking specific aim at Carlisle” (Lewandowski, “Changing,” 34-35). Zitkala-Ša’s series appeared in the Atlantic Monthly, a journal with “a reputation for raising issues of racial and social inequality,” in the early months of 1900 (Lewandowski, “Red Bird,” 37). Zitkala-Ša’s first pair of stories, “Impressions of an Indian Childhood” and “The School Days of an Indian Girl,” detail her early life as a child, first on the reservation with her mother wherein she lived a traditional Dakota life, and then at the school, where her experiences were informed by the attempted assimilation and cultural genocide that was the intention of the boarding school system. Her later story, “An Indian Teacher Among Indians,” focuses on her experience as a teacher within the boarding school system. It is in this narrative that Zitkala-Ša works to create awareness of the maltreatment of Indigenous children at Carlisle.

Instead of using her birth name, Bonnin published her Atlantic Monthly series under a Lakota name, Zitkala-Ša (37). Bonnin’s choice to attach her written work to an Indigenous name
is important as it “claims the right to resist predetermined linguistic and social categories of identity” (Stanley 66). While she attended White’s Manual Labor Institute as Gertrude Simmons, she reclaims her Sioux identity in her writings by publishing her work under an Indigenous name (Stanley 66). In what might be described as “perhaps the most significant act underlining her series, Amelia Katanski suggests that “Zitkala-Ša’s decision to identify herself with a Lakota name sends the message that even the most forceful effects of white society to erase Native cultures are unsuccessful” (qtd. in Lewandowski, “Changing,” 43). In this analysis, I will refer to Gertrude Simmons Bonnin by her chosen Indigenous name, Zitkala-Ša. In part, this decision reflects my desire to recognize Zitkala-Ša’s authorial voice as it emerges from her writing, and thereby, respect her choice to publish her series of narratives under a Lakota name despite her experiences with attempted assimilation.

On the note of terminology, I will also specify here how I will refer to Zitkala-Ša’s Indigenous heritage, according to reservation and nation. As formerly stated, Zitkala-Ša spent her early childhood on the Yankton Sioux Reservation. I will continue to use this term to refer to the place where Zitkala-Ša lived alongside her mother before attending boarding school, where she was taught Indigenous customs, such as the practice of beadwork, and where she was later sent to recruit children to attend the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. Additionally, I will use the term Dakota Sioux to refer to Zitkala-Ša’s affiliation to a particular Indigenous nation.

While there is much scholarly debate on whether Zitkala-Ša’s Atlantic Monthly series is truly autobiographical or semi-autobiographical, my own interpretation of her work is that her narratives blend her own early life experiences along with fictional elements. While her works are somewhat particular to her own individual experiences, they also resemble the stories of other Indigenous children who attended boarding school. Tadeusz Lewandowski suggests that
Zitkala-Ša’s “series blends fact, fiction and literary devices as a means to criticize Euro-American society for its treatment of Indigenous peoples” (“Changing” 35). According to my interpretation of Zitkala-Ša’s stories as semi-autobiographical, I will be using the term “the narrator” to refer to the character in the series whose experiences I will close read later in my analysis. Yet, even in my use of this term, I do acknowledge that many of Zitkala-Ša’s lived realities are present within her writing, and the importance of the portrayal of such experiences, as they embody many of the wider experiences of children in the boarding school system.

The profound impact and great importance of Zitkala-Ša’s literary works is illustrated in the numerous previous and contemporary studies by scholars. Tadeusz Lewandowski writes “it is a testament to the density of her Atlantic Monthly writings that fresh interpretations and criticisms are still possible after decades of dissecting what are, in essence, three small texts” (“Changing” 45). As a complex figure, Zitkala-Ša resists easy categorization as either existing in a liminal state or in being assimilated, as much previous scholarship on her work has focused on. To trace the changeable and developing interpretations of Zitkala-Ša’s work, I will rely upon an article by Tadeusz Lewandowski titled “Changing Scholarly Interpretations of Gertrude Bonnin.” Zitkala-Ša’s work returned to scholarly attention forty years after her death with an article by Dexter Fisher, published in the American Indian Quarterly, titled “The Evolution of a Writer.” Fisher declared that Zitkala-Ša existed in a “truly liminal position, always on the threshold of two worlds but never fully entering either” (233). Much scholarship about liminality, such as that published by Fisher, has focused on the depiction of separation from Indigenous birth culture in Zitkala-Ša’s semi-autobiographical narratives (Lewandowski, “Changing,” 31). Since it is Fisher’s article that brought renewed academic attention to Zitkala-Ša’s literary works, this article has set a certain tone with which scholars have come to regard her
work, specifically in its representation of liminality. In noting the negative interpretations that were attached to Zitkala-Ša’s work and identity following the publication of Fisher’s criticism, Tadeusz Lewandowski notes that “though Fisher’s research was vital to reviving Zitkala-Ša’s legacy, its critical precedents exercised a decidedly negative effect on how subsequent scholars perceived the writer’s work and drew attention to the Atlantic Monthly series as the principal, full, final and liminal representation of her life” (“Changing” 38). For example, Lewandowski writes that “[Zitkala-Ša] was declared a ‘cultural ghost’ who fatefully betrayed her birth culture and lived in an endlessly ‘schizophrenic’ existence, too influenced by her white education to present a consistent critique of white society or even to know her place in the world” (“Red Bird,” 14).

Following Fisher’s article, many other scholars who examined Zitkala-Ša’s writings concluded that she was a liminal figure. Yet, assimilationist interpretations of her work eventually emerged, a development which can be traced to James Sydney Slotkin’s The Peyote Religion: A Study in Indian White Relations (Lewandowski, “Changing,” 39). Slotkin wrote of Zitkala-Ša as “a marginal fusionist,” meaning that she was a “member of a ‘subordinate group’ who was ‘violently opposed’ to Native customs” (qtd. in Lewandowski, “Changing,” 39). In addition, Betty Louie Bell (Cherokee) published an assimilationist interpretation of Zitkala-Ša’s work in her critique “If this is Paganism… Zitkala-Ša and the Devil’s Language.” Bell painted Zitkala-Ša as a traitor who had become disconnected from her Indigenous heritage and argued that Zitkala-Ša’s “rhetoric of accommodation undermine[d] the strength of her political legacy” and trapped “her argument in a colonial identity” (qtd. in Lewandowski, “Changing,” 40-41).

Recent scholarship on Zitkala-Ša’s literary works demonstrates a movement away from Fisher’s interpretation, and indeed other liminal and assimilationist readings of her work.
Instead, new scholarship has focused on re-evaluating both Zitkala-Ša’s writings and her identity in a way that addresses the complexities of her life, character, and literary works. P. Jane Hafen (Taos Pueblo) is broadly considered a leading scholar on Zitkala-Ša, and her work seeks to acknowledge the complexities of Zitkala-Ša’s writings. Most importantly, Hafen wrote about redefining Zitkala-Ša’s supposed liminality as biculturalism. Hafen noted Zitkala-Ša’s “[firm commitment] to her tribal sovereignty” while also considering the contradictions that are present within her work (31). In explanation of such contradictions which have previously been used to support liminal interpretations of Zitkala-Ša’s work, Hafen argues that Zitkala-Ša “embraces” the “dominant ideologies” of early twentieth century white America (31).

Following P. Jane Hafen’s redefinition of Zitkala-Ša’s supposed liminality, Ruth Spack extended the idea of Zitkala-Ša as a bicultural writer, noting her existence in both Indigenous and white societies to be an asset that “enabled her to speak for herself, to represent herself and to render her (bi)cultural experiences in all their complexity and interrogate Euro-American society from differing discourses” (2). Tadeusz Lewandowski describes how Zitkala-Ša’s various cultural experiences “allowed her to interrogate and criticize Euro-American society from differing discourses, move between worlds and assert the validity of her Sioux heritage” (“Changing” 33). In thinking about the discourses of both Spack and Lewandowski on Zitkala-Ša’s ability to consider “differing discourses,” it is important to recognize the complexity that her multiple cultural experiences have created within her work. Despite P. Jane Hafen’s redefinition of Zitkala-Ša’s liminality, Hafen’s work has also echoed the liminal interpretations of other scholars, in noting that Zitkala-Ša “seemed caught between validating her Indigenous beliefs and seeking public approval” (qtd. in Lewandowski, “Changing,” 43). Hafen’s acknowledgement of the existence of liminality in Zitkala-Ša’s work, and the simultaneous
redefinition of it, demonstrates the complexity of Zitkala-Ša’s semi-autobiographical writings, but also their resistance to binaries that suggest either full assimilation or existential liminality. As Amelia Katanski writes, the intention of Zitkala-Ša’s work is to deny “any simple classification” (qtd. in Lewandowski 43).

I want to state the importance of situating Zitkala-Ša’s literary writings within the social atmosphere of the time in which she lived, in order to create context for my close reading of her work. It is important to note how the time period in which Zitkala-Ša lived both influenced the intention of her writing project and impacted its outcome. Stromberg describes that “the problem in terms of understanding figures such as Zitkala-Ša arises from a neglect of the specific historical situation from which their writings emerge” (107). To me, this means that a fair reading of the work of Zitkala-Ša must situate itself within the historical time period and arrive at an understanding of the “complexity of the times she inhabited” (Stromberg 107). In part, this is about acknowledging that Zitkala-Ša’s childhood occurred within the midst of an assimilationist campaign by a settler colonial government. As a young girl, Zitkala-Ša was subjected to the government’s policy that mandated education for Indigenous children, but which was truly a disguise for acculturation. As an adult, Zitkala-Ša wrote largely for a colonial audience, according to the notion that “the ears of the palefaces could not hear” her Indian speech,” and so she “create[d] a voice that would be intelligible in their culture” (Carden 62). Zitkala-Ša began her writing project “at a time in the U.S. when assimilation policies sought to remake [Indigenous peoples] in the image of white culture” (Carden 62). According to this social context, P. Jane Hafen traces the limitations that would have been placed on Zitkala-Ša as an early Indigenous woman writer. Hafen first notes that “Zitkala-Ša adopts [the] oppressor’s language in the style and structure of short fiction,” and then considers Zitkala-Ša’s intention to
communicate with the “palefaces” through narrative, by noting that her works were “often attuned to her audience of mainstream Americans, whom she wished to educate about American Indian issues” (31). Hafen describes that while Zitkala-Ša’s “writings were shaped by various influences and her intended audience, one factor that remained was her commitment to her Yankton heritage” (31). This commitment to her Indigenous ancestry is important, as it suggests how she manoeuvred within a certain social context to be able to “[speak] and [act] to the benefit of not only herself but Native peoples more largely” (Vigil 135). In consideration of this context, it becomes foundational to my project to acknowledge and understand the complexity of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This involves the reader’s recognition that Zitkala-Ša lived and wrote during a time when Indigenous peoples were “pulled from [their] communities and traditions and thrust into indoctrination programs” and were “prepared to live in a white culture that did not want them” (Stromberg 107). The influence of the time period in which Zitkala-Ša lived shaped her literary writings by creating complexity and density within them, and this is essential to realize to develop a fair, critical reading of her short narratives that is attentive to the temporal and spatial factors that guided her work.

