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Essay Title: The Reclamation of Identity, Zitkala-Sa

It was March of 1884 when a young Native American girl boarded the train to Quaker boarding school. The Dakota plains would not delight the child's eyes for several years to come; it was passing away beyond the windows of the white man's strange metal contraption that housed staring faces and rudely pointing fingers. The girl, Gertrude Simmons, had left the warmth of her mother's arms for an education in the marvelous and magical Eastern land described by the missionaries (Zitkala-Sa). But it was not marvelous nor magical. The school's objective was to strip the indigenous children of their inherited "savagery," molding a "sophisticated" member of white society. Many died due to these institutions that had stifled their voices and identities in a way none should ever have to endure: corporal punishments, silencing native tongues, military discipline, and lack of care. After four years, Gertrude returned to her mother only to find the Sioux Yankton reservation on which she grew up altered drastically by the poverty that continues to afflict most reservations today. These traumatic experiences led to Gertrude struggling internally with her identity (Zitkala-Sa).

Upon arriving as a teacher at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, Gertrude appeared the perfect semblance of what she had been taught to become, but this submissive air would not be prolonged. The storm of her ordeals finally caused the rain cloud to burst: Gertrude authored several semi-autobiographical stories appearing in the *Atlantic Monthly* that expressed the discrimination executed upon her people. She signed them using the name Zitkala-Sa, a Native American title, thus reclaiming her ethnic identity.

Alas, due to her heritage and gender, most paid little heed to Zitkala-Sa's discussion. Though her skill of writing was recognized, the true meaning beneath her eloquence went

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unnoticed. Richard Henry Pratt, the founder of Indian boarding schools, heavily critiqued her work, but his literary attempts of halting the honest scrawl of her pen only encouraged her to further share her views. Carlos Montezuma, ironically working for Pratt, was the man who shared a meaningful relationship with Zitkala-Sa and was always someone on whom she relied to vent her frustration or to simply share a friendly conversation.

Throughout her life, Zitkala-Sa authored many stories and poems, even composing an opera with William Hanson, as she was a talented musician. She fluently discussed in her speeches the tribulations Native Americans and women face, she fought in many legal battles, and she engaged in the National Council of American Indians, or NCAI, campaigning for suffrage. Zitkala-Sa's dedication to improving society only faltered with her passing at age 63 in Washington, DC, where she and her husband Raymond Bonnin had lived. And yet Zitkala-Sa did not die with accomplishment strong in her heart; at the time she couldn't truly see the blessings she had given to planet Earth. Her perspective and love for her beliefs flourished into the legacy she left behind.

Her legacy entails stepping forward to dismiss prejudice, for this injustice shatters humanity and affects every one of us in our empathy, respect, and understanding of the individuals with whom we share our Earth (Lewandowski). The artistry, wisdom, perspectives, and spirits we lose due to biases are the prices paid. I ask myself whether Leonardo da Vinci would still have been the greatest artist of his time had privilege been granted to women and people of color. I ask myself what great minds we lost when police brutality took innocent lives. It is only when individuals stand against prejudice that society benefits from an advantageous diversity of thought, culture, and body. Throughout countries, throughout time, these moral principles must persist.

This sense of morality was exemplified four years after Zitkala-Sa's death and roughly 2,600 miles from her confrontations in Washington, DC when a 25-year-old lawyer named Minoru Yasui strolled the streets of Portland, Oregon. Yasui was arrested on March 28, 1942 and confined for 9 months in solitude. His incarceration continued at Minidoka, a relocation camp housing thousands of Japanese Americans, until the end of WW2. "What was the cause for such detainment?" you may ask. The answer is not an act of thievery or murder. It was because he rebelled against the 8 PM curfew, a curfew singling out Japanese Americans due to the belief in racial attributes being a military danger. Like Zitkala-Sa, Yasui had grown weary of unjust consequences induced by prejudice rather than logic.

Logically, the next step in Minoru's life after his confinement was to fight prejudice. Many of the ways Zitkala-Sa fought racism were also found in Yasui's strategies: public speeches, fighting in legal battles to eradicate biased laws, and participating in organizations promoting civil rights through non-violent protests. Minoru Yasui lived through his motto: "We are born into this world for a purpose: to make it a better place for our having been there" (Zhou).

Following in these activists' footsteps, I would encourage others to join me in writing letters to the government for funding of an improvement in the conditions of Indian reservations. I will use my voice for those who have been unfairly silenced. I will spread my love and support for those in need of feeling it. There will be other steps to take in the future, hundreds more ethnicities in need of equilibrium with white culture. Our lives are short, and we cannot expect to see a utopia within our timeline, but our actions, individual or collaborative, are what form the equity we dream of. I'm honored to play my part in the paving of this wondrous world for the generations to come.

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