HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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NATIVE AMERICAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY – 20th Century

Gertrude Simmons Bonin aka Zitkala-Sa (1876-1938)

The collection of writings in the Penguin classics edition is divided into four parts:
1. *Old Indian Legends*, first published in 1901, is mostly trickster stories of Iktomi
2. American Indian Stories, includes the *Atlantic Monthly* articles from 1900
3. Selections from *American Indian* magazine, which she edited from 1918 to 1920
4. Poetry, Pamphlets, Essays and Speeches, some not published in her lifetime

Please read at least part 1, the first five essays in part 2, and the fourth through eighth essays or speeches in part 4.

Gertrude Simmons Bonin, as she was then known, entered literary discourse when she published two articles, “Impressions of an Indian Childhood” and “School Days of an Indian Girl” in the January and February 1900 issues of *Atlantic Monthly*, one of the most respected magazines of the U.S. intelligentsia.

An essential skill of a good autobiographer, which Zitkala-Sa employs well, is to represent the naiveté of herself as a child in writing aimed at adults. In her case, as a child she did not speak English and knew only her family and a few Sioux neighbors. This is accomplished in part through the technique of circumlocution applied to key objects such as the apples, the railroad, and the telegraph poles (see 84-88). But beyond Eastman’s use of circumlocution, Zitkala-Sa employs literary allusions that transcend the consciousness of a young girl. In “Impressions of an Indian Childhood” her decision to go east to school is represented as a sinful thirst for knowledge and fall from grace, for the east is referred to as “Orchards of the East” where the trees grow red, red apples. And in the section entitled “The Devil” in “The School Days of an Indian Girl” the Christian devil appears to have animal features like many of the characters in Sioux mythology.

Zitkala-Sa wrote in a more literary mode than Charles Eastman, for she wanted her stories to be readable as fiction, not only as autobiography or memoir. The essays use a generalizing technique, not giving names except for Sioux names such as her older brother Dawée, and not mentioning names for places such as the schools she attended and taught at. Eastman wrote as a man who was already famous and well-connected, and boasted of his friendships with powerful men. Zitkala-Sa wrote as a journalist and fiction-writer who wanted her submissions to magazines to be accepted on their own merits, for she could not rely on her own fame. Consider the story “The Soft-Hearted Sioux” which tells of a Sioux missionary preacher returning to his tribe. How does this story, which is only vaguely autobiographical, convey the tragic conflict between Native and Christian values? How do you think it represents Zitkala-Sa’s own struggles?

Zitkala-Sa breaks out of this distancing and fictional mode in the 4th section, “Retrospection,” of the third essay “An Indian teacher among Indians” (104-113). Her narrative voice there becomes suddenly sophisticated and politically astute. She has a detailed and well-informed critique of the boarding school system and the government bureaucracy behind it, much more pointed that anything Eastman wrote. But this section and the following and previous also show a crisis of conscience and faith far more profound that Eastman’s political conversion. She rejects the Bible just around the time that her mother converts to the faith (see 117). She writes that “for the white man’s papers I had given up my faith in the Great Spirit. For these same papers I had forgotten the healing in trees and books” (112).

The essay “The Great Spirit” (pp. 114-17) was originally published as “Why I am a Pagan” in *Atlantic Monthly.* The title antagonized Richard Henry Pratt. Compare her reflections on “the solemn-faced ‘native preacher’” (116) here with the way William Apess represented himself. Apess was proud to be a preacher and a Christian. Zitkala-Sa is the first of the autobiographers we have read who forthrightly declares that she believes indigenous religion is better for her than Christianity.

Zitkala-Sa attended a Quaker-run boarding school, White's Manual Labor Institute in Wabash, Indiana. She then went to Earlham College, also a Quaker institution in Indiana. Later she studied music in Boston and then taught at the Carlisle Indian Training School. Her views on the treatment of American Indians in the boarding schools were highly critical. Her relationship with the Richard Henry Pratt, the administrator of Carlisle and ideological leader of the boarding school movement, was vexed as well. Pratt was eager to have the publicity she brought, but tried to muffle her criticism. He reprinted some of her essays in his school's organ, the *Red Man*, slightly revised, to make the essays less critical of his enterprise. Later, Pratt himself wrote articles for another school magazine, the *Word Carrier,* that tried both to celebrate and take credit for her success as a writer, and to refute the criticisms of the boarding school that she had written. Look back at her reflections on her school days and identify which events she chooses to convey the sense of anger and alienation that she felt. Why do you think Eastman did not write of such things at his school?

