

**THE ECHO OF MEMORY: NECROPOLITICS AND RESISTANCE IN THE WORK
AMERICAN INDIAN STORIES BY ZITKÁLA-ŠÁ**

O ECOAR DA MEMÓRIA: NECROPOLÍTICA E RESISTÊNCIA NA *OBRA AMERICAN
INDIAN STORIES* DE ZITKÁLA-ŠÁ

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ABSTRACT

This work aims at the literary analysis of the work “American Indian Stories” (1921) by the Native American writer and indigenous activist Zitkála-Ša, in order to examine which elements the author focuses on when portraying her individual and collective memories and how these stand out within the narrative. Furthermore, it highlights how the author's process of resistance opposes the impositions of the state that holds power and its manifestations of necropolitics. To compose this work, we drew on the critical fortunes of authors such as Tânia Sarmento-Pantoja (2023), Alfredo Bosi (1996) to address the concept of Resistance; Achille Mbembe (2011) on questions about Necropolitics and Olga Von Simnson (2000) on Memory and Culture.

Keywords: Memory. Necropolitics. Resistance. Zitkála-šá.

RESUMO

Este trabalho visa a análise literária da obra “*American Indian Stories*” (1921) da escritora nativo americana e ativista indígena Zitkála-Ša, a fim de examinar a quais elementos a autora se detém ao retratar suas memórias individuais e coletivas e como essas se destacam dentro da narrativa. Além disso, pontuar como o processo de resistência da autora vem se contrapor às imposições do estado detentor de poder e suas manifestações de necropolítica. Para a composição deste trabalho, recorreremos a fortuna crítica de autores como Tânia Sarmento-Pantoja (2023), Alfredo Bosi (1996) para tratar do conceito de Resistência; Achille Mbembe (2011) nas questões sobre Necropolítica e Olga Von Simnson (2000) sobre Memória e Cultura.

Palavras-chave: Memória. Necropolítica. Resistência. Zitkála-šá.

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1. Introduction

We are receptors of everything that surrounds us, we live this constant construction as a person and the totality of this makes up our memories. According to RIOS (2013) "o indivíduo isolado não forma lembranças, ou pelo menos não é capaz de sustentá-las por muito tempo, pois necessita do apoio dos testemunhos de outros para alimentá-las e formatá-las."³ It is therefore clear that we need to establish memorial links that reinforce our existence.

In considering this memorialistic link, we turn to the work *American Indian Stories* (1921) by the indigenous writer and activist, Zitkála-Ša, a native of the South Dakota tribe in the United States, who details her life, culture and experiences during her journey through American school as an indigenous woman. It is a story of memories and writing about resistance as a way of perpetuating their existence. In this respect, literature has the capacity to play an important role in allowing silenced voices from social groups who live on the margins of society to have freedom of expression, given that this silencing is caused by an oppressive state that holds power.

This article aims to reflect on the concepts of individual and collective memories in the light of Olga Von Simson's study (2000) and to externalize how these are expressed within the work. It also aims to point out the effects of the state and its relationship within the narrative with the concept of Necropolitics proposed by Achille Mbembe (2003). To conclude, to present and reflect on the concept of resistance literature from the perspectives of Alfredo Bosi (1994) and Tânia Sarmiento-Pantoja (2022) and how this act of resisting is represented in the narrative of Zitkála-Ša.

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2. Memory

Memory is part of who we are, remembering is knowing how to extract information from the past that can be passed on to the future, especially to future generations. That said, *American Indian Stories* (1921) is the narrative from the perspective of the memory and

