

# *First Year Writing Prize 2021*



*Sponsored by The Center for Teaching and Learning  
and The Writing Colleagues Program  
Hobart and William Smith Colleges*



# CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION	2
<i>Hannah Dickinson, Ingrid Keenan, and Amy Green</i>	
JURORS	4
FINALISTS	6
PRIZE WINNERS	8
ESSAYS	
UMAMA AHMED	9
<i>“Yearning to Mourn”</i>	
KAYLA POWERS	17
<i>“Indigenous Knowledge: Žitkála-Šá’s Use and Subversion of English”</i>	

# INTRODUCTION

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Around campus this winter, you may have noticed land acknowledgement stones painted with the flag of the Haudenosaunee people, on whose land we hold this ceremony. The stones, harvested from shores of waterways and fields of the Finger Lakes, speak to the interconnections of place, culture, and storytelling. This is a set of connections investigated with beauty and seriousness in both of this year's prize-winning essays. Kayla Powers' essay on Zitkála-Šá's use of English to explore indigenous knowledges reminds us that although "systemic institutions attempt to erase the history and culture of Native Americans," stories that tell the truth about the places and cultures we inhabit endure. "Yearning to Mourn" by Umama Ahmed meditates on the personal and cultural impacts of patriarchal attitudes that restrain women's expression, weaving a story about the past made new on the page.



Given the powerful role of place in both essays, it is striking that Kayla and Umama wrote these gorgeous essays from homes far from HWS and the territory of the Haudenosaunee. These essays, along with those of all of the First-Year Writing Prize finalists we honor today, are a testament to the new relations to place, community, and belonging that we all developed this year. We've learned together that it is not simply sharing a location that holds our community together but the stories we tell together, the books we read in common, the art we make across continents, and the questions we sharpen collectively.

It is a maxim of the Writing Colleagues and Writing Fellows programs that good writers do not write alone. And this year, more than any other, it is clear that the writing communities we build are constituted not just by our classmates and our professors but by all of those workers from the Library to IT Services and Dining to Housekeeping that made it possible for us to learn in common. And, of course, the Writing

Colleagues and Writing Fellows supported writers across the curriculum not from the library's yellow couches, but over zoom—discovering new ways of making connections between paragraphs, ideas, and communities.

Many community members were involved in the process of discussing and selecting the prize-winning essays. Deans Kelly Payne and Joe Mink were insightful and sensitive readers of the nominated essays. Additional thanks go to the Writing and Rhetoric Program, the Center for Teaching and Learning, and the First Year Seminar Program for their support of this event and commitment to creating a vibrant culture of writing at HWS. We'd especially like to thank Will Hochman '74 whose celebratory spirit inspired this prize and Suzanne Rutstein '95 whose generous gift makes this prize possible.

We are equally grateful to the many students who submitted essays for the First Year Writing Prize. It was a pleasure to read such stunning examples of first-year writing and learn from the challenging questions, intellectual energy, creativity, and dedication that our students bring to the page.

HANNAH DICKINSON

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Director, Writing Colleagues Program*

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AMY GREEN

*Writing Colleagues Program  
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# JURORS

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## FACULTY & STAFF

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PROFESSOR MAGGIE M. WERNER  
*Department of Writing and Rhetoric*

# WRITING FELLOWS

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TOLULOPE ARASANYIN '21

JILL CROCETTA '21

BAILEY DISANTO '21

GRACE MONGEAU '22

BLAIR REILLY '22

OLIVIA ROWLAND '21

FAIR SMITH '21

OLIVIA VARNER '21

# FINALISTS

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CHRISTINA ASHENDEN

*Nominated by Professor Susan Pliner*

ISABELLA E. BABIKIAN

*Nominated by Professor Rob Carson*

GUILLERMO ALBERTO CASTAÑEDA CHANG

*Nominated by Professor Ruth Shields*

JULIA COWIE

*Nominated by Professor Don Spector*

MALAK FADLOU-ALLAH

*Nominated by Professor Don Spector*

TIFFANY MARIE FOSTER

*Nominated by Professor Chris Annear*

ERIN HOWE

*Nominated by Professor Robinson Murphy*

CLAIRE ISABEL KAPITAN

*Nominated by Professor Michael Dobkowski*

ELINOR KENNEDY

*Nominated by Professor Colby Ristow*

JACKSON C. MISCHLER

*Nominated by Professor Janette Gayle*



IAN MOON

*Nominated by Professor Eric Barnes*

ELISA RIBORDY

*Nominated by Professor Karen Frost-Arnold*

KATHERINE E. RISLEY

*Nominated by Professor Ruth Shields*

CRISTINA M. ROC

*Nominated by Professor Lara Blanchard*

KYLIE ROWLAND

*Nominated by Professor Rob Carson*

ABIGAIL SCHNEIDER

*Nominated by Professor Rob Carson*

ANNETTE STEPHENS

*Nominated by Professor Chris Annear*

VUTHY VEY

*Nominated by Professor Sherri Martin-Baron*

BRITTA WILKERSON

*Nominated by Professor Robinson Murphy*

ALEXANDER T. WILMOT

*Nominated by Professor Maggie Werner*

JULY WINTERS

*Nominated by Professor Lara Blanchard*

# PRIZE WINNERS

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UMAMA AHMED

*“Yearning to Mourn”*

Written for WRRH 105:

Multilingual Writer’s Seminar

*Nominated by Professor Sherri Martin-Baron*

KAYLA POWERS

*“Indigenous Knowledge: Žitkála-Šá’s Use and Subversion of English”*

Written for ENG 152:

American Revolutions

*Nominated by Professor Alex Black*

# UMAMA AHMED

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## LETTER

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I am my mother's third daughter, born in a country where daughters are considered inauspicious to have. If by any stroke of unluck, a daughter is born, she needs to be pretty in order to marry well. The moment a daughter is born, families mourn the financial loss her marriage would incur, or if she would be able to marry well if she is not pretty. I embody the tension between the third daughter my culture reduces me to, and my parents' consistent efforts to not let society come in the way of my growth as an individual. Growing up, I overcompensated for the immense love I received from family, and wanted to prove to the larger society that I in fact do deserve a place in this world. But in doing so, I was already coming from a place that believed I needed to always prove that I have the credentials to even exist. That I did not need to be extraordinary to have a place in this world. I never loved the beautiful ordinary parts of me, trying so hard to be needed. I realized this through the death of someone so integral to the society that has birthed the third daughter.

My grandmother's death was a visitation from a whole new geography of emotions for me. I just did not know how to process it. I was horrified at how fleeting and inapplicable her words became the moment she died. Words I had clung on to while trying my best to change her perspective about daughters. I thought I just had to be kind enough towards her but never realized that I needed to display the same arduous empathy towards myself. Her death bought me face to face with how traumatic it was to live with constantly having to make peace with a society that disregards my existence. I cannot prove myself to everyone. But I can forgive this society, in a way that affords me the belief that it is alright to not fight for a place in this society. I already have a place, so I need to forgive the people that make it seem the other way. Through my grandmother's death, I found forgiveness for the culture I was raised in. Forgiveness that I maybe always had inside of

me, but I never addressed because I was always unready to face my subconscious self.

The prompt scared me. I spent hours crouched on a one-seater sofa in the far end of an isolated corner of the house knowing what I wanted to write about yet not wanting to write about it at all. There were days when I wrote too much, and days when I wanted to erase everything I had written. There were days that summoning a very personal trauma felt excruciating and days when I was liberated after actually writing down what I had only felt for 8 months between my grandmother's death and receiving the prompt. I have kept a daily journal since middle school but there is no mention of my grandmother's hurtful ways or her death in that diary. Writing about this death made me understand the mechanisms of self, how subconsciously I myself never thought I was worth everything that came my way as a third daughter.

My first draft was twelve pages. Every detail of my grandmother's funeral, and its aftermath was seared into my brain, ready to have an outlet after months of maddening reruns in my head. I discussed it with my Professor and we worked together to create drafts that focused more on the prompt itself. We unpacked the challenge to mourn and letting go of someone unkind in a kind way. In retrospect everything that I did during the funeral perfectly aligned with how I am as a person. My interpretation of my actions changed. I just could not forgive myself for refusing to see her dead body, but this essay evoked deep understanding and sympathy for the girl 8 months ago. Understanding why it took me 40 days to mourn.

I am not the cherished daughter and the unloved third daughter, but a cherished third daughter. Cherished by myself before anyone else. I celebrated the third daughter with this essay. I wanted her to know that she has been kind to a society that has unjustly put her into a box and sealed it with duct tape. I am outside that box labelled unpretty third daughter. My identity as a third daughter is part of a self that is so much more. This nomination comes as reiteration of that self. A self that has multitudes to offer, and a self that refuses to be chained by a society that restrained her expression of self.

# ESSAY

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## YEARNING TO MOURN

My grandmother scorned me when I was born. What furthered her contempt was that she could tell, just tell by the colour of my skin and my underdeveloped features that I would grow up to be unpretty. I was born as both the unneeded granddaughter and the cherished daughter; the ugly and the most pretty; the curse and the blessing. After having spent twenty years of being society's sympathetic fascination, constantly reminded that the love and luxury she receives is rare for a third daughter, one day, that third daughter was summoned to send away a crucial member of that society. On a cold winter morning of January, her grandmother died, burying with her the warmth she had yet to exude, the kind words she had yet to say, and the affectionate relationship we had yet to share. The third daughter who strived twenty years to be validated by her, constantly trying to be important suddenly found herself being thrown to the ground and hysterically laughed at by the heavens, who maybe always knew that all that her efforts are going to be in vain.