The Society of American Indians, founded in 1911, was a national, pan-tribal organization which sought to address the many problems of Indian tribes and to enhance their political power, notably by securing the rights of citizenship. American Indians were not United States citizens, and could not vote, until an act of Congress in 1924. Charles Eastman was among the founding members of the Society and lobbied for the citizenship bill (see 209). Zitkala-Sa edited the Society's magazine for about two years. The selections on pp181-211 include minutes of annual meetings as well as essays and position papers.

Maria Campbell, *Halfbreed*

By the time Maria Campbell published this book in 1973 at age 33, she was already a political activist for Native and Metis rights in western Canada. Because the Metis identity is specific to Canada and little known in the U.S., some background is necessary.

In the early nineteenth century the nation of Canada encompassed only the regions that today are southern Quebec and Ontario. The huge area known as Rupert's Land, roughly the watersheds of rivers flowing into the western side of Hudson Bay, nominally belonged to the Hudson Bay Company (HBC), a fur trade corporation based in London and chartered by the British Crown in 1670. The company established forts such as York Factory and Moose Factory, on the coast of Hudson Bay, and employed factors who traded blankets, knives, guns and other goods to local Indians for beaver and other pelts. By the late 1700s other fur trade companies such as the North West Company, based in Montreal, competed with the HBC. While the managers of the posts were mostly English and Scots men, the voyageurs who carried pelts by canoe between posts or down to Montreal for shipment to Europe were most often French speaking men from Quebec. We saw a window into this world in John Tanner's narrative, where he sold pelts to the HBC and the Northwest, and witnessed the rivalry between the two companies in the 1810s, which often turned violent. Many of the men of the fur trade had children by Native women, but few of these liaisons resulted in formal marriages, and rarely or never did the men take their mates back to Montreal or England. Gerhard Ens in *Homeland to Hinterland: The Changing Worlds of the Red River Metis in the Nineteenth Century* writes: "the emergence of identifiable Metis communities awaited specific political and economic conditions" (13) that developed at the Red River settlement, near modern Winnipeg and named for the river that flows northward from the Dakotas and Minnesota into Manitoba. The sons of mixed marriages who lived near fur trade posts (often after their fathers had abandoned their families and returned to Great Britain or lower Canada) sought employment in the fur trade, and some of them aspired to become bourgeois, but exclusionary policies of the HBC prevented this. Instead, many began to work as suppliers of provisions to posts on the Red River or Hudson's bay, by hunting buffalo on the prairies.

In 1869-70 the Hudson Bay Company sold Rupert's Land to the Canadian government, which began the process of annexing the land and imposing its national laws and land titles. Many Metis found their hunting grounds and farms taken from them and granted to railroad companies or to settlers from eastern Canada. In addition, schools and social services were now run by anglophone Protestants, and the Catholic faith of the Metis was marginalized. The Metis found an inspirational leader in the visionary priest Louis Riel (1844-1885) one of the most controversial and colorful figures in Canadian history. Riel wanted to create an independent nation called Manitoba, where Catholicism would be the official religion and the francophone Metis would have political and cultural sovereignty. Riel's vision brought him into conflict with the Canadian military, which acted to put down two Metis rebellions, in 1869 at Red River and in 1885 at Batoche, Saskatchewan. After the second rebellion, Riel was tried and hanged. Some of the Metis refugees crossed into the United States and found refuge among

Indian tribes. The Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota is populated by many Metis as well as by Ojibwa and metis refugees included the mother of prominent Native writer D'Arcy McNickle on the Flathead reservation in Montana.

All this helps explain what Campbell writes in the first two chapters about her family's background. Because the Metis did not have rights to live on aboriginal reserves or to collect benefits the Canadian government grants to First Nations or aborigines, they were doubly marginalized. To survive many were forced to squat on lands set aside for railroad lines, or to hunt illegally in park lands, as Maria's father does in Prince Albert National Park in central Saskatchewan. This explains the title of Campbell's collection of fiction *Stories of the Road Allowance People* (1995). Maria's activism helped to gain recognition for the Metis, but treaty status and benefits for Metis came only with the Pawley decision by the Canadian Supreme Court in 2003. This decision held that under the 1982 Canadian constitution, the Metis were entitled to many of the same rights as First Nations aboriginals.

The term "halfbreed" is among several synonyms for Metis that are quite derogatory, but Campbell appropriates and rehabilitates the term. What does she write about the relationships between Indians, whites and halfbreeds (such as in sexuality and courtship) that help affirm the dignity of the Metis?

Campbell writes very fondly of her grandmother Cheechum, her spiritual and cultural anchor, whom she returns to for wisdom many times and finally at the end of the book, when Cheechum dies at age 104. Compare the portrait of Cheechum to other Indian grandmothers in our earlier readings.

