

## Changing Scholarly Interpretations of Gertrude Bonnin (Zitkala-Ša)

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The Yankton Sioux writer and activist Gertrude Bonnin (1876-1938), better known by her Lakota name, Zitkala-Ša (Red Bird), was perhaps the most prominent Native American woman of the early twentieth century. In her writings, she consistently overturned conventions of language and meaning to subvert and criticize the American discourse of civilization. Bonnin's use of English as a tool of resistance has invited misrepresentations and misunderstandings. Criticism can be distilled into three interpretive frameworks: liminal, assimilationist and bicultural. Liminal scholarship focuses on Bonnin's 1900 semi-autobiography for the *Atlantic Monthly*, which laments the author's separation from her birth culture. Assimilationist criticism springs from extra-literary sources, concentrating on her anti-peyote and pro-US citizenship campaigns. Finally, bicultural criticism argues that Bonnin's knowledge of both the white and the Sioux world allowed her to form a compelling critique of Euro-American society from differing cultural and linguistic discourses. Recently, however, more forceful interpretations on Bonnin have begun to emerge. They identify her as either a promoter of Gerald Vizenor's concept of "survivance" or as a forerunner of the Red Power movement. This article traces and dissects the evolution of Bonnin scholarship, pointing to emerging perspectives from which to interrogate her work and the direction future research and analysis could take.

Keywords: Gertrude Bonnin; Zitkala-Ša; liminal; assimilationist; bicultural; interpretation

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### Interpretaciones académicas de Gertrude Bonnin (Zitkala-Ša): pasado, presente y futuro

La escritora y activista sioux Yankton Gertrude Bonnin (1876-1938), más conocida por su nombre lakota, Zitkala-Ša (Pájaro Rojo), fue quizás la mujer nativa americana

más prominente de principios del siglo XX. En sus escritos, consistentemente volcó las convenciones del lenguaje y el significado para subvertir y criticar el discurso de la civilización estadounidense. El uso del inglés por parte de Bonnin como herramienta de resistencia ha provocado tergiversaciones y malentendidos. La crítica existente puede ser clasificada en tres marcos interpretativos: liminal, asimilacionista y bicultural. La crítica liminal se centra en la semiautobiografía que Bonnin escribió en 1900 para el *Atlantic Monthly*, donde lamenta el distanciamiento que experimentó de su cultura de nacimiento. La perspectiva asimilacionista proviene de fuentes extraliterarias, centrándose en sus campañas contra el peyote y a favor de la ciudadanía estadounidense. Finalmente, la aproximación bicultural argumenta que el conocimiento por parte de Bonnin de los mundos blanco y sioux le permitió formular una crítica convincente de la sociedad euroamericana a partir de discursos culturales y lingüísticos diferentes. Recientemente, sin embargo, han comenzado a surgir interpretaciones más potentes sobre Bonnin, interpretaciones que la identifican como promotora del concepto de “supervivencia” de Gerald Vizenor o como precursora del movimiento *Red Power*. Este artículo rastrea y analiza la evolución de los estudios sobre Bonnin, subrayando las perspectivas emergentes desde las cuales se está interrogando su labor y la dirección que podrían tomar la investigación y el análisis futuros.

Palabras clave: Gertrude Bonnin; Zitkala-Ša; liminal; asimilacionista; bicultural; interpretación

## I. INTRODUCTION

Much has been written on the Yankton Sioux writer and activist Gertrude Simmons Bonnin (better known as Zitkala-Ša) since the rediscovery of her work in the late 1970s. Due to this attention, Bonnin's story—from her recruitment to a Quaker boarding school at the age of eight to her tenure as president of the National Council of American Indians—is well known within the field of Indigenous Studies. She has, to be sure, taken her place in history among the Red Progressives, who, through the Society of American Indians, fought for Native rights in the early twentieth century. Yet it would not be inaccurate to observe that vastly differing conceptions of Bonnin have emerged in scholarly literature, some liminal, some assimilationist, some bicultural and some outright condemnatory. This fact is not surprising for a woman who lived a public life of considerable controversy and drama. What does surprise, however, is the selective manner in which aspects of Bonnin's career have been employed to define her, quite removed from the sum total of her life of writing and activism.

Broadly speaking, there are three main strains of Bonnin criticism that have materialized over the past forty years and at times intertwined. The first declares Bonnin a “cultural ghost” (Meisenheimer 1997, 115) who lived an endlessly liminal or “schizophrenic” existence (Stout 1984, 70)—too influenced by her white education to present a consistent critique of American society in her writings. The second paints her as an assimilationist who “sold out” to white society by using her Indian identity to promote causes detrimental to Native religion and tribal sovereignty, such as her anti-peyote and pro-US citizenship campaigns (Davidson and Norris 2003, xxiv; Newmark 2012, 343).<sup>1</sup> The third, more complex, strain of criticism positively recasts Bonnin's liminality as biculturalism—a trait that allowed her to interrogate and criticize Euro-American society from differing discourses, move between worlds and assert the validity of her Sioux heritage (Heflin 2000, 9). Scholars writing in this vein only sometimes cite contradictory notions within Bonnin's writings (Hafen 1997, 31-33).

