

Ted Lewandowski  
(Uniwersytet Opolski)

## SPEAKING BACK TO THE MURDER STATE: GERTRUDE BONNIN'S CALIFORNIA WRITINGS AND THE "LITTLE MATTER OF GENOCIDE"

---

ABSTRAKT

### W ODPOWIEDZI ZBRODNICZEMU PAŃSTWU – KALIFORNIJSKIE PIŚMIENNICTWO GERTRUDY BONNIN I „DROBNA KWESTIA LUDOBÓJSTWA”

Niniejszy artykuł zestawia książkę historyczną na temat dziejów stanu Kalifornia z połowy dziewiętnastego wieku pt. *Murder State* (2012 r.) autorstwa Brendana C. Lindseya z piśmiennictwem Gertrudy Bonnin dotyczącym Indian kalifornijskich opublikowanym w *San Francisco Bulletin* w 1922 r. B.C. Lindsay argumentuje, że wspierana przez państwo przemoc, która miała kluczowe znaczenie dla kolonizacji Kalifornii przez Amerykanów europejskiego pochodzenia, stanowiła akt ludobójstwa w myśl Konwencji ONZ z 1948 r., którego dopuszczono się przeciwko ludom autochtonicznym. Ludobójstwo to podsyte było rasizmem oraz żądzą zdobycia ziemi i zasobów, a dokonano go przy użyciu demokratycznych mechanizmów, którymi dysponowała władza stanu Kalifornia. G. Bonnin już dziewięćdziesiąt lat wcześniej wskazała chęć posiadania ziemi i zasobów, która kierowała Euroamerykanami, jako podstawowy motyw zabójstwa tubylczej ludności. Nie przypisała ona jednak masowych morderstw demokracji, a wrodzonym defektem ludzi rasy białej. Porównanie tezy wysuniętej przez B.C. Lindseya z kalifornijskim piśmiennictwem G. Bonnin nasuwa refleksje na temat charakteru demokracji i zderzenia cywilizacji Euroamerykanów i autochtonów, do którego doszło w Kalifornii.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** Gertruda Bonnin, Zitkala-Ša, Brendan C. Lindsey, *Murder State*, Kalifornia, Indianie Ameryki Północnej, ludobójstwo

## ABSTRACT

This article juxtaposes Brendan C. Lindsey's history of mid-nineteenth-century California, *Murder State* (2012), with Gertrude Bonnin's 1922 writings on the California Indians in the *San Francisco Bulletin*. Lindsey argues that the state-supported violence crucial to the Euro-American colonization of California amounted to a "genocide" against the indigenous peoples, as defined by the UN convention of 1948. This genocide was motivated by racism and desire for land and resources, and implemented through the democratic mechanisms of the state government. Bonnin, writing ninety years earlier, also designates Euro-American desire for land and resources as the primary motive in the erasure of the Native population. She does not ascribe the mass killings to democracy, but to inborn Caucasian defects. The comparison of Lindsey's thesis and Bonnin's California writings prompts reflection on the nature of democracy and the civilizational clash between Euro-American and indigenous cultures that occurred in California.

**KEYWORDS:** Gertrude Bonnin, Zitkala-Ša, Brendan C. Lindsey, *Murder State*, California, American Indians, genocide

---

In *Murder State: California's Native American Genocide, 1846–1873*, Brendan C. Lindsey recounts the Euro-American colonization of present-day California, and the efforts of white settlers and their emerging state to erase the resident Native population. Lindsey demonstrates that in order to accomplish what he terms "genocide," the citizens of California successfully employed the democratic mechanisms of their young government, thereby launching a politically and legally sanctioned campaign of violence. Widely shared ideas of the supposedly "violent nature" of the California Natives, meanwhile, were often used as justification for their murder—though Native violence was, the vast majority of the time, a reaction to white encroachment. As California's "Murder State" developed in the latter half of the nineteenth century, citizens either carried out genocide themselves through organized actions or gave tacit support to state efforts, stemming from open approval, acquiescence, or apathy.<sup>1</sup> Considering the promises of the United States federal government, this genocide should not have occurred. Beginning in 1850, the year California became a state, Congress proposed eighteen treaties with various indigenous nations meant to create eighteen reservations. The California state legislature protested, convincing

---

1 Brendan C. Lindsey, *Murder State: California's Native American Genocide, 1846–1873* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 9–11.