There was white. So much white. White spreads on the floor. White sheets covering the furniture. White shrouds for the dead body. I felt as if someone had bleached my life's canvas the same wistful and sprawling white that lay before me. Colourful prayer beads placed on the floor in clusters small distances from each other and bright red chairs against one wall silently screamed solace from the unknowing everything seemed drowned in. The preparations for the funeral were underway when I arrived at my Uncle's place. I saw the living room slowly fill up with people, neighbours, friends, acquaintances, distant family, all giving me a brief uneasy look before going inside. In the room across it, close family was preparing my grandma's body for burial. Everyone threw awkward, uncomfortable glances at each other and then at myself every time I refused an offer to assist in bathing my grandmother. I stood outside both rooms, failing to evoke any emotion, or reason. How do you express your soul ripping itself apart, severing the times it had spent agonising over our dysfunctional relationship, desperately trying to make itself understand that it is now wholly and completely defunct? Family brought the body outside and the moment

I saw a glimpse of the white wrapped body, I ran against the jostling crowd that made its way towards the body. I frantically ran, pushing everyone and everything out of the way like a mad woman until I was in a clear space, with a huge crowd of people behind me, making it seem like a dead body does not exist between them.

There at the end of it all, he stood, my uncle's youngest, almost my age, digging the ground with his feet. Cherished as a beautiful kid, and celebrated as a handsome man, I could hear my grandmother's beaming, joyful voice that often praised his marbly blue eyes, curly ginger hair and her most preferred 'milky white' complexion. I stared at the third daughter's other extreme looking nothing like the happy, pretty boy his grandmother doted on. He pretended he did not see me and continued to stab the ground with frightening emotional indifference. I hugged him, trying to understand his pain and shock. He, who was loved unboundedly by the deceased. He who probably feels pain larger than any emotion can express. In an effort to console, not knowing how to, I hugged him. He did not hug me back. As we stood like that, I could feel his grief, his shock, his ache. I broke away, and immediately noticed tears glistening in his eyes. We stood like that, my head on his shoulders, holding his hand, crying over the loss of his beloved grandmother. I could not mourn my grandmother, but he deserved to mourn his.

They carried the body two the white room. Two women chanted religious sermons, the splitting loud collided with the anguished cries and screams of close family, followed by even louder efforts to console and comfort. I stood at a distance, seeing family mourn and for fleeting moments I wanted to run over, to hold and be held through this indescribable pain. Every time, over the cacophony of loss asked a voice: "who are you mourning?", and I used to stop. Who should I mourn? What do I want to mourn? My grief was tainted by the trauma of the third daughter. I stood on the fringes of sadness so sure that if I embraced this trauma in its entirety it might embrace me for longer than I would want, and until I embraced it, I could not bring myself to mourn.

I stood in the circle of guests while the funeral rites proceeded, unable to locate the body or my family. As the body was lifted to the ground, ready to be taken away for burial as everyone said their final farewells, I

was faced with the chance of seeing her one last time, the chance I had run away from all day now. I felt something welling up inside me, sucking the air out of my lungs while trying to get out, and just not finding an escape. Unsure of everything, I quite conspicuously turned my face away from the body and stood like that, with my back towards the casket until I was certain it was far out of sight. The third daughter did not know farewell yet.

I rushed towards my mom. Even from a distance, she looked palpably aghast, but up close, her pale, forlorn face looked like it had known no other emotion other than the profound sadness etched on it. Her body sagged as she sunk her head into my shoulder and cried in a low, pained whimper that seared my heart. She chose daughter over mother, celebrated her daughter louder than her mother's protests over giving a daughter too much. She whose mother left unhappy and critical of her upbringing left without any kind, encouraging words of acknowledgement of her hardships. The cherished daughter felt ashamed for separating a daughter from her mother, and that sense of guilt deepened knowing that there is no way to make amends now. The third daughter felt empathy, empathy for another disregarded individual. I sat her down, and leaned against her. We sat in silence, hand in hand, head over each other's shoulders, watching the white room empty as the dark of the night grew. Hours dragged by; time that felt too short to mourn her yearning, her disbelief and the times she spent being unloved. We mourned the unloved daughter's mother together.

I came outside to an utterly still, silent night, as if the universe was holding its breath, wary of disturbing the balance between loss and mourning everyone was grappling with four hours after the funeral. Outside the white room, across the entrance of the door of my Uncle's house, my grandmother's house stood, its huge, nebulous shadow almost unavoidable. I stood as frozen as the night, knowing that if I tilted my head just a little, I would see the window of my grandmother's room. I wanted her to appear just once so I could ask her everything that was too late to ask from her now. If we knew, if we were fully aware of the possibility of death, would we have had a better ending? Would I have placed my head on her lap and told her how much she hurt me? Would I have not foolishly smiled at her rebuke? Would she have cherished me? All those times that I let my soul be punctured

because of her, with surety that one day, she would look at me like I matter, what do I do of those times?

