

Longing for Wonderland: Nostalgia for Nature in Post-Frontier America

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Nostalgia has long held the dubious distinction of being one of contemporary theory's most pigeonholed concepts. As David Lowenthal explains, nostalgia stands accused of being "ersatz, vulgar, demeaning, misguided, inauthentic, sacrilegious, retrograde, reactionary, criminal, fraudulent, sinister, and morbid" (27). In some cases, it is guilty as charged. Nostalgia's scapegoat status stems from a range of admittedly problematic traits: its easy cooptation by capitalism, which critics like Fredric Jameson say generates a postmodern cultural paralysis in which old styles are recycled and marketed without critical effect; its ubiquity in the media and the arts, which signifies a lack of creativity, an alienation from the present and a complicity in consumer culture; its tendency to romanticize the past through imagining an origin that is too simplistic; and its reactionary bent—the use of nostalgia by right-wing forces to gloss over past wrongs and glorify tradition as justification for the present. Due to its problematic associations, the term "nostalgic" is often used interchangeably with words like conservative, regressive, ahistorical, or uncritical to disparage or dismiss writers, politicians, scholarship, and cultural texts. Yet as both an emotion and a political narrative—a narrative Linda Hutcheon deems capable of "the unexpected twin evocation of both affect and agency" (199)—nostalgia exceeds such limitations. It is high time to breathe new life into nostalgia, to revitalize and rearticulate its diverse narrative possibilities, and to redeploy it in the service of more progressive politics.

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Literature emerges as a powerful ally in this project. While much contemporary theory subscribes to the above criticisms, a surprising amount of American fiction envisions nostalgia as a disruptive and thus productive force—an individual emotional experience, a source of collective consciousness, or a narrative catalyst that facilitates social critique. Perhaps because it is typically less confined by expectations of coherence or didacticism than traditional scholarship, literature contributes its own unique “theories” of nostalgia, many of which are progressive, transformative, even revolutionary. Literature implicitly defines nostalgia as both a narrative—a way for authors to manipulate language, drive plot, develop characters, and influence readers—and an emotion—felt by readers, shared by groups, perpetuated by institutions, and instilled by both narrative and lived experience. Likewise, my essay treats nostalgia as an emotion and a narrative—a longing to return home that can be felt, wielded, manipulated, and retold in a variety of ways. My recuperation and formulation of counter-nostalgia, which I define in detail below, suggests nostalgia should not be dismissed as inherently conservative or reactionary. Rather, in some contexts, nostalgia can be a mechanism for social change, a model for ethical relationships, and a useful narrative for social and environmental justice.

I focus here on a particular kind of nostalgia that has proven especially prevalent in the United States: nostalgia that takes nature as its object of longing.¹ Often figured as the quintessential home—and frequently posited as the Eden from which humanity has tragically fallen—nature demands attention as a slippery object of nostalgic longing throughout American history. Many nature narratives are fraught with nostalgia—for the western frontier, for unspoiled landscapes, for a pre-industrial golden age, or for harmonious communities with close connections to nature. Yet, despite the frequency with which nostalgic discourse governs conversations about nature, critical work that links nostalgia and nature is conspicuously absent from cultural studies. William Cronon and Raymond Williams are salient exceptions to this rule. Cronon, in particular, has been instrumental in exposing the troubling consequences of mainstream environmentalism’s nostalgia.² Both thinkers offer what I would classify as anti-nostalgic arguments about nature: they use an expository, didactic genre to condemn nostalgia for being a totalizing, romantic, and oversimplified narrative approach to a complex socioeconomic past. Such anti-nostalgia has offered important critiques of nostalgia throughout the century. However, by focusing only on its detrimental effects, anti-nostalgic criticism tends to foreclose alternate readings whereby nostalgia might function in more interesting ways. Instead of reifying nostalgia as always fostering problematic environmental or social narratives, this essay begins to reveal how nostalgia might contribute to more productive stories and offer new insights to theoretical conversations—about nostalgia, nature, and national identity—in American studies.