While the bicultural paradigm has been used to defend Bonnin from the many attacks upon her writings and legacy, increasingly forceful perspectives from which to view her work have very recently emerged. Some scholars suggest that Bonnin should be seen as a more oppositional figure, one who advocated a position reminiscent of Gerald Vizenor's concept of “survivance”—the active effort by Native peoples to resist white narratives of dominance and instead reconstruct inherited identity (Conley 2016, 174; Newmark 2012, 341-42). I have gone further, arguing Bonnin held a position

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<sup>1</sup> Peyote is a small cactus native to the Rio Grande Valley. Its top contains alkaloids that, when ingested, cause physiological effects such as hallucinations. The Spanish recorded peyote use five hundred years ago among the Chichimeca in present-day Mexico. The Comanche, Kiowa and Wichita Plains Indians developed peyote use into a religious movement in the late nineteenth century. Peyotism became a set of rituals designed to offer a spiritual panacea to the destructive encroachment of Euro-Americans. When Bonnin witnessed peyote use on the Uintah and Ouray Reservation in Utah, her home from 1902 to 1917, she became hostile. Dismissing any religious significance to its ingestion, she deemed the cactus a dangerous drug that harmed the family unit and began a campaign to ban it. See my *Red Bird, Red Power: The Life and Legacy of Zitkala-Ša* (90-92).

defined by core tenets—racial pride, democratic tribal self-determination within the United States and intertribal identity—that constitute a proto-Red Power platform (Lewandowski 2016, 16). These marked, deeply conflicting shifts in how Bonnin has been viewed over the decades beg reflection—not only upon past approaches, but especially upon the future directions Bonnin scholarship might take.

## 2. GERTRUDE BONNIN AND THE *ATLANTIC MONTHLY* SEMI-AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Explanation as to how scholars have produced such differing readings of Bonnin's life requires some biographical detail. Born on the Yankton Sioux Reservation in 1876 to Ellen Taté Iyóhiwin Simmons and a delinquent white father, young Gertrude became caught up in the US government's attempts to subdue Indian populations through assimilation. This effort was the cornerstone of President Grant's "peace policy," inaugurated in 1869. At age eight, Gertrude left her mother's tepee by the Missouri River for the Quaker-run White's Manual Labor Institute, a boarding school in Wabash, Indiana. Thus began a course of education meant to instill the values of "civilization" and Christianity, and sever the tribal and familial bonds that supposedly held Natives back from the benefits of the modern world. This manner of schooling proved traumatic for many, Gertrude included. After three years at White's, Gertrude reunited with her mother but experienced a profound cultural alienation that compelled her, in 1890, to return to the school. There she was trained in music and eventually gained acceptance to Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana. In 1896, Gertrude, a polished speaker, represented Earlham at the Indiana State Oratorical Contest (Davidson and Norris 2003, xv-xvi). Presenting a speech entitled "Side by Side," she strongly criticized America's treatment of Native peoples, then sought reconciliation by suggesting that Natives could adopt white ways and make a unified "claim to a common country" in the spirit of equality (1896, 179). Though she won second place, Gertrude left Earlham soon after due to ill health and a desire to support herself financially. She secured a post at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, overseen by former Army officer Richard Henry Pratt. Pratt's motto, "Kill the Indian and Save the Man," reflected a curriculum marked by harsh discipline and derision for indigenous modes of life. At the school, students were stripped of their Native beliefs, customs, languages and even names (Davidson and Norris 2003, xvii; Spack 2001, 175-76).

Bonnin's time at Carlisle became a turning point. She quickly determined that the erasure of Indian cultures in favor of assimilation was a cruel path to disrupted identity and a serious wrong. In 1899, she left for Boston. Encouraged by friends in publishing to write her life story, Bonnin found notoriety through a three-part semi-autobiography that served as a literary rejoinder to Pratt's institution and assimilationist ideals. Published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in early 1900, "Impressions of an Indian Childhood," "The School Days of an Indian Girl" and "An Indian Teacher among Indians" lamented the cultural upheavals forced upon Indian children at government

boarding schools, taking specific aim at Carlisle. Gertrude signed the series with a new self-given name, Zitkala-Ša (Red Bird, in Lakota), signifying her cultural and spiritual rebirth. A succession of other indigenous-themed stories, such as “Why I am a Pagan” (1902), followed the *Atlantic Monthly* debut, each questioning the foundations of assimilation and Christian missionary work. These critiques were accompanied by her rejection of the East and return to tribal lands in the spring of 1901. In Sioux Country, Simmons cared for her aging mother and married a fellow mixed-race Sioux, Raymond Telephase Bonnin. In 1902, the Bonnins relocated to the Uintah and Ouray Reservation in Utah. While there, Bonnin wrote little, moving instead toward Native rights activism under the auspices of the Society of American Indians (SAI), founded in 1911. She also inaugurated her own projects: *The Sun Dance Opera* (1913), an amalgam of Sioux ritual and western operatic forms, as well as a grass roots community center and a fierce, multi-state anti-peyote campaign meant to outlaw the cactus, aided in part by the assimilationist Indian Rights Association (IRA).