³ "o indivíduo isolado não forma lembranças, ou pelo menos não é capaz de sustentá-las por muito tempo, pois necessita do apoio dos testemunhos de outros para alimentá-las e formatá-las." RIOS, 2013, Pág. 1-22 - DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12957/intratextos.2013.7102> (free translation)

recollections of Gertrude Simmons Bonnis (Zitkála-Ša). Born in 1876, in the South Dakota tribe, on the Yankton reservation, with origins in the indigenous lands of the United States, the author describes day after day in her tribe and the nuances of its cultural archive through her memories. Considering that it is a memorial narrative, the question arises: what is memory and its capacity to retain information? According to Carla Dalmaz and Carlos Alexandre Netto, researchers at the Federal University of Rio Grande Do Sul (UFRGS):

What you know about the world, others and yourself: all this information has been acquired through experience and is stored in your memories. We are beings with a history, we build our identity through a process that mixes our lived experiences (...) and our previous experiences (...) we are who we are because we learn or remember. (Dalmaz & Netto, 2004, Revista Cienc. E Cult., Vol. 56)⁴

To be a person without memory is to be forgotten, without a record in history, in the limbo of social erasure. In *American Indian Stories*, the narrator provides a wealth of detail as she recounts her experiences. What was once an intimate memory, known only to the narrator, now becomes a collective memory, aimed at perpetuating the memorial legacy of the Dakota people.

Zitkála-Ša brings out her own voice through literature, every detail described is the intimacy of her mind, of her story. The description of the objects that make up the narrative brings out the cultural essence of the Dakota. All that is collected in her memories, and any detail, from landscapes to clothing, all becomes a fragment of what she once experienced and this characterizes what Olga Rodrigues Von Sinmon (2000) says about individual memory, that generated from the moment the individual sees themselves in a society. In *O casaco de marx* by Peter Stallybrass, we are introduced to the concept of the social life of things. Stallybrass states that part of our memorial load is in the objects we accumulate throughout our lives. For the author, “Clothes are preserved; they remain. (...) in the first place, clothes have a life of their own: they are material presences (...)”⁵(STALLYBRASS, 1993, p. 29). Drawing on the memory of objects, it is necessary to emphasize that for the Dakota people, objects are not only a place of memory, but also a depository of culture. At the beginning of the narrative, when little Zitkála-Ša introduces herself, she uses clothing as a component of her memory:

⁴ Aquilo que você sabe a respeito do mundo, dos outros e de você mesmo: toda essa informação foi adquirida através da experiência e está armazenada em suas memórias. Somos seres com história, construímos nossa identidade através de um processo que mescla as experiências vividas (...) e as nossas vivências anteriores (...) somos quem somos por que aprendemos ou lembramos. (free translation)

⁵ “as roupas são preservadas; elas permanecem. São os corpos que mudam. (...) em primeiro lugar, as roupas têm uma vida própria: elas são presenças materiais (...)”(free translation)

I was a wild little girl of seven. Loosely clad in a slip of brown buckskin, and light-footed with a pair of soft moccasins on my feet, I was as free as the wind that blew my hair, and no less spirited than a bounding deer. These were my mother's pride,--my wild freedom and overflowing spirits. She taught me no fear save that of intruding myself upon others. (Sá, 1921, pág. 05)⁶

Writing, Sá doesn't let the details evaporate. Through these descriptions of clothes, objects, landscapes and the memory of her mother on the Missouri River, we enter the author's story in this narrative. Recourse to memory is the narrative resource through which Dakota culture, its traditions and its identity are brought to light. Crafting with microspheres is the tool with which the tapestry of memory is woven:

Close beside my mother I sat on a rug, with a scrap of buckskin in one hand and an awl in the other. This was the beginning of my practical observation lessons in the art of beadwork. From a skein of finely twisted threads of silvery sinews my mother pulled out a single one. With an awl she pierced the buckskin, and skillfully threaded it with the white sinew. Picking up the tiny beads one by one, she strung them with the point of her thread, always twisting it carefully after every stitch.. (Sá, 1921. Pág. 09).⁷

In this keepsake, we see memory explored through living in local societies, in this case, in their village. The action of producing and constructing beaded jewelry for the Dakota community is an inheritance and a cultural artifact, and here we have a fact in which culture is everything we witness during our life's journey, be it teachings that are passed down from mother to daughter, from father to son, from friend to friend and so on.