Like all nostalgic narratives, nostalgia for nature serves a broad range of political agendas. It can justify both localized and national violence, as in Thomas Dixon’s *The Clansman*, or just as readily foster inclusive social justice movements on a global scale, as in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*. Accordingly, I do not intend to glorify nostalgia as always productive or to set up an inviolable

binary between “conservative” and “progressive” nostalgia. Rather, this essay seeks a new theoretical framework—underwritten by a new vocabulary—to enable more nuanced discussion of such diverse narratives and effects. I use the work of two important theorists as a starting point. While they do not address nature, both Svetlana Boym and Andreea Deciu Ritivoi offer useful approaches to thinking about nostalgia more generally. Boym proposes a model based on two kinds of nostalgia: restorative and reflective. She formulates her terms by dividing the word *nostalgi* into its two parts—*nostos*, the “return home,” and *algia*, the “longing.” Restorative nostalgia, linked with “nostos,” poses as truth, embraces tradition, and seeks a reconstruction of the lost “home,” imagined as a return to a coherent origin. She links this sort of nostalgia with national memory and identity. Boym locates transformative potential in longing, which she associates with reflective nostalgia. “Ironic, inconclusive and fragmentary,” reflective nostalgia does not attempt to reconstruct a coherent “home,” but chooses to “explore ways of inhabiting many places at once” (50). This kind of nostalgia embraces ambivalence with the intention of fostering creative dialogue through collective, local memory rather than national metanarratives of linear progress. Ritivoi shares Boym’s goal of recovering productive uses for nostalgia and offers important insight toward that end; rather than being inherently conservative, nostalgia, she argues, can “signal the breach [between past and present] and inaugurate a search for the remedy” (39).

My consideration of nostalgia begins with the premise that this “breach” can be a starting point from which to construct alternate narratives and build positive social change. Extending these authors’ theories, I introduce “official nostalgia” and “counter-nostalgia” as operative terms in a genealogy of nostalgia that theorizes new ways of imagining both the “return” and the “home” (or origin) for which nostalgic narratives long. While official nostalgia is characterized by totalizing metanarratives of return that posit coherent origins as points on a progressive timeline leading to the present day, counter-nostalgia is reflective, in Boym’s sense: it is ambivalent, ironic, localized, contingent, and potentially subversive. Counter-nostalgia depends upon a tactical reappropriation of official nostalgia through creative, often literary, means; in this sense, the two are mutually dependent. I distinguish counter-nostalgic from *anti*-nostalgic texts, like Cronon’s and Williams’s, which work within an expository, theoretical genre of writing that seeks closure in the form of argument. Counter-nostalgic texts, by contrast, incite revisions of history by toying with the blurry realm of readers’ emotions rather than the rule-bound world of argument and so leave “argument” up to each reader to piece together. Official and anti-nostalgia have thus far been the most common narratives of nostalgia addressed by cultural studies; as such, it is counter-nostalgia that offers the most fruitful ground for rejuvenating conversations about nostalgia.

While Boym emphasizes longing as a transformative emotional state, I focus on the “return home” and the ways in which this is imagined by literary texts as a site of potential renegotiation of the past and the present. Both official and counter-nostalgia are fueled by longing—a longing that can be a personal, felt emotion as well as a larger, collective, even national sentiment. The primary distinction between official and counter-nostalgia, then, is their attitude toward the *object* of this

longing—the “home”—and the contrasting ways in which they envision a return to this space and time. Official nostalgia’s “home” is a pure origin—a truthful, cohesive site or event constructed by simplifying and romanticizing a complex past. By contrast, counter-nostalgia envisions the “home” as fractured, fragmented, complicated, and layered; to “return” to this sort of home is to revisit a dynamic past and to invert or exploit official narratives in ways that challenge dominant histories. As Michel Foucault explains, a historical event “is not a decision, a treaty, a reign, or a battle, but the reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it, a feeble domination that poisons itself as it grows lax, the entry of a masked ‘other’” (Nietzsche 154). The counter-nostalgic author appropriates dominant “vocabulary” to make sure her readers long for messy *events* rather than comfortable homes. Moreover, while official nostalgia encourages its adherents to return to a celebrated origin to find both comfort and justification for the present, counter-nostalgia “returns” in order to reflect on the present in critical ways. By recognizing history as non-linear and events as complex—but continuing to long for them in all their complexity—counter-nostalgia has the potential to challenge the logics of “feeble domination” that govern both past and present.