The Bonnins left Utah for Washington, DC, in 1917 to further Gertrude’s activism. In the capital, Bonnin took over the SAI, edited and penned articles for its *American Indian Magazine*, and dueled, alongside Pratt, with pro-peyote ethnologist James Mooney before a congressional subcommittee. After leaving the SAI in 1919, Bonnin commenced an effort to win Natives US citizenship through work with the progressive General Federation of Women’s Clubs, at whose meetings she performed and lectured in buckskin. During this period, she promoted herself as the granddaughter of Sitting Bull to attract media attention and published the pamphlet *Americanize the First American* (1921), which laid out a path to the regeneration of Native peoples. In 1926, Bonnin founded the National Council of American Indians. The council represented indigenous nations in a quest for land rights, legal protections and sovereignty, each year conducting months-long investigations into reservation conditions (Lewandowski 2016, 11-14). Bonnin died in 1938, impoverished by the Great Depression and convinced that the Indian remained a “veritable prisoner of war” in America. Any beneficial results of her years of activism, she wrote a friend in 1935, were “scarcely visible” (Welch 1985, 229). Following her death, she was quickly forgotten.

Before delving into the changing scholarly perceptions of Bonnin, a brief recounting of her 1900 *Atlantic Monthly* trilogy is also relevant and necessary. As the first autobiographical account produced by a Native American woman without the aid of an editor or interpreter, the series has largely dominated interpretations of Bonnin’s work (Hofel 1997, 110). Its installments take the reader through Bonnin’s first twenty-four years, blending fact, fiction and literary devices as a means to criticize Euro-American society for its treatment of indigenous peoples. The first part, “Impressions of an Indian Childhood,” begins on the Dakota plains, where the “wild” Gertrude lives with her mother, a model of wisdom and rectitude. She teaches Gertrude never to intrude upon others, like the “paleface” who has attacked the Sioux for decades (Bonnin 1900a, 87). Gertrude’s father, a warrior rather than delinquent white man, has been killed

fighting American aggressors. Though content living with her mother and learning her traditional ways, Gertrude is tempted from her Edenic home by missionary recruiters for an eastern boarding school, who promise to take her to a land with a “great tree where grew red, red apples” (46). The Biblical motif casts Christians as devils offering knowledge of new lands and “civilization” in exchange for displacement and separation. The apples they speak of also boast another connotation. Their red peel reveals a white interior—the very endgame of Indian assimilation policy. Gertrude succumbs to temptation, begging for permission to make the journey east. Although aware of the missionaries’ deceit, Gertrude’s mother eventually agrees, realizing that her daughter will “need an education when she is grown, for then there will be fewer real Dakotas, and many more palefaces” (47). On the day she is set to leave, Gertrude immediately regrets her decision. Placed in a carriage and separated from her mother, tears run down her cheeks.

Gertrude’s journey to “civilization” continues in “The School Days of an Indian Girl,” which presents a reversal of the white-as-civilized, Indian-as-savage discourse prevalent at the time. Once at boarding school, Gertrude’s mood only worsens as she is robbed of all her mother’s old ways, her language, her religious beliefs and her dignity. Treating the pupils like “little animals,” the missionaries violently cut their hair, causing Gertrude to lose her “spirit” (Bonnin 1900b, 187). In another episode, a friend is beaten for playing in the snow. Life at the boarding school, meanwhile, appears as little more than a purposeless “iron routine” (190) shored up by threats of damnation lest the students rebel. This “civilizing machine,” devoid of humanity and personal attention, generates casualties (190). Gertrude looks on as an ill classmate dies with a Bible in her hands, a victim of the “superstitious ideas” that are the foundation of white schooling and Indian assimilation (190). White “civilization” is therefore not a new life for the Indian but, more likely, death.

And yet, Gertrude finds herself irrevocably changed by missionaries. When she returns to Yankton after three years she cannot reconnect with her mother and lives a painful, liminal existence. “I was neither a wee girl nor a tall one; neither a wild Indian nor a tame one,” she writes, “I seemed to hang in the heart of chaos, beyond the touch or voice of human aid” (191). Gertrude’s “wildness” as a child, we learn, had not been the “savagery” perceived by whites but rather a “freedom” now lost. As a result, Gertrude must return east to find her place and complete her transformation. Though she eventually achieves academic success and renown as an orator at Earlham College, she comes to feel that nothing in white society can compensate for her dislocated identity and physical displacement.

In “An Indian Teacher among Indians” Gertrude completes her journey, ultimately finding agency within herself and rejecting her errant path toward “civilization.” Deciding to direct her energies into “a work for the Indian race,” she travels to Pratt’s Carlisle boarding school in Pennsylvania (Bonnin 1900c, 382). She is briefly reunited with her mother when Pratt sends her on a recruiting trip to Sioux Country, but the

meeting is spoiled by the poverty that prevails on the reservations and the intrusion of white settlers. Gertrude returns to Carlisle determined that her peoples and heritage must be protected from the onslaught of Euro-American society, fully aware of the process of transformation she has endured. “For the white man’s papers I had given up my faith in the Great Spirit,” she ruefully admits, “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” (386). Separated from what is right, Gertrude struggles on in a world where she does not belong, stating, “I made no friends among the race of people I loathed. Like a slender tree, I had been uprooted from my mother, nature, and God. I was shorn of my branches, which had waved in sympathy and love for home and friends” (386). Carlisle’s students, “a small forest of Indian timber,” risk the same fate (386). Appalled by these circumstances, Gertrude leaves Pennsylvania for Boston, where she reflects on her experiences.