As I analyze the literary works of Zitkala-Ša, then, I am motivated by a particular question: what do Zitkala-Ša’s boarding school narratives suggest about her sense of agency, both of herself as a writer and of her narrator, and how does this become represented in her literary works? In following P. Jane Hafen’s repositioning of Zitkala-Ša as a bicultural writer, I will go beyond the labelling of her identity as liminal or assimilationist, interpretations that rely on problematic binaries and notions of Indigenous authenticity. Instead, I will consider how the lens of biculturalism provides a way of reading Zitkala-Ša’s work that is attentive to the nuances and subtleties which emerge from her storytelling.
In pursuing the central research question of this thesis, I also intend to reflect on another: As a settler scholar working in what is now referred to as Canada, and as a guest in the field of Indigenous literary studies, what are strategies I can use for close reading Indigenous texts produced in what is now referred to as the United States, from a different time period? As a non-Indigenous student, I recognize the importance of situating my identity and voice as part of my analytical framework. In understanding how my non-Indigenous identity impacts my study of Indigenous literature here, I have taken note of several strategies that I will use in my engagement with Zitkala-Ša’s semi-autobiographical narratives. I will briefly introduce and describe each strategy here, and these will be further elaborated on within the later chapters of this thesis. While this section about my positionality is meant to fulfill the intention of being deliberate and clear about my motivations as a non-Indigenous scholar, I will maintain an awareness of my positionality throughout my analysis.

Perhaps most importantly, I will describe my intention in studying and extensively writing on the work of Zitkala-Ša. My desire in this academic work is to closely engage with the semi-autobiographical narratives of Zitkala-Ša, but also to recognize where there is potential for my analysis to become invasive. As I remain conscious of my non-Indigenous voice throughout the duration of my study, one strategy I will use for close reading Zitkala-Ša’s works will be prefacing my interpretations with a statement about the position from which I am reading. As Helen Hoy writes of her own experience as a non-Indigenous critic, I intend to “keep to the forefront the assumptions, needs and ignorance that I bring to my readings, the culture-specific positioning from which I engage with the writing” (46). In part, my intention here is to remain aware of my own positionality as a settler reader, without decentering Indigenous voices. This will involve acknowledging the limitations of my work, or of my access to a particular cultural
moment in the text as a non-Indigenous reader. The intention of such “statements with admissions of lack of cultural knowledge” will be to create boundaries, to describe specifically where there is a particular lack of knowledge and where I will “take the initiative to learn” as a non-Indigenous scholar (McKegney 84). Non-Indigenous scholar Sam McKegney refers to the idea that “non-Native critics can never and should never claim ‘big A’ authority in their discussion of Native texts” (84). To me, the idea of not ascribing authority to my voice means ethically attending to moments in the text that I find to be significant, yet not holding an overpowering or overly certain tone in my interpretation of those moments or representations in the text. There are also moments—representations of Sioux culture and community dynamics—when it becomes invasive to offer my own interpretations or opinions. In such instances, I will rely upon the previous work done by other scholars. This method reaffirms my belief that there is room for my interpretations and opinions within some moments of the narratives, but in my position as a non-Indigenous reader, it is not appropriate to provide any written form of expression on certain representations of Sioux culture and community.

Secondly, I will work to listen to the authorial voice of Zitkala-Ša as it emerges from her literary writings. In part, this will involve emphasizing the moments wherein Zitkala-Ša appears to share her own feelings with the reader, or where she provides the reader with knowledge about Sioux culture. While I intend to attentively listen to Zitkala-Ša’s voice as it emerges from the text, I will also be conscious of my understanding of the texts as semi-autobiographical and my choice to use the term “narrator” to refer to the main character within the narratives. This attentive listening is motivated by my belief that an author must not be separated from a story—and a story must not be separated from larger systemic patterns—here, of colonial violence and Indigenous resilience. Thereby, while Zitkala-Ša’s work represents her own experiences in the
boarding school system, her authorial voice is central to the narrative itself, and the narrative contributes to larger Indigenous histories.

Finally, I will prioritize using the previous studies of Indigenous scholars in my analysis. I will strive to follow the previous studies Indigenous academics, which will be crucial to informing my thinking about Zitkala-Ša’s works. In addition, I will note that I will also use the works of non-Indigenous scholars to develop a more sophisticated understanding of their ethical handling of Indigenous texts. This will be important to informing my reading and writing practice as a non-Indigenous scholar. I will note here that this does not mean that I will rely solely upon the work of other scholars in forming the interpretations I present here. As Helen Hoy indicates, by “making explicit various sources of [my] responses,” I endeavor to “render the readings more clearly local, partial, and accountable” (46). I take responsibility for my own interpretations that will be formed in consideration of Zitkala-Ša’s voice as it emerges from her writing; previous and current scholarship on Zitkala-Ša’s works; and my independent readerly interpretations of the texts.

In particular, my analysis here will engage with two critical Indigenous frameworks: Gerald Vizenor’s (Chippewa) concept of Native survivance, and Scott Richard Lyons’s (Ojibwe/Dakota) idea of rhetorical sovereignty. To begin thinking of the application of these paradigms to an analysis of Zitkala-Ša’s work, I will provide a definition here, and further trace these theoretical concepts later in my analysis. Vizenor’s theoretical work will be central to my analysis for its presentation of “Native survivance [as] an active sense of presence over historical absence” (1). Vizenor describes survivance as “an active resistance” and writes that “Native stories are sources of survivance” (88). Vizenor’s idea of survivance will be important to my argument of why it is appropriate to read Zitkala-Ša’s work according to the notion of
biculuralism, and to my explanation of her choice to communicate her boarding school experiences in the written form and in the colonizer’s language.

Secondly, Lyons’s concept of rhetorical sovereignty describes “the inherent right and ability of peoples to determine their own communicative needs and desires in […] pursuit, to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles and languages of public discourse” (449-459). Lyons’s concept of rhetorical sovereignty will be important to my interpretation of why Zitkala-Ša chose to write about her boarding school experience in a literary form, and my recognition of her agency in my analysis.

Finally, I will outline the organization of the remainder of this thesis. The next chapter will consist largely of close readings of Zitkala-Ša’s boarding school narratives to develop a nuanced understanding of her writings. This chapter will include a number of subsections, which will analyze many elements of Zitkala-Ša’s writings. The subsections within this chapter will consider the numerous representations in her work, including that of her mother culture; her experience as an Indigenous boarding school student in the late nineteenth century; the symbolisms within her writing; the stripping of culture she experiences; and her acts of resistance.

In the concluding chapter of this thesis, I will compare what I view to be two core ideas that are central to this study of Zitkala-Ša’s work—assimilation and adaptation. The purpose of this will be to delineate how Zitkala-Ša’s boarding school narratives can be viewed collectively as a form of what I will call “adaptive agency,” which she seems to find as a source of empowerment through language and literature. I will articulate why regarding Zitkala-Ša’s narratives as forms of adaptive agency, rather than as evidence of her assimilation, provides a more sophisticated and enriched understanding of the complexity of her writings and character.
Chapter 3: Representations of Agency and Resistance in Zitkala-Ša’s Boarding School Narratives

As I have chosen to regard Zitkala-Ša’s Atlantic Monthly series as a collection of semi-autobiographical narratives, I will begin here by referring to the work of Amelia Katanski in noting what it is that Zitkala-Ša achieves within her practice of writing. Katanski describes that Zitkala-Ša is “offering a representation of her life (and is therefore, shaping and molding her experiences to fit both literary conventions and her political agenda)” (124). To preface my own analysis of Zitkala-Ša’s semi-autobiographical works which seek to both record her own experiences and expose the assimilation efforts of white missionaries, I will further delineate my strategies for performing a close reading of her works. As my analysis will regard the three short narratives as a single, longer narrative, my intention here is to consider the subjectivity of autobiography; particularly, Zitkala-Ša’s representation of identity, agency, and embodiment as it emerges from her writing through the cultural experiences of the narrator. While I have chosen to approach the narratives laterally in my written analysis, I will acknowledge here that while there are moments where the individual narratives represent various experiences in Zitkala-Ša’s life, there are fragmented moments or pauses between them. Rather than following the trajectory of the narratives in full in my close reading practice, or reconstructing a biography of Zitkala-Ša as the author, my study will be focused on what Zitkala-Ša presents about her life in writing through the experiences of the narrator. I intend for my reading practice to honour the complexity of the narrator’s experiences. My desire is to perform a reading that seeks to resist the minimization or reduction of the experiences and identity of the narrator, and by extension, that of Zitkala-Ša.
As I examine Zitkala-Ša’s boarding school narratives, my analysis will be framed by an important theoretical concept developed by an Indigenous author. By using the work of Gerald Vizenor from his text *Aesthetics of Survivance*, I will think about how Zitkala-Ša’s stories are sources of Native survivance through their embodiment of what Vizenor calls the “character of survivance” (85). This character that emerges from story is “an active sense of presence over historical absence” (1). Vizenor writes that “survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, detractions and obtrusions” (85). Vizenor’s concept of Native survivance will inform my analysis of Zitkala-Ša’s work. I will use the concept of Native survivance as a lens through which to view autobiographical subjectivity within Zitkala-Ša’s narratives. Here, I will first consider the narrator’s agency in her resistance to the acculturation efforts of the missionaries which seek to subdue her Indigenous identity. In consideration of how the elements of Sioux culture that are visible upon the narrator’s body are ultimately connected to her sense of her Sioux identity, I will argue that the narrator’s fierce protection of her cultural expression is a demonstration of Native survivance as it asserts an active Indigenous presence and seeks to resist the domination of white missionaries. Secondly, I will also utilize Vizenor’s concept of Native survivance in discourse on the agency of Zitkala-Ša as the author. Here, I will think about how the literary choices that Zitkala-Ša makes intend to resist the settler dominance that was often maintained by preconstructed notions of Indigenous peoples, and to expose the falsehood of the semblance of education and civilization within the boarding school system.

Beginning with the first installment of her *Atlantic Monthly* series, in “Impressions of an Indian Childhood,” Zitkala-Ša creates a depiction of Indigenous life and community on the Yankton Sioux Reservation before the disruptive arrival of the missionaries. Zitkala-Ša writes this narrative from the perspective of an eight-year-old girl, and crafts a representation of her
relation to her mother, and to Sioux culture. Before the young narrator’s first interaction with the missionaries who arrive on the reservation, the narrator describes herself according to her sense of freedom. She indicates that as a “wild little girl of seven,” she was “loosely clad in a skin of brown buckskin, and light-footed with a pair of soft moccasins on [her] feet, [she was] as free as the wind that blew [her] hair, and no less spirited than a bounding deer” (4). This moment represents what is perhaps one of Zitkala-Ša’s first authorial expressions of agency in her semi-autobiographical series. Within this passage, there is a subtle moment in which Zitkala-Ša expresses agency through her choice of language. By referring to the narrator as a “wild little girl,” Zitkala-Ša, in Julianne Newmark’s analysis, “undermines the structure of the Anglo use of the term, being fully aware of the popular association of the marker “wild” with savage, uncivilized, ignorant” (337). Despite Zitkala-Ša’s understanding of settler associations of the term “wild” with such notions of ignorance and uncivilization, she still chooses to attach this particular characteristic to her narrator. Within this authorial choice, Zitkala-Ša seems unconcerned with negative settler perceptions of Indigenous identities. Julianne Newmark notes that, “to counter the dominant disparaging stereotypes, [Zitkala-Ša] establishes a stereotype to subsume the one used in Anglo culture; she invents an “Indian” in the world of her text, a world in which the word wild, for example, takes on specific crucial meanings. […] Being wild allowed her to exist as part of the natural world—as free as the wind, spirited as a deer, able to bring joy to her mother” (337-338). In her use of the term “wild,” Zitkala-Ša simultaneously crafts a representation of the life of an Indigenous youth before the disruptive entrance of missionaries on the reservation and offers her narrator a sense of boundless freedom. Newmark adds that “such meanings [of the term wild] are (re)visionary components of [Zitkala-Ša’s] autobiographical and ethnographic project” (337). This is a moment wherein the character of
survivance emerges from Zitkala-Ša’s narrative. As the author, Zitkala-Ša creates an active sense of presence of the “wild” Sioux narrator in this early representation of her identity that is crafted upon her lifeway of freedom, and as the narrator appears in brown buckskin and moccasins, the embodiment of culture. Yet, there is also a subtle renunciation or resistance here to the detraction and belittling of Indigenous peoples by settlers that was often attached to Indigenous lifeways and dress. By using the term “wild” to describe the narrator and choosing for her to appear in traditional Sioux clothing, Zitkala-Ša reclaims the language often used by settlers to construct harmful perceptions of Indigenous peoples. As Julianne Newmark notes, to Zitkala-Ša, “wild means nothing short of free” (337). According to her perception of the term “wild,” Zitkala-Ša reclaims language. Zitkala-Ša reclaims a word in English, a word in the colonizer’s language, and this becomes an important demonstration of authorial agency and the spirit of resistance that is part of Native survivance. Instead of adhering to preconstructed colonial notions of Indigenous identities in her writing, Zitkala-Ša presents an understanding of freedom in a Sioux context, and through writing, maneuvers to dismantle the association of Indigenous culture and life with uncivilized society.