The importance of the grandmother, and relative insignificance of the mother, is also the case in some Native American myths, as with Nokomis (the Ojibwa word for grandmother) in some of the Nanabozho tales from week 1. After her mother dies, leaving her in charge of her seven younger siblings, Maria in effect is her own mother. What did you think of the measures she has to take to try to continue going to school while also caring for her siblings?

We have seen in other women autobiographers, such as Sarah Winnemucca, the difficulty of balancing the moral standards of the implied reader with the challenges of survival. Winnemucca wrote nothing of her husband, who left her after a short time. Campbell is more forthright. How does she explain or justify, in retrospect, her decision to marry Darrell, or her relationship with Ray, who in effect was her pimp when she lived in Vancouver? Does she use euphemisms or discretion in omitting certain facts?

Week Fourteen: John Fire Lame Deer, *Lame Deer Seeker of Visions*

If you read the entire book this will I think be the longest weekly assignment. Feel free to skip chapters 8, 11, and 15, and the epilogue, in which Richard Erdoes tells readers about his own life.

John Fire Lame Deer in the 1960s called himself "a hippie indian" (28) and embraced an image as a counterculture hero, a sharp critic of American capitalism and its values. He was also a Sioux or Lakota medicine man or shamanic healer and a comic trickster. The book appeared in 1972, and was researched and written a few years earlier during the brief psychedelic era and at the moment when the Vietnam War was becoming deeply unpopular. American Indians appealed to many hippies and others as victim/heroes because they had experienced the worst of the U.S. government's oppressive policies. Many hippies believed that they too were unjustly persecuted. As a Sioux in the 1960s Lame Deer was aware of Black Elk and the popularity of his book, and he and his collaborator Richard Erdoes made the Sioux and the Wounded Knee massacre important to the book. The hairstyles and clothing of the 1960s hippies also resembled those of American Indians.

Lame Deer's moral indictment of the United States government and its policies rests on different foundations than what we read in earlier texts, where a sincere Christian conversion experience or success in education provided evidence of the autobiographical subject's virtue and trustworthiness. In chapters 3 and 4, "The Green Frog Skin" (Lame Deer's term for dollars) and "Getting Drunk, Going to Jail" how does Lame Deer assert a kind of moral authority to his readers while at the same time recounting his rebellious, dissolute behavior? What does this suggest about the changing audience for American Indian autobiographies in his time compared to earlier?

Many Sioux and other American Indians are understandably outraged by Mount Rushmore, carved out of a mountain in the Black Hills, land stolen from the Sioux after being granted to them by treaty. In chapter 5, "Sitting on top of Teddy Roosevelt's Head," the text deflects this moral indignation by attributing it to Richard Erdoes. Lame Deer assumes that his readers are already angry, rather than trying to make them angry. Many tourists visiting the Black Hills combine their visit to Mount Rushmore with a visit to Korszak Ziolkowski's Crazy Horse monument. In Lame Deer's account in this chapter, shared with statements by a few other Indian visitors, how does the Crazy Horse sculpture critique or refute the political statement made by Mount Rushmore? Does it do honor to Crazy Horse and the Sioux? Or is it another desecration?

Given Lame Deer's collaboration with Richard Erdoes this book fits into the tradition of "as-told-to" American Indian autobiographies, but there are several spots where it introduces interesting twists to the format. In the chapter "Don't Hurt the Trees" about the Peyote ceremony, Lame Deer's narrative voice addresses "you" referring to Richard Erdoes, who is participating in the all-night psychedelic experience. Lame Deer takes over Erdoes' job as investigative journalist or anthropologist, as the person who acts to fulfill the reader's curiosity and guarantee the reader's demand for veracity. When Lame Deer cannot provide the best eye-witness testimony, he seeks out other Sioux who can, such as Leonard Crow Dog on the peyote religion, and Fool Bull in chapter 14, which is about the Ghost Dance and the Wounded Knee Massacre. Having read about Wounded Knee in Charles Eastman's writings, what is your overall assessment of this event and its significance for American Indian history?

In many of the autobiographies we have read since George Copway, the subjects have devoted many chapters or long sections of the text to ethnographic descriptions of Native customs. Lame Deer does the same. Chapter 8 is about courtship, marriage and sexuality among the Sioux, Chapter 10 is about the sweat lodge, and chapter 16 about sacred pipes. This form is familiar from the works of academic anthropologists who began publishing such studies around 1900, but its real roots go back to explorers of the renaissance, including Columbus, Verrazano, Champlain and many others. Lame Deer and Erdoes employ a variation on the form, because whereas most ethnographers efface their own presence as witnesses to the behaviors they describe, Lame Deer, and occasionally Erdoes too, is nearly always there. In the American Indian autobiography, the ethnographic form also satisifies readers' desire for cultural information, but does it also detract from the focus on the subject's own life? Or does it instead reaffirm the principle that for tribal peoples, the self is less important than it is in the Judeo-Christian worldview?