the U.S. Senate to reject ratification.<sup>2</sup> The combination of these legal failures to respect Native rights resulted in the near decimation of the California Indians. By the end of the nineteenth century the indigenous population—utterly disparaged by most of white society—had been reduced by approximately seventy-five percent, to just twenty thousand.<sup>3</sup>

In the early 1920s, one noted American Indian woman publicized the plight of Native Californians. Gertrude Simmons Bonnin (1876–1938), better known by her Lakota name, Zitkala-Ša (Red Bird), traveled to the state to report on conditions. Her work was supported by the General Federation of Women's Clubs (GWFC), an activist organization then involved in a variety of civil rights struggles across the United States. The outcome was series of critical exposés published in the *San Francisco Bulletin*.<sup>4</sup> In speaking back to the Murder State, Bonnin drew a sharp contrast between communal Native values and Euro-American acquisitiveness and its deadly consequences. Though these writings were infused with a simplistic sentimentality, today Bonnin's comments prompt further reflection on the state violence that played such a large role in wresting California's vast lands from their original inhabitants.

\* \* \*

The history of the California Indians is understandably long. Peoples had inhabited the West coast of the North American continent since 2000 B.C., forming a wide diversity of approximately five hundred distinct tribes ranging from North to South. The richness of the land in terms of plant life and game meant that few peoples had the need to develop crop cultivation and engaged in relatively few conflicts.<sup>5</sup> According to the most assiduous researcher on their population, Sherburne F. Cook,

---

2 Robert Heizer, *The Eighteen Unratified Treaties of 1851–52 between the California Indians and the United States Government* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 1.

3 Sherburne F. Cook, *The Population of the California Indians, 1769–1970* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 199–200.

4 Tadeusz Lewandowski, *Red Bird, Red Power: The Life and Legacy of Zitkala-Ša* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 163.

5 J.S. Holliday, *Rush for Riches: Gold Fever and the Making of California* (Berkeley: Oakland Museum of California and University of California Press, 1999), 6–7.

their number is thought to have been 310,000 prior to European arrival.<sup>6</sup> In the mid-1700s, the peoples of the Pacific coastal regions came in contact with Spanish colonizers. Sustained by the Crown, over approximately sixty years the Franciscans established a network of Catholic missions that reached northward past present-day San Francisco. The rule of the Spaniards and spread of their diseases had serious consequences for Native Californians. Missionaries sought to convert their new brothers, impose the Spanish language, and create a European-style economy based on agriculture and the exploitation of indigenous labor. The Spanish commonly employed corporal punishment to encourage diligence and discourage “vicious pagan practices.” During the years 1790–1800, the padres baptized 16,100 neophytes, 9,300 of whom died from various causes. This death rate of fifty-eight percent was consistently exceeded to the point where converts suffered an eighty-six percent death rate due to epidemics of measles, tuberculosis, small pox, and syphilis.

Greater troubles occurred following the declaration of Mexican independence in 1821. The mission system subsequently underwent a process of secularization, in which half the land and livestock was to go to the Indians and half to new citizens. Corruption prevailed, resulting in the rapid theft of lands by government cronies. By the 1830s, Natives in former-mission areas were forced to disperse as Mexican and American ranchers moved in, forcibly appropriating farms and land. In 1848, the United States took control of the California region following the Mexican-American War.<sup>7</sup> While beforehand there had never been more than four Spanish colonizers for every hundred Indians in the region,<sup>8</sup> after the announcement that gold had been discovered, in 1849, a flood, or “rush,” of whites poured into coastal lands. Those Natives in more northerly regions who had largely avoided permanent penetration now had to contend with a true invasion that came with pollution and the decimation of game. Hydraulic mining, logging, commercial hunting, damming, urbanization, and a general plundering of resources quickly ensued, leaving the landscape transformed within just one generation.<sup>9</sup> Deforestation and the

---

6 Cook, *The Population of the California Indians, 1769–1970*, 43.

7 Holliday, *Rush for Riches*, 8–41.

8 Sherburne F. Cook, *The Conflict between the California Indian and White Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 256–57.