All cultures are formed by the traditions/habits that make them up, and as we know, a habit is something that is done routinely, such as brushing your teeth, taking a shower and so on, while a tradition is passed down from generation to generation, such as everyone sitting down at the table for a family lunch or coffee, going to church on Sundays, or even passing on

⁶ Tradução livre: Eu era uma menina selvagem de sete anos. Vestida folgadoamente com uma combinação de pele de gamo marrom e pés leves com um par de moccasins macios nos pés, eu era tão livre quanto o vento que soprava em meus cabelos e não menos espirituoso do que um cervo saltitante. Esse era o orgulho de minha mãe: minha liberdade selvagem e meu espírito transbordante. Ela não me ensinou o medo, exceto o de me intrometer nos outros. (Sá, 1921, pág. 05) (free translation)

⁷ Tradução livre: Perto da minha mãe, sentei-me num tapete, com um pedaço de pele de gamo numa mão e um furador na outra. Este foi o início de minhas aulas práticas de observação na arte do bordado com miçangas. De um emaranhado de tendões prateados finamente retorcidos, minha mãe tirou um único. Com um furador ela perfurou a pele de gamo e enfiou-a habilmente no tendão branco. Pegando as miçangas uma por uma, ela as amarrou com a ponta da linha, sempre torcendo-a com cuidado após cada ponto. (Sá, 1921. Pág. 09). (free translation)

traditional knowledge through work, such as the act of making jewelry, the art of handicrafts, traditions that are passed down through space and time.

Olga Rodrigues, a professor in the department of social sciences at UNICAMP, in her article on *memória, cultura e poder na sociedade do esquecimento* (2000)⁸ emphasizes that the memory that is kept by an individual is also about their cultural experiences lived over time. This is what she refers to as the collective memory of a people: “We call collective memory, that formed by the facts and aspects considered relevant by the group (...)”⁹(Moraes, 2000).

Sá narrative takes us back to remind us of his culture, such as the conversations around the campfire, a cultural act for family dialogues, and even the descriptions of the handicrafts created from family teachings, made by his parents and knowledge that was transferred to future generations.

Beside the open fire I sat within our tepee. With my red blanket wrapped tightly about my crossed legs, I was thinking of the coming season, my sixteenth winter. On either side of the wigwam were my parents. My father was whistling a tune between his teeth while polishing with his bare hand a red stone pipe he had recently carved. Almost in front of me, beyond the center fire, my old grandmother sat near the entranceway. (Sá, 1921, pág. 42)¹⁰

The narrative shows scenes from the daily life of the Dakota people. Their cultural legacy has been passed down from generation to generation, represented in the narrative by the handicraft of bracelets, beaded threads, moccasins, or in the teaching of legends and hunts and everything that is part of the culture of generations, the collective memory of a people. However, the Dakota people don't live on beautiful memories alone. The armed arm of the state has interfered heavily in the lives of these people, bringing them to the brink of ethnocide. The harmful powers of the state and their representations in American Indian Stories are the subject of the subsequent discussion.

3. Necropolitics. State and the ownership of power

⁸ VON SIMSON, 2000

⁹ “Denominamos de memória coletiva, aquela formada pelos fatos e aspectos julgados relevantes pelo grupo (...)”.(free translation)

¹⁰ Tradução livre: Ao lado da lareira, sentei-me em nossa tenda. Com meu cobertor vermelho bem enrolado nas pernas cruzadas, eu pensava na estação que se aproximava, meu décimo sexto inverno. De cada lado da cabana estavam meus pais. Meu pai assobiava uma melodia entre os dentes enquanto polia com a mão nua um cachimbo de pedra vermelha que ele havia esculpido recentemente. Quase à minha frente, além do fogo central, minha velha avó estava sentada perto da entrada. (Sá, 1921, pág. 42) (free translation)

According to Mbembe (2003), Necropolitics is the use of political and social power, especially by the state, which determines who can live and who must die. Thus, not only the destruction of bodies, but simply their erasure is the target of this form of power.

