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From the Great Plains to the Red Apple Country: Identity and Ecology in Zitkala-Ša's *American Indian Stories*

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Identity and ecology are closely interwoven in the autobiographical texts of Lakota writer Zitkala-Ša. Born on a reservation in the prairies of South Dakota, Zitkala-Ša was educated in Quaker mission schools in the "Red Apple Country" of Indiana, and later became a teacher at Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania. Interpellated by strongly conflicting ideologies from a very young age, Zitkala-Ša gradually developed her own, Native-American version of W. E. B. Du Bois's famous concept of "double consciousness." While the Western, American aspect of her identity is expressed not least in the fact that she wrote all of her essays and stories in English, her Indian self-understanding was anchored in her special relationship to nature. In my essay, I demonstrate how representations of the imperiled ecological space of the Great Plains are of central importance to Zitkala-Ša's autobiographical texts, and how her Native-American double consciousness aided her in her political fight for Native American civil rights and environmental justice.

Zitkala-Ša was a woman of many names. Registered as Gertie Felker when she was born on the Yankton Sioux Reservation in the winter of 1876, she would later take on the Lakota word for "Red Bird" – Zitkala-Ša – as her Indian name and use it alongside her married American name Gertrude Bonnin, depending on the context. The ambiguity in naming mirrors the ambiguity of Zitkala-Ša's identity: born into the confined landscape of an Indian reservation, she was educated in Quaker mission schools in Indiana, and later became a teacher at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania. Interpellated by strongly conflicting ideologies from a very young age, Zitkala-Ša could not help but

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develop a Native American version of the dual and conflicted identity that W. E. B. Du Bois has called "double consciousness." Referring to the "souls" of oppressed African Americans, Du Bois famously explains that these are necessarily shaped by "a world which yields [them] no true self-consciousness, but only lets [them] see [themselves] through the revelation of the other world" (Du Bois 45). The "other world" that Du Bois mentions is of course white America: the European American citizens of the United States who at the time oppressed both black Americans and American Indians, if in different ways. While the destinies of these two minorities were in many ways quite different, they also shared some commonalities: both groups were labeled, by European Americans, as backward, uncivilized and pre-modern, and members of both groups had to define and negotiate their identities over and against the stereotypes and prejudices that were constantly imposed on them.

Born on an Indian reservation and subjected to a "modern" education at Indian boarding schools, Zitkala-Ša's experiences mirror those of thousands of Native Americans who struggled with the psychological consequences of dispossession and forced acculturation. As I will show in the following, Zitkala-Ša responded to these social and cultural pressures with her own version of "double consciousness": while the Western, American aspect of her identity is expressed not least in the fact that she wrote all of her essays and stories in English, she was able to retain important aspects of her Indian identity, expressing them predominantly through her spiritual relationship to nature. In her autobiographical writings, Indian identity always springs from the earth and is anchored in the inseparability of humans (of all colors) and the rest of the natural world. Representations of the imperiled ecological space of the Great Plains pervade her texts, and when she remembers moments of personal serenity and self-confidence they are without exception related to the natural environment of the prairies. While the forced assimilation practices at the Indian boarding schools she attended did not leave her unchanged, Zitkala-Ša refused to let go of Indian culture and its deep connections with nature. Making the best of her insider-outsider status in American society she learned to use her hybrid identity deliberately for the political fight for Native American civil and environmental rights.

Whoever speaks or writes about American Indians and the environment is quickly suspected of embracing that romanticizing image that Shepard Krech III has called the "Ecological Indian." As Krech points out in his influential book of the same title, published in 1999, the Ecological Indian is the stereotype of "a man living in and with nature who understands the systemic consequences of his actions, feels deep sympathy with all living forms, and takes steps to conserve so that earth's