Both the narrator’s sense of unlimited freedom and her embodiment of Sioux culture become largely interrupted by the arrival of the missionaries on the Yankton Sioux Reservation. The presence of the missionaries on the reservation is motivated by their intention to recruit Indigenous children to attend off-reservation boarding schools for the purpose of attaining an Anglo-centered education. Ultimately, it is the missionaries’ desire for the participation of Indigenous children in the colonial project of assimilation that moves them to visit the Yankton Sioux Reservation, where they come into contact with the narrator. As another expression of authorial agency here, Zitkala-Ša chooses to describe the arrival of the missionaries in such a
way that anticipates future hardship for the narrator as a result of their presence on the reservation. The narrator indicates that “the first turning away from the easy, natural flow of [her] life occurred in an early spring” (21). According to her own difficult experience at boarding school, as Zitkala-Ša writes of the narrator’s first interaction with the missionaries, she describes the day of their arrival as one of interruption to the harmonious life of the narrator. The narrator’s words here indicate that the arrival of the missionaries means a transition from an easy and peaceful lifeway, to one of difficulty and subordination. Yet, in this moment as an eight-year-old, in her lack of experience and understanding, the narrator is entirely unsure of their presence on the reservation, and seeks the advice of her mother. After the narrator describes hearing of the arrival of the missionaries through her young peers in the community, she feels concerned about the presence of these outsiders in her home. In what appears to be an expression of mild panic, she rushes to locate her mother and begins to question her about the intentions of the missionaries. The narrator describes “running direct to my mother, I began to question her why these two strangers were among us. She told me, after I had teased much, that they had come to take away Indian boys and girls to the East” (21). While it would be difficult for the narrator to fully understand all that the removal of Indigenous children from their community would mean, this concept of Indigenous children being separated from their families to obtain an education was not foreign to the narrator, as she describes her brother’s recent arrival back on the reservation. The narrator states “Within the last two seasons my big brother Dawée had returned from a three years’ education in the East” (22). Unlike the narrator, who in her young age and lack of comprehension is unable to understand all that the arrival of the missionaries on the reservation indicates, the narrator’s mother, after having been parted from her son during the
course of his own education, is completely aware of the intentions of the missionaries. In an expression of concern for her daughter’s welfare, the narrator’s mother states

I knew you were wishing to go, because Judéwin has filled your ears with the white man’s lies. Don’t believe a word they say! Their words are sweet, but, my child, their deeds are bitter. You will cry for me, but they will not even soothe you. Stay with me, my little one! Your brother Dawée says that going East, away from your mother, is too hard an experience for his baby sister (22).

The narrator’s mother is unprepared to give her consent for her daughter to attend boarding school, as she is largely understanding of the way in which an educational experience with the white missionaries would come to alter her daughter’s Sioux identity. The narrator confirms that her friend, Judéwin, has influenced her desire to travel to the east, with her stories of glorious red apple orchards. The narrator recalls being enticed by Judéwin’s stories of the eastern landscape, as she recalls, “Judéwin had told me of the great tree where grew red, red apples; and how we could reach out our hands and pick all the red apples we could eat. I had never seen apple trees. I had never tasted more than a dozen red apples in my life; and when I heard of the orchards of the East, I was eager to roam among them” (23). The interpreter hears the narrator’s words to her mother and confirms, “yes, little girl, the nice red apples are for those who pick them; and you will have a ride on the iron horse if you go with these good people” (23). With the irresistible promise of red apples and a train ride made to the young narrator, she appears to regard the missionaries with a sort of fondness, as she states “the missionaries smiled into my eyes and patted my head” (23). Even in the narrator’s initial interaction with the missionaries, they gain some of her trust by making false promises to her, and in her role as a young child, she accepts such promises to be true. The narrator appears to develop a slight sense of trust in the
missionaries and begins to question her mother’s mistrust of these white figures, as she states, “I wondered how my mother could say such hard words against him” (23). Despite her mother’s more complete understanding of what her education in the east will entail, the narrator is keen to go with the missionaries, and fails to consider her mother’s warnings.

In thinking about Zitkala-Ša’s authorial intention in this scene, it is important to note the role that temptation plays in the interaction of the narrator with the missionaries. Within the false promises that the missionaries make to the narrator, and the narrator’s fervent desire to be amongst the apple orchards for the pleasure of tasting the sweet fruits, there is an important layered meaning within the symbol of the red apple that perhaps is part of Zitkala-Ša’s authorial intention in writing about and exposing the operation of Indigenous boarding schools. Catherine Kunce writes about this moment as “Zitkala-Ša’s retelling of the Garden of Eden story” (73). While the Christian story presents the temptation of Eve by a red apple, wherein she succumbs to her desire for the apple and commits original sin, Zitkala-Ša uses this biblical symbol in the narrator’s interaction with the missionaries to resist the supposed benevolence of their mission and to reveal the red apple as a misogynistic symbol. Amelia Katanski writes that “Zitkala-Ša clearly represents the missionaries’ efforts to convince [the narrator] to attend their school as a rewriting of the Eden myth, in which she casts the missionaries in the role of Satan” (119). In Zitkala-Ša’s reorganization of the role of the “white missionaries as devilish seducers” (Carden 65), there is a subtle play on gender that resists the misogyny found within the instance of original sin in the biblical story. As Ron Carpenter describes, an earlier moment from the narrative becomes important here in Zitkala-Ša’s resistance to biblical misogyny. Carpenter notes that, “In Zitkala-Ša’s Eden, the woman is not responsible for the fall: her brother Dawée’s education happens first” (7). The occurrence of the narrator’s brother first exiting what Mary
Carden calls the “Sioux Eden” allows for Zitkala-Ša to both reveal and resist the misogyny within the Christian ideology of the missionaries (65). This important detail, that the narrator’s brother, a male, first leaves the reservation to attend boarding school where he experiences cultural dislocation that ultimately harms the vitality of Sioux culture back on the reservation, is critical to the resistance that Zitkala-Ša brings to this moment. I will argue here that the narrator is not responsible for the fall, but that she has simply been witness to her brother’s previous departure with the missionaries.

Yet, it is important to consider Zitkala-Ša’s casting of sin in this scene, as it emphasizes a method used by the missionaries to recruit Indigenous children—temptation. In thinking about how Zitkala-Ša recasts the fall in this moment, Amelia Katanski argues that “Zitkala-Ša makes it clear that [the narrator’s] decision to leave for boarding school is a fall, which reverses the reformers’ understanding of the direction of improvement and evolution” (119). According to Katanski, while some sort of a fall takes place in this moment, it can be attributed to the process of acculturation not as the achievement of civilization and evolution, but as a movement away from the narrator’s free and cultured Sioux lifeway that occurs as a result of the persuasive methods used by the missionaries. As the missionaries tempt the narrator with the promise of an abundance of red apples to obtain the consent of her mother, Zitkala-Ša’s re-creation of the Garden of Eden story casts the occurrence of sin upon the missionaries. It is the missionaries who commit a sin here in their temptation of the narrator, as they attempt to recruit her into a space that will ultimately destroy her Sioux identity and cultural expression. Zitkala-Ša does not cast the narrator in her role as a young girl, as weak or as unable to resist seduction, as Eve is portrayed in the biblical narrative. Instead, the focus here becomes the missionaries’ act of temptation. The missionaries deliberately use the tool of temptation that is also used to craft a
biblical narrative which relies upon misogyny, in their pursuit to destroy the existence of Indigenous cultures.

In thinking further about the complex symbolism of the red apple in this narrative, it is important to note the way in which the apple hints at the intention of the missionaries who visit the reservation and promote Indigenous education. In consideration of the density of the symbol of the red apple, Tadeusz Lewandowski notes that the apples do not only reference the Book of Genesis, but “also [take] on another shade of meaning: their skin is red, their inside white, which is the goal of assimilation” (“Red Bird,” 40). During the narrator’s first encounter with the white culture that promoted the removal of Indigenous children from their families for the purpose of assimilation, in her age and lack of experience, the narrator does not understand that the eastern landscape she so desires to see will ultimately serve the intentions of the missionaries to ensure that she comes to resemble an apple through the process of education—while her skin will always be what the settlers viewed as “red,” just as the skin of an apple, her training at the school will allow for her lifeway to eventually mimic that of the settlers, and her persona will become white. The impressionable narrator does not understand that by providing her with an education, the missionaries will alter her identity by removing from her life all that is associated with Sioux culture, including her earlier sense of freedom and her embodiment of cultural expression. While the narrator will always appear visibly Indigenous, her training at boarding school will try to ensure that by the style of her hair and dress, and by her habits, she will more closely resemble her white neighbours than her Sioux relatives. What the narrator does not yet understand as she first interacts with the missionaries, but what her mother understands entirely, is that her journey to the east means that there must be a change or shift in her identity, from Sioux to white, in order for her to represent an ideal of assimilation, just as the symbol of the red apple.
According to the narrator’s mother’s understanding of this forced change or shift within her daughter’s identity upon her attendance at boarding school, she continuously warns her daughter against traveling with the missionaries. Despite her mother’s warnings, the young narrator continues to beg for permission to go to school in the East. The narrator describes that once “alone with [her] mother, [she] yielded to tears, and cried aloud, shaking [her] head so as not to hear what [her mother] was saying to [her]” (24). The narrator continues by acknowledging that “this was the first time [she] had ever been so unwilling to give up [her] own desire that [she] refused to hearken to [her] mother’s voice” (24). In noting the narrator’s persistent attempts to achieve her mother’s permission, Catherine Kunce notes the persuasive method used by the missionaries in their pursuit to recruit Indigenous children to attend boarding school. Kunce notes that, “since [the narrator] will have to obtain her mother’s permission to join the missionaries, [the missionaries] recognize the value in persuading the child to bring pressure to bear on her parent” (79-80). To the narrator, the pressuring of her mother does not seem adequate, and she even pleads with the Great Spirit to encourage her mother to grant her permission. The narrator describes that “before [she] went to bed [she] begged the Great Spirit to make [her] mother willing [she] should go with the missionaries” (24). Despite the narrator’s pleading with both her mother and the Great Spirit, the method of the missionaries in appealing to the child to bring pressure upon their parent is successful with the narrator’s mother. The following day, the narrator’s mother communicates her response to the missionaries who await her permission to take the young narrator to a boarding school in the east. In a solemn tone, and implying her understanding of the true objective of the missionaries, the narrator’s mother states, “my daughter, though she does not understand what it all means, is anxious to go. She will need an education when she is grown, for there will be fewer real Dakotas, and many more palefaces.
This tearing her away, so young, from her mother is necessary, if I would have her an educated woman” (24). This reply to the missionaries demonstrates the narrator’s mother’s belief that education will be central to her daughter’s identity and lifeway in a post-contact culture, wherein Sioux ancestral lands will be populated by numerous white settlers. While the narrator’s mother recognizes that education will become necessary to her daughter in this social atmosphere, she also knows that her daughter will suffer greatly in forsaking her Sioux identity and adapting to the white man’s ways. According to these truths, the narrator’s mother continues, “for her sake, I dread to tell you my reply to the missionaries. Go, tell them that they may take my little daughter, and that the Great Spirit shall not fail to reward them according to their hearts” (24). Upon the narrator’s mother giving her consent to the missionaries, this moment comes to represent what Catherine Kunce calls “the missionaries’ craft” (79). Kunce notes that the missionaries’ craft is the successful “[intercession] between mother and daughter, [misleading of the narrator] about the accessibility of apples, and [playing] upon a child’s natural curiosity” (79). This moment wherein the “missionaries’ craft” becomes evident marks the first step in the process of assimilation, and the narrator is permanently separated from her mother, birth culture, and home community.

