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Publisher: Routledge

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International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tqse20>

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Available online: 26 Sep 2011

To cite this article: Laura L. Terrance (2011): Resisting colonial education: Zitkala-Sa and Native Feminist archival refusal, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 24:5, 621-626

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2011.600265>

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Resisting colonial education: Zitkala-Sa and Native Feminist archival refusal

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(Received 1 September 2010; final version received 22 June 2011)

This paper examines resistance through a Native Feminist lens, employing the boarding school memoirs of Zitkala-Sa. Within a “story” of appropriation in methodology, it considers protest and parody, and presents archival refusal as modes of resistance to colonial education.

Keywords: Native Feminisms; archive; boarding schools; resistance; Zitkala-Sa

Native Feminist theory, an emerging intellectual movement developed by Native American and Kanaka Maoli scholars, understands contemporary gender and race issues within a context of colonialism. It seeks to center indigeneity and gender as tools of decolonization, recognizing the ways in which colonization instills and continually re-inscribes heteropatriarchy, perpetually naturalizing social hierarchies and heteronormativity within contemporary society. It aims to think beyond what is and has been taken for granted in sovereignty struggles, to reach for a liberatory global politic, to re-think nation and nation-states, to interrogate the why and the way knowledge is produced by who and for whom, and to re-imagine methodology in scholarship (Smith and Kauanui 2008). In light of the foregoing, allow me to share two stories about native boarding schools, one refused and one retold, in order to consider resistance to colonial education.

Somewhat by chance I discovered a boarding school journal in a library. It was an autograph journal that belonged to a young woman who attended a residential boarding school in the early twentieth century. As an autograph journal opposed to a personal log or diary, it contains entries made by several other students. But I am not actually going to tell you anything that is written in the journal. I am not going to tell you the name of the young woman the journal belonged to or even her tribe. I am not going to tell you which boarding school she attended and I am not going to tell you which library I found it in or where it is now.

Instead, I turn to Zitkala-Sa, also known as Gertrude Simmons Bonnin, a member of the Yankton Sioux tribe, who traveled from her home in South Dakota to Wabash, Indiana, in 1888 to attend White’s Manual Institute, later documenting her personal experiences in a publication entitled “The School Days of an Indian Girl” (Zitkala-Sa 2003). Zitkala-Sa generously provided her boarding school experiences, voluntarily publishing them for the express purpose of dissemination and so I will

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Figure 1. Turnips.

employ these to illustrate my subsequent discussion. By contrast, the journal I found was resting silently in its archival repository without memory of having arrived there, its existence likely unknown by those descended from its inscribers, its pages filled with unknowable meaning and history. Naturally, I read it. In doing so, I projected my interpretation-as-meaning into each of the entries, gradually coming to feel like I “knew” these students. I came to like them, to respect them, to feel a connectedness to them. They have so many important things to say and I very much wanted others to learn what I had come to know. Except they can’t be known, because they cannot speak; they can only be spoken for, about, and around, becoming objects of study (Spivak 1988). After spending some time with the students in this journal, I considered how exactly it and they came to reside in the space they were in, but, also and more importantly, the why.

Off-reservation boarding schools have been the focus of much scholarship, particularly relative to the conditions and treatment endured by students. Toward a different end, a re-examination of these institutions as technologies of power in a colonial endeavor foregrounds the unique position that these schools occupy relative to the communities they purportedly serve. Centralizing the idea that the schools function as (colonial) state apparatuses illuminates a particular power structure wherein the objectives most closely represent the desires of the state for disciplined and regulated subjects whose own desires cohere to colonial ideologies. So positioned, the school remains an expression of power and domination, yet not simply as a downward force upon the students; rather, it must stake its claim within

community and negotiate its exertion of domination as a process of interpellation, "... where the behavioral conformity of the subject is commanded" (Butler 1993, 122). However, resistance emerges with interpellation, and with resistance, misrecognitions and reconstructions of self.