harmonies are never imbalanced and resources never in doubt" (*Ecological* 21). The Ecological Indian, Krech explains, is one manifestation of the stereotype of the "Noble Savage," and it was repeatedly used by European intellectuals such as Montaigne and Rousseau to laud the pureness, naturalness, and equality of Indian life and to condemn the life style of the Old World as corrupt, greedy, and unnatural.[1] The problem with "the rhetoric implicit in the image of the Ecological Indian," according to Krech, is that it "masks complex and differing realities" ("Beyond" 3). After all, environmental historians have shown that Native Americans, too, had a transformative influence on their environment, and that there have been instances in history when Native American practices actually turned out to be ecological unsustainable.[2] Our awareness of the dangers of romanticization however, as Krech also points out, should not prevent us from seeing that indigenous people in North America and elsewhere did (and do) indeed possess "extensive and precise knowledge of their environment" ("Beyond" 3). The deep spiritual connection to and direct dependence on the land manifested itself in Indian social and cultural tradition, thus shaping Indian knowledge and identity.

It is this kind of place-bound ecological knowledge and cultural tradition that we find on display in Zitkala-Ša's autobiographical *American Indian Stories* (1921), and it is striking to note how consistently the Indian component of her identity is linked to her memories of a traditional life in and with nature. In "Impressions of an Indian Childhood," the first chapter of *American Indian Stories*, Zitkala-Ša remembers her early childhood on the Yankton Sioux Reservation in South Dakota. The life of Indian children on the reservation, she makes clear, was embedded in the natural world. Not only did she drink the water from the nearby river and – at least during the summer months – eat her meals outside on the grass, but it also was plants and trees that provided both candy and entertainment. "Many a summer afternoon," Zitkala-Ša remembers,

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[1] French intellectuals such as Montaigne and Rousseau, Krech explains, "seizing on liberty and equal access to basic resources as characteristic of 'savage life' and important virtues to emulate, were without peer over two centuries in developing an imagery of noble indigenousness" (18). The works of these writers were extremely influential, not least in the "New World." While, as Krech points out, "one train of influence runs toward and converges with the nature poetry of William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and others . . . a nearly uninterrupted path runs from Wordsworth to James Fenimore Cooper, best-selling author from the early 1820s through the 1840s and arguably the most important nineteenth-century figure for development of the Noble Indian imagery" (18).

[2] For a detailed discussion of Native American environmental practices, see Carolyn Merchant's *American Environmental History*, especially chapter 1: "The American Environment and Native-European Encounters, 1000-1875."

"a party of four or five of my playmates roamed over the hills with me. We each carried a light sharpened rod about four feet long, with which we pried up certain sweet roots" to eat it like candy (21). A few lines down in the same chapter, she recalls how

> the mere shifting of a cloud shadow in the landscape near by was sufficient to change our impulses; and soon we were all chasing the great shadows that played among the hills. We shouted and whooped in the chase; laughing and calling to one another, were like little sportive nymphs on that Dakota sea of rolling green. (*American Indian* 22-3)

In this poetic passage, Zitkala-Ša describes the natural environment of the reservation fondly, almost lovingly. "The Dakota sea of rolling green" emerges as the idyllic setting of an untroubled and happy childhood supported and protected by a tightly-knit social network and a close relationship to the land. The setting is so idyllic, in fact, that it sometimes comes unsettlingly close to the romanticized version of Native American life that we find expressed in Western notions of the Noble Savage. The only serious problem in this peaceful remembered world is what Zitkala-Ša's mother calls the "paleface," but it is a problem so multifaceted and ubiquitous that from the very first pages of the narrative it compromises and threatens the remembered childhood idyll. We learn that white Americans are not only directly responsible for the death of Zitkala-Ša's uncle and sister, but for the plight of the Sioux people in general. "We were once very happy," Zitkala-Ša remembers her mother saying, "but the paleface has stolen our lands and driven us hither. Having defrauded us of our land, the paleface forced us away" (*American Indian* 10). The "defrauding" mentioned here most likely refers to the fact that in 1858, the Yankton chief Struck-by-the-Ree and nine other Yankton headmen had reluctantly signed over 11 million acres of Sioux land to the American government. In exchange, they were guaranteed that the remaining 435,000 acres of their land was "reserved" for the tribe's own use. In addition, the US government promised to provide the newly established Yankton Reservation for fifty years with "food, livestock, lumber, plows, cash, and other services, totaling $1.6 million" (Rappaport 7). Doreen Rappaport tells us that as a result of the treaty, "the Yanktons were rounded up and force marched . . . to the reservation. When they arrived . . . they were told they could not leave without a written pass" (7).