9 Holliday, *Rush for Riches*, 163–64.

poisoning of water sources for the first time became common occurrences.<sup>10</sup> When California was granted statehood in 1850, the census counted 93,000 Indians.<sup>11</sup> Congress made them no formal appropriation of land. Instead, in the immediate years a series of eighteen “proposed” treaties were signed with one third of the indigenous tribes, theoretically guaranteeing the creation of eighteen reservations. The California state legislature objected vociferously, successfully lobbying the Senate to reject ratification. The treaties were subsequently sealed by injunction (until 1905).<sup>12</sup>

With federal interference countered, the California state government enacted its own methods for solving the “Indian problem” by offering bounties to militias of “Indian killers.” No legal impediments—or for that matter social or cultural prohibitions—protected indigenous life. Farmers could and did shoot at will to protect perceived threats to newly acquired property.<sup>13</sup> From this time the genocide implemented by the Murder State, as dubbed by Lindsey, developed rapidly. Lindsey writes that during this period Euro-Americans employed the “clever manipulation of democracy and its various institutions: local and county governments, the press, and the state legislature, executive, and judiciary,” in order to protect their economic interests and procure new lands for use. In Northern California, for instance, Indians were forced into the highlands. With game decimated, there began a cycle of Native retaliation and stock theft, met with more violence from whites who, organized into death squads, did not discriminate between killing indigenous men, women, or children. “Militia law,” sought by California citizens through petition, empowered individuals to protect property with deadly force when the state militia was indisposed. Kidnapping and slavery were also common.

---

10 See Charles N. Alpers, Michael P. Hunerlach, Jason T. May, and Roger L. Hothem, “Mercury Contamination from Historical Gold Mining in California,” November, 2005. <https://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/2005/3014/>; Raymond F. Dasmann, “Environmental Changes before and after the Gold Rush,” in *A Golden State: Mining and Economic Development in Gold Rush California*, edited by James J. Rawls and Richard J. Orsi (Oakland: University of California Press, 1999), 105–22; Randall Rohe, “Man and the Land: Mining’s Impact in the Far West,” *Arizona and the West* (1986): 310–38.

11 Stuart Banner, *How the Indians Lost Their Land: Law and Power on the Frontier* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2005), 230.

12 Robert Heizer, *The Eighteen Unratified Treaties of 1851–52 between the California Indians and the United States Government* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 1.

13 Holliday, *Rush for Riches*, 163–64.

Lindsey notes that California's campaign of genocide was openly waged at the highest levels of the state government. Throughout the 1850s and 60s, each sitting governor of California received petitions from numerous communities requesting intervention from state militias and federal troops to expel or exterminate the Native population. Californians felt this an unavoidable conflict, justified by Manifest Destiny and the belief that inferior aborigines would—as if by some unstated divine edict—eventually die out as superior whites replaced them. Speaking in 1852, Governor Peter H. Burnett announced: “That a war of extermination will continue to be waged between the two races until the Indian race becomes extinct, must be expected; while we cannot anticipate this result but with painful regret, the inevitable destiny of the race is beyond the power to avert.” The *Californian* concurred: “We desire only a white population in California; even the Indians among us, as far as we have seen, are more a nuisance than a benefit to the country; we would like to get rid of them.”<sup>14</sup> The collective effect of this mentality and the state's policies were overwhelming. As put by Cook: “[The Indian] was driven from his home by the thousands, starved, beaten, raped, and murdered with impunity. He was not only given no assistance in the struggle against foreign diseases, but was prevented from adopting even the most elementary measures to secure his food, clothing, and shelter. The utter devastation caused by the white man was literally incredible.” By the 1900s, the indigenous population had been reduced to approximately twenty thousand persons, who often existed in a state of near starvation on the peripheries of a constantly-expanding, transplanted society.<sup>15</sup> The U.S. federal government ultimately sponsored this grand divestment. Washington at times supplied troops and eventually reimbursed California for the expenditures incurred funding death squads and individual Indian killers.<sup>16</sup>

\* \* \*

When Gertrude Bonnin arrived in California in the early 1920s, it would be sheer understatement to say that the state's Native population had been

---

<sup>14</sup> Lindsey, *Murder State*, 179, 184, 191, 195–96, 216–17, 231–32, 271.

<sup>15</sup> Cook, *The Population of the California Indians*, 199–200.