In the last lines of her story, Gertrude recalls visitors to Carlisle leaving satisfied that their nation has shown such generosity. “In this fashion,” she writes, “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” (386). In telling her story, Gertrude has linked assimilation with the physical genocide that marked previous relations between whites and Indians, implicitly arguing that “civilization” means little but enslavement to new, inferior norms. Overturning these conventions of language and meaning, the *Atlantic Monthly* series subverted and criticized the prevailing Euro-American discourse. The result is a canonical text in American Indian literature.

### 3. LIMINAL INTERPRETATIONS

Bonnin’s rediscovery came forty years after her death with Dexter Fisher’s article, “Zitkala-Ša: The Evolution of a Writer” (1979), written for the *American Indian Quarterly*. Fisher’s pioneering scholarship was key to resuscitating Bonnin’s legacy, but the legacy resuscitated was unfortunately skewed—based almost exclusively on the liminality expressed in her early works. As such, Fisher developed a narrative in which Bonnin betrays her Yankton heritage to make her way in the white world and becomes psychologically cursed as a result. In this selective reading, passages such as “I was neither a wee girl nor a tall one; neither a wild Indian nor a tame one” and “I seemed to hang in the heart of chaos” (Bonnin 1900b, 191) buttressed Fisher’s conclusion that due to the clashing cultural demands of her reservation childhood and boarding school education, Bonnin’s writing reflected her “truly liminal position, always on the threshold of two worlds but never fully entering either” (1979, 233). This “conflict between tradition and acculturation,” Fisher continued, ever remained a “plague” on Bonnin’s life (231). Incomplete assimilation, then, accounted for her writings and

activism, which derived from a supposedly broken or split sense of self, creating “a model of ambivalences, of oscillations between diametrically opposed worlds” that “struggled toward a vision of wholeness in which the conflicting parts of her existence could be reconciled” (236-37).

Though Fisher’s research was vital to reviving Bonnin’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. Mary Stout, writing in the mid-1980s, quoted Fisher’s “excellent thesis” at length while speaking, in even stronger terms, of Bonnin’s “schizophrenic life” as “someone neither wholly white nor wholly Indian” (1984, 70-71, 74). During the years that followed, scholars in fields outside Indigenous Studies adopted this perspective as well. In the early 1990s, Laura Wexler and Sidonie Smith both published liminal statements on Bonnin’s psychological makeup. Citing the *Atlantic Monthly* series, Wexler claimed that Bonnin’s use of sentiment—derived from her “sentimental indoctrination” and the “dictates of a sentimental education”—demonstrated that her “self-conception had been so effectively ensnared in the codes of sentiment that there was no Indian in them that was left untouched by Western codes” (1992, 32, 34). Bonnin, therefore, was a “sentimental writer” who tried to reject the assimilationist doctrines of boarding school education, but betrayed her fragmented nature in passages that indicated “her own increasing inability to straddle the contradictions between the two societies” (31, 33). Ultimately, Wexler surmised that Bonnin merely created “short fiction that spoke within and to sentimental forms,” rather than any sustained critique of white society’s wrongs against the Indian (33).

Reinforcing Wexler’s analysis, Smith put forth similar contentions. She argued, quite insensitively, that the *Atlantic Monthly* semi-autobiography constituted nothing more than a failed attempt at resisting “passification [*sic*] and assimilation,” insisting that being “truly American” means “adopting the values, behavior, dress, and point of view of the Anglo-American middle-class and shedding the differences of language, outlook, dress, [and] demeanor” (1994, 121). In her estimation, Bonnin, despite her attempted rebellion, fit such criteria because her texts were “marked by the inescapable mark of Americanization” and the “context of her understanding of her past and its meaning in her autobiographical narrative is inflected throughout with the education that has Americanized her” (135). The “language of the paleface,” Smith added, “is precisely the language of her self-constitution” (135). Ironically, then, Bonnin’s “critique of the colonial oppression of the dominant culture is rendered in the canonical discourses of the conqueror” (136). Smith capped her discussion with a remarkable paragraph worth quoting at length:

[Bonnin] unmakes herself as an American of conformity and docility, even as she can never entirely escape being remade as American. She writes herself through Western discourses

to the traditionally based but historically adapted beliefs of the Sioux Indians. She critiques the civilizing mission from inside the effects of that mission. She inveighs against Americanization to other Americans having already become an American. Her resistance narrative, an act through which she would assert her sense of her own individuality against the cultural expectations of docility and industriousness, through which she would assert the viability of alternative spiritual values against a denigrating Christianity hostile to Indian difference, is precisely the durable legacy of her American education and its myth of radical individualism. (36)

Smith's ethnocentric, monocultural interpretation, which appears to hinge on a discourse in which only Euro-American values and education legitimately serve as a means of expression and resistance, cast Bonnín not as conscious agent, but as the very embodiment of unwitting liminality. Referring to this established line of thought, D. K. Meisenheimer, Jr., writing in 1997, noted: "Criticism of [Bonnín's] work typically concedes her status as a cultural ghost, interpreting key passages of her autobiographical essays as her own recognition of, even acquiescence in, a tragic cultural dissolution" (115). This concession, based on such a narrow view of Bonnín's writings and life, unquestionably required correction.

