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A Culture Erased

No one expects a child to act perfectly. Childhood is the stage in life where we are most moldable. The first introduction to the world will shape how individuals will see themselves and present themselves throughout life. In Zitkala-Ša's short story "The School Days of an Indian Girl," American Indian children are not granted the freedoms often associated with childhood. Their white teachers expect them to seamlessly transition into a new culture and forfeit their own. Zitkala-Ša's story begins with the scene of eight American Indian children who board a train to travel west and visit the "land of red apples," where they are to start schooling and learn the ways of the palefaces. Before boarding the train, the children are excited. They have pictured how the "Red Apple Country" will look. The children's excitement is instantly replaced with anxiety upon boarding the train. Paleface passengers watch and ridicule the narrator for her appearance: "directly in front of me, children who were no larger than I hung themselves upon the backs of their seats, with their bold white faces towards me… and [they] pointed at my moccasined feet. Their mothers, instead of provoking such rude curiosity, attracted their children's further notice to my blanket. This embarrassed me and kept me constantly on the verge of tears" (48). In the encounter on the train, one would expect a mother to scold a child for staring. The adults on the train act as if the Indian children are oddities. The journey to the school initiates what is called assimilation to white culture. Throughout the girl's experience at the

white school, and later in college, people watch and judge her for her cultural identity. Just as the encounter on the train caused grief and troubled the children, the educational system continues to outcast the Indian children and their culture throughout their time at the school. The Indian children who board the train to "the land of red apples" experience discrimination and ridicule for the first time. The train ride episode illustrates the Indian assimilation process, which focuses more on eradicating Indian culture than on teaching the children.

The white passengers who watch the children on the train initiate the assimilation process. In the new school, the children's white teachers watch them closely. On the children's first day of school, white teachers expect them to understand the value of the bible and Christian grace, despite never learning of it before: "all the others hung their heads over their plates. As I glanced at the long chain of tables, I caught the eyes of a pale face woman upon me. Immediately I dropped my eyes, wondering why I was so keenly watched by this strange woman" (53). The scrutiny of the white teachers pressures the children to conform, even if they do not understand the meaning of the new customs.

The pressure for the children to conform is reinforced with fear as the white teachers scold, spank, and scare the children with threats of the white man's devil. The devil haunts the narrator in her dreams: "Then rushed in the devil! He was tall! He looked exactly like the picture I had seen of him in the white man's pictures. He did not speak to my mother, because he did not know the Indian language, but his glittering yellow eyes were fastened upon me" (63). The woman who teaches the girl of the devil threatens her to behave in school. She tells the narrator that the evil being tortures those who disobey school regulations. The same watching eyes that caused such grief and embarrassment on that first train ride continue to watch and ridicule,

regardless of their efforts to conform. Their teachers even tell the children that the devil watches them. The stares are a constant reminder to conform or face the consequences.

The whites' school system erodes the children's sense of individuality and the connection to their Indian identities. The new school subjects the Native children to foreign customs. The disapproving white onlookers force the children to surrender their identity markers. The white teachers replace the Indian children's moccasins with wooden shoes, pull the blankets off of their shoulders, and cut their sacred braids. Could we predict from the first encounter on the train, that the disapproving eyes – cast upon moccasins, blankets, and braids – would be the same eyes that would scrutinize and erase a culture? Who are we without our identities? The narrator is conflicted by the white customs and routine that she must adopt. She finds it "impossible to leave the iron routine after the civilizing machine had once begun it's day's buzzing; and it was inbred in me to suffer rather than to appeal to the ears of one whose open eyes could not see my pain, I have many times trudged in the day's harshness heavy-footed, like a dumb sick brute" (66). The routine of the school exhausts the children as they try and fail to conform to the whites' standard of perfection.

As a way to reclaim her Indian culture, the narrator, when she is older, brings herbal medicines to the school, wears her moccasins in rebellion at home, and refuses to accept the religion that scarred her as a child. "Though I was sullen in all my little troubles, as soon as I felt better I was ready again to smile upon the cruel woman. Within a week I was actively testing the chains which tightly bound my individuality like a mummy for burial" (67). She is victorious after her rebellion against the system that betrays her, yet confused as to where she now belongs. Even her mother cannot comfort her at home, and offers her the white man's bible in an attempt to help the narrator feel like herself. Many of the Indian children in the white educational system

feel outcast among the whites and the Indians alike: “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” (69). The girl feels estranged from her Indian culture, yet she does not belong to white culture either. Now older, the Indians are burdened with finding themselves within the layers of customs and ideals that were not their own to begin with. Their childhood is stolen from them the second they board the train heading west.

The white passengers’ scrutinizing eyes are the same eyes that watch her win awards in college. Disapproval from her peers attempts to prompt fear and uncertainty in order to pressure her into conformity, just as she had been pressured throughout her childhood. “There, before that vast ocean of eyes, some college rowdies threw out a large white flag, with a drawing of a most forlorn Indian girl on it. Under this they had printed in bold black letters words that ridiculed the college which was represented by a ‘Squaw’” (77). The discrimination and ridicule that she faced on the train ride follow her throughout her childhood and into adult life. In an attempt to outcast the Indian narrator, the white students present a flag with the derogatory term “squaw,” which angers her. The students holding the flag do not want her to succeed. They ridicule her because of her ethnicity, like the other disapproving white people during her youth. The Indian girl narrator “had arrived in the wonderful land of rosy skies” but after all the first encounter with the white people “ [she] was not happy, as she had thought she should be” (51).

Even when she proves those who doubt her wrong by winning the oratorical contest, she does not feel content. Her life is not her own as she grows up. She would never belong to just one culture the way she had as a young child, before the educational assimilation. After winning an award during the oratorical contest in college “the little taste of victory did not satisfy a hunger in [her] heart. In her mind she saw her mother far away on the western plains, holding a

charge against her" (80). Even in her accomplishments she is not satisfied. Throughout her life she is unable to truly please herself, her mother, or the pale faces. Her relationship with her mother and culture is shaped by the white education system that she was subjected to at such a young age. Forever affected by the train ride that brought her to the "land of red apples," the narrator is torn between two cultures.

Citations

Zitkala-Ŝa. “The School Days of an Indian Girl.” *American Indian Stories*. Forward by Dexter Fisher. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1979: 47-80.