This essay locates and interrogates both official nostalgia for nature and its formidable challenger, counter-nostalgia, in post-frontier America.³ Because it is necessary to understand official nostalgia before seeing how counter-nostalgia reappropriates it, I begin by sketching nostalgia’s role in enabling the incorporation of local Indians into the scenery of Yosemite National Park and identifying the National Park Service (NPS) as representative of a dominant, national, official nostalgia for nature. An agency whose appeal is built, in part, on nostalgic narratives, the NPS embodies the overlap between “real” or material life and fictional or literary narrative: the agency illustrates how nostalgic stories—when used to bolster a fabricated national identity and publicly consumed—can translate into a collectively felt nostalgia that in turn influences real events. After providing a sense of the ways in which official nostalgia for nature was circulating during this period, I read Zitkala-Ša’s *American Indian Stories* as exemplary counter-nostalgic literary narratives. I suggest her stories invert and reappropriate the frontier rhetoric of civilization versus savagery, critique white institutions and their regimen of assimilation, and humanize Indians by linking them, nostalgically, with nature. Zitkala-Ša also complicates the problematic origin myth of nature as unoccupied Eden. Her nostalgia is “counter-” insofar as it seizes contemporary official nostalgic discourse and rewrites it, turning her stories themselves into “events.” Through foregrounding the contributions nostalgic narratives about nature can make to cultural studies, my goal is to move beyond the now pedestrian insight that nature is socially constructed towards discovering new ways of talking about what kinds of nature nostalgia has historically helped produce, as well as what “future natures”⁴ we should imagine. At the same time, my formulation of counter-nostalgia introduces this previously overlooked trope and adds this versatile neologism to theories of nostalgia that have tended to foreclose its more appealing possibilities.

The year 1916 hosted two related events in the U.S.: the formation of the Na-

tional Park Service—arguably the nature-management institution most familiar to the general public—and the first of a seldom-acknowledged series of tourist attractions, Yosemite National Park’s Indian Field Days. Initiated as part of a park strategy to promote tourism in Yosemite National Park during the late summer season, when visitation typically dwindled, the Field Days showcased artifacts and events identified with Yosemite Indian culture, such as basketry, bead work, rodeos, wigwams, and horse races. The NPS granted awards for winners of such superlative designations as “Best Indian Warrior costume” and “Best Indian Squaw costume.” The 1925 Field Days included an Indian Baby Show. Tourists and park officials could pose with the Indians for photo ops or dress themselves in native garb—“playing Indian” to pledge allegiance to the nation.⁵ As Mark David Spence explains, the local Indians “participated in the Field Days because they enjoyed the events and derived certain benefits” from them (120). The Yosemite Indians did receive economic and social compensation for displaying or selling their work and for participating in the festivities. Likewise, visitors to the park appreciated the Field Days: having seen the spectacular American landscapes depicted by painters and the harmonious communities of native people who used to abide in such wilderness, tourists went away feeling they had seen authentic representations of “natural” America. Armed with photos, artwork, and perhaps a basket or a necklace, they had the souvenirs to display their patriotic tourism to the rest of the “civilized” world.⁶ As long as Yosemite’s Indians contributed to the pleasure of tourists, lived up to stereotypes about their culture, and conformed to park-mandated standards of “morality,” they would not be forced out of their homes—at least not immediately (Spence 116-120).⁷