Forty days passed like this. Forty days of silently sitting with people who mourned my grandmother, imbibing grief from them, because my sorrow felt too impure, marred by trauma and unkind. Forty days of commuting between my house and the white room. Forty days of avoiding my grandmother's house. Forty days of working until my bones ached. Of staring at the wall across my bed for what felt like eternities lived. Forty days of obscurity perpetuating within me. Of splitting headaches and panic attacks, as if my body was struggling to throw out this foreign feeling. Forty days of consoling and being consoled, all of which felt futile. The last funeral rite was performed at the fortieth day since the death of the deceased.

It was unlike the funeral. Colour returned to the white room as the white sheets were wrapped up after the last rite. Chatter, reminiscence, and laughter combined in a sweet euphony as family and friends gathered one last time to recollect memories with my grandmother. The ambience was so warm and bright, it made me feel a sense of unbelonging, as if I did not deserve this happiness everyone got after a long period of mourning.

“Please pray for my son; please pray he finds a job and settles well,” my grandmother's cousin held my hand and earnestly said. She must have seen my face contort in confusion to explain “God listens to people like you”. “People like me?”, I giggled awkwardly and she clasped my hands tighter to say, “You're kind; the kindest.” My befuddled laughter stopped with an abrupt hiccup. A distant relative sitting beside her broke my touched silence. “Have you seen the amount of times she has travelled back and forth, caring both for her mother and her home?” As testimonies and compliments about little, unimportant instances of the past forty days grew, I felt an eerie sorrow welling up inside me. My grandmother had observed me for twenty years, and never once did she tell me I am kind. Humbled, embarrassed and ashamed, I stared at these women, all my grandmother's age, calling me an amazing daughter. The third daughter gleamed, basking in validation and acceptance she was getting, although not from the person she wanted it from. I felt a suffocating happiness.



“Which one of these do you take to be your mother-in-law?” my cousin mischievously asked as I entered the kitchen with a pile of empty dishes. With amused faces, all my cousins had been watching me awkwardly receiving praise and decided to hound me the moment I broke free from their company. Two of my cousins started singing wedding songs while more joined to add background effects. “They just seemed to like me”, I smiled while placing the plates in the sink. “For their sons,” three of them smirked in unison, breaking into a weirdly coordinated dance. The rest of them shook their heads in pity while remarking on my innocence to think that the elderly women “just” liked me. I burst out laughing. A genuine, uninhibited laughter. A first in forty days. As we sat on counter tops and shelves, passing on helpings of ras malai to each other, clattering spoons and bowls, eating while bickering and laughing, I found myself away from the dilemma of mourning in a long time. These people only knew the cherished daughter who had been loved enough to not be affected by her grandmother’s dislike. I have been welcomed and celebrated by these people despite my grandmother’s hostility for me. I realized how well I had sheltered the third daughter, never letting her pain come in between forming relationships with other celebrated grandchildren of my grandmother. The third daughter, despite everything, never once resented anything or anyone that was associated with this pain of being disregarded. I stared at my unfinished ras malai feeling something crack inside of me.

What held me back from feeling anything during these past forty days was the cherished daughter. The third daughter who wanted to, at least once, complain, and feel pain without having to feel apologetic to the cherished daughter, wanted to acknowledge the pain that forgiveness bought with it these past twenty years. I told the third daughter, that she had never once wielded her grief like a weapon, and understand that forgiveness can be traumatic as well. This grief was hers to mourn. In that moment, of a lazy spring afternoon, the third daughter appeared in her entirety, unapologetic and ready to face the unloved parts of her existence. She who could never love the love she got, and received love and appreciation like a repentant sinner; she who felt hugely burdened with the amount of affection she received and was never delighted by it. That third daughter had lived so well up until now. I felt urgency engulf me. I was going to mourn the third daughter’s grandmother now.

Before I knew it, I was before my grandmother's house, walking up the dark staircase, leading to an even darker corridor. Terror filled me up as I hurried through the corridor. Floodgates opened, and out cascaded one unhappy memory after the other, one belittling comment after the other. I felt pain: fresh, sharp, jabbing pain. pain that had been pricking at me ever since I learned to put words together and make sense of conversation, yet a pain that I had never ever felt before. the dark corridor ended, and I was in the lounge. Through the large windows, sunlight filtered through in parallel streams, bathing everything in golden. I stopped, soaking in the quiet of my grandmother's favourite place in her house. It was hauntingly heavenly. I felt weak, my body convulsed, and then after a few voiceless gasps, came loud, uncontrollable cries.

I stopped after two hours, feeling a consummate yet liberating heartache. Drained of strength and emotion and afraid that I might start to appear missing, I made my way back to my Uncle's house. The huge mirror in the corridor just at the start of the lounge caught me. My face was red and wet, my nose swelled and my eyes sunk in deeper. The pale sunlight and the dark of the corridor merged on me. I smiled. The third daughter smiled back.

There existed no cherished daughter. There lived only the third daughter, always conscious of not resenting her grandmother, unknowingly letting her fester inside of her. I sent her grandmother away kindly, reassuring her that she did good these past twenty years. I picked up the paintbrushes, facing the dauntingly gigantic white canvas that my life felt like these past forty days and painted myself every colour forgiveness is. I choose to be kind. I choose to forgive. I choose to be precious.