Almost immediately after she parts from her mother, the narrator feels a sense of regret and unease at leaving her mother to travel with the missionaries to the east. As the train departs from the reservation, the narrator describes that “when [she] saw the lonely figure of [her] mother vanish in the distance, a sense of regret settled heavily upon [her]” (25). As the distance between her and her mother increases, she remembers her mother’s earlier warnings about the true intentions of the missionaries. The narrator acknowledges that “[she] was in the hands of strangers whom [her] mother did not fully trust” (25). In a statement that seems to demonstrate
the narrator’s understanding of the future mandatory shift from her Sioux identity to a white identity, the narrator continues, “I no longer felt free to be myself, or to voice my own feelings. The tears trickled down my cheeks, and I buried my face in the folds of my blanket. Now the first step, parting me from my mother, was taken, and all my belated tears availed nothing” (25).

Here, as the narrator mourns the loss of her comfortable life with her mother, and the freedom that was very much a part of her lifeway on the reservation, there is a sense of loss of agency for the narrator. In this moment, Zitkala-Ša creates a depiction of the immense loss that Indigenous children faced at the moment they were separated from their families, and the loss of agency that became part of this experience. In the minutes after she leaves her mother, the narrator already senses the limitations that will be placed upon her in the boarding school environment. As the train moves away from the reservation, the narrator comes to understand the lack of space for her Sioux identity and her former wild lifeway amongst the missionaries, and she is overtaken by the realization of her helplessness as she recognizes that the first step of the missionaries’ plan has been achieved, and she has now been parted from her mother indefinitely.

As the narrator grimly realizes the pain that lies beneath her previous excitement to attend boarding school, Zitkala-Ša details her experience on the train as she journeys to the east in “The School Days of an Indian Girl.” This second installment in Zitkala-Ša’s Atlantic Monthly series begins by describing the narrator’s journey east but is mainly focused on depicting the experiences of the narrator at the boarding school as an Indigenous student. As Zitkala-Ša creates a textual representation of the Indigenous boarding school experience, her writing reflects the centrality of the embodiment of culture to the narrator’s identity as a Sioux girl. Zitkala-Ša’s narrative works to expose the major role of erasure in the process of assimilation and in the space of the boarding school. Even in the journey towards the boarding school, the narrator begins to
feel its threat as she experiences cultural and spiritual effects of being separated from her homelands—that is, the trauma attached to colonizing attempts to sever deep Indigenous interrelationships with land. The narrative begins after some Indigenous children have been recruited to attend the boarding school and are subsequently removed from their community. As the train moves eastward carrying a group of Indigenous children who have been parted from their parents, the narrator describes that “there were eight in [the] party of bronzed children who were going East with the missionaries” (26). Despite the pleasure that the narrator describes in her anticipation of a ride on the train, she quickly becomes uncomfortable in the presence of white passengers who become pointedly focused on her “bronz’d” skin (26). In an attempt to relieve the embarrassment that she feels at their persistent staring, the narrator turns to look out the window. As she directs her gaze to the passing landscape, the narrator describes herself as “quite breathless upon seeing one familiar object” (27). The narrator identifies the object to be a “telegraph pole” (27). Remembering the presence of a telegraph pole on the reservation, the narrator recalls “very near my mother’s dwelling, along the edge of a road thickly bordered with wild sunflowers, some poles like [those] has been planted by white men. Often I had stopped, on my way down the road, to hold my ear against the pole, and, hearing its low moaning, I used to wonder what the paleface had done to hurt it” (27). As the narrator recalls her sensory interaction with a telegraph pole in her community and ponders how settlers might have caused it to moan in pain, she remembers the land near where her mother’s home is situated. The narrator describes the natural occurrence of sunflowers on the land, and in the space of a comma, captures the swift and unnatural arrival of settlers on Indigenous lands. As Julianne Newmark notes, “the telegraph pole [becomes] a symbol of industrial advancement and white encroachment” (356). The telegraph pole comes to represent the frontier, a space where “the ‘civilized’ and ‘uncivilized’
meet, where nature and (European) culture are momentarily joined” (Cutter 7). As Martha Cutter describes, the representation of the frontier is solidified by the knowledge that “the poles were once trees, and now they are ‘planted’ amid wild sunflowers” (7). The encroachment of white settlers is marked by their activities which take place upon the land, altering it in some way and delivering to it pain which becomes implanted in the earth.

As the narrator wonders about the pain that the telegraph pole must have experienced, and how it is connected to the encroachment of white settlers on Indigenous lands, the sound of the low moaning of the telegraph pole comes to foreshadow the narrator’s imminent mourning of her Sioux life. Just as the land is disturbed by the arrival of white settlers, the lifestyle of the Sioux people is simultaneously disturbed by their arrival. Both the narrator, in being separated from her home community as she travels towards the boarding school, and the trees that were once alive and which now take the suffering form of telegraph poles are “altered and removed from the land that nurtured them” (Wilkinson 52). Yet, even as the narrator thinks of the low and painful sound that the telegraph pole makes as the train speeds eastward, the pole is merely a “silent and stark symbol” (Wilkinson 52). As the pole appears to stand silent on the landscape through the window of the train, and the narrator silently recalls the land which once nurtured her as she moves toward the boarding school, both appear “victimized and mute” in this moment of dislocation (Wilkinson 52). Later, the narrator makes explicit some of the cost of her forced disconnect from nature: “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” (55). Likening her identity to the pole, she states, “like a slender tree, I had been uprooted from my mother, nature, and God. […] Now a cold bare pole I seemed to be, planted in a strange earth” (55-56). While this moment
works primarily to emphasize the narrator’s experience with cultural dislocation, the narrator’s invoking of the figure of the tree, a prominent feature of the natural environment, is significant. Reading from a non-Indigenous perspective, I interpret this passage to suggest the narrator’s maintenance of the view that she somehow continues to be interconnected with nature through her birth into Sioux culture. Yet, I also interpret this moment to place emphasis on the disillusionment from culture, heritage, and tradition that the boarding schools created for many Indigenous children within the process of separation from home community and assimilation from mother culture. Here as the narrator describes her habitation in a “strange earth,” she communicates the profound sense of dislocation that such efforts often resulted in for the former students of Indigenous boarding schools (56).

Upon her arrival at the boarding school, the narrator describes the uncomfortable atmosphere wherein she is unfamiliar with the busy activity and foreign language that overwhelm her senses. The narrator describes that “the constant clash of harsh noises, with an undercurrent of many voices murmuring an unspoken tongue, made a bedlam within which I was securely tied. And though my spirit tore itself in struggling for its lost freedom, all was useless” (29). Here, there is a sense of the entrapment of the narrator, as she begins to recognize how the harsh environment of the boarding school contributes to the loss of her “wild” lifeway. In the moments that follow, as she views some of her new peers within the school, the narrator begins to realize the removal that she will face, not only of her freedom, but also of her embodiment of Sioux culture. The narrator states “these were Indian girls, in stiff shoes and closely clinging dresses. The small girls wore sleeved aprons and shingled hair. As I walked noiselessly in my soft moccasins, I felt like sinking to the floor, for my blanket had been stripped from my shoulders” (29). Beyond the separation from her mother and home community, this moment
marks yet another step in the assimilation process of the narrator, as intended by the missionaries in their project of colonization. In thinking about the removal of markers of Indigeneity from the bodies of children in boarding schools, Laura Terrance describes that, “upon arrival, the school seized students’ means of cultural expression” (623). Such means of cultural expression, which I will continue to refer to interchangeably with the term “embodiment of culture,” includes the dress and hair of Indigenous children who came to inhabit a school community wherein the missionaries were able to physically remove such cultural ties from the bodies of students. In choosing the word “stripped,” the author signals a disruption to the narrator’s cultural expression, as she becomes forbidden from wearing an article of clothing that is associated with Sioux culture. In thinking about the power of the missionaries to remove such markers of cultural expression from the bodies of Indigenous children, the blanket becomes a symbol of Indigenous culture and community in this scene. The forced removal of the blanket from the body of the narrator resembles the wider forced removal of Indigenous children from their communities, and represents the attempt to bring about the eventual removal of all aspects of Sioux culture from the life of the narrator and her Indigenous peers. As the narrator describes the emotion she feels in having her blanket removed from her body, and describes her steps in the soft moccasins which still cling to her feet, she does not yet realize that the other girls around her, in their wearing of dresses, aprons, and shingled hair, represent an ideal of assimilation in the eyes of the colonizers, which she will also come to resemble.

As the narrator unknowingly begins her process of assimilation with the forced removal of her blanket, the further removal of cultural expression from her body becomes imminent. The narrator hears of the missionaries’ intent to cut her long hair from one of her peers. With an uneasy and fearful tone, the narrator states “later in the morning, my friend Judéwin gave me a
terrible warning. Judéwin knew a few words of English, and she heard the paleface woman talk about cutting our long, heavy hair” (30). The narrator describes the significance of long hair in Sioux culture, as she continues, “our mothers had taught us that only unskilled warriors who were captured had their hair shingled by the enemy. Among our people, short hair was worn by mourners, and shingled hair by cowards” (30). While the narrator describes the significance of her long hair according to Sioux cultural customs, she does not yet realize that one’s wearing of short hair does not mean they are in mourning, and that shingled hair is not regarded as a sign of cowardice, in the school community that has been cultivated by the missionaries. But yet, of course, the narrator, and her peers, are put into a state of mourning by the violent shearing of their hair. In thinking about the narrator’s perception of short hair, Laura Terrance describes that the narrator “cannot dis-identify with cut hair stigma even though it carries none within the school community she now physically inhabits” (623). Yet, because she is unable to disidentify with the symbolism of short or shingled hair in Sioux culture, and because her long hair is so deeply connected to her Sioux identity, the narrator is instantly motivated to fiercely protect her hair. The narrator describes that she and Judéwin “discussed [their] fate some moments” (30). The narrator continues, “when Judéwin said, “we have to submit because they are strong,” I rebelled” (30). In defiance of the objective of the missionaries to cut her hair, the narrator declares “no, I will not submit! I will struggle first” (31). Despite any knowledge that the narrator might have about her lack of autonomy in the space of the boarding school, she does not easily submit to the missionaries. In an attempt to save her long hair, the narrator begins a resistance to their assimilation efforts by an act of escape, as she describes “I watched for my chance, and when no one noticed, I disappeared. I crept up the stairs as quietly as I could in my squeaking shoes—my moccasins had been exchanged for shoes” (31). As the narrator escapes
the gaze of the missionaries and her Indigenous peers, she promptly notes the further removal of cultural expression from her body to the reader, as she relates the interchange of moccasins for shoes. As she searches for a place to protect her long hair—seemingly the final marker of Sioux cultural expression on her body—the narrator continues

Turning aside to an open door, I found a large room with three white beds in it. [...] On my hands and knees I crawled under the bed, and cuddled myself in the dark corner. [...] From my hiding place I peered out, shuddering with fear whenever I heard footsteps nearby. Though in the hall loud voices were calling my name, and I knew that even Judewin was searching for me, I did not open my mouth to answer. The sounds came nearer and nearer. Women and girls entered the room. [...] What caused them to stoop and look under the bed I do not know. I remember being dragged out, though I resisted by kicking and scratching wildly. In spite of myself, I was carried downstairs and tied fast in a chair (31).