These are the traumatic experiences that prompt Zitkala-Ša's mother to assert that "the paleface is a sham, – a sickly sham" (*American Indian* 9). Not only has the white man cheated her and her people out of their land and thus made it impossible for them to sustain themselves; he is

now also in the position to exchange the badly-needed food rations for a defining influence on the education – and eventually on the identity and psyche – of their children. Zitkala-Ša's mother knows that if she does not agree to have her son and daughter schooled away from the reservation, her already insufficient food rations will be cut in half. This is why she reluctantly agrees to have both her son David and Gertrude taken to Indian boarding schools where they can learn how to be civilized and "white." From what Zitkala-Ša tells us, her mother seems to have done her best to prepare her daughter to be a traditional Yankton woman during the first seven years of her life. However, even as the little girl was educated in a traditional Indian way, we should not forget that her identity was already at that early age a hybrid one, and deeply influenced by the European conquest of the American continent. Not only did Zitkala-Ša grow up on a *reservation* on which Indian life was circumscribed and often policed by American authorities, she also was half-white herself. Her father was a white man whom her mother seems to have left after he mistreated her oldest son David (from a different father). However, while her mixed-race ancestry as well as her life in the constrained space of a reservation must have seemed entirely natural to the little girl, the experience in an Indian residential school was not. The coerced re-education and indoctrination that she experienced there, shared by hundreds of thousands of Indian children over the decades, produced a significant rupture in Zitkala-Ša's life, and had a deep impact on her identity and her relation to her native land.

Initially, we learn in Zitkala-Ša's memoir, she was eager to go. When her mother first tells little Gertrude that her brother has spoken to the "paleface missionaries," she fears that "David had forbidden them to see me and that my hope of going to the Wonderland would be blighted" (*American Indian* 40). Her friend Judéwin has told her that the missionary school is "in the East, in a land of great trees filled with red, red apples. You could reach out your hands and pick all the red apples you could eat there" (41-2). Gertrude has never seen apple trees and not "tasted more than a dozen red apples" in her life (42). A keen lover of nature, she cannot wait to see the "Red Apple Country" with its fabulous orchards and thus decides that she must go, against the wishes of her mother, who warns her that the missionaries' "words are sweet, but, my child, their deeds are bitter" (41).

The little girl insists and in the end follows the missionaries to "the wonderful Eastern land" (43); already in the train to Indiana, however, she realizes that things might indeed not be quite as wonderful as the missionaries have promised her. White children are staring at her, pointing at her moccasined feet: "Their mothers, instead of reproving such rude curiosity, looked closely at me, and attracted their children's further

notice to my blanket. This embarrassed me, and kept me constantly on the verge of tears" (*American Indian* 48). The embarrassing incident foreshadows the humiliating and painful experiences that Gertrude will make at the school, where the sole aim of her teachers will be to erase every possible trace of her Indian identity to make her a civilized member of the "modern" American world.

Throughout the period of their existence – roughly from 1870-1990 – the expressed aim of Indian residential schools all over the United States was the complete transformation of American Indian children into assimilated working-class Americans. Shepard Krech reminds us that despite frequent romanticization of Indian culture "nineteenth-century anthropologists and sociologists positioned savages on the earliest and lowest rungs of human society" in their theories of social evolution (*Ecological* 17). Most white Americans viewed traditional Indian culture and education as backward and worthless if not dangerous, and they acted accordingly. Richard Henry Pratt, captain in the US Army and the founder of the notorious Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, was one of the most influential people in terms of Indian education and federal Indian policy at the turn of the twentieth century. "It is a great mistake to think that the Indian is born an inevitable savage," Pratt explained in a paper read at the Nineteenth Annual Conference of Charities and Correction in Denver in 1892 (Pratt). "Transfer the savage-born infant to the surroundings of [modern] civilization, and he will grow to possess a civilized language and habit" (Pratt). Pratt's infamous battle-cry, "Kill the Indian in him, and save the man," formulated with perfect clarity the goal of Native American re-education.