#### 4. ASSIMILATIONIST INTERPRETATIONS

As liminal interpretations developed and took root, another selective reading of Bonnín established itself—this time from a decidedly extraliterary source. Its origin is traced to James Sydney Slotkin's *The Peyote Religion: A Study in Indian White Relations* (1956), where the author took a derisive view of Bonnín that became the starting point for subsequent assimilationist characterizations. Citing Bonnín's involvement in efforts to suppress peyote use through legislation, Slotkin labeled her "a marginal fusionist"—that is, a member of a "subordinate group" who is "violently opposed" to Native customs (27, 121). Through distaste of her own heritage, Slotkin hyperbolically and wrongly asserted, Bonnín sought to abolish all Indian cultures and actively gain official approbation through "White religious organizations" as an "entree into the dominant group" (121).

Thirty-five years later, the same assimilationist assessment appeared in a widely-cited paper by the prominent Cherokee scholar William Willard, "The First Amendment, Anglo-Conformity, and American Indian Religious Freedom" (1991).<sup>2</sup> This survey of the Indian Rights Association's anti-peyote campaign of the 1910s implicated Bonnín in the promulgation of "the doctrine of Anglo-conformity" against indigenous religious freedom. Willard highlighted her furnishing of a petition to the IRA and her 1918 clash with the pro-peyotism ethnologist and "champion of religious freedom,"

<sup>2</sup> Willard, however, cannot be counted as a Bonnín detractor. See his earlier article, "Zitkala-Ša, a Woman Who Would Be Heard!" in the 1985 volume of *Wíčazo Ša Review*, where he praises Bonnín's lifetime of activism.

Mooney, before a House subcommittee hearing arguments for and against a peyote ban (25-26). Bonnin had declared peyote a demoralizing, lethal drug that “excites the baser passions” (28). For later scholars concerned with peyotism, these actions strictly, even exclusively, defined Bonnin’s life. Thomas Constantine Maroukis (2005), Mooney biographer L. G. Moses (1984) and Scott Richard Lyons (1999) have all singled out Bonnin as the primary villain in the peyote controversies of the late 1910s.<sup>3</sup> Similar sentiments also appeared in Robert Allen Warrior’s (Osage) *Tribal Secrets* (1995), which deemed Bonnin and her Red Progressive colleagues principally “Christian” and “secular assimilationist” in character, stating once again that opposition to peyote obstructed Native sovereignty (4, 10).

The effect of such combined criticisms on Bonnin’s reputation were, in some academic circles, devastating and almost dehumanizing. With an apparent nod to Slotkin’s “marginal fusionist” condemnation, in “Splitting the Earth: First Utterances and Pluralist Separatism” (2006), Jace Weaver, with little recourse to supporting facts or justifications, made an offhand but venomous attack on Bonnin as a willing and traitorous tool of transplanted white society, comparing her to both Squanto and Pocahontas. The first, Weaver wrote, though “kidnapped” and “traduced,” had returned “speaking the language of the colonizer” to assist the Pilgrims. The second, he charged, yielded in “sacrificing her body and her health on the altar of mediation” (2). Bonnin, in Weaver’s estimation, was a distillation of both. Along these lines, there has also appeared an undercurrent in certain scholarship on Bonnin that suggests, or even declares openly, that she was mentally unstable. Deborah Sue Welch, author of a path-breaking dissertation on Bonnin, has remarked upon her subject’s “almost paranoid” personality (1985, 119). Welch has also posited that Bonnin’s activism was little more than “a purpose she adopted to assuage the guilt” over engaging the white world, rather than the result of a desire to fight injustices done to Native peoples (2001, 38). Such activism purportedly led to even greater insanity. Fisher states that Bonnin’s “own image of herself eventually evolved into an admixture of myth and fact, so that at the time of her death in 1938, she believed [...] that she was the granddaughter of Sitting Bull” (1979, 236). Moses has also depicted Bonnin as a woman “harried” by many “demons” (1984, 198). Speaking mainly to these male critics, Ruth J. Heflin has suggested that, as a woman, Bonnin’s “assertive personality” may have negatively influenced scholarly perceptions (2000, 107).