In hindsight, of course, it is clear the valley’s Indians were unfairly commodified: objectified, packaged, and marketed for the gratification of public curiosity and the stimulation of the park’s economy. The NPS identified the Indians with other natural resources of the area and, like these other resources, “managed” them primarily for the sake of tourism. As the costumed native populations became part of the manufactured façade of the park, “unsightly” realities, such as their often dilapidated housing areas, were kept out of the public eye (Spence 121). The official narrative justifying such treatment went something like this: “Indians were the first ‘visitors’ to park areas, who, for a variety of reasons, decided not to visit these lands sometime in the distant past, and . . . ‘real’ Indians ceased to be a viable presence in the area long before the establishment of the national park” (Spence 131). As proponents of such dominant myths, national parks are in many ways “a microcosm for the history of conflict and misunderstanding that has long characterized the unequal relations between the United States and native peoples” (Spence 4). Such “misunderstanding” has often hinged on definitions of nature and the ways in which those definitions are used to subjugate those people deemed most “natural.”⁸ The Field Days show how representations of Indians that locate native culture in a nostalgic, natural pre-history can perpetuate troublesome myths and sanction problematic treatment of America’s native people.

Tracing the shifts in dominant understandings of both American nature and native residents reveals important connections between the two as well as the

ways in which Indians and nature have been malleable symbols in a national agenda that included white supremacy, Manifest Destiny, and global imperialism. Just as the violence involved in this agenda was downplayed, early park publicity “glorified not the commercial and industrial developments that were catapulting the United States to world power but the natural landscapes and ancient ruins of the West that were symbolic of America’s origins” (Shaffer 143). A new version of “cultural nationalism,” based on touring the country’s natural wonders, “grew out of a nostalgic ideal of America as nature’s nation” (Shaffer 146). Perhaps “the nation’s most sacred myth of origin,” nature in America has a long history of being alternately respected and romanticized, or feared and tamed (Cronon 77).⁹ Throughout much of the nineteenth century in America, wilderness, stemming from Biblical references, was “a place to which one came only against one’s will, and always in fear and trembling” (Cronon 71). But toward the end of that century, rapid industrialization and the official closing of the frontier in 1890—coupled with Frederick Jackson Turner’s influential frontier thesis three years later—contributed to a reversal of the earlier wilderness ideology. As industrialization marched steadily forward, more Americans cultivated an anti-modern nostalgic backlash to help alleviate anxieties accompanying the technological, economic, and social developments of the time; correspondingly, wilderness was no longer a scary place in need of taming, but a valuable asset in need of protection. By the turn of the new century, nostalgia for nature—particularly for the lost space of the frontier—had been catapulted into the forefront of the national imaginary, and the nation began to embrace a new “ethic” of preserving its dwindling natural “resources.” One major cost of this preservation was the continued displacement of native populations.

In the context of these changing understandings of the natural world and their popularization by figures like Theodore Roosevelt,¹⁰ the formation of the National Park Service crystallized the burgeoning national nostalgia for nature within a political institution. The agency emerged as the culmination of decades of politics, activism, art, literature, and increasing public appreciation for nature. The seeds for its formation had been planted early in the nineteenth century; some even credit George Catlin’s vision of a “nation’s Park” in 1833 as the first articulation of the national park ideal. Yellowstone had become the first official national park in 1872 and was routinely invoked as a model for later parks’ preservation. Despite its gradual accession into public favor, the NPS’s institutional beginnings required several legitimating factors: the creation of origin stories, the positing of tradition as a key facet of the agency, the constitution of tourism as a primary way of experiencing nature in America, and, as my previous discussion of the Yosemite Indians makes clear, the displacement and either actual or cultural death of native populations. One underlying trope linking these disparate narratives and their effects is nostalgia.