<sup>16</sup> Lindsey, *Murder State*, 355.

marginalized. To Bonnin, this was a trend she had witnessed in one way or another since her birth in 1876. At age eight, then named Gertrude Simmons, she had been removed from the Yankton Reservation in present-day South Dakota for a course of assimilationist schooling at White's Manual Labor Institute in Wabash, Indiana. Separated from her mother for most of her formative years, she eventually gained admission to Indiana's Earlham College, where she became a star pupil.<sup>17</sup> During this time Simmons's Sioux Nation suffered greatly, experiencing the forced extinction of the buffalo by a United States Army policy of mass slaughter, and the constant division of communal, ancestral lands at the hands of the U.S. government (which more often than not freed up lands for white settlement and cattle grazing). Resistance was sometimes met with overwhelming force. In December of 1890, the Wounded Knee massacre occurred. Over two hundred Lakota men, women, and children were killed by the Seventh Cavalry in a tragically brutal act that ended any hope of the Sioux continuing a fully traditional lifestyle.<sup>18</sup> Simmons, meanwhile, continued her life in Euro-American society, eventually securing a teaching post at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, founded in 1879 by the federal government in order to assimilate Indians to American ways. There, Simmons took a dim view of the school's efforts to erase Native cultures. She subsequently left to make a career as a musician and writer in Boston, where in 1900 she published articles critical of Indian assimilation in the *Atlantic Monthly*. These writings signaled an increasing break from white America. Simmons soon after moved back to Sioux Country, married a mixed-race Sioux named Raymond Bonnin, and relocated to the Uintah and Ouray Reservation in Utah. Once settled, she dedicated approximately fifteen years of her life to assisting the besieged Ute population. By the late 1910s, however, Bonnin had emerged as part of the front line of the early Native-rights movement as secretary of the Native self-help organization, the Society of American Indians (SAI).<sup>19</sup> This reform work

---

17 Leon Speroff, *Carlos Montezuma, MD, A Yavapai American Hero: The Life and Times of an American Indian, 1866–1923* (Portland: Arnica Publishing, 2005), 206–07.

18 See Paul H. Carlson, *The Plains Indians* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), 175–82; Thomas Constantine Maroukis, *Peyote and the Yankton Sioux: The Life and Times of Sam Necklace* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 21–23; Jeffery Meyers, *Converging Stories: Race, Ecology, and Environmental Justice in American Literature* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 111.

19 Lewandowski, *Red Bird, Red Power*, 11–13.

took her to Washington, D.C., where after the SAI's disbanding, Bonnin partnered with the powerful, two-million-strong General Federation of Women's Clubs, founded in 1892 by female suffragists.<sup>20</sup> The GFWC promoted her work as a lecturer and investigator within their Indian Welfare Committee, formed in June 1921.

One of the Bonnin's first tasks under the auspices of the Indian Welfare Committee was an investigative trip to California, meant to shed light on the conditions under which the state's indigenous peoples endured.<sup>21</sup> The product was a series of articles for the *San Francisco Bulletin*. Published in 1922, the pieces combined "poetics and politics" (as Cathy N. Davidson and Ada Norris put it) with religiosity and awe of the natural, tracing the California region's indigenous history in a highly sentimental vein.<sup>22</sup> In them, Bonnin challenged the ingrained racism that helped fuel the California genocide. This theme was highly pertinent. Newly arrived Californians naturally feared and hated Indians, thinking them to be utter savages, while into the twentieth century Indians continued to be seen as sub-human—perhaps a "connecting link" between uncivilized, ancient man-beasts and modern homo-sapiens. To cite the representative observation of one Californian: "The [Indian] men and boys, especially, look more like orangutans than human beings."<sup>23</sup> Bonnin overturned this racial discourse by portraying Natives as innately spiritual, and Euro-American society as ruled by savage, material predispositions that bring about environmental and human devastation in a deterministic search for wealth.

"California Indian Trails and Prayer Trees" commences Bonnin's four-part critique. It establishes the connection between nature and Native cultures by explaining a ritual in which a young mother would find

---

20 Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 23; William Willard, "Zitkala-Ša: A Woman Who Would Be Heard!" *Wicazo Sa Review* 1 (1985): 13.

21 See Susan Rose Dominguez, "The Gertrude Bonnin Story: From Yankton Destiny to American History, 1904–1938" (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 2005), 252–54; Lewandowski, *Red Bird, Red Power*, 159, 163; Deborah Sue Welch, "Zitkala-Ša: An American Indian Leader, 1876–1938" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wyoming, 1985): 179.