# KAYLA POWERS

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## LETTER

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A historical event that is not immortalized in a textbook does not lose its truth, but it may lose its legitimacy within normative culture. As soon as I enrolled in my American Revolutions English class, I was confronted with this negotiation between academic texts and literature. Between history and life.

The simplest form of history is viewed in the textbooks that give broad summaries of complex disputes. They often fail to be personal. To destabilize us from the solid ground of our own lives and truly hear others' stories. Too often textbooks attempt to remedy this with flashes of painful images that defile those harmed in the moments captured by a camera lens. In doing so, the viewers are left to infer and make assumptions that could have dire consequences.

A personal story, though, brings empathy. It gives a chance to the subjects of the photographs to take control of the narrative, and maybe even flip the camera on their viewers. I recently experienced this myself when I read about the Nacirema tribe in my Introduction to Sociology course. With its strange cultural traditions, this tribe was actually an outsiders' description of American society. I noticed from myself and other students that we were quick to find the descriptions perplexing, failing to realize we were in fact seeing ourselves. Like looking through a funhouse mirror, this distorted depiction showed me just how much power was in language and word choice. Even something as familiar as my own culture became foreign when pushed through an uncompromising lens. I believe that if the story had been told by an individual from within this society, these seemingly odd practices would have been approached with greater cultural relativism and in turn would have incited empathic responses. When we listen to or read a story that is vulnerable and honest, we find the capacity to place ourselves near the perspective of the storyteller.

But it isn't easy. Reading, as I have come to learn, is an active engagement in the text beyond simple note taking or quoting. It requires us to fully immerse ourselves in a concept we may be unfamiliar with. Reading then becomes a social interaction, in which we must allow ourselves to read, not with the intent of understanding but of listening; understanding must come after.

I found this within myself as I read the works of Zitkála-Šá, an indigenous woman from the late 1800s. As I read, I mistakenly did so with the intent to write and talk about her works, framing each note around this possibility. But even so, her writing compelled me so deeply. Upon returning to this essay, I was happily reminded of this. I was also reminded of the challenges I faced while writing. My biggest hurdle was the discomfort I felt in writing an thesis about a situation I could never truly understand. In the end I decided to embrace my insecurities about this paper. What I believe came out of this resolution was not necessarily a conventional literary analysis, but instead an attempt to extend upon the ideas Zitkála-Šá already displayed for her readers using an intersection of literary and historic framework. I only wish I could have read the stories she tells in her native Dakota language.

## ESSAY

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### INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE: ZITKÁLA-ŠÁ'S USE AND SUBVERSION OF ENGLISH

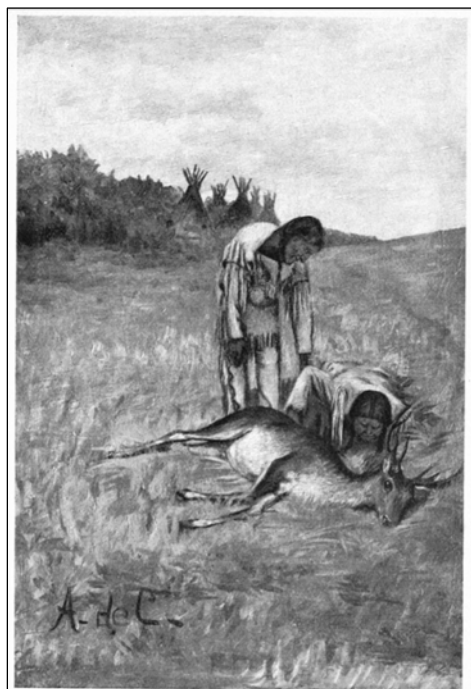
Zitkála-Šá, a Native American author in the early 1900s, actively subverted the colonialist narrative by creating works which advocated for indigenous cultural preservation and by doing so heeded against assimilationist tactics of the colonizers. In *Iktomi and the Turtle*, *The Toad and the Boy*, *Manstin, the Rabbit*, and *Impressions of an Indian Childhood*, Zitkála-Šá depicts the dangers of colonial assimilation and the cycle of loss that it can perpetuate. When viewed within the realm of Sioux ways of knowing, these stories can therefore become a warning to other indigenous people of the need for self-authentication separate from, but also within, colonial systems.