In *American Indian Stories* (1921), it is clear to see how the State acted in an authoritarian way in relation to the culture and beliefs of the Native American peoples. The imposition of state power on these individuals was aimed at silencing them and making their language, beliefs and even their existence invisible. The government imposed an evangelizing education on these peoples that would mold them into American habits and culture. Recalling her days at the American school, young Zitkala Sá reiterates the imposition of the dominator's language and her fragility as the dominated:

The first day in the land of apples was a bitter-cold one; for the snow still covered the ground, and the trees were bare. A large bell rang for breakfast, its loud metallic voice crashing through the belfry overhead and into our sensitive ears. The annoying clatter of shoes on bare floors gave us no peace. The constant clash of harsh noises, with an undercurrent of many voices murmuring an unknown tongue, made a bedlam within which I was securely tied. And though my spirit tore itself in struggling for its lost freedom, all was useless. (SÁ, 1921, pág. 21)¹¹

In this episode, Zitkala-Sá describes life in another reality, in a place outside her context, her culture. The narrator expresses her anguish at being away from home, her confusion with the dominator's language, her incessant desire to be free again and not being able to realize it. This is the anguish created by the absolute power of the state.

The silencing of indigenous languages, the stripping away of their traditional clothing, the erasure of any trace of their culture are all stages in a long, painful process. The struggle was constant. Sá evokes her reluctance to have her long hair cut, hair that is a mark of cultural value, revealing a feeling of revolt present throughout the narrative that emphasizes the visible cultural erasure.

Late in the morning, my friend Judéwin gave me a terrible warning. Judéwin knew a few words of English; and she had overheard the paleface woman talk about cutting

¹¹ Tradução livre: O primeiro dia na terra das maçãs foi muito frio; pois a neve ainda cobria o chão e as árvores estavam nuas. Um grande sino tocou para o café da manhã, sua voz alta e metálica ressoou no campanário acima e atingiu nossos ouvidos sensíveis. O barulho irritante dos sapatos no chão não nos dava paz. O choque constante de ruídos ásperos, com uma corrente subterrânea de muitas vozes murmurando em uma língua desconhecida, criou uma confusão na qual eu estava firmemente amarrado. E embora meu espírito se dilacerasse na luta pela liberdade perdida, tudo foi inútil. (SÁ, 1921, pág. 21)

our long, heavy hair. Our mothers had taught us that only unskilled warriors who were captured had their hair shingled by the enemy. Among our people, short hair was worn by mourners, and shingled hair by cowards! We discussed our fate some moments, and when Judéwin said, "We have to submit, because they are strong," I rebelled. "No, I will not submit! I will struggle first!" I answered. (Sá, 1921, pág. 22)¹²

In *American Indian Stories*, the issues of sovereignty and biopower are expressed through episodes that show domination through fear, oppression and acculturation. These issues affect the freedom and autonomy of the Dakota people. The holder of biopower believes that only one culture is "correct" and the others are merely "colonized". The necropolitical state has the power to repress minors and decide who should live or die. "Civilize" the indigenous individual is what Zitkala-Sá work represents.

As a result of her experience away from her life in the village, in seclusion at the American school, the narrator is faced with a totally authoritarian reality, immersed in customs and standards that are different from what she knew and witnesses many Native Americans, who had been attending the school for some time, undergo the process of acculturation and show that they are no longer attached to their own culture.

When the state places its truth as absolute over another cultural element, it ends up creating spaces of isolation and silencing the voice of the Other. The silenced individual is faced with the terrible choice of following their culture or abandoning it for another that is imposed on them. In addition, it's not just cultural issues that end up being ignored. Ancestry and cultural heritage end up becoming what the state forces them to be and reminds us that "sovereignty is the ability to define who matters and who doesn't, who is 'disposable' and who isn't"¹³ (MBEMBE, 2016). Necropolitics depreciates the life of the individual, stripping them of their dignity.