Zitkala-Sa notes the impact on her subjectivity made by her move from home to school. Following a stressful breakfast, a fellow student informs her that the new students will be gathered for haircuts. Explaining that shingled hair denotes shame in her tribe, she becomes horrified by the prospect of "shingled hair" (Zitkala-Sa 2003). Outside of her community she cannot dis-identify with cut hair's stigma even though it carries none within the school community she now physically inhabits. In response to a fellow student's warning, "We have to submit, because they are strong," she declares, "No, I will not submit. I will struggle first!" (Zitkala-Sa 2003). Because shingled hair signifies cowardice, her political consciousness, culturally informed, resists the stigmatization and impels her to struggle. When Zitkala-Sa sees her self as the school's desired subject she cannot recognize her self as herself. Instead she experiences a mis-recognition of self, jarring her subjectivity. However, her declaration of resistance acknowledges that her hair *will be* shingled. So the question becomes, why struggle when the end result is still shingled hair?

By their severity these schools tacitly acknowledge culture as a site of articulation between subjectivity and collectivity. Upon a student's arrival, the school seized his/her means of cultural expression: manner of dress, hair, diet, language, religion. When Zitkala-Sa resists, she retains a degree of articulation between self, culture, and community, preserving a measure of her original subjectivity and communal connectedness. This, of course, does not render the assault inconsequential. Once found, she kicks and screams while being carried and tied to a chair, stating, "I cried aloud, shaking my head all the while until I felt the cold blade of the scissors against my neck, and heard them gnaw off one of my thick braids. Then I lost my spirit" (Zitkala-Sa 2003).

Zitkala-Sa chooses to resist, fighting a losing battle despite having peer support and pressure to submit. But this isn't about romanticizing her resistance or her person. In the end, her hair is cut and she loses her spirit. This is about what that means, why resistance matters. The altered subjectivity projected onto her by the school leads her to a state of mis-recognition. She faces an unrecognizable version of her self: "My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored" (Fanon 1967). This view – the view of the self through the eyes of the other – deconstructs the subject through its violence. As Frantz Fanon aptly describes upon encountering his own self-through-the-other: "I burst apart" (Fanon 1967). A reconstruction of self ensues, but the lacuna between subjectivity deconstruction and reconstruction foments the resistive impulse. It is a dimension of selfhood where a command is belated and a response is formulated. It is the instant Zitkala-Sa chooses to run away and the moment her thrashing begins once found. Thereafter reconstruction occurs: "Now the fragments have been put together again by another self" (Fanon 1967). Zitkala-Sa must reconstruct herself in a way that can reconcile who she is/was alongside the view of herself through the eyes of the school. The school's refusal to accommodate the subjectivity of the student, imposing its objectives, leads to a power struggle forcing the student to assert the self: "Since the other hesitated to recognize me, there remained only one solution: to make myself known" (Fanon 1967). Exposing one's self through acts of resistance, forcing the self upon the vision of the other, pushing back against a force of domination changes the power

relationship – perhaps it even changes the vision the other holds. This transformation – of power structures and subjectivities – is not on the scale of a vanguard revolution; it is transformation, movement by degrees. Zitkala-Sa decides to openly defy the school's rules and navigates the consequence in a way that pushes back against the punishment and by extension the original rule and thus the force imposing the rules. She has her haircut and it breaks her spirit, but before that happens she runs away, kicks, screams, scratches and squirms. Resistance is a way for the self to speak for the self when another is trying to speak over it.

Zitkala-Sa recalls many “ridiculous” misunderstandings that led to “unjustifiable frights and punishments into our little lives” (Zitkala-Sa 2003). She develops resentment toward overly restrictive rules, willfully defying one in protest. Consequently, she must prepare turnips for the evening meal. She undertakes her chore, but explains, “I saw that the turnips were in a pulp, and that further beating could not improve them; but the order was ‘Mash these turnips,’ and mash them I would! I renewed my energy . . . Just here a paleface woman came up to my table . . . I stood fearless and angry. She . . . gave one lift and . . . the pulpy contents fell through the crumbled bottom to the floor . . . I felt triumphant in my revenge” (Zitkala-Sa 2003). The attempt to discipline Zitkala-Sa ultimately forces a new confrontation between discipliner and discipline. More particularly, the “paleface woman” must contend with Zitkala-Sa's resistive yet compliant behavior. In effect, rather than subordinating Zitkala-Sa to school regulation, the command affords her an opportunity to articulate a different level and degree of power. Complicating power as a fluid, flexible force understood as neither inherently bad nor oppressive looks: “beyond the romantic dichotomy of dominated-and-then resisting peoples and into an examination of ‘microprocesses’ and cultural mysteries . . . where resistance indeed matters, but as a diagnostic of power rather than a final and absolute expression of power” (Simpson 2003).

