Zitkala-Sa
a.k.a. Gertrude Bonnin
“She illustrates that the question of cultural and spiritual identity goes deeper than notions of civil rights” -- Roseanne Hoefel at Bucknell University

“[Zitkala-Sa] has broadened the genre of autobiography with her autobiographical narratives, retelling of traditional Dakota stories, and the Indian opera, the latter two of which demonstrate collective autobiographies of Indigenous Peoples......[She] transforms herself in and through the autobiographical narratives and other activities, and overcomes the civilization discourse, while transcending the representation of the Indigenous Women.......She managed to accommodate herself to the new culture, while retaining her indigenous old culture.......The transformation and cultural work she did at the juncture of two cultures give us an insight to examine the dominant discourses of today and our own struggles against them.” Yo Tabayashi at Ritsumeikan University
Early Years

- Born in 1876 on Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota
- Zitkala-Sa means “Red Bird”
- Youngest of three children of Ellen Tate ‘Iyohiwin Simmons
- Age 12 went to Wabash, Indiana to Quaker missionary school for Indians.
  - Attended boarding school with assimilationist style teachings for three years
  - Caused her to feel ambivalence towards her own culture
  - In her own words, the school left her “neither a wild Indian, nor a tame one”
Education

- Earlham College to become a teacher
- Won awards for writing and oration
- New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, Massachusetts on a scholarship
- Traveled to Paris for the Paris Exposition as a violin soloist
- Taught at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania to assist in assimilating and “civilizing” Native Americans
- Had a short career there before she decided to begin her writing career
Zitkala-Sa significantly contributed to the composing of the music and lyrics for the opera *Sun Dance* (1913) while working with composer William Hansen.
Writings

- Published autobiographical essays in *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper’s Monthly*
- *American Indian Stories* contained short stories and essays about growing up in a Sioux tribal culture while also being educated in American culture
- First major works written by a Native American in English
- Many of her pieces reflected her work as an Indian rights activist
Zitkala-Sa was never one to conform. She wrote her famous essay, “Why I Am a Pagan” during a period that many Native Americans wrote about their conversions to Christianity.
Political Activism

- While living in Utah with her husband, the two became affiliated with the Society of American Indians.
- She wanted better education, healthcare, cultural preservation, and conservation resources for her people.
- In 1930, she formed the National Council of American Indians where she served as president.
- This council consisted of members of different tribes from all over the country, rallying together for Indian rights.
Death

- Zitkala-Sa died in 1938 at the age of 61
- She was buried in the Arlington Cemetery because her husband had fought in World War I
- She was known as one of the first (if not the first) Native American to write her own autobiographical story without the aid of an editor, ethnographer, or interpreter
Works Cited