Here, as the narrator hides under a bed and refuses the missionaries’ plan to cut her long hair, she engages in an act of “Native resistance of dominance,” that becomes an important demonstration of survivance within the text (Vizenor 97). As the narrator attempts to preserve her hair, she resists the missionaries’ quest for dominance, as they attempt to impose their own white cultural customs upon her body. The narrator’s resistance here, first by hiding, and later by physically opposing the forceful grasp of the missionaries, is a clear demonstration of survivance and an active rejection of the acculturation process. Although she has already been forced to engage with the process of assimilation through the removal of the blanket and moccasins from her body, as her “long, heavy hair” represents a final marker of cultural expression on the body, she attempts to resist its erasure by the missionaries. In thinking about the narrator’s active resistance
in this scene, it is important to note the agency that Zitkala-Ša ascribes to the narrator. Despite the young age of the narrator, Zitkala-Ša writes her as a figure who holds agency, which is guided by her sense of Sioux cultural values. This moment of resistance demonstrates the narrator’s protection of her embodiment of Sioux culture from the forceful imposition of white settler norms, as well as her unwillingness to abandon her Sioux identity. In ascribing the narrator agency, Zitkala-Ša creates a representation of Native survivance that clearly depicts a spirit of resistance to the acculturation efforts of colonizers in boarding schools.

Despite the narrator’s spatial and bodily resistance, the missionaries swiftly place her in a chair and take hold of one of her long braids. Zitkala-Ša creates this scene as a representation of violence committed upon the narrator’s body, by the removal of her embodiment of Sioux culture. As the missionaries manoeuvre the scissors through the narrator’s braid, she describes “I cried aloud, shaking my head all the while until I felt the cold blades of scissors against my neck, and heard them gnaw off one of my thick braids. Then I lost my spirit” (31). In this moment, as the narrator’s long hair is cut, the missionaries commit an act of violence upon the narrator’s body and spirit by their removal of what seems to be the final marker of Sioux cultural expression from her body. As a non-Indigenous reader, while I understand this moment to be motivated by prejudice and racism, and recognize the cutting of the narrator’s hair to be an enactment of violence, I do not wish to ascribe authority to my voice in close reading this scene. I do not intend to perform a close reading that is invasive of Sioux cultural norms, or that seeks to articulate the significance of long hair in Sioux culture, which is information that I do not have access to. In careful articulation of my understanding of this scene, I interpret the narrator’s loss of spirit to mean a severing of her connection to her Sioux identity by the loss of her long hair. I understand the braids of the narrator to be a bodily expression of Sioux culture, which connects
her to her Sioux ancestry and identity. As the missionaries erase the existence of the thick braids from her head, they remove this marker of cultural expression from her body, and cause the narrator to feel disconnected from her Sioux identity. The violence within this moment can be attributed to both the forcefulness with which the narrator’s hair is cut and the spiritual loss that she experiences as her braid is literally severed from the rest of her body. As part of my close reading, I want to also recognize and think about the narrator’s voice as it emerges from the writing here. Although the narrator does not speak out loud in this scene, there is a profound sense of pain within her cry, which is quickly replaced with silence as she feels her spirit exit her body. I interpret the narrator’s silence, or perhaps more aptly, her lack of the use of words, to be an expression of grief for the violent loss of her hair, and her connection to her Sioux identity that was held within her wearing of long braids. By the end of this scene, the narrator seems to enter into a silent mourning for not only her long hair but also her spirit.

It is important to consider the depiction of the white missionaries, as they intentionally commit an act of violence upon the body of an Indigenous child. The haircutting scene represents a final gesture of forced removal of the narrator’s cultural expression. In consideration of the representation of the missionaries specifically within this scene, Jessica Enoch writes, “Zitkala-Ša inscribes a kind of white savagery when she discusses how white, seemingly civilized actions actually transgressed cultural practices of great importance to Indigenous peoples” (126). Within this scene, Zitkala-Ša works to expose the forms of violence that Indigenous children were exposed to in boarding schools, through the attempt of missionaries to eradicate Indigenous cultures. Here, the missionaries, as figures representing malevolence and “white savagery,” do not simply and innocuously cut the hair of the narrator. Instead, the missionaries disregard the
cultural ties of the narrator according to the settler belief of the inferiority of Indigenous traditions.

In their disrespect of Indigenous customs, they subject the narrator to a further form of violence, as Sandra Stanley describes. Stanley notes, “the missionaries in cutting [the narrator’s] hair impose one set of values while they erase another. They impose a whole system of signification, which as a child, [the narrator] cannot decode, and as such, in which she cannot situate herself” (67). In writing this scene wherein the narrator’s hair is cut by white missionaries, Zitkala-Ša demonstrates the forced exchange of Indigenous cultural norms for white settler norms which was experienced by many children in government-sanctioned boarding schools. Zitkala-Ša creates a depiction of white disregard for Indigenous customs by demonstrating the deliberate severance of the narrator from that which connects her to her Sioux identity. By creating this image of the missionaries not as benevolent figures who wish to “help” Indigenous children, but as perpetrators of violence and cultural destruction, Zitkala-Ša demonstrates the fundamental untruth that the Indigenous education system was predicated upon. Jessica Enoch notes that Zitkala-Ša’s narratives “reveal the false dichotomy that produces and reproduces asymmetrical power relations that define Indian culture as savage and white American life as civilized” (127). In her writing of the hair-cutting scene, Zitkala-Ša works to uncover the acculturation process as one of violence. By crafting a literary representation of perhaps one of the most common experiences for Indigenous children in boarding schools, Zitkala-Ša not only exposes a violent system in her writing, but also works to dismantle the binary that suggests the civility of white settlers, and the savagery of Indigenous peoples. By offering a representation of the maltreatment of Indigenous children in boarding schools to a
literary audience, Zitkala-Ša demonstrates the violence perpetuated by white religious figures in the name of civilization, and according to the ideology of white supremacy.

Within this literary representation of lived violence against Indigenous peoples, Zitkala-Ša also forms a representation of the trauma involved in the process of forced acculturation. In consideration of the narrator’s loss of cultural expression, and her subsequent loss of spirit, as an emotional moment within the narrative, Julianne Newmark writes that “the haircutting episode is emblematic of the emotional violence which ensues due to cultural disorientation and forced dislocation” (345). The emotional violence that the narrator experiences as a result of having her hair cut is created by the missionaries in their attempt to “civilize” the Indigenous children, as they regard their long hair not as representations of their Indigenous identities, but somehow as markers of savagery. As the narrator describes losing her spirit at the moment in which her braid is cut, she experiences a form of disorientation and cultural dislocation as her Sioux identity becomes decentralized in the boarding school environment which she now inhabits. In a final interpretation of this scene from my own voice as a non-Indigenous reader, I understand the narrator’s identity to be rooted in what her blanket, moccasins, and long hair embody—that is, her Indigenous heritage and her belonging to the Sioux nation—and the missionaries’ denial of these markers of cultural expression to constitute a form of emotional violence and trauma upon the body and spirit of the narrator.

While there are other moments in the text wherein the narrator experiences various forms of cultural and social dislocation, I am most compelled to discuss the narrator’s disorientation upon returning to her home community in the final pages of the narrative. The initial separation of the narrator from the reservation, and the acculturation methods used by the missionaries for many of the narrator’s formative years, are impactful and continue to trouble her even after she
leaves the boarding school. While the narrator expresses her experience of liminality in the aftermath of her return to the reservation quite clearly in the text, scholarly articulation of the narrator’s liminality requires a careful approach to reduce the risk of simplification of the narrator’s experience, and indeed, her Indigenous identity. In Red Bird, Red Power, Tadeusz Lewandowski’s analysis of the narrator’s return to the reservation reduces her to living in a perpetual state of liminality as a result of her boarding school experience. Lewandowski writes, “the greatest harm manifests itself when [the narrator] returns home years later, only to find that her thinking has been so distorted that she cannot resume her old ways. She lives a sadly liminal existence, trapped between white and Sioux aspects of her identity” (42). In thinking about this argument made by Lewandowski, and that of many other scholars who suggest that Zitkala-Ša’s writings present a narrator who eventually faces existential liminality, it is important to perform a deeper analysis of such liminality to reduce the potential of a harmful, oversimplified reading. In thinking about the narrator’s expression of liminality, I will argue that while this experience of the narrator might be articulated in academic writing, one must first consider the narrator’s experiences with attempted assimilation and understand that the liminality that she experiences is perhaps momentary, as it is the result of comparison between her own experiences with acculturation and that of others on the reservation. I will also note here in my analysis that my suggestion of what I will call the narrator’s “experience of liminality” does not reduce her Indigenous identity to somehow less Sioux or to being assimilated. I want to state that it is also important to recognize that the narrator’s experience is one ultimately born of land theft and cultural genocide, of the collision of two cultures and lifeways, wherein one has the power to dominate, dispossess, and oppress. Thus, the narrator’s experience of liminality might also be thought about in terms of the aftermath of this violent collision, where Indigenous peoples lived
with the memory of trickery, land theft, and cultural genocide. In the trajectory of her “education,” as the narrator is made to represent an ideal of assimilation through the experience of cultural genocide, she develops a poor sense of identity and individuality, which eventually lends itself not to a “sadly liminal existence” as Tadeusz Lewandowski suggests, but to the experience of liminality. Finally, I will briefly note here that my analysis is focused on the experience of liminality by the narrator within the text, and not on the identity of Zitkala-Ša as the author.

The narrator describes that upon her return home, she “roamed again in the Western country through four strange summers” (38). The narrator describes the difficulty in moving back to the reservation, as she continues to feel displaced. She describes “I seemed to hang in the heart of chaos, beyond the touch or voice of human aid. […] My mother had never gone inside of a schoolhouse, and so she was not capable of comforting her daughter who could read and write” (39). The inherent experience of cultural dislocation as part of the process of Indigenous education within the boarding school system results in a prolonged experience of displacement and unbelonging within the narrator, even after she returns to her home community and the company of her mother. The narrator’s sense of unbelonging in her community is largely rooted in the difference between her own childhood experiences and that of her mother. The narrator describes that her mother had never been to boarding school, and so her own childhood came to minimally resemble that of her mother. Indeed, the separation between the narrator and her mother based on their differing childhood experiences is so profound, that the narrator attributes her own literacy to be the cause of her mother’s failure to comfort her. The narrator’s experience of alienation when she returns to the reservation is a result of her “education,” as it limits her relationality to her mother, who did not experience cultural dislocation in the same way, and so
this prevents the narrator from fully returning home. The narrator understands that it is her education which created a profound sense of displacement within her, and describes her poor sense of identity, after being severed from her mother culture and being educated by white missionaries for a duration of three years. The narrator’s expression of liminality is most clear as she states, “even nature seemed to have no place for me. I was neither a wee girl nor a tall one; neither a wild Indian nor a tame one. This deplorable situation was the effect of my brief course in the East” (39). In this statement, the narrator expresses experiencing liminality upon returning to the reservation. Yet, much of the narrator’s sense of her own liminality is derived from the comparison of herself to what she views as the successful acculturation of other young people on the reservation. The narrator describes others who returned from boarding school, largely according to their loss of Sioux cultural expression. She states

    that moonlight night, I cried in my mother’s presence when I heard the jolly young people pass by our cottage. They were no more young braves in blankets and eagle plumes, nor Indian maids with prettily painted cheeks. They had gone to school three years in the East, and had become civilized. […] The young men wore white man’s coats and trousers, with bright neckties. The girls wore tight muslin dresses, with ribbons at neck and waist (40-41).