So, she loses her hair and spirit, but the reconstruction of her self later perceives stifling rules as defiable, parodies the mashing of turnips, and stands resolute, “fearless and angry” in response to the “paleface woman.” Zitkala-Sa's parody of the command, indeed resistive, asserts her subjectivity and political consciousness amidst an interplay of recognition. Parody as resistance asserts a self-as-subject consciousness in response to a command, producing a shift in the power dynamic. “The refusal of the law in the form of the parodic inhabiting of conformity . . . subtly calls into question the legitimacy of the command . . . [becoming] a rearticulation of the law against the authority of the one who delivers it” (Butler 1993, 122). Although Zitkala-Sa complies and thus acknowledges the dominance of the school, she conceives her original transgression of school rules as valid protest and this political consciousness informs her parodic resistance to the consequent discipline.

So why Zitkala-Sa? Why not instead turn to our journal and rely on its “authenticity” and originality? Her narrative distinguishes itself in a singularly important manner from the journal: she decided which memories and experiences to share, which painful or joyful occasions to disclose, what extent to lay herself bare. In other words, utilizing Zitkala-Sa involves no appropriation. This is not to suggest that what was given is pure or without any level of coercion or is “the truth.” In fact, it is my understanding that a need for income motivated the publication, and, just like the journal, its verity is unknowable. Rather, it is to suggest that escaping complicity with disenfranchisement demands research “about a present that is enriched by both the past and the future” (Tuck 2009). It is also to take seriously Foucault's assertion that: “[knowledge] creates a progressive enslavement to its

instinctive violence. Where religion once demanded the sacrifice of bodies, knowledge now calls for experimentation on ourselves, calls us to the sacrifice of the subject of knowledge” (Foucault 1977). It is to suggest that a time has come to make different choices in the methodologies of knowledge production.

So why not choose both? Why not *also* study a “found” journal containing unexamined, unique and powerful expressions of communal experiences within an educational environment widely perceived as excessively oppressive? After all, in the world of knowledge production empirical data matter and the journal’s substance is not complicated by testimonial reliability, interview format, etc. The entries are “authentic.” However, as I suggested above, history cannot recuperate “truth.” The journal’s very designation as an archival object demonstrates the relationship between the state’s colonial project/objectives and its production of indigenous peoples as “objects of knowledge” (Spivak 1999), specimens for study, primitive and historical, forever vanishing as a result of the pathology that defines their communities. Moreover, it reinforces the conception of social hierarchies as inevitable and natural: some populations are to be investigated, scrutinized and objectified by those who are able to cogitate and analyze. Refusing to reify the narrative of colonization and the naturalization of colonial structures necessitates a re-evaluation of what constitutes “legitimate” research material.

So, what of the *difference* between Zitkala-Sa’s “The School Days of an Indian Girl” and the discovery of a boarding school journal? If we believe Foucault, salvage ethnography reduces and compromises not only the students who appear within it, but us as well. Slaves to knowledge. But I am not enslaved by Zitkala-Sa. The archive is not the storage room of History and Truth. Using her stories is meant to open up a lacuna in the project of knowledge production in order to foment something new; it’s meant to remind us that we decide how to produce knowledge and for what purpose. What are we trying to accomplish? How does using Zitkala-Sa and not an archival object open up a space for something new? Zitkala-Sa’s is the story of an intellectual ancestor, continually classified pre-modern, yet openly announcing in a modern voice the hypocrisy of education. She points to the potential for and vision of a different kind of world and spent much of her life working towards that end. As Native Feminists we are her descendants.

Notes on contributor

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