22 Cathy N. Davidson and Ada Norris, eds., introduction to *American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), xxvii–xxviii.

23 Lindsey, *Murder State*, 23–24, 355.



a California redwood just beginning to grow, and graft a “sacred token of her baby in its topmost shoot.” She would speak: “In memory of my beloved child, bear this token up as you reach upward to the stars. I want my child to grow upright and strong along with you through all the seasons.” Such “prayer trees” remain “sacred” but have come under threat, much like the people themselves, by whites: “Catastrophe it was when both the big trees and the ancient race of red men fell under the ax of a nineteenth-century invasion.” That Indian and tree fell together is significant, while the reasons demand reflection. Bonnin conjectures why her people “have fared so badly under the foremost democratic government of the world.” It is, she ironically suggests, a matter of race:

I used to wonder if it could be the pigment of the skin that was our offense. Yet, in nature, flowers of every hue abound. Sin could not be in a color. When I began perusing the papers I was amazed at the crimes being committed in large cities, brother against brother. Scarce could I believe the palefaces were killing one another, too. From this I reasoned it was not the Indian’s dark skin that had brought on his unspeakable sorrows at the hands of heartless men, money crazed.

In this passage white skin—despite Bonnin’s apparent insistence that color has no meaning—becomes a symbol of violence, chaos, and environmental devastation. The link between whiteness and aggression explains recent events. Bonnin declares the Great War “a monumental attempt at suicide by the Caucasian race.” She continues: “It grieved me that in the past my people were ruthlessly slaughtered in the white man’s quest for gold. It grieved me no less that the white man’s greed for gold, for world power, now turned death dealing bombs and gases upon himself.” Therefore, the “mechanical genius” boasted by European peoples amounts to “powers misused”—not only against indigenous peoples, but ultimately for “self-destruction.”<sup>24</sup>

Bonnin continues her analysis of civilizational clash and inborn Caucasian defects in “Lost Treaties of the California Indians,” outlining the history of white encroachment on the Pacific coast. She references the

---

<sup>24</sup> Zitkala-Ša, “California Indian Trails and Prayer Trees,” *San Francisco Bulletin*, 1922. Reprinted in Davidson and Norris, *American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings*, 250–53.

treaties of the early 1850s, which promised 750,000,000 acres of reservation lands for the California Indians, as well as “moneys, subsistence, clothing, supplies and educational advantages.” Though guaranteed territorial sovereignty, the tribes’ lands were invaded by “lawless gold seekers” who killed and appropriated at will. The very treaties meant to prevent such encroachments were returned to Washington, where the Senate sealed them. These “lost” treaties signify a duplicitous act that must be rectified by immediate government action.<sup>25</sup> Such action, of course, could assist those indigenous Californians who remain in the state. In “The California Indians of Today” Bonnin outlines the present situation. She insists that if presented with the chance to participate in modern society the Californian Indians, though suffering from poverty and European diseases, will quickly “equal the average American.” Should Californians support a Congressional bill that will reimburse indigenous peoples for stolen lands, “national honor” may be restored.<sup>26</sup>

Aside from agitating for the California Indians’ cause, in these short essays Bonnin expresses what is to her was the defining difference between Native peoples and Euro-Americans. Her final statement, “Heart to Heart Talk,” dwells the familial relationship among tribe members. “I was born on the Dakota Plains,” she writes, “[where] by marriage, by blood, or by adoption every member of the tribe bore some relationship to the rest. It was considered an honor for a hunter who brought home game to divide it with his neighbors. Especially true was this in times of famine.” Such reinforced connections precluded the egocentric individualism characteristic of white society. “This is a beautiful spirit,” she continues, “It is the very essence of the Sermon on the Mount of which our white brothers talk in their modern churches. Our Indian ancestors cultivated this wonderful spirit when they worshipped in the living temples, those ancient forests Nature took so many centuries to build, and which unfortunately our white brothers destroyed.” Here, Bonnin designates the Christian virtues of fraternity and generosity within a people whose cultures and religions pre-date Christianity. Juxtaposed with violent whites,

---

25 Zitkala-Ša, “The Lost Treaties of the California Indians,” *San Francisco Bulletin*, 1922. Reprinted in Davidson and Norris, *American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings*, 254–57.