The narrator also notes that “at these gatherings, they talked English” (41). This is followed by a direct comparison of the narrator to her peers on the reservation. She states “I could speak English almost as well as my brother, but I was not properly dressed to be taken along. I had no hat, no ribbons, and no close-fitting gown. Since my return from school I had thrown away my shoes, and wore again the soft moccasins” (41). As the narrator describes her only slightly poorer command of English, and her failure to dress according to white cultural norms, she finds herself
experiencing liminality. The narrator’s experience of liminality is largely based on comparison to others, so it is important to make a distinction here to avoid discounting or reducing her experience: the narrator is experiencing liminality according to the differences she perceives between the childhood experiences of herself and her mother, and now, the appearance and speech of herself and her peers. The narrator’s perception that she cannot be comforted by her mother who does not share a similar experience with cultural dislocation, but also cannot fit in with the other young Indigenous people who attended boarding school, causes her to experience liminality. So, it becomes important to clearly articulate that while the narrator is experiencing liminality here, this does not necessarily mean that she lives in a perpetual state of liminality. To the narrator, assimilation is directly and irremovably tied to the body. From her earlier description of the removal of her own blanket and moccasins, and the cutting of her hair, to her description of the young people who pass by her cottage in coats and dresses, evidence of assimilation is always tied to the body. The narrator understands the embodiment of culture of the “young braves” and “Indian maids” to be adhering to white cultural norms, while she exchanged her shoes for moccasins upon returning to the reservation. As narrator observes how the bodies of other young people on the reservation have come to reflect white settler culture, she cries in the presence of her mother as she mourns the loss of Sioux culture for those who attended boarding school.

From my perspective as a non-Indigenous reader, the issue with simplifying the experience of the narrator by labeling her entire existence as liminal rather than regarding her liminality as a potentially momentary experience created by comparison, is that such assumptions play on problematic dichotomies of the success of assimilation. The idea of assimilation suggests that one can only be savage or civilized; wild or tame; ignorant or
educated. To declare that the narrator lives in a perpetual state of liminality in the immediate aftermath of her return to the reservation is harmful, as it suggests that she has not found a way to conform to stereotypical expectations of either Indigenous peoples or white settlers. Such strict binaries seek to regulate identities according to race. Racialized dichotomies are harmful to Indigenous peoples both for their perpetuation of stereotypes, and for their marginalization of Indigenous peoples to immovable positions on the peripheries of society. The simplicity of dichotomous thinking does not adhere to the complexity of the writing within “The School Days of an Indian Girl,” or the narrator as a character within Zitkala-Ša’s narrative. To consider why the narrator describes herself as “neither a wild Indian nor a tame one” by drawing on the experiences of others in her community, and to regard the narrator not as existing in a state of liminality, but as experiencing liminality, is to work towards the necessary dismantling of equating ignorant with Indigenous, and educated with white. The narrator is simultaneously Indigenous and educated, and despite her subjection to the project of acculturation and her subsequent experience of liminality, the narrator continues to assert her identity as a member of the Sioux nation through the embodiment of culture, as she “[throws] away [her] shoes, and wore again the soft moccasins” upon returning from the school (41).

In her creation of the narrator as the main figure within the text, Zitkala-Ša contests such Indigenous-white dichotomies that suggest one’s successful acculturation. “The School Days of an Indian Girl” refuses notions of the educated Indigenous person as a civilized, assimilated individual. Instead, through her writing of the experiences of the narrator, Zitkala-Ša creates a representation of a girl who is simultaneously Indigenous and “educated,” but who has also been inhumanely stripped of her culture, language, and identity by racially motivated policy that was intentionally created to harm Indigenous peoples. So, although Zitkala-Ša crafts the experience
of the narrator so that she feels displaced both at the boarding school and on the reservation, this creates a literary representation of the coming-home experience for many Indigenous students, where their families spoke a different language, practiced a different culture, and had dissimilar experiences with cultural dislocation. As Zitkala-Ša articulates the difficult experience of liminality for many Indigenous students who were exposed to the acculturation process, “The School Days of an Indian Girl” ultimately becomes a contestation of government assimilation policies. As the text exposes violent methods of acculturation and describes the narrator’s difficult position upon her return to the reservation, Zitkala-Ša captures a former reality for many boarding school survivors. The destruction of the narrator’s embodiment of Sioux culture, in addition to her lack of relationality to her mother according to their dissimilar experiences with cultural dislocation, ultimately creates within her a sense of perceived liminality that echoes a wider experience of Indigenous youth in this era.

In the final installment of the Atlantic Monthly series, Zitkala-Ša constructs the narrator’s experience as a teacher within the boarding school system in “An Indian Teacher Among Indians.” At the beginning of the narrative, the narrator describes her intention to begin working as a teacher in the Indigenous education system. The narrator expresses her desire to develop a career in service of Indigenous communities, as she states, “since the winter when I had my first dreams about red apples I had been traveling slowly toward the morning horizon. There had been no doubt about the direction in which I wished to go to spend my energies in a work for the Indian race. […] Thus I had written my mother briefly, saying my plan for the year was to teach in an Eastern Indian school” (46). While she works as an Indigenous teacher amongst white missionaries within the space of a boarding school, the narrator is quick to notice the inappropriateness of the employment of many white figures. The narrator describes the various
injustices which the Indigenous education system was predicated upon, where the employment of white staff who were unfit for their positions often resulted in the suffering of Indigenous students. The narrator notes the various instances wherein the employment of white missionaries at the school seemed to be not for the benefit and education of the Indigenous students there, but for the livelihood of the white families which would be supported by the income generated by the enrolment of students in the school. The narrator describes, “as the months passed over me, I slowly comprehended that the large army of white teachers in Indian schools had a larger missionary creed than I had suspected. […] It was one which included self-preservation quite as much as Indian education” (54). The narrator goes on to describe the many layers of incapability that lay beneath the semblance of education performed by various figures within the school environment. She recalls

when I saw an opium-eater holding a position as a teacher of Indians, I did not understand what good was expected, until a Christian in power replied that this pumpkin-coloured creature had a feeble mother to support. An inebriate paleface sat stupid in a doctor’s chair, while Indian patients carried their ailments to untimely graves, because his fair wife was dependent upon him for her daily food. […] I find it hard to count that white man a teacher who tortured an ambitious Indian youth by frequently reminding the brave changeling that he was nothing but a “government pauper” (54).

In the numerous examples that the narrator provides which work to expose the semblance of productivity and benevolence performed by the Indigenous education system, it is important to consider the depiction of the injustices perpetuated against Indigenous children and families. Again, Zitkala-Ša ascribes agency to the narrator in working as a Sioux teacher within the Indigenous education system, and voice in her revelation of the falsehoods perpetuated by white
figures within their various roles. Another moment wherein Zitkala-Ša allows for the voice of the narrator to emerge from the writing follows the narrator’s description of the inadequacies and injustices of the structure at Carlisle Indian Industrial School. The narrator states, “though I burned with indignation upon discovering on every side instances no less shameful than those I have mentioned, there was no present help. Even the few rare ones who have worked nobly for my race were powerless to choose workmen like themselves” (54-55). By allowing for the narrator as an Indigenous educator to speak about what she witnesses in the school in a way that records the maltreatment of Indigenous children, Zitkala-Ša assigns a sense of voice to the narrator that is impactful beyond the perimeters of literary narrative. The instances that the narrator reflects on here document the inhumane crimes that took place within boarding schools, which were disguised as spaces of learning, achievement, and productivity. Ultimately, the power of the narrator’s voice here draws attention to the immense suffering amongst Indigenous children in the boarding school era.

In the conclusion of the final narrative of the Atlantic Monthly series, the narrator critically describes the role of falsehood within the boarding school system as perpetuated by the white missionaries and educational figures. The narrator questions whether the structure of the boarding school system was truly meant for the benefit of Indigenous populations. She documents a further demonstration of falsehood, wherein the supposed “work” of Indigenous students is prepared in advance, and used to demonstrate the success of the missionaries in their efforts to “civilize” Indigenous children through the process of education. The narrator states:

As answers to their shallow inquiries they received the students’ sample work to look upon. Examining the neatly figured pages, and gazing upon the Indian boys and girls bending over their books, the white visitors walked out of the school satisfied: they were
educating the children of the red man […] In this fashion many have passed idly through the Indian schools during the last decade, afterward to boast of their charity to the North American Indian. But few there are who have paused to question whether real life or long-lasting death lies beneath this semblance of civilization (56).

Here, the narrator describes the falsehood within the educational mission of white figures who worked within the system by noting the presentation of false work to the authorities who visited the schools to examine their operations. The white settlers and missionaries who work within the Indigenous education system feel satisfied in their mission of Indigenous education because they equate it with civilization and assimilation. The narrator regards the boarding school system as only a semblance of civilization, for its use of inhumane, and one might argue, rather uncivilized, methods of acculturation. As Amelia Katanski notes, “the outward signs of assimilation are nothing but a ‘semblance of civilization’ to Zitkala-Ša, representing what she believes is a program of cultural genocide” (126)¹. As a figure of agency and voice, the narrator critically questions whether there is actually room for the growth of Indigenous populations within this system, or if it is merely a disguise for something malicious—that is, the intentional destruction of Indigenous nations, cultures, languages, and spiritualities. The narrator recognizes that the concept of Indigenous education was not at all meant to benefit the children of those who first

¹ My understanding of this term is derived from the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which states: “For over a century, the central goals of Canada’s Aboriginal policy were to eliminate Aboriginal governments; ignore Aboriginal rights; terminate the Treaties; and, through a process of assimilation, cause Aboriginal peoples to cease to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural, religious, and racial entities in Canada. The establishment and operation of residential schools were a central element of this policy, which can best be described as “cultural genocide” […] Cultural genocide is the destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group. States that engage in cultural genocide set out to destroy the political and social institutions of the targeted group. Land is seized, and populations are forcibly transferred and their movement is restricted. Languages are banned. Spiritual leaders are persecuted, spiritual practices are forbidden, and objects of spiritual value are confiscated and destroyed. And, most significantly to the issue at hand, families are disrupted to prevent the transmission of cultural values and identity from one generation to the next” (1).
occupied the landscape that settlers so came to desire, but rather for the purpose of genocide in order to gain access to those lands.