Zitkála-Šá and other native works should not be reviewed under the same system as a white, Euro-American man's work. Such a revision dictates that an autobiography must be some sort of "voyage of self-discovery," that may impose a pattern one finds in life or some coherent structure. Forcing an indigenous work under these bounds results in viewing Zitkála-Šá's works as singular, conflicting stories. Instead, her works must be viewed as holistic to reject the colonial expectations of a unified, coherent identity achieved through "linguistic self-authentication" (33). As James Rupert explains, there is instead an inherent duality of Native American written works in English because, "Native American writers write for two audiences—non-Native and Native American... To illuminate and mediate, they utilize the different cultural codes simultaneously" (Diana, 2). Zitkála-Šá follows this trend, as she utilizes the English language to translate traditional Sioux legends in *Old Indian Legends*, which includes the stories of Iktomi and the Turtle, The Toad and the Boy, and Manstin, The Rabbit. Central to these oral traditions and legends was the belief in the deep, unconditional power and efficacy of language (Spack 45-46). Historically, European translations actively stripped the stories of their cultures to gain political and cultural control over the colonized individuals (45). For instance, the rise in multilingual translations was used by missionaries to characterize the legends as superstitious and Dakota rituals as "evil and embarrassing" (47). Contextualizing Zitkála-Šá's purpose requires a reconfiguration of what qualifies as an individual narrative or autobiography, as well as how this can be applied to better understand the experiences of indigenous people outside of a Euro-centric perspective.

Zitkála-Šá subverts this Euro-centric narrative expectation with her retelling of native stories, strengthening the power of indigenous knowledge. In the preface she says, "These legends are relics of our country's once virgin soil," to convey their ability to challenge present colonial control by preserving their own past (vi). In *Iktomi and the Turtle*, she uses the theme of trickery to instill the strength that legends must teach younger generations the knowledge of the elders. She supplements this concept through her personal narrative in *Impressions of an Indian Childhood* by describing the evening meals and the impacts they had on her way of knowing. In her retelling of one of the stories, the purpose of this trickery is continued, using Iktomi's representation as human frailties to "illustrate what happens when one

fails to heed the edicts and customs of social living” (Spack 48). In this story particularly, Iktomi comes to symbolize the white colonizer who initially presents benevolence but then replaces their promises with violence instead. As Zitkála-Šá says in her preface, these creatures are, “not wholly fanciful,” indicating that they may instead be taken as real and prevalent (vi). By creating this connection, Zitkála-Šá rewrites the normalized view of the colonizer as the protagonist, in real life and her stories. Understanding the power the Lakota placed on oral history, this becomes clear. For instance, when the turtle Patkasa struggles to find

food for his children, he is gifted it by the ancestors. This act of being provided food for the turtle reflects the Sioux tradition of ancestors as “Kind ghosts [who] pitied the unhappy hunter and led him to the newly slain deer” (Zitkála-Šá 102). Sioux non-fiction writers often tell “ghost stories told by elders” and depict the spirits as having active influence on the livings’ experiences (Sail 14). As a Lakota named White Face says, “We do not separate our spirituality from reality; they are the same” (Diana 8). Within *Iktomi and the Turtle*, Zitkála-Šá juxtaposes the white colonizer (Iktomi) to the indigenous people (represented by Patkasa) so that the audience understands the importance of



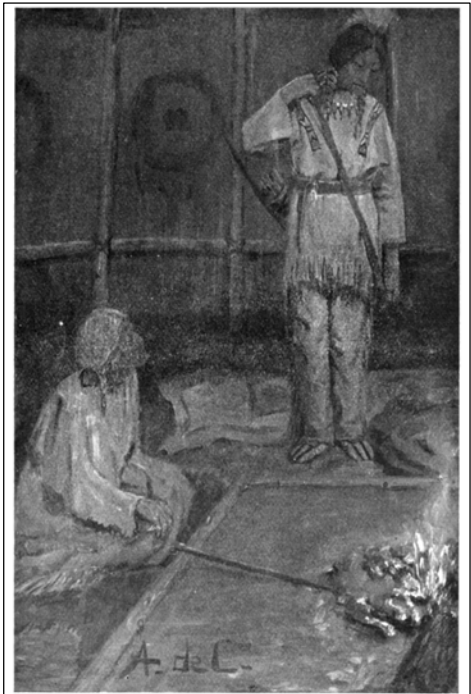
“ My friend, you are a skilled hunter ”

*Iktomi and the Turtle* tells the story of Patkasa, a huntsman turtle who could not find any game for him and his family. Pitying him, the spirits lead him to a dead deer, but Iktomi comes along and challenges Patkasa to an unfair contest that he does win.

preserving ancestral knowledge. This legend further emphasizes the importance of these stories which Zitkála-Šá and other indigenous children learn from and are meant to take seriously as a mode of subverting colonial control.

In considering the factors which harm Patkasa (and the indigenous population the character represents), Zitkála-Šá uses Manstin, the Rabbit to warn her readers about the strategies of domination enacted

upon them by white colonials. This is because Manstin’s story is one of learning and growth. Upon meeting the blind man, Manstin exclaims, “I wish I lived in such sure luxury!” (149). Similarly, Zitkála-Šá’s own experiences parallel this when the white Christian colonial missionaries visit her tribe, and Zitkála-Šá as a child raves about “a more beautiful country than ours... wishing in my heart that I too might go” (The Big Red Apples). In both stories, which are both meant to be taken as “reality,” the trickery indigenous peoples are subjected to is the missionaries’ manipulation of the narrative to make others believe in Euro-centric superiority (Diana 8). By Manstin’s exclamation, he believes he does not live the life that he “wishes” for, just as Zitkála-Šá does in her “heart.” In both scenarios, the subjects to the trickery have an intense desire for a life they think will be better, “more beautiful,” or more “luxurious” than the one they have. In both of their descriptions, they use surface-level descriptors, indicating this desire lacks true knowledge to accurately compare their lives to their imagined ones. The major difference between these two warning legends, though, is that Manstin gets a chance to return completely to the life he had before. This is because the old man had the wisdom to know Manstin would hate his