In his confrontational book of the same title – *Kill the Indian, Save the Man* (2004) – Ward Churchill gives a detailed and often heart-wrenching account of the practices at Indian residential schools in the USA and Canada. The regimen at such schools, Churchill explains, was "deliberately and relentlessly brutal," not least in psychological terms (19). "From the moment the terrified and bewildered youngsters arrived at the schools . . . a comprehensive and carefully-calibrated assault on their cultural identity would commence" (Churchill 19). The children, who had often been taken forcefully from their native reservations, were forbidden to speak indigenous languages or practice native spirituality and instead "educated" in modern Western mores and forcefully converted to Christianity. In Churchill's view, the ruthless and brutal "Americanization" of Native Americans by forced cultural assimilation was nothing less than a genocidal practice, one that aimed at destroying the very cul-

tural foundations of a people by systematically erasing that culture from the identities of their children.[3]

This seems to have been exactly what happened to Zitkala-Ša in what she calls the Josiah White Institution's "civilizing machine" (*American Indian* 66). "I had arrived in the wonderful land of rosy skies," she writes about her first days at the Institute, "but I was not happy, as I had thought I should be" (51). Her description of the confined and lifeless space of the school contrasts sharply with the "Dakota sea of rolling green." Arriving in Indiana in early February, she finds no rosy skies or red apples. Instead, everything in the "massive brick building" of the school seems cold and dead to her, and "the constant clash of harsh noises" and "the annoying clatter of [western] shoes on bare floors" (*American Indian* 53) frighten and bewilder the young girl, who feels like "the captured young of a wild creature" (45). The process of "civilization" begins almost immediately, and in the next few days Gertrude looses her soft moccasin shoes, her beloved blanket, her long braids, and her very humanness: "Not a soul reasoned with me, as my own mother used to do; for now I was only one of many little animals driven by a herder" (*American Indian* 56). From now on, the employees of the school will be doing their best to kill the Indian inside of the little girl.

Because of its central importance in the process of identity formation, language is one of the top priorities of the teachers. Like all the students at Indian residential schools Gertrude and her companions are severely punished for speaking in their native tongues. Since she does not speak a word of her "new" language, it takes Gertrude a year before she is able to communicate with her teachers in what is still broken English. Slowly, though, she begins to adjust. She stops throwing herself lengthwise into the snow to look at her own impression, she learns how to move in clunky shoes and tightly fitting clothes, she learns to wait for the bell before sitting down on a wooden chair for lunch, and she learns to pray correctly – all of this to avoid the ever-looming punishment. She does not, however, allow her teachers to completely erase her Indian identity. Early on, she decides that she "will not submit" (*American Indian* 54), and one of the first English words she learns to speak is "no"

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[3] In his application of the term "genocide," Churchill goes back to what he calls "the *actual* definition of the word" (xlv). This definition was given by Raphaël Lemkin, who coined the term in 1944. Lemkin explained that "generally speaking, genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation, except when accomplished by a mass killing . . . . It is intended rather to signify a coordinate plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of the essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves" (79). In Churchill's view, European American practices in their interaction with American Indian nations fit this original definition of genocide quite perfectly.

(57). She scrutinizes Christian ideology through the lens of Indian spirituality, and, like many other Indian children, she now and then even resists or subverts the strict school regime, thus "actively testing the chains which tightly bound my individuality like a mummy for burial" (*American Indian* 67). When, as a punishment, she is ordered to mash turnips for dinner (which she resents), she hits the masher with so much rage into the bottom of the jar that she destroys it. At another moment, she scratches out with a pencil the wicked yellow eyes of the feared and abhorred "white man's devil" in one of the school's editions of *The Stories of the Bible*, thereby destroying the book thoroughly (*American Indian* 64). In both cases, she feels like having taken revenge; and the scolding she receives for her deeds gives her nothing but deep satisfaction.