In chapter 2 Lame Deer recounts a story told to him by his Grandmother about "Iktome, the evil spiderman, a smart-ass who played tricks on everyone" (21). Although in this course we examined most closely Nanabozho, the Ojibwa trickster, Iktomi the spider is the trickster hero in the mythology of the Sioux, and spiders are also the trickster heroes among some Southwestern tribes. Consider how Lame Deer himself fulfills the role of the trickster.

N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain* and "The Man Made of Words"

The last two weeks of the course are devoted to the Kiowa poet, artist, memoirist, and storyteller N. Scott Momaday (b. 1934), who holds a special place among contemporary Native American authors. His 1969 Pulitzer-Prize winning novel *House Made of Dawn* is often identified as the start of a Native American literary renaissance in the United States. The term was coined by critic Kenneth Lincoln in his 1983 book *Native American Renaissance*. One consequence of this renaissance was that more Native authors began to publish works of fiction, poetry, history, and criticism. Until this time relatively few Native people were able to acquire the education in English as well as the financial means and social connections necessary to publish a book, and those who did generally began by telling their own stories and advocating on behalf of the needs of their tribe. For instance Black Hawk, Sarah Winnemucca, Geronimo and even John Lame Deer each published only one book, an autobiography. But with the Native American Renaissance the centrality of autobiography or life-writing diminished, and since the 1980s the most prominent Native literary figures alongside Momaday, such as Louise Erdrich, Leslie Marmon Silko, and James Welch, became famous for works of fiction that are no more autobiographical than those of non-Indian writers.

Momaday's work is particularly interesting for this course because of the formal sophistication with which he has explored the history of his tribe, his family, and his own memory and presented it in two books. The twenty-four sections or chapters of *The Way to Rainy Mountain* are organized into three parts. In "Man Made of Words" Momaday refers to them as the mythical (the left hand pages, in Electra Roman), the historical (the upper part of the right hand pages, in Electra Italic), and the immediate (the lower part of the right hand pages, in Optima Italic). We have seen that many of our earlier authors mixed traditional stories into their autobiographical narratives, but Momaday stands out because his process of learning about his tribe's myths, language, and history is itself part of his own "immediate" life story, and because he shows how the old myths have contemporary relevance. Look at chapter IX, where the mythical part fits into the larger Kiowa origin story that began in chapter III, the historical part offers an alternate version linked in ritual objects still held by the Kiowa, and the immediate part tells of how the object was venerated by Momaday's own great-grandmother, whom we will meet in *The Names*.

In the last four chapters, XXI-XIV, how does the immediate or autobiographical thread find its way into the left-hand pages?

Momaday's work forces readers to reconsider common notions about the status of Native mythology. A conventional view has pigeonholed Native culture as non-literate or Oral. Consider this series of contrasts between oral and written cultures:

Oral cultures	**Writing (alphabetic) cultures**
guided by myth, superstition	guided by reason and fact
religions that are animist, spiritual	religions of book: Judaism, Christianity, Islam
ruled by custom	ruled by laws, constitution
oral lit. is fluid, inconsistent	textual lit. is fixed, definitive
have no knowledge of history	have a documented, objective history
cyclical concept of time	linear concept of time

This dichotomy is false, for several reasons. Here are three:

First, oral traditions are not transient or inconsistent. They can endure for centuries, while written histories and laws can be easily perverted by despotism or propaganda. Still, a tribal mythology and oral history is not necessarily ancient; Momaday acknowledges that "the golden age of the Kiowas had been short-lived, ninety or a hundred years, say, from about 1740" (85) and that when their ancestors lived in the Yellowstone country, without horses, they were a profoundly different culture, not yet truly Kiowa.

Second, because some tribes did have written histories, though generally in pictographic or non-alphabetic languages. The Mayan codices and stele and inscriptions from Mesoamerica are one example, and the Kiowa Calendars referred to in chapter XVII and published by anthropologist James Mooney, are another example, similar to the ledger art which we saw in week nine.

Third, because as Momaday writes, the "oral tradition can be shown, dramatically, to exist within the framework of a literary continuance." The oral tradition works alongside documentary evidence to provide a comprehensive history and memory of a Kiowa culture going back to its origins, in the hollow log and the Yellowstone country.