It is important to note what Zitkala-Ša achieves within her writing—by sharing her own personal experiences first as a student and then as a teacher within the boarding school system in a literary form, Zitkala-Ša raises ethical concerns as she questions the true objective of boarding schools, which were disguised as spaces of learning and literacy for Indigenous children. In consideration of the fact that Zitkala-Ša published the Atlantic Monthly series in a literary journal while the Carlisle Indian Industrial School was still in operation, Zitkala-Ša’s writing publicly contested and undermined the authority and legitimacy of the boarding school system. Ultimately, these narratives allow for Zitkala-Ša as a critical Indigenous voice, who experienced attempted assimilation within the space of a boarding school firsthand, to expose and publicly denounce the maltreatment of Indigenous children and families in the process of separation and assimilation. I will note here that contrary to Richard Henry Pratt’s criticisms of Zitkala-Ša’s work, where he “indicated privately that [Zitkala-Ša] was ungrateful for the opportunities that a boarding school education had afforded her,” Zitkala-Ša does not oppose education, but the true function of the boarding school system as a space of cultural genocide and acculturation (Bertolet 619). Zitkala-Ša’s documentation of the early life of an Indigenous narrator in the boarding school era importantly creates a public and accessible record of the immorality of the attempt of the settlers to “civilize” Indigenous peoples by weaponizing education. In her creation of this public record, Zitkala-Ša simultaneously emphasizes the necessity of dismantling harmful Indigenous-white dichotomies that suggest the (un)civilization of Indigenous peoples, and which rely upon notions of civility that are predicated solely upon the completion of an education, the ability to speak the English language, and the adherence to white cultural norms.
narrator’s experiences also represent the inadequacy of this education, especially in comparison to the standard of education given to white children. Ultimately, Zitkala-Ša’s boarding school narratives achieve a rejection of the harm done to Indigenous communities by white settlers in the name of civilization.
Chapter 4: Empowerment Through Language: Zitkala-Ša’s Literary Writings as Adaptive Agency

In arriving at the conclusion of this thesis, I want to think back to my initial thoughts surrounding Zitkala-Ša’s literary writings, and articulate why I chose to write a lengthy analysis of her work in particular. In preparing to embark on the journey of writing a thesis, which I had decided would be centered on the work of an Indigenous author based on my extensive interest in Indigenous literatures, I thought back to my experience as an undergraduate student, and considered Indigenous authors who greatly influenced my focus on Indigenous writing later in my career as an undergrad. Before I read Zitkala-Ša’s “The School Days of an Indian Girl” in a third-year English class, I had only previously read the poetry of Gregory Scofield (Métis) and a novel by Drew Hayden Taylor (Ojibway). As the first Indigenous woman writer I had ever read, and in my understanding that her short narratives were semi-autobiographical, I felt that Zitkala-Ša’s voice as an author was incredibly important to the development of my interest in Indigenous literatures. I often thought about the hair-cutting scene in the months and years that followed my initial reading of “The School Days of an Indian Girl.” Zitkala-Ša’s illustration of this moment of loss for the narrator, so filled with raw emotion and desperation, which I understood to be based largely on her own experience as a boarding school student, made me wonder about all the other representations in her work that demonstrated a connection between culture, custom, and identity. In the years that followed my first reading of Zitkala-Ša’s most admired writings, *American Indian Stories*, I also wondered about what other Indigenous intellectuals during the time period pondered and wrote about. I became interested in reading the works of some of Zitkala-Ša’s Indigenous peers, especially those who attended boarding schools and later crafted literary representations of their experiences. The other writers I was keen to explore, who
“witnessed the [tragedy] of […] the government’s educational plan for Indian assimilation,” included Charles Eastman (Santee Sioux), Carlos Montezuma (Yavapai-Apache), and Luther Standing Bear (Oglala Lakota) (Enoch 119). I became particularly interested in some of Luther Standing Bear’s boarding school stories from his collection *My People the Sioux* (1928) for its representation of his attendance at Carlisle Indian Industrial School as a student. What echoed most strongly for me in comparing his and Zitkala-Ša’s accounts was how they both represent at length the weaponization of the colonizer’s language by boarding school authors—in Luther Standing Bear’s case in the imposition of Anglo names on the boys and in Zitkala-Ša’s in the punishment visited on a group of female students when they misunderstand the English language. Both authors also make stark the violence involved in the removal of Indigenous cultural identification from the body and identity of the students in the school—“cultural violence[s] enabled in part through physical violence”—partly through the telling of the experiences of enforced hair-cutting from the students’ perspectives (Lyons 448). At the same time, both authors include moments when students, individually and collectively, work to sustain voice, choice, and agency. In particular, they both represent food as a site of Indigenous agency in the face of attempted deprivation and starvation, which are forms of violence in residential schools that have been brought to wide public attention in recent years. One powerful scene of communal resilience by Luther Standing Bear shows the narrator and the other boys in their small community “who never seemed to get filled up,” scheming successfully together for extra food by tricking the teachers that administer the meals (154). Zitkala-Ša shows her narrator manipulating an order she was given, as a punishment, to mash turnips for dinner. With “hot rage” and “vengeance” (34), she pulps the turnips so hard that she smashes them through the jar and they become inedible; she “whooped in [her] heart for having once asserted the rebellion
within [her]” (34). As Brenda J. Child (Red Lake Ojibwe Nation) and Tsianina K. Lomawaima (Creek) have stated more generally, even in the face of attempted genocide, Indigenous students in boarding schools “found ways and means, times and places, to speak their own languages, eat their own foods, and exercise religious practices” (quoted in Katanski, 42).

While I ultimately felt that I do not yet have the critical tools or knowledge to discuss Luther Standing Bear or the other Indigenous authors of boarding school narratives in depth, reading their narratives reinforced my sense of these early Indigenous authors reclaiming the space of the boarding school through written narrative. This reclamation occurs through the creation of voice; through literary representations of agency and resilience; and through engagement in the truth-telling process that regards not only the occurrences in boarding schools, but also the struggle of students for individual expression in a space constructed for assimilation and cultural genocide. In my decided focus on Zitkala-Ša’s boarding school narratives, I pondered how the intersectionality of the complex time period in which she lived, and her identity as a former student and teacher of the Indigenous education system, was present in her writing. I thought about how as an early Indigenous author, her choice to write about the experience of attempted assimilation and cultural genocide in the colonizer’s tongue for the consumption of general society might have been perceived. My curiosities about the ideas of identity, agency, and adaptation in relation to Zitkala-Ša’s writings thus birthed a long analysis of her most widely recognized collection.

As I think back to my inspiration for this project, I also want to reiterate my central research question, and reflect on my desire to gain a deeper understanding of the representation of Zitkala-Ša’s agency through her literary writings. In particular, my analysis has been primarily concerned with how Zitkala-Ša’s boarding school narratives are suggestive of her own sense of
agency, and how this extends to and becomes translated within the agency she ascribes to her narrator. I have been interested in how Zitkala-Ša used language as a tool to find empowerment through the form of storytelling, and how her sense of agency became represented in her literary works.

I have also been largely concerned with how Zitkala-Ša’s writings might be looked at through a bicultural lens. This concern is derived largely from early interpretations of Zitkala-Ša’s works by literary critics, which stated that her writings revealed her existence in a permanently liminal state as a result of her boarding school experience. In later interpretations of the same narratives, in addition to some of her political writings, scholars suggested that Zitkala-Ša had been fully assimilated and was deeply indoctrinated into settler culture. To me, each of these interpretations seemed to overlook the complexity of Zitkala-Ša’s character and work, and indeed, the social atmosphere for Indigenous peoples during the early twentieth century. As I read previous scholarship on Zitkala-Ša, I wondered about the possibility of renewed interpretations of her work that are focused on the density and complexity of her character, life, and writing. One such renewed interpretation that I cited earlier was published by Taos Pueblo author, Jane Hafen. Hafen’s reading of Zitkala-Ša’s writings position her as a bicultural writer, one whose work was shaped by the various cultural influences of the time period in which she wrote. Hafen moves away from assimilationist and liminal positionings of Zitkala-Ša, and instead considers how the scope of biculturalism might reveal subtleties within Zitkala-Ša’s writings, which become apparent when one considers literary trends and the social atmosphere of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Thus, I will be guided largely by Hafen’s work in the thoughts and remarks that will conclude my analysis. I will aspire to achieve two primary objectives in this conclusion, by using scholarly secondary sources that seek to understand the
purpose and impact of Zitkala-Ša’s boarding school narratives. Firstly, according to my own 
interpretation of Zitkala-Ša’s narratives, I will argue that her writings are essentially a form of 
what I will call “adaptive agency.” This argument considers how Zitkala-Ša utilizes language as 
a tool to express her own sense of agency, and how she finds empowerment within this. I will 
delineate why this is significant to renewed interpretations of Zitkala-Ša’s work. Secondly, I will 
briefly indicate where there is room for future scholarship in anticipation of new and differing 
directions that scholars will seek to locate Zitkala-Ša’s writings within.

With a developed understanding of the complexity of the time period Zitkala-Ša 
inhabited, I want to introduce a concept to my analysis which I will think about comparatively 
with the idea of assimilation. In her article, “Expanding Interpretations of Native American 
Women’s History,” Kiara Vigil notes that “initial engagements with Indigenous women’s 
literature from the 19th and 20th centuries criticized Zitkala-Ša for being assimilationist” (131). 
Vigil describes that this interpretation was derived in part from “the notion that Native women 
had to give up some part of their Native identity and belonging if they were to become 
professional writers” (131). This idea that Zitkala-Ša must have given up her Indigenous identity 
and belonging in order to begin her career as a published author is significant, for it suggests that 
the result of Zitkala-Ša’s boarding school education, where she learned to read and write, and 
therefore gained the necessary skills for publication, was assimilation. To me, this interpretation 
“reduces the complexity” (Stromberg 107) of her short narratives, and does not consider the 
limitations and restraints she encountered as an early Indigenous woman writer, writing to what 
is believed to have been a predominantly settler audience. In response to this historical regard for 
Zitkala-Ša’s work, I will suggest that her writing might instead be interpreted through the lens of 
adaptation. As she chooses to write in the colonizer’s language to tell her story and communicate
with a targeted audience, her writings are a form of adaptive agency. I am motivated by an idea that Kiara Vigil presents in her work, where she suggests the importance of “consider[ing] different sorts of cultural modes, discursive limits, [and] structural constraints that Zitkala-Ša contended with in a settler-colonial context” (135). To honour Zitkala-Ša’s writings, her experiences with forced assimilation, and her struggles as an Indigenous woman in the time period, it is necessary to think about her intentions as an author, and the decisions that were necessary in order for her to publish her written narratives. Her literary writings wrote against what would have been generally accepted as truths about the lived experiences of Indigenous children in the boarding school system.

As part of my consideration of various contexts that preface my final argument on Zitkala-Ša’s literary writings, I want to acknowledge her relationship with the colonial language of English. It is important to think about Zitkala-Ša’s experience of learning English, which was “forced upon her through trickery,” thereby making her “relationship with this language” forever “disharmonious” (Newmark 349-350). While the “benefits of [Zitkala-Ša’s] political voice” must be acknowledged, it is equally important to recognize that Zitkala-Ša’s “ability to use the oppressor’s language has not been acquired without a painful cost” (Wilkinson 53). Her writings “trace the reductions she endures in return for “the white man’s papers” and forces her reader to reconsider the so-called benevolent practices of Americanization through her eyes and voice” (Carden 62). While Zitkala-Ša’s relationship with the language was strenuous according to its rootedness in trauma, she also recognized how she might “[appropriate] the English language, as her own authorial language, [and] directly [critique] the assumed benefits of a hegemonic system by clearly displaying its pernicious and personal effects” (Newmark 344), namely her “alienat[ion] from her mother and Yankton origins” (Hafen 40). Thus, Zitkala-Ša “realized the
necessity and urgency of the skill of writing” and understood that to write in the colonizer’s language would allow her to “express herself and reveal the emotional and physical violence which marked her permanently” (Newmark 346). So, Zitkala-Ša used writing as an “act of self-representation” to “[afford] her a sense of control over signifiers of her identity” and to challenge “dominant American discourses on difference” (Carden 73). Ultimately, her “understanding of language [enabled] her to give voice to the traumas of her own life and to an extent, the lives of her fellow Sioux people in an autobiography form” (Newmark 357). While Zitkala-Ša’s boarding school experience was often one of alienation and devastation, her education “provided her with a voice with which to address injustices,” (Hafen 40) and “language to expose the missionaries’ power position” (Spack 8).