Caught between the forcefully assimilationist policy of the school and her residual Indian identity, Gertrude thus develops the "twoness" that W. E. B. Du Bois sees at the basis of a "double consciousness": the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (45). For Du Bois, the dilemma of double consciousness is at the very foundation of the African American experience: as members of a discriminated and oppressed minority, black people in the United States cannot help but look at themselves through the eyes of others who deeply disapprove of them. Trying to be an American and a "Negro" at the same time, Du Bois argues, leads to a mighty conflict between "two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (45). The continuous nature of this deep self-conflict gives white stereotypes an unhealthy power over black self-perception, and there is always the danger that it eventually leads to the complete adaptation of a person's identity to the perceptions of disapproving others.

The dilemma that Du Bois describes seems to have been a common experience not only for African Americans but also for the students of Indian residential schools. Ward Churchill quotes one former student who states that "long before [I had] completed [my] schooling, [I had] learned to hate, not simply the people who oppressed [me], but [my]self and [my] race as well" (24). Zitkala-Ša similarly remembers how her "education" at the White Institute made her feel deeply ambivalent and insecure about her own identity and culture. When in the narrative Gertrude returns to her native reservation for the first time after three years of schooling, she feels estranged not only from her mother and her people, but even from the rolling green hills that she used to love so much. "Even nature seemed to have no place for me," she writes, "I was neither a wee girl nor a tall one; neither a wild Indian nor a tame one" (*American Indian* 69). What becomes evident here is one of the

greatest problems of hybrid and transcultural identities: that of not feeling at home *anywhere*. Neither in the (in this case forced) host culture, nor in the original home culture.

Despite these painful moments of seeming rejection and estrangement, however, Zitkala-Ša continues to connect the Indian component of her identity to the natural environment of the Great Plains. She recalls how "the cloud shadows which drifted about on the waving yellow of long-dried grasses thrilled me like the meeting of old friends" (*American Indian* 86). In a moment of sudden desperation, her younger self steals her brother's pony and gallops into the prairie. When the pony races with her across the level lands, she happily notices that

> There was nothing moving within the great circular horizon of the Dakota prairies save the tall grasses, over which the wind blew and rolled off in long, shadowy waves. Within this vast wigwam of blue and green I rode reckless and insignificant. (70)

Here, the natural space of the prairie becomes Gertrude's "wigwam" and thus her spiritual and emotional home. Evoking the "Dakota sea of rolling green" of her earlier memories, Zitkala-Ša sharply contrasts the confined, artificial environment of the residential school to the openness and sheer vastness of the prairie, the place where she feels at home. Lovingly, she describes the beauty of the grassland, an ecological space at least as much endangered by the advance of the white man as her own culture and identity. At this moment, she seems to be one with the landscape and even if this return and reunification is not permanent – she will enroll in another Indian boarding school only a few months later – the deep spiritual connection with nature displayed here will remain a defining feature of the Indian component of her identity throughout all of Zitkala-Ša's autobiographical texts. "Perhaps," she writes tellingly

> my Indian nature is the moaning wind which stirs [my memories] now for their present record. But, however tempestuous this is within me, it comes out as the low voice of a curiously colored seashell, which is only for those ears that are bent with compassion to hear it. (*American Indian* 67-8)

Equating her own literary voice to the natural sound of a seashell, Zitkala-Ša addresses her (white) reader directly, suggesting to him to listen more carefully to hear what both she and nature might have to tell him.

As in the passage quoted earlier, Zitkala-Ša asserts her Indian identity through a depiction of an indigenous life in harmony with nature. And like in that earlier passage, she relies on what we cannot help but read as

a somewhat romanticized representation of Native American life. Must we thus suspect Zitkala-Ša herself of embracing the problematic image of the "Ecological Indian" that I discussed earlier in this essay? And if yes, was she doing it on purpose? I would argue that the answer to both questions is yes and no. It is crucial to keep in mind that in the clutches of the American "civilizing machine," Zitkala-Ša's memories of the prairies, and of her people's spiritual relationship to them, were one of the few things she could cling to in order to maintain at least part of her Indian identity. Quite possibly, some of these memories became ever more precious to her in the process, and she increasingly romanticized them as a result. However, this should not preclude the fact that, like many American Indians, Zitkala-Ša and her people *did* have a spiritual relationship to nature and what Shepard Krech calls an "extensive and precise knowledge of their environment" ("Beyond" 3).