I cried aloud, shaking my head all the while until I felt the cold blades of the scissors against my neck, and heard them gnaw off one of my thick braids. Then I lost my spirit. Since the day I was taken from my mother I had suffered extreme indignities. People had stared at me. I had been tossed about in the air like a wooden puppet. And now my long hair was shingled like a coward's! In my anguish I moaned for my

¹² Tradução livre: No final da manhã, meu amigo Judéwin me deu um aviso terrível. Judéwin sabia algumas palavras em inglês; e ela ouviu a cara pálida falar sobre cortar nossos cabelos longos e pesados. Nossas mães nos ensinaram que apenas os guerreiros inexperientes capturados tinham seus cabelos arrancados pelo inimigo. Entre o nosso povo, o cabelo curto era usado pelos enlutados e o cabelo penteado pelos covardes! Discutimos nosso destino por alguns momentos, e quando Judéwin disse: "Temos que nos submeter, porque eles são fortes", eu me rebelei. "Não, não vou me submeter! Vou lutar primeiro!" Eu respondi. (Sá, 1921, pág. 22)

¹³ "a soberania é a capacidade de definir quem importa e quem não importa, quem é "descartável" e quem não é"

mother, but no one came to comfort me. Not a soul reasoned quietly with me, as my own mother used to do; for now I was only one of many little animals driven by a herder. (SA, 1921. Pág. 23)¹⁴

Despite the violence she suffered, the narrator seeks ways to resist the necropolitics of the American state. Even though she is a child, Zitkala Sá makes it clear in her account that there was silencing, but there were also those who resisted for the sake of their own existence and Dakota culture.

4. Resistance

When defines Resistance, we can think of the concept proposed by Denise Rollemberg (2015) *apud* Sémelin (1994) Who, when using the work *homem revoltado* by Albert Camus, states that “To resist is first of all to find the strength to say 'no', without always having a very clear idea of what you want”.¹⁵ Based on this statement, resisting is an act that starts from a denial against an action of power and/or forces that are on a larger scale, which are contrary to the ethics or values of a given social group. In this line of thought, we turn to Alfredo Bosi, who also dialogues with the concept of resistance and proposes that: “Resistir é um conceito originalmente ético, e não estético. O seu sentido mais profundo apela para a força da vontade que resiste a outra força, exterior ao sujeito. Resistir é opor a força própria à força alheia.” (BOSI, 1996).

Literature plays an important role for society in general terms, but resistance literature is written in the form of a denunciation against acts that threaten someone's life and values. In this way, we analyze American Indian Stories in the light of the study of resistance as a fracture, a deviation proposed by Tânia Sarmiento Pantoja (2022), who characterizes this deviation as something that has been fractured, be it a body, a population, a culture, that which has had its normal and continuous flow modified.

¹⁴ Tradução livre: Eu chorei alto, balançando a cabeça o tempo todo até sentir as lâminas frias da tesoura contra meu corpo, pescoço, e ouvi-os roer uma das minhas tranças grossas. Então perdi meu espírito. Desde o dia em que eu fui tirada de minha mãe, sofri extremas indignidades. As pessoas olhavam para mim. eu tinha sido jogada no ar como um fantoche de madeira. E agora meu cabelo comprido estava bagunçado como o de um covarde! Na minha angústia gemi por minha mãe, mas ninguém veio me consolar. Nenhuma alma argumentou calmamente comigo, como minha própria mãe costumava fazer; por enquanto eu era apenas um dos muitos animaizinhos conduzidos por um pastor.(SÁ, 1921. pág. 23)

¹⁵ “Resistir é, primeiramente, encontrar a força para dizer ‘não’, sem ter sempre uma ideia muito clara acerca de que se aspira”

