

Stephanie Settle 3MT Transcript | University of Guelph Campus Final 2020

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Title: Cross-Cultural Collaboration and Stories of Survivance: The Work and Legacy of Zitkala-Ša

Transcript: The picture on the right of the slide is early twentieth century Dakota writer, activist, and musician Zitkala-Ša, also known as Gertrude Bonnin. You might not have heard of her, but she accomplished an incredible amount in her life, despite facing a lot of prejudice against Indigenous women at the time. In my research, I'm analyzing many different aspects of her work across multiple genres and how it remains important and relevant today, but for now I'll focus on just one part of her varied career: her work on *The Sun Dance Opera*.

Throughout the early to mid-twentieth-century, it was a popular trend for American operas to include Indigenous characters—these operas were mostly created by non-Indigenous artists, and often enforced negative stereotypes. Zitkala-Ša was one of very few Indigenous artists who was able to assert creative agency over the portrayal of Indigenous people in one of these productions, through a cross-cultural collaboration with non-Indigenous composer William F. Hanson.

Despite the harmful colonial attitudes that Hanson still held, Zitkala-Ša found ways to use their collaboration to gain some measure of creative control over how the people of the Ute Nation, on whose culture the opera was based, were depicted on stage. She was even able to give some Ute performers the opportunity to participate in a ceremony that was outlawed by the American federal government at the time. Her work is part of what made it possible for Indigenous artists to continue expressing themselves through opera today.

To provide one example, in 2017, the Canadian Opera Company revived another opera that originated in the same negative trend that Zitkala-Ša was trying to counteract: *Louis Riel*, written by two white men in 1967. The Canadian Opera Company transformed this originally problematic production into something much more complex and thought-provoking through the involvement of many Indigenous artists—including Métis performer Jani Lauzon, whom I've been fortunate enough to be able to interview for my research. I asked her what she thought the reclamation of the *Louis Riel* opera accomplished, and she said she felt it was successful in "[creating] a dialogue that continues to this day, and [opening] awareness to inclusivity" in opera. As a non-Indigenous scholar, I hope to find ways to participate in this kind of dialogue with Indigenous artists, in order to work towards a more inclusive future in both arts and academia.

Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor uses the term "survivance" to describe the persistent continuance of Indigenous people's stories in the face of colonial oppression — something that's more active than just simple survival. I often think about this term when I see examples like this of the impact that Zitkala-Ša's work has had, and continues to have, on other Indigenous women artists. She may have lived a century ago, but because of the work of people like Jani Lauzon, an active sense of her presence in the world remains alive.

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