Toward the end of the 1990s, liminal and assimilationist readings of Bonnin contributed to Betty Louie Bell’s (Cherokee) wide-ranging critique, “If this is Paganism... Zitkala-Ša and the Devil’s Language” (1998). Bell rendered an excoriating portrait of Bonnin’s work as, essentially, traitorous. Bonnin was portrayed as an actor,

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<sup>3</sup> Due to the nature and complexity of Bonnin’s anti-peyote campaign, a full discussion of its significance is outside the scope of this article. As noted above, her opposition to peyote use, in any case, was based not on any distaste for Native religion, but on her belief that peyote was a harmful presence on the Uintah and Ouray Reservation.

all flash and little substance, who lost touch with her indigenous roots and exhibited nothing but short-sighted naiveté. Perhaps worse, Bell noted that Bonnin was “proud of her achievements and, even long after she had become alert to the cultural and spiritual costs of such a trajectory, she advocated education and the acquisition of English for Native people” (61). In a doomed endeavor, therefore, Bonnin wrongly attempted to gain independence through integration and pure sycophancy. What falsely informs her work is “the hope that a voice of accommodation can enact resistance within an alien and hostile culture and its language” (67). Bell continues:

Many scholars have interpreted, with good reason, her embrace and advocacy of education and citizenship (and testimony against the syncretic peyotist religion) as assimilationist. For [Bonnin], tribal self-determination could be gained only through Indian accommodation with “the good intentions of a benevolent Government.” She failed to see that the act of assimilation, or even the appearance of it, in postcolonial cultures does not rearrange hierarchies of power but stabilizes them. (67)

Bonnin’s “rhetoric of accommodation,” Bell added, “undermines the strength of her political legacy,” thus ensnaring “her argument in a colonial identity” (67). Such gestures, in the end, contradicted her superficial position “against native dependence and disenfranchisement,” annihilating any potentially meaningful criticism in her writing (67). With Bell’s analysis, the question had become: how could this supposedly confused, *almost* assimilated and mentally entrapped individual produce anything ideologically consistent?

## 5. BICULTURAL INTERPRETATIONS

Thankfully, by the end of the 1990s new scholars had begun to challenge the basis of this question, putting forth a bicultural reading of Bonnin that was, initially, tentative. In an article for *Wičazo Ša Review*, “Zitkala-Ša: Sentimentality and Sovereignty” (1997), P. Jane Hafen (Taos Pueblo) gave a different, generally positive account of Bonnin. Through a more inclusive survey of her life, Hafen acknowledged that Bonnin “remained firmly committed to her tribal sovereignty,” while also highlighting the supposed “contradictions within [her] work” by noting that Bonnin “embraces” the “dominant ideologies” of early twentieth-century white America (31). The culprit in such contradictions was, much like in Fisher, “an ‘ideological product’ of both Native and Euramerican identification” (32).

Yet in positively redefining liminality as biculturalism, Hafen made a significant breakthrough that led to an important re-evaluation of the *Atlantic Monthly* series. Soon after, Ruth Spack took this reorganization of perspective further, deeming Bonnin’s biculturalism 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 (1997, 25). Along these lines, Penelope Kelsey has stated that Bonnin's "complex heritage" created not negation, but "a successful critique of colonial policy" (2003, 136) that—as Dorothea Susag similarly argued—"operates to break the Euro-American powers of (de)culturation and acculturation" (1993, 23). This more sensitive, nuanced current of literary analysis continued to evolve throughout the 2000s as more academics contributed feminist-inspired evaluations that took a view of Bonnin's writings as a successful fusion of Yankton Sioux communal values and American individualism. Margot Reynolds, for instance, argued that the *Atlantic Monthly* series constituted an attempt to "rework imperial, Christian-influenced patriarchy" (2007, 189), while Ron Carpenter wrote of how Bonnin employed her "bicultural resources to produce a new type of Indian, one that exceeds the prescriptive roles offered Native American women by either culture" (2004, 2).

Scholars in the bicultural vein also sought to explain Bonnin's supposed acquiescence to Euro-American culture from a different standpoint, interpreting conciliatory gestures to the white audience as a sprinkling of sugar necessary to sway ethnocentric public opinion within the narrow dominant discourse of her times. They concluded that Bonnin's work inescapably featured compromises and tensions that would only be resolved by demanding a white exodus to the Old World—meaning that engaging Euro-American society required an intricate negotiation ripe with real and rhetorical barriers that restricted literary protest. Refuting liminal and sentimental interpretations of the *Atlantic Monthly* series, Martha J. Cutter contended that Bonnin's writing "subverts traditional [American] modes of autobiographical and linguistic self-authentication" (1994, 31). In doing so, Bonnin refuses to "legitimate" white literary conventions by conforming to "generic criteria" such as "a structural movement from disorganization to coherence" or "the expectation that an autobiography will establish a pattern of dominance over circumstances" (33). Rather than constituting a doomed quest to become whole or to reject the dominant culture while unwittingly embodying it, Cutter argued that Bonnin effectively shows that forced acculturation is performed at "the expense of the self" (36). The concept of a sentimental narrative that leads to triumph, so pertinent to late nineteenth-century readers, dissolves into a critique in which the promise of white society is shown to be false. Susan Bernardin seconded this assessment, arguing that Bonnin's "stories selectively use the language of domesticity to scrutinize sentimental ideology's foundational role in compulsory Indian education as well as its related participation in national efforts to 'Americanize' the Indian" (1997, 213). Mary Paniccia Carden, writing around the same time, likewise noted how Bonnin "maneuvers for self-determination within the colonizer's vocabulary" (1997, 60).