“I am going to the North Country on a long hunt”  
*Manstin and the Rabbit* tells the story of a young hunter. Coming across an old blind man’s home he wishes to switch places and so they do. Manstin finds that the life is not as he had imagined.

imagined life and used it as a teaching moment. In Zitkála-Šá’s and other indigenous children’s cases, if they did not learn from their elders’ warnings, they would suffer at the hands of colonizers. In this way, Manstin’s story is one which prepares and educates the younger generation before they are harmed (Spack 49).

Zitkála-Šá juxtaposes two alternative results of forced assimilation through the characters of Blue-Star Woman and two unnamed

indigenous men in order to display that subversion can exist within assimilation. In *The Widespread Enigma Concerning Blue Star-Woman*, this is especially considered through multiple facets of the story. Firstly, Zitkála-Šá considers the assimilation of Blue-Star Woman herself since she must abide by certain colonial systems in order to maintain an indigenous rite of land, where land is linked to Indigenous culture (Spack 48). Within the introduction of her, Zitkála-Šá tells of the ways she has assimilated, where “The coffee habit was one of the signs of her progress in the white man’s civilization” (*The Widespread Enigma*). Despite her assumed assimilation, Blue-Star Woman is still identified as an “Indian Woman,” in which she maintains the culture of not speaking the name of ancestors against the colonial expectation. To contrast this, Zitkála-Šá then introduces two men who did not resist the system they were forced into, and were instead identified as “near white men,” “wolves,” and “tricksters” (*The Widespread Enigma*). When they came to Blue-Star Woman under the veil of assistance, they mimicked the acts of the white colonists before them, stealing land from indigenous people, devouring all the profit they could in the same way they devoured her food like “wolves.” These “tricksters,” are successful because of their (mis)use of the white man’s language, identifying another struggle for indigenous people writing in English. As Cutter determines, Zitkála-Šá subverts the language’s power through her use of it, unlike these men, by rejecting the gauge (36). As Spack adds on, the stories she tells, though written in English, took “place in her mother tongue, the ‘bloodline’ of the culture” (51). Although most autobiographies are expected to create a pattern and coalesce into a singular identity, Zitkála-Šá tells the story of multiple indigenous people in retaliation of the colonial system. With these depictions Zitkála-Šá identifies a cycle which can occur for those who have been tricked, where the victims become enforcers of the very system that harmed them (Cutter 39). She does not argue, however, that this cycle is inescapable.

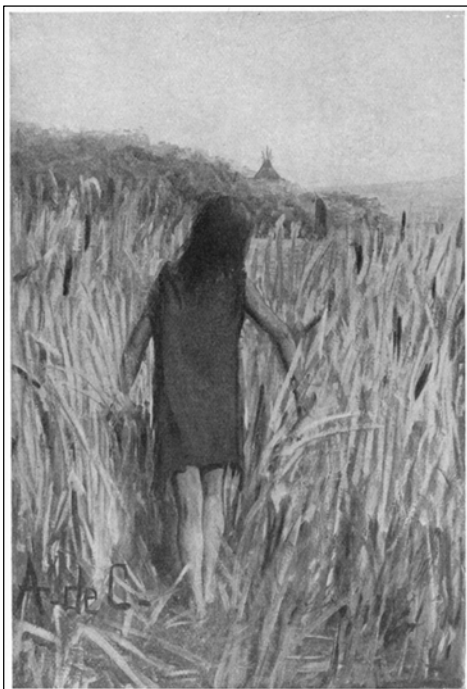
Once the warning and consequences had been conveyed, Zitkála-Šá provides a narrative of hope in her belief that the harm is not completely irreversible. Although the systemic institutions attempt to erase the history and culture of Native Americans, Zitkála-Šá tells her own story as well as that of *The Toad and the Boy* to convey how there is still hope of returning to an authentic indigenous self. For the boy, although he was stolen from his parents as an infant, upon hearing the



cries of his long-lost mother, he asks his Toad mother, “why the human voice stirs all my feelings!” (124). In this, Zitkála-Šá writes in recognition of an almost innate sense of belonging which cannot be stripped and surpasses colonial comprehension, as it is buried deep within “feelings.” This is proved even further to be true when the mother and son reconnect, in which, “she knew him” (126). Once again, this knowledge, based on feelings of spirituality, which are mere concepts to a European perspective, are reality to the Lakota (Diana 8). Moreover, Zitkála-Šá’s story of a stolen child parallels her own, and both are described as “nymphs.”