How do the horse and the buffalo play a central role not only in Kiowa culture but in the way *The Way to Rainy Mountain* records the struggles of Kiowa culture in the face of U.S. colonialism?

In his essay "The Man Made of Words" Momaday includes the story of the arrowmaker found in chapter XIII of the book, and says "it is a link between language and literature" as well as the clearest illustration of "that personification which in this instance emerges from it: the man made of words." Why is the arrowmaker made of words? What are we to make of his killing the enemy, who never actually threatens the arrowmaker, by his arrow? What if we as readers sympathize with the man outside the tent?

Week Sixteen: N. Scott Momaday, *The Names*

Momaday divides the book into four chapters:
One: tells story of his ancestors, first on his mother's side then on his father's
Two: his earliest memories 1936-43, when the family lived in Gallup and elsewhere in New Mexico.
Three: during WWII his family lived in Hobbs, NM, when he was roughly 7-12 years old.
Four: in Jemez, NM starting at age 12, his parents taught school among the Pueblo Indians.
Epilogue: tells of his journey north to Tsoai, or Devil's Tower, which coincides with the Prologue to *The Way to Rainy Mountain*.

N. Scott Momaday is well-read in world literature, and quite familiar, for example, with the modernist narrative techniques of James Joyce and Vladimir Nabokov. In reading *The Names* we can see how Momaday understands his work as autobiographical literature and understands autobiography as a subjective practice of memory. By this principle, the world and his history in it was not or is not objectively available but must be built up out of his memory and consciousness. He writes in different modes such as stream of consciousness in order to show not only that the narrator is separate from the protagonist, but that the protagonist can best reach us through an artistic work of memory. The longest section of stream of consciousness narration, about his life in Hobbs, begins with the statement, "I invented history" (97).

That same passage in chapter Three includes the line, "an idea of one's ancestry and posterity is really an idea of the self" (97), which helps explain the content of the first chapter. Louise Erdrich is among the few prominent Native American authors who have acknowledged and written about her non-Indian ancestors, but Momaday does also in this book. His grandfather Theodore Scott was born in 1875 in the "knobs" area of western Kentucky. He worked at various trades including tobacco farmer and sheriff. Theodore's maternal grandmother Natachee was a Cherokee. N. Scott's mother in around 1929 decided to leave aside the life of a southern belle (while living in Fairview, KY, where the Confederate President Jefferson Davis had been born) and "began to see herself as Indian. That dim native heritage became a fascination and a cause for her, inasmuch, perhaps, as it enabled her to assume an attitude of defiance....This act of imagination was, I believe, among the most important events of my mother's early life, as later the same essential act was to be among the most important of my own" (25). She took the name Natachee from her grandmother and went to Haskell Institute, the Indian boarding school in Lawrence, Kansas. Her roommate there was a Kiowa girl, who introduced her to Alfred Morris Mammedaty. In this history N. Scott Momaday admits that Indian identity has to be cultivated, and that most Indians are of mixed ancestry. He prints for us the notarized document from the BIA which says he is 7/8 Indian blood, without commenting on how he perhaps ought to be only 5/8, since only one of his mother's grandparents was Indian.

Momaday uses the word "race" and "racial" (such as in the phrase "racial memory") in a way that most scholars and writers in the 1970s did not. Charles Eastman also used this term race or racial, but that was in a different era. So for example p155 Momaday writes that the Kiowa were a horse culture and "therefore there is in me, as there is in the Tartars, an old, sacred notion of the horse. I believe that at some point in my racial life, this notion must needs be expressed"

In chapter two p61 a passage explains how and why childhood memories are like myths: "They call for a certain attitude of belief on my part now; that is, they must mean something, but their best reality does not consist in meaning. They are not stories in that sense, but they are storylike, mythic, never evolved but evolving ever. There are such things in the world: it is in their nature to be believed; it is not necessarily in them to be understood." Consider how this statement helps explain how the myths in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* should be read.

Momaday's father's family is Kiowa but his grandfather Mammedaty died just before he was born, and he was raised mostly away from Oklahoma, in part among other Indian communities such as at Jemez. Look at the fourth chapter and explain how Momaday writes descriptions of local Indian customs, like other autobiographers we have read. How does it change the effect given that these people are not actually his own tribe?

One can find many connections between Momaday's work and the sketchbook of Etahdleuh Doanmoe, and indeed Momaday is also an artist who includes visual work (by his father Al) in The Way to Rainy Mountain.

Consult pages 178-186 of *A Kiowa's Odyssey* where scholar Janet Catherine Berlo refers to Momaday several times, and explore some of these connections.