26 Zitkala-Ša, “The California Indians of Today,” *San Francisco Bulletin*, 1922. Reprinted in Davidson and Norris, *American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings*, 258–60.

Indians are the true standard-bearers of spiritual and moral values. As such, Native peoples must take pride in their heritage while the United States, if it can be compelled to offer fair treatment, will only play an ancillary role to these civilizations already long established. Meanwhile, the white impulse to kill and accumulate can only be fought through Indian organization. Natives must “think and act together” and thereby have a voice in “our country.”<sup>27</sup>

\* \* \*

There are some bases on which to criticize Bonnin’s articles on the California Indians, ranging from their romanticized view of Native life and irreconcilable contrast between indigenous and Euro-American values, to their overly sentimental tone. Still, the themes in her articles strike a relevant chord. The white avarice for land and wealth Bonnin speaks of, and the question she poses as to why Indians “have fared so badly under the foremost democratic government of the world,” are highly germane to Lindsey’s thesis in *Murder State*. So, too, is Bonnin’s suggestion that “the pigment of the skin that was our offense,” that is, the reason for California’s campaign of violence against Indians. While she designates the primary motivations of Euro-American settlers (greed and racial intolerance) in attempting to expunge the indigenous peoples of California, Bonnin falls short of pinpointing how this desire to protect newly-wrested property and resources found expression through a democratic governance that resulted in the state-sponsored killing that Lindsey describes. For according to Lindsey two factors—hatred of Indians and desire for their lands and gold deposits—fueled the democratic Murder State’s genocide.

The term “genocide” was, of course, not in circulation in the nineteenth century. It first appeared in 1944, coined by the Polish lawyer Raphael Lemkin, an early analyst of the Holocaust who was instrumental in the formation of international law. In applying the term to the Nazi atrocities, Lemkin was not describing a novel phenomenon, but identifying a crime as ancient as humanity. Though Lemkin mainly saw genocide as

---

<sup>27</sup> Zitkala-Ša, “Heart to Heart Talk,” *San Francisco Bulletin*, 1922. Reprinted in Davidson and Norris, *American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings*, 261–63.

emanating from a central authority, in *Murder State* Lindsey stresses that in the California example the mass killing was largely a grass roots affair due to pervasive racism and the inherent weakness of the burgeoning state—though state support was naturally crucial. Lindsey, in his precise labeling of the American conquest of California, makes his case based on the Lemkin-authored United Nations Convention on Genocide (1948), specifically Article 2, which outlines the definition of “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic or religious group,” including killing, “bodily or mental harm,” and the conscious “inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction.” Article 3, Lindsey notes, designates genocide, conspiracy to carry out genocide, inciting genocide, and being complicit in genocide as punishable offenses.<sup>28</sup> There were no punishments meted out for those who engineered and participated in California’s genocide, nor those other genocides committed against numerous indigenous Nations across the Americas since the arrival of Columbus.

Although she did not live to see genocide defined, Gertrude Bonnin devoted the remainder of her life to aiding its victims. In 1923 and 1924, supported by the General Federation of Women’s Clubs and the American Indian Defense Association, she investigated crimes in Oklahoma against the Five Civilized Tribes committed by the political establishment and businessmen determined to appropriate oil-rich Indian lands. These acts included graft, bribery, kidnapping, and murder. In 1926, Bonnin formed her own Indian self-defense organization, the National Council of American Indians (NCAI), which investigated reservation conditions throughout the country, sought to influence Congressional legislation, and protected Native interests, whenever possible, through legal means. The NCAI was her effort to make Indians “think and act together.” Bonnin never witnessed the United States make any serious effort to regain its “national honor” with respect to its “little matter of genocide,” as the Oglala Sioux activist Russell Means (1939–2012) characterized the subjugation of Native Americans.<sup>29</sup> And while her work was instrumental in enacting significant reforms in U.S. Indian policy in the 1930s, she died in 1938, doubtful that

---

<sup>28</sup> Lindsey, *Murder State*, 11–31.