The boy, “ran like a nymph with swift outstretched toes” (122) similar to Zitkála-Šá and her friends, “like little sportive nymphs on that Dakota sea of rolling green” (The Beadwork). This comparison not only shows the reality that lies within the story of The Toad and the Boy, but it also returns the two indigenous children to a natural element, regardless of the assimilation tactics used against them. This matches Cutter’s analysis that the Sioux exist in a symbiotic relationship with nature in a “realm” which cannot be taken away from them (34). In this depiction of a dual-existence (between the colonial and indigenous worlds), Zitkála-Šá rejects the Euro-

centric expectation of an autobiographical work; it does not develop into “acceptance, integration, and vision” (Cutter 35).



A little boy stopped his play among the grasses

*The Toad and the Boy* tells the story of a young indigenous child who was kidnapped and raised by a toad mother. Years later, he heard his human mother (whom he did not know) singing in mourning and was immediately fixated by it.

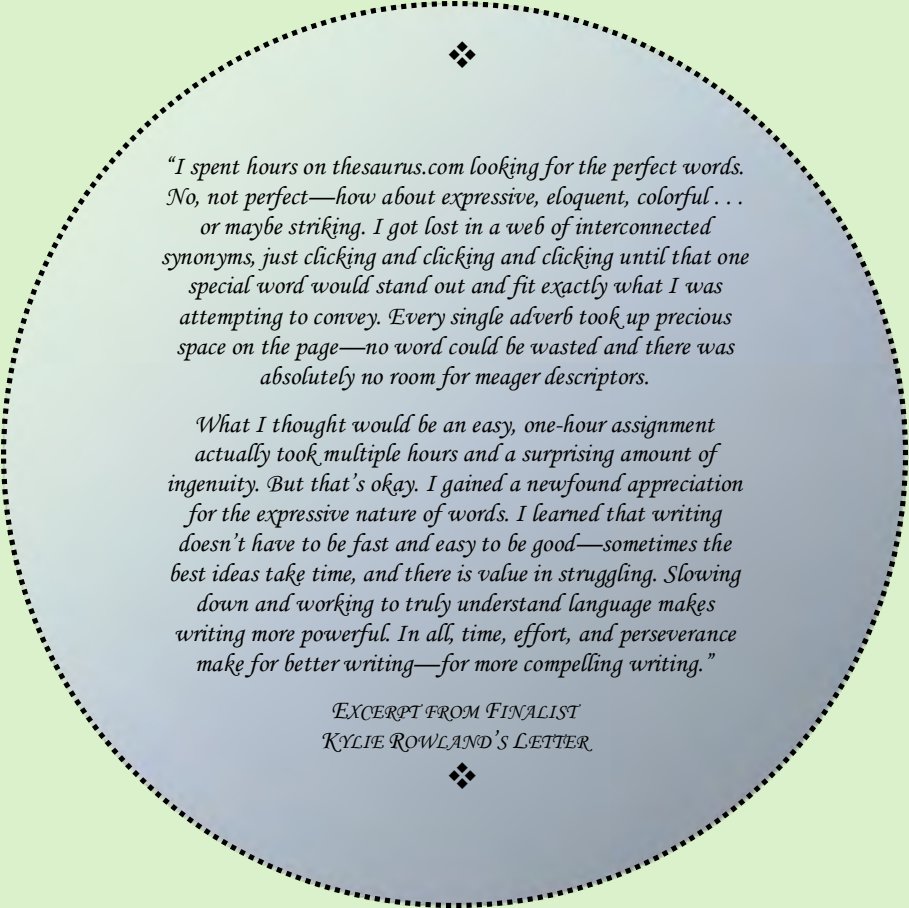
Using Sioux indigenous knowledge systems, Zitkála-Šá’s seemingly disparate works become cohesive. Her decision to translate Native American oral history to the English language stands as an example of the nuance that can exist in assimilation as well as the subversion that can still take place within it. As a result, her work becomes a warning

against white colonizers' trickery that indigenous people have been subject to, but also a message of hope that colonial assimilation does not, in fact, irrevocably.

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*"I spent hours on thesaurus.com looking for the perfect words. No, not perfect—how about expressive, eloquent, colorful. . . or maybe striking. I got lost in a web of interconnected synonyms, just clicking and clicking and clicking until that one special word would stand out and fit exactly what I was attempting to convey. Every single adverb took up precious space on the page—no word could be wasted and there was absolutely no room for meager descriptors.*

*What I thought would be an easy, one-hour assignment actually took multiple hours and a surprising amount of ingenuity. But that's okay. I gained a newfound appreciation for the expressive nature of words. I learned that writing doesn't have to be fast and easy to be good—sometimes the best ideas take time, and there is value in struggling. Slowing down and working to truly understand language makes writing more powerful. In all, time, effort, and perseverance make for better writing—for more compelling writing."*

*EXCERPT FROM FINALIST  
KYLIE ROWLAND'S LETTER*