Secondly, one must remember that one of Zitkala-Ša's main purposes as an adult became to educate white Americans about the beauty and intrinsic value of Indian culture – and to ask for some understanding. Not by coincidence her second important text, *Old Indian Legends* (1901), is a translation, transcript, and re-telling of traditional Sioux legends. Marketed as a children's book, *Old Indian Legends* foregrounds even more pronounced than *American Indian Stories* Native American spirituality and its close connection to nature. While this connection most certainly is something that Zitkala-Ša experienced as true and real in her own life, she might nevertheless have used it rhetorically to make the Indian world she described more attractive to white American readers.

Zitkala-Ša's attempt to bridge cultures, and the sometimes perilous balancing act it implied, was of course always grounded in her own "double" and transcultural identity. Some scholars criticize Zitkala-Ša's attempts to reconcile the conflicting parts of her identity in her writing as a weakness or even failure. Dexter Fisher, for example, argues that the texts' "oscillations between two diametrically opposed worlds" lead to a lack in overall cohesion (237). Other critics, like Martha Cutter, Sandra Stanley, or Jeffrey Myers, see this interpretation as somewhat misguided, as it seems to call for a kind of coherence and closure that Zitkala-Ša's life (and that of many other American Indians who shared her destiny) simply did not offer. As Jeffrey Myers explains, "to let go of Lakota-Dakota culture and embrace the dominant culture's ways [would have been] cultural suicide. But to fail to engage with Euroamerican culture [would have amounted to a tacit acceptance of] cultural genocide" (116). The only practicable way out of this situation was to work within the force field of both cultures and thus with a hybrid identity. Zitkala-Ša's texts show, argues Myers, that she was well aware that white identity was a construction, constructed "not only against 'blackness' but

against the ecological and racial Other containing all people of color and the nonhuman world" (129). And she thus used her writing to construct her own fragile and hybrid identity over and against white supremacy, using images of Native life and nature to affirm and ground the Indian component of her self. "For the white man's papers," writes Zitkala-Ša in *American Indian Stories*, "I had given up my faith in the Great Spirit . . . had forgotten the healing in trees and brooks. . . . Like a slender tree I had been uprooted from my mother, nature, and God" (96). However, she makes clear, this was not the end of her story: "A day would come when my mute aching head, reared upward to the sky, would flash a zigzag lightning across the heavens . . . a new way of solving the problem of my inner self" (97). This new way, for the adult Zitkala-Ša, was to leave her teaching position at Carlisle Indian School and use her hybrid identity in order to do something more meaningful for herself and her people.

While her time in Indian residential schools left Zitkala-Ša with a number of physical and psychological problems, it also thus helped her to develop the cross-cultural literacy and competence that would be of central importance for her later political work. In her autobiographical writings she developed a spirit of resilience that allowed her to be both Zitkala-Ša and Gertrude Bonnin for the remainder of her life. In 1902, three years after leaving her teaching position at the Carlisle Indian School, *The Atlantic Monthly* published her controversial essay "Why I Am a Pagan." In this essay she powerfully affirms her Indian spirituality and her close connection to nature, and sharply criticizes the brutal practices of Christian missionaries. "Still," she adds at the end of her essay,

> I would not forget that the pale-faced missionary and the hoodooed aborigine are both God's creatures, though small indeed their own conceptions of Infinite Love. A wee child toddling in a wonder world, I prefer to their dogma my excursions into the natural gardens where the voice of the Great Spirit is heard in the twittering of birds, the rippling of mighty waters, and the sweet breathing of flowers. If this is Paganism, then at present, at least, I am a Pagan. ("Why I Am a Pagan" 803)

All beings in the world are related, Zitkala-Ša affirms here and elsewhere in her writings; and the insights of Indian tradition and spirituality are in fact of great value for the co-existence of humans and the rest of the natural world, and should thus be preserved and appreciated. Her cross-cultural literacy and double consciousness thus, in the end, served her to better understand the fatal problems inherent in Western approaches to both cultural otherness and the planet as a whole. A few months after

the publication of this essay, Zitkala-Ša returned to South Dakota, to spend the rest of her life as a committed political activist, fighting for civil and environmental rights for American Indians, and the preservation of Native American culture and history.

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