Such revisions in interpreting the *Atlantic Monthly* series evolved into a view of Bonnin as a conscious and tactical actor. Vanessa Holford Diana, for instance, has drawn attention to the author's "careful playing of her white audience's expectations and preexisting world view." The effectiveness of this method relied on Bonnin's

“understanding of her position’s inherent restrictions and her exploration of ways to subvert them” (1997, 156). Amelia Katanski, in *Learning to Write “Indian”* (2005), also countered Wexler’s and Smith’s charges of sentimentality and individualism, arguing that “[Bonnin] does not use this framework [of sentimentality] to indicate her acquiescence in the *values* of sentimentalism. Instead, she attempts to use the masters’ tools to dismantle the masters’ house, showing the way that institutions spawned by sentimentalism were injurious to Indians and urging their reform” (158; italics in the original). Bonnin’s perspective consequently differed radically from that of the dominant culture, because her work showed she had not imbibed but rejected the ethnocentrism at the national discourse’s core. This fact made her semi-autobiographical writings an act of cultural integrity and resistance, first and foremost. Katanski noted that these tactics were employed with phenomenal success in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), which also meant not only to condemn, but to spur change by making the audience feel “pain and subsequent anger” (159). The effect of Bonnin’s work is thus to deny “any simple classification” and “encourage us to question our own critical assumptions concerning Indian identity and its representation” (164). Perhaps the most significant act underlining her series, Katanski suggested, was Bonnin’s decision to identify herself with a Lakota name—sending the message that even the most forceful efforts of white society to erase Native cultures are unsuccessful (114-15). In this view, the *Atlantic Monthly* writings ultimately show that boarding school education leads not to assimilation, but to resistance and an awareness of how ethnocentrism clouds the minds of reformers—though not their wards, who recognize the value of the cultures from which they hail.

Still, it should be noted that the bicultural strain does at times betray a degree of tentativeness in its analyses. Spack admits that Bonnin was always conscientious in “satisfying a mass audience” (2002, 149), while Hafen has echoed liminal interpretations by writing that Bonnin “seemed caught between validating her indigenous beliefs and seeking public approval” (2001, xx). Hafen, however, goes on to say that this position was “part of the complex mediation that Native peoples frequently reconcile in order to survive in the modern era” (xx). Nonetheless, thanks to bicultural readings of the *Atlantic Monthly* series, by the end of the 2010s Bonnin’s self-awareness and intellect were restored within scholarly literature, and her mission to proclaim the value of Native identity outside colonial conceptions and annihilating discursive contradictions recognized. Rather than being seen as assimilationist preacher or, conversely, casualty, Bonnin had finally, at long last, rightfully regained her agency.

## 6. RECENT INTERPRETATIONS

Bonnin’s agency has come more fully to the fore in recent interpretations of her writing and activism. So, too, has a wider scholarly view of her work, which is shifting to an emphasis on Bonnin’s actions as a campaigner for Native peoples. In 2012 Julianne

Newmark, in an article for *American Indian Quarterly*, argued vigorously for an expanded perspective on Bonnin, far removed from reductionist readings of the *Atlantic Monthly* series. Looking at the bulk of Bonnin's committed activism with the National Council of American Indians and her later writings on Indian issues, Newmark countered the liminal and assimilationist interpretations put forth by Warrior and Weaver in favor of a pluralistic reading. In making her argument, Newmark depicted Bonnin as a strong advocate of "Native persistence and *survivance*—in regard to land, language, community, and culture" (2012, 341; italics in the original). Such advocacy spoke out against the White Nativism of the 1910s and 1920s, offering a vision of "mutual empowerment of all Americans" (343). Newmark was adamant that previous scholarly criticisms that did not consider Bonnin's "cooperative work" and "life experiences" failed to recognize her ultimate goal, which was "securing permanent home places for and equitable treatment of all Native people in regard to health care, education, and financial matters" (343). This focus on the survivance aspect of Bonnin's work was later reflected in Paige A. Conley's "Strategically Negotiating Essence: Zitkala-Ša's Ethos as Activist" (2016), which employed the concept in an analysis of Bonnin's speeches from 1920 to 1925. Conley argued too that Bonnin "sought to both survive within the dominant American society, and simultaneously maintain, if not advance, sovereign forms of identity, community, and culture" (173-74).

In 2016, I published the first scholarly biography of Bonnin, *Red Bird, Red Power: The Life and Legacy of Zitkala-Ša*, with the University of Oklahoma Press. The book offered a more forceful interpretation of Bonnin, designating her a precursor of the Red Power movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. Through an inclusive assessment of her lifetime of activism coupled with philological analysis of her entire body of writing, I argued that—despite her anti-peyote campaign and advocacy of US citizenship—Bonnin was a fierce defender of Native peoples. In her early and later works, her emphases on self-determination, cultural preservation and the moral and spiritual superiority of Indian peoples, encompassed by her belief in an intertribal bond whereby all Indians shared the same fate, combined to formulate what I called "a proto-Red Power platform" (16). Though I did not specifically link Bonnin to the Red Power movement that followed her, I pointed to the similarities between her writings and positions and those of Vine Deloria, Jr., the major Red Power intellectual of the 1970s. Key to this comparison was the racial and cultural pride evinced by both activists, their plans for the regeneration of Indian nations and their harsh criticisms of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and US government. Ultimately, I placed Bonnin within the long-term efforts of the Lakota to resist white encroachment, labeling her "one of a new generation of Sioux resistance fighters who sought protections using the tools that her historical period offered" (16). Her legacy, then, is as a forerunner of Red Power.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Reviews of *Red Bird, Red Power: The Life and Legacy of Zitkala-Ša* have been generally accepting of its central thesis regarding Bonnin's legacy as a forerunner of the Red Power movement. See, for instance, Blanchard (2017), Estes (2017) and Newmark (2018).