Following Sarmiento-Pantoja's line of thought, we note that the narrative of resistance present in Zitkála-Šá's work takes place from the moment when, moving away from her tribe and going to American school, she is strongly influenced by what was not "normal" in her culture. The narrator is confronted with a reality that was hidden by the state and with the barbarity of acts that would directly influence her culture, her essence as a person. Wanting to "civilize" the indigenous is what motivates her to resist the fracture and violation of the sacredness of Dakota culture. Sarmiento-Pantoja (2022) uses the concept of desecration as a breach of what is sacred. In the narrative, the desecration takes place in the moments imposed by the white colonizer, represented in the arbitrary cutting of the little indigenous girl's hair, in the erasure of her mother tongue at school, in the acts and customs that are sacred to her Native American culture, but which are now no longer accepted within the school context. This gave rise to a strong desire to fight, to resist. In her narrative, Zitkála-Šá intends to fight against this cultural erasure proposed by the "paleface schools"

Within a year I was able to express myself somewhat in broken English. As soon as I comprehended a part of what was said and done, a mischievous spirit of revenge possessed me. One day I was called in from my play for some misconduct. I had disregarded a rule which seemed to me very needlessly binding. I was sent into the kitchen to mash the turnips for dinner. It was noon, and steaming dishes were hastily carried into the dining-room. I hated turnips, and their odor which came from the brown jar was offensive to me. With fire in my heart, I took the wooden tool that the paleface woman held out to me. I stood upon a step, and, grasping the handle with both hands, I bent in hot rage over the turnips. I worked my vengeance upon them. All were so busily occupied that no one noticed me. I saw that the turnips were in a pulp, and that further beating could not improve them; but the order was, "Mash these turnips," and mash them I would! I renewed my energy; and as I sent the masher into the bottom of the jar, I felt a satisfying sensation that the weight of my body had gone into it. (SÁ, 1921)¹⁶

¹⁶ Tradução livre: Em um ano, consegui me expressar em um inglês um tanto ruim. Assim que compreendi uma parte do que foi dito e feito, um espírito malicioso de vingança tomou conta de mim. Um dia fui chamada da minha peça por alguma má conduta. Eu havia desconsiderado uma regra que me parecia desnecessariamente vinculativa. Fui mandada para a cozinha para amassar os nabos para o jantar. Era meio-dia e pratos fumegantes foram levados às pressas para a sala de jantar. Eu odiava nabos, e o odor que emanava do pote marrom era ofensivo para mim. Com fogo no coração, peguei a ferramenta de madeira que a mulher de rosto pálido me estendeu. Subi num degrau e, agarrando o cabo com as duas mãos, inclinei-me furiosa sobre os nabos. Eu trabalhei minha vingança contra eles. Todos estavam tão ocupados que ninguém me notou. Vi que os nabos estavam numa polpa e que bater mais não poderia melhorá-los; mas a ordem era: "Amasse esses nabos", e eu os amassaria! Renovei minhas energias; e quando coloquei o espremedor no fundo do pote, tive uma sensação satisfatória de que o peso do meu corpo havia entrado nele. (SÁ, 1921)

The voice of little Zitkala-Sa contains a feeling of revolt and the will to fight against all kinds of abuse that injures culture, silences languages and disgraces human beings. Resistance is strengthened from this point of view, from the body that is no longer sacred, from the culture that becomes the target of the Necropolitical State, against which all that remains is to resist.

4. Final Considerations

Individuals are made up of memories, both good and bitter, which are stored in their minds and help them to recover the past. Zitkala-Sá brings relevant information about her cultural heritage, full of comforting information and fragments of her life: her mother, her friends, her origins, important and valuable things. On the other hand, we also see memories of struggles, suffering and resistance, and of the strength to resist and exist. We are what we inherit, what we become. Resistance is an act of courage and Zitkala-Sá's narrative shows us that even a small Native American woman can show us that the dilemmas experienced in other times and in other spaces should serve as a light against the darkness imposed on native peoples by necropolitics.

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