<sup>29</sup> See A. Clare Brandabur, “A Little Matter of Genocide,” Website of University College, Cork. June 3, 2004. Available at: [http://www.monabaker.com/pMachine/more.php?id=A2068\\_0\\_1\\_0\\_M](http://www.monabaker.com/pMachine/more.php?id=A2068_0_1_0_M). Accessed on August 1, 2017.

she had achieved anything substantial.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, in purely juxtaposing her California writings with Lindsey's *Murder State*, Bonnin's strict dichotomy between spiritual, communal Indians and violent, rapacious whites, begins to appear reasonable. One is also reminded that a democracy, without the requisite rights and protections for all individuals within, can devolve into a majority rule that perpetrates state genocide against vulnerable minorities. So to answer Bonnin's question as to why American Indians had "fared so badly under the foremost democratic government of the world," the answer is precisely because that government was democratic, in the crudest sense of the term.

## Works Cited

- Alpers, Charles N., et al. "Mercury Contamination from Historical Gold Mining in California." November, 2005. Available at: <https://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/2005/3014/>. Accessed July 27, 2017.
- Banner, Stuart. *How the Indians Lost Their Land: Law and Power on the Frontier*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2005.
- Brandabur, A. Clare. "A Little Matter of Genocide." June 3, 2004. Website of University College, Cork. [http://www.monabaker.com/pMachine/more.php?id=A2068\\_0\\_1\\_0\\_M](http://www.monabaker.com/pMachine/more.php?id=A2068_0_1_0_M).
- Carlson, Paul H. *The Plains Indians*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1999.
- Cook, Sherburne F. *The Conflict between the California Indian and White Civilization*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976.
- Cook, Sherburne F. *The Population of the California Indians, 1769–1970*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976.
- Cott, Nancy F. *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987.
- Dasmann, Raymond F. "Environmental Changes before and after the Gold Rush." In *A Golden State: Mining and Economic Development in Gold Rush California*, edited by James J. Rawls and Richard J. Orsi. Oakland: University of California Press, 1999.
- Davidson, Cathy N. and Ada Norris, eds., introduction to *American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings*. New York: Penguin Books, 2003.

---

30 See Lewandowski, *Red Bird, Red Power*, 14, 165–72.

- Dominguez, Susan Rose. "The Gertrude Bonnin Story: From Yankton Destiny to American History, 1904–1938." Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 2005.
- Heizer, Robert. *The Eighteen Unratified Treaties of 1851–52 between the California Indians and the United States Government*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1972.
- Holliday, J.S. *Rush for Riches: Gold Fever and the Making of California*. Berkley: Oakland Museum of California and University of California Press, 1999.
- Lewandowski, Tadeusz. *Red Bird, Red Power: The Life and Legacy of Zitkala-Ša*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016.
- Lindsey, Brendan C. *Murder Sate: California's Native American Genocide, 1846–1873*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012.
- Maroukis, Thomas Constantine. *Peyote and the Yankton Sioux: The Life and Times of Sam Necklace*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004.
- Meyers, Jeffery. *Converging Stories: Race, Ecology, and Environmental Justice in American Literature*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005.
- Rohe, Randall. "Man and the Land: Mining's Impact in the Far West." *Arizona and the West* (1986): 299–388.
- Speroff, Leon. *Carlos Montezuma, MD, A Yavapai American Hero: The Life and Times of an American Indian, 1866–1923*. Portland: Arnica Publishing, 2005.
- Welch, Deborah Sue. "Zitkala-Ša: An American Indian Leader, 1876–1938." Ph.D. diss., University of Wyoming, 1985.
- Willard, William. "Zitkala-Ša: A Woman Who Would Be Heard!" *Wicazo Sa Review* 1 (1985): 11–16.
- Zitkala-Ša (Gertrude Bonnin). "California Indian Trails and Prayer Trees." *San Francisco Bulletin*, 1922. Reprinted in Davidson and Norris, *American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings*, 250–53.
- Zitkala-Ša (Gertrude Bonnin). "The Lost Treaties of the California Indians." *San Francisco Bulletin*, 1922. Reprinted in Davidson and Norris, *American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings*, 254–57.
- Zitkala-Ša (Gertrude Bonnin). "The California Indians of Today," *San Francisco Bulletin*, 1922. Reprinted in Davidson and Norris, *American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings*, 258–60.
- Zitkala-Ša (Gertrude Bonnin). "Heart to Heart Talk," *San Francisco Bulletin*, 1922. Reprinted in Davidson and Norris, *American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings*, 261–63.