## 7. CONCLUSION

The latest interpretations of Bonnin as a proponent of survivance and forerunner of the Red Power movement demonstrate the radical change in how scholars have perceived her work and writings since the late 1970s. Once viewed as either a creature doomed to ineffectual protestations born of tragic liminality or unwitting assimilation, Bonnin—after rehabilitation through bicultural scholarly readings—is now beginning to garner an even fuller appreciation for her oppositional stances. Bonnin's *Atlantic Monthly* writings, which arguably began her life as an activist, meanwhile remain a focus of scholarly attention. In the recent *Sovereign Stories and Blood Memories: Native American Women's Autobiography* (2017), Annette Angela Portillo revisits the semi-autobiographical series, noting approvingly that despite issues of liminality and acculturation, Bonnin “subversively uses the English language to illustrate the hypocrisy of her audience” and “dispel the myths and negative connotations about Native American identity and culture” (115, 188). This would now seem the standard interpretation, but perhaps not for long. In the forthcoming second volume of *Changed Forever: American Indian Boarding School Literature*, Arnold Krupat puts forth a more critical reading of the *Atlantic Monthly* series, based not on liminality, but on the “highly selective” way that Bonnin tells her story (2). He seeks to demonstrate that bicultural assessments of the *Atlantic Monthly* writings, grounded mostly in their narrative of resistance to assimilation, have in fact appeared from “reading them back through the lens of [Bonnin's] later life and work” as an activist (3). To make his argument, Krupat points to the contradictions within the series, its cultural and historical misrepresentations and Bonnin's use of Indian stereotypes “to appeal for the reader's sympathy” (15). Unlike those scholars who have promoted a view of the semi-autobiography as a stinging indictment of Pratt's program of forced acculturation, Krupat argues that Bonnin gives a much-sanitized version of boarding school life and Carlisle's “ethnocidal ideology,” which leaves out many of the forms of ethnocide practiced at the school, such as name-changing (35).<sup>5</sup> How Krupat's criticisms affect readings of Bonnin will become evident in time. Yet 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.

Krupat's point is well made, for it seems that interpretations of the *Atlantic Monthly* series, once so dismissively censorious, have in the last decade veered toward the other direction—that of uncritical praise. Undeniably, tendencies to “read into” Bonnin's semi-autobiographical writings have produced scholarly statements that might, in retrospect, reveal layers of meaning not necessarily justified by the works' content. Krupat's circumspect approach, if taken by other scholars, could do much to clear away

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<sup>5</sup> I thank Professor Krupat for sharing an early draft of his subchapter with me in an email dated October 7, 2017. I also thank him for his permission to use the quotes herein. The page numbers appear as they do in the document he kindly provided.

any hyperbole and embellishments that mark the more enthusiastic bicultural analyses of Bonnin's early semi-autobiography.

My own wish is that future research would also shift its focus from Bonnin's earlier to her later writings dating from the mid-1910s onwards. Fortunately, there are still relatively fresh texts to interrogate. Lengthy and mature works that have rarely garnered the scholarly consideration they warrant include "The Sioux Claims" and "Our Sioux People," both dating from 1923, and the National Council of American Indians Petition to the Senate (1926)—undoubtedly Bonnin's most complete statement of her views on Native-US relations.<sup>6</sup> Bonnin's writings for the Society of American Indians' journal, the *American Indian Magazine*, have also regrettably not received due consideration in the body of scholarly literature, despite their relevance to her US citizenship campaign. Analyzing her Congressional testimony on peyote and letters from the Uintah Reservation in Utah, meanwhile, do more to explain Bonnin's opposition to the cactus's use than generalized assertions that she was against Native sovereignty. Critically pursuing these avenues of research would do much to generate debate and achieve a greater and more nuanced understanding of Bonnin's political stances.

In conclusion, one hopes that assessing Bonnin's life and legacy more broadly and inclusively is still in its infancy and that differing evaluations of her work will continue to appear, each adding insight into issues of liminality, assimilationism, biculturalism, pluralism, survivance and the Red Power movement. And if the past is any indication, we can be confident that scholars will never reach a final consensus. For a person as complex as Gertrude Bonnin, this is to be welcomed.

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<sup>6</sup> I have recently edited *Zitkala-Ša: Letters, Speeches, and Unpublished Writings (1898-1929)* for Brill. The volume, published in 2018, features a selection of Bonnin's letters, later speeches and writings, including the previously unpublished "The Sioux Claims," "Our Sioux People" and the National Council of American Indians Petition to the Senate.

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