

NICK ESTES

Red Bird, Red Power: The Life and Legacy of Zitkala-Ša
by Tadeusz Lewandowski
University of Oklahoma Press, 2016

NÉE GERTRUDE SIMMONS in 1876 and assuming the Dakota nom de plume Zitkala-Ša (or Red Bird) in the early 1900s, Zitkala-Ša is the most profound and underrated American Indian intellectual of her generation. Scholars have often misunderstood this Yankton Sioux poet, musician, educator, critic, and activist as an assimilationist. Tadeusz Lewandowski's *Red Bird, Red Power: The Life and Legacy of Zitkala-Ša* wades into the debate arguing against "assimilation" and "liminal" categorizations. Zitkala-Ša was neither an assimilationist like many of her "Red Progressive" colleagues nor was she a tragic victim of the "two worlds" paradigm, the failing to negotiate white and Indigenous realities. As the title of the book suggests, Zitkala-Ša should instead be understood as "a forerunner to Red Power" because she advocated "Indian cultural renewal and political independence" at a time when the American Indian population was at its lowest and thought to be vanishing into the wilderness of history (16).

Although the product of a Quaker education herself, Zitkala-Ša first gained notoriety with a series of autobiographical stories published in the *Atlantic Monthly* that denounced the violent church- and government-run Indian boarding school system. She was not opposed to Indian education, and she even took a teaching position at the infamous Carlisle Indian School. The problem was the way education was used to annihilate American Indian cultures, a criticism that drew ire from her mentor and employer Richard Pratt. While critical of boarding school education, her stories also affirmed the superiority American Indian culture, specifically of the Sioux. This message, however, was lost on white society, who "ignored or criticized" Zitkala-Ša and cast her as a "civilized savage" (44). This view plagued her for the rest of her career.

The battleground was not confined to literary circles. Zitkala-Ša spent years on the Uintah reservation in Utah, where she organized community self-help groups. The work led her to join the ranks of the "Red Progressives," a generation of American Indian intellectuals and professionals that founded the Society of American Indians (SAI) in 1911. SAI held diverse views on assimilation and peyote use but generally advocated for American Indian citizenship, education, and the abolition of the Indian Bureau. Zitkala-Ša, who had by then converted to Catholicism, adamantly opposed assimilation and

peyote use and advocated for full citizenship. Her peyote position oscillated between Christian temperance and a perception that the peyote priests (all older men) preyed on young women, children, and the vulnerable, which occurred but not with great frequency. The citizenship question was pragmatic. How could American Indians protect tribal lands and hold the government accountable if they possessed no rights under law? Citizenship became a further sticking point during World War I, as American Indians enlisted in large numbers.

Zitkala-Ša's views on peyote and citizenship mar her legacy. But she was more forward-thinking. For example, Zitkala-Ša pushed SAI to seek international representation at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference to advance American Indian citizenship and self-determination. She tried to reshape the SAI top-down style of organizing to one where each tribe could form its own SAI chapter. Under this structure, she believed SAI would eventually replace the Indian Bureau. Neither measure came to pass. Frustrated that SAI failed as a Progressive Era vehicle of reform, Zitkala-Ša returned to community organizing and formed the National Council of American Indians in 1926. She worked tirelessly on many fronts to advance American Indian rights, from the Osage oil boom, to the Sioux Black Hills land claim, to legal rights for California Indians. The grueling pace caused both financial and physical exhaustion, leading to her death in 1938.

To her contemporaries Zitkala-Ša was an exotic figure, a "civilized savage." In reality, she was a firebrand Indigenous nationalist and a fierce advocate. Commenting on her own legacy she said, "They all want to know about me, but I would rather they would ask about the Indians" (173). Lewandowski argues that we need to know more about Zitkala-Ša *and* the Indians. Indeed, Zitkala-Ša was a forerunner to Red Power. But she was also a product of her time. More important, she is a profound testament to the existence of a historical Indigenous radical tradition. Denying over-coded binaries of assimilation, her legacy begs us to understand early twentieth-century intellectuals like her as part of a longer tradition of Indigenous resistance.

NICK ESTES (KUL WICASA) is a doctoral candidate in American studies at the University of New Mexico.