In going back to my earlier mention of my focus on renewed scholarly interpretations of Zitkala-Ša’s narratives, I rely on the work of Jane Hafen as a leading scholar on Zitkala-Ša to reconsider the positioning of her as a liminal and assimilationist author. In her article, “Zitkala-Ša: Sentimentality and Sovereignty,” Hafen reformulates Zitkala-Ša’s position from liminality to biculturalism. Here, I am guided by her work to learn about the nuances that are present in Zitkala-Ša’s writings, and which become clear to me when I think in terms of biculturalism. Hafen describes Zitkala-Ša’s writings as “angry and impassioned” and “pleading for justice in the plight of the early twentieth-century American Indian” (31). The sense of emotion within Zitkala-Ša’s writing, as she “appeals” for the “recognition of her Indian voice,” is related to her sense of disconnection from her community and mother culture that occurs as a result of her “white man’s education” (Hafen 40). Zitkala-Ša’s experience within the colonial institution of education, in combination with her deep commitment to her Sioux heritage is important, for it produces contradictions within her work that Hafen views as “ideological product[s]” of Zitkala-
Ša’s “Native and EuroAmerican identification,” which becomes apparent in her “authorship” (32). In thinking about the reproduction of Zitkala-Ša as a bicultural writer, one might also consider Dorothea Susag’s thought on how Zitkala-Ša inhabits a space of complexity that is largely tied to her Indigenous identity. Susag writes, “Zitkala-Ša has constructed a literary voice both from the rhetoric and value systems of the colonizers, and from a remembered Yankton/Dakota landscape, language and story” (Heflin 7). To regard Zitkala-Ša’s literary voice according to her learned and remembered values, as both Jane Hafen and Dorothea Susag suggest in their texts, is important for it acknowledges the intersection of Indigenous and white cultures that is represented in her short narratives collectively, and that one might argue her writing is born of. While she documents the horrors of acculturation in the boarding school system, she also relates her childhood learning of Sioux customs and values with her mother on the reservation, and attempts to write to the future by creating a record that “represent[s] her past and the problems that have plagued her people” (Newmark 342). So, in thinking about the influence of two cultures on Zitkala-Ša’s work, I argue that Zitkala-Ša’s adaptative agency emerges from her sense of creativity; her recognition of the necessity for the publication of narratives which detail boarding school experiences for Indigenous children; and her choice to use the colonizer’s language as a tool to tell her own story. Even as she recognizes the importance of her story, she seems to understand that she must do this in a “language of dominance,” in order to “reach an audience” and to “receive payment for her words,” and to me, this becomes a manifestation of adaptation in her work (Newmark 342). To perform an assimilationist reading of Zitkala-Ša’s work minimizes her struggle to retain her Sioux identity, and her choice to practice adaptation in order to tell her story. It also minimizes her expression of
resistance, which her young narrator practices as “a way to the self to speak for the self when another is trying to speak over it” (Terrance 624).

In accordance with my objectives for this conclusion, I want to discuss the various nuances that I have detected as a reader when thinking about Zitkala-Ša’s writings according to the methodologies of survivance and rhetorical sovereignty, and through the lens of biculturalism. Namely, I am interested in discussing the topics that I have thought about as the language of difference, and the transformation of the colonizer’s language. I begin with a quotation from Martha Cutter, which I believe gestures towards Zitkala-Ša’s demonstration of rhetorical sovereignty in the form of storytelling. Cutter writes, “as a Native American writer forced to speak and write in the language of the oppressor, why should we expect [Zitkala-Ša’s] writing to legitimate the very institutions (the English language, writing, culture, and “civilization”) which have suppressed her? Her writing does not, indeed, legitimate these institutions” (1). This question is important for the way in which it suggests that Zitkala-Ša used the colonizer’s language, not to legitimate the very institutions which imposed it upon her, but rather, to question the efficacy of the methods of assimilation used. The settler colonial expectation that would have been placed on Zitkala-Ša for her to use her education in such a way that would promote the assimilation of Indigenous peoples is dismantled by Zitkala-Ša through her writing practice, and within this, she seems to find language to be a source of empowerment. Zitkala-Ša chooses to write against the false perceptions that were circulated about Indigenous education in order to justify the harsh methods of settlers and missionaries. As she “reinscribes Carlisle as an institution that constructs a false reality of student experience to convince the government and public of the school’s good work” (Enoch 134), Zitkala-Ša “asks for reconsideration by readers of what schools like Carlisle do for their students (Enoch 133). She
alerts her readers, who very well might have been “Carlisle patrons and supporters of Indian education” (Enoch 133) to the fact that the teachers within the schools were not “loving guides to white civilization that Carlisle present[ed] them to be in the newspapers” (Enoch 133). Zitkala-Ša uses the tool of language to “[expose] her readers to the world she experienced as an Indian student and teacher, and troubles dominant educational storylines like Carlisle’s, which dictated that white, culturally bound realities define what is good and right for Indian children” (Enoch 137). As she challenges dominant narratives created by figures such as Richard Henry Pratt, and seeks to unveil the true harm that was perpetuated against Indigenous children, and protected by rehearsed falsehoods, “Zitkala-Ša does the work of rhetorical sovereignty” (Lyons 499).

According to her “rejection of Pratt and his educational plan,” Zitkala-Ša “inscribes her strategic rhetoric of pedagogical resistance” by “challeng[ing]” the “educational norms that silenced [Indigenous] voices and erased [Indigenous] culture[s]” (Enoch 118). In a refusal to legitimate the colonial institution of education, Zitkala-Ša attempts to “revive” a sense of “possibility” for Indians” (Lyons 499) by “interven[ing] in a dominant educational narrative” and demanding that “disciplinary histories listen to her voice as a Native American educator” (Enoch 135, 139).

Through her work, Zitkala-Ša “requires that there cannot only be reliance on master narratives, but that histories listen to and record the voices that contest and challenge such master narratives” (Enoch 139).

In thinking about the nuances that can be traced within Zitkala-Ša’s writings when they are viewed through the lens of biculturalism, this idea of Zitkala-Ša writing to challenge dominant narratives and perceptions of Indigenous education is important. As she writes back to the colonizer and the colonial institution of education, Zitkala-Ša creates what Julianne Newmark calls a “language of difference” (349). Newmark writes that, “through language and
the assertion of an immutable individuality, Zitkala-Ša effectively affirms that she cannot fully assimilate—thus her only language is a language of difference” (Newmark 349). This “language of difference” emerges from Zitkala-Ša’s stance as a witness to the horrors of assimilation policy. While she adapts to writing in the colonizer’s language, and publishes under a Lakota name, her writing is not a demonstration of assimilation. She uses a “language of difference” in her narratives, because she does not write to legitimate the very institution that subjugated her—she writes to expose its perpetuation of harm against Indigenous peoples. Even in her identity as an Indigenous writer who published narratives written in the colonizer’s tongue, to regard her as an assimilationist figure is inadequate, for she does not write in approval of Pratt’s education system, but rather in opposition to it. Earlier in this analysis, I suggested that Zitkala-Ša’s writings might be viewed as acts of survivance for their “active sense of presence over historical absence, deracination, oblivion” (Vigil 136). Zitkala-Ša’s writing in a “language of difference” is important as it “[pushes] back against colonial narratives of vanishing, tragedy, [and] powerlessness” (Vigil 135-136) to create a representation of a writer that is inspired by her various cultural influences and empowered by language. While I seek to represent Zitkala-Ša’s empowerment by language and the relevance of her stories in this thesis, I also do acknowledge the immense harm and trauma that this system has brought to Indigenous nations, and the role of language and writing throughout the existence of educational institutions intended for Indigenous children.

A second nuance that I have traced within Zitkala-Ša’s work is her transformation of the colonizer’s language. Martha Cutter describes that for Zitkala-Ša, “language itself is problematic, an ambivalent tool—both the sign of oppression and the means of escaping it” (5). Cutter continues by questioning whether “Zitkala-Ša, through the writing of this text, use[s] the very
language which has oppressed her to transform language?” (8). To answer this question, bell hooks’ thoughts on the “use of the oppressor’s discourse” can be considered (Hafen 32). hooks suggests that the transformation of a colonial language “enables resistance [and] also forges a space for alternative cultural production and alternative epistemologies” (Hafen 32). For Zitkala-Ša, gaining access to such alternative spaces enables her to write in representation of “herself and other boarding school students,” to effectively “[resist] being both victimized and silenced” (Wilkinson 53). Zitkala-Ša’s writings allowed her to formally and publicly “recognize systems of power that constructed the narratives that justified off-reservation schooling and attempted to erase both Zitkala-Ša’s culture and her [Indigenous] voice” (Enoch 137). So, there is a transformation of language that occurs within Zitkala-Ša’s refusal “to remain silent in the face of oppression” as she “make[s] language take account of her oppression” through her act of storytelling (Cutter 8).

Finally, I want to conclude my study of Zitkala-Ša’s narratives by thinking about a critical question posed by Gerald Vizenor. Jessica Enoch cites Vizenor’s question in her work, as she writes that “in many ways, Zitkala-Ša’s life answers the question that Gerald Vizenor poses when he asks ‘what did it mean to be the first generation to hear the stories of the past, bear the horrors of the moment, and write to the future?’” (121). Vizenor’s question hints at the complexity that was inherently part of the life, character, and writing of Zitkala-Ša, and other writers of her generation, such as Luther Standing Bear, who grappled with similar concerns of voice and storytelling. There are a number of ways in which Zitkala-Ša’s life and literary career adds meaning to this question posed by Vizenor. While this question is much too large and complicated to be answered in full here, I will use brief remarks by a number of academics to conclude on a note that will engage future discussion on Zitkala-Ša’s positioning in the way that
Vizenor suggests. Firstly, in a statement that connects largely to my focus here, Susan Bernardin writes that “Zitkala-Ša’s narrative identifies the double bind of literacy as both a source of empowerment and as an emblem of irreparable estrangement from one’s home culture” (225). To augment this thought on the sort of duality that is present in Zitkala-Ša’s writing, Mary Carden describes that Zitkala-Ša’s narratives “trace[d] the painful process of assimilation and evaluate[d] its consequences engaging the complexities of deciphering and rewriting dominant notions of racial and gendered identity” (72). Finally, Martha Cutter describes that Zitkala-Ša’s writings in the form of semi-autobiography are complicated by the idea that “English denies the Native American speaker a place to stand, and its fallen, manipulative nature makes its mastery, in and of itself, suspect and problematic” (7). This difficult positioning of language that Zitkala-Ša contends with gestures to “the real problem of a canonical search for identity in Native American writing” (Cutter 7).

As I conclude this analysis, I am hopeful that Zitkala-Ša’s boarding school narratives will continue to be culturally relevant, especially as Indigenous nations and settler communities across Turtle Island engage in dialogue about the institution of Indigenous education created by settlers, and the methods of assimilation used within it. At the time that I finish writing this thesis, the current number of unmarked mass graves that have been found is 7310. The search for unmarked graves at the Mohawk Institute, the residential school that is located closest to my home geographically, has commenced. The imminence of this demonstrates that Zitkala-Ša’s work is critical, in both its historical and contemporary relevance. It is my hope that her work will continue to be engaged with, and that emerging interpretations of her work will centre her voice as an early Indigenous woman writer within a contemporary social context. In her position as a writer, Zitkala-Ša is artful and empowered—an icon of feminine power.
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