The National Park Service demonstrates how nostalgic stories—when publicly consumed to the degree that they seem “natural”—can lead to actual, troublesome consequences. Consistent with official nostalgia’s tendency to romanticize and simplify its “home,” the NPS both promotes and itself becomes the object of a national nostalgia that eulogizes an ever-endangered natural world while failing to

recognize the power dynamics involved in that nature's preservation. Today, the NPS enjoys a certain amount of appeal as a relatively well-liked government agency that has the best interests of the public in mind, and part of this appeal stems from the strong sense of tradition the agency cultivates.¹¹ In my experience as a longtime seasonal park ranger, most people react with admiration, curiosity, questions, and respect when I tell them of my summer job. Tourists with whom I have talked in visitor centers often express regret—"I wish I'd done something like this when I was your age"—and offer encouragement. Park visitors treat me like a scientist, a police officer, even a medical doctor—none of which I am—simply because I sport the recognizable NPS uniform. When I mention my job to people, I almost always face the question: "Do you get to wear the 'Smokey the Bear Hat'?"¹² The sentimental infatuation with the NPS uniform is pervasive and, I think, reflective of the general public's recognition of the role of tradition in nature management—a recognition that adheres to a nostalgic location of nature itself, along with aspects of the organization that manages it, in the past. In fact, I would argue there is something about nature tourism itself that is fundamentally nostalgic: in the same way museums contain and represent cultural relics from the past, national parks contain and display nature as a relic. The nature of national parks has been created, institutionalized, preserved, and re-presented for public consumption in ways that both generate and capitalize on nostalgia.

It is important to pay attention, though, to the ways in which the touristic interest in superficialities like photographs and uniforms glosses over a complex institutional history. The foundational mythology of the NPS has its basis in politically influenced origin stories and socially constructed conceptions of tradition that continue to this day. "Tradition," like wilderness, had to be created, especially since the NPS had no real precedents for its resource management and only resorts like Niagara Falls on which to model its facilities. Richard West Sellars's history of the NPS explains one popular account of the institution's origins—an account he describes as "a revered part of national park folklore and tradition":

[T]he idea [for the parks] originated in September 1870 during a discussion around a campfire near the Madison Junction, where the Firehole and Gibbon rivers join to form the Madison River in present-day Yellowstone National Park. Nearing the conclusion of their exploration of the Yellowstone country, members of the Washburn-Doane Expedition (a largely amateur party organized to investigate tales of scenic wonders in the area) had encamped at Madison Junction on the evening of September 19. As they relaxed and mused around their wilderness campfire, the explorers recalled the spectacular sights they had seen. Then, after considering the possible uses of the area and the profits they might make from tourism, they rejected the idea of private exploitation. Instead, in a moment of high altruism, the explorers agreed that Yellowstone's awe-inspiring geysers, waterfalls, and canyons should be preserved as a public park. This proposal was soon relayed to high political circles, and within a year and a half Congress established Yellowstone Park. (8)

As an origin myth, this one serves its purpose: it provides a succinct, romantic story that can be easily retold; it offers compelling, heroic characters in an inspira-

tional setting; and it casts the NPS in favorable terms that are welcomed by a public eager to consume the resources the agency manages. However, as Foucault and Edward Said have each pointed out, origin stories tend to be problematic for several reasons. Typically, they assume coherence (or an “essence”), continuity (a linear progression of events instigated by the one in question), and an almost “divine” passivity (the event develops an aura of sacredness that can then be put to various uses). Origins leave out the complexity of factors and dynamics of power that culminate in an “event.” As one of official nostalgia’s most common narrative modes, origin stories simplify, totalize, and restore a past to which audiences can “return” again and again without conflict or concern. Rather than recognizing the many factors contributing to the NPS’s formation, this seemingly benign campfire chat implies a coherent, unifying vision shared by the park’s founding fathers—the vision of preservation rather than development. Nature operates as the divine sanction for this vision; the landscape seems to accept its role as the spectacle that affirms the men’s plan.

Like most nostalgic tapestries, though, this one’s threads quickly unravel upon careful examination. The narrative reifies several problematic figurations: the masculine frontier explorer who conquers nature, the inherent separation of humans from the natural world, the construction of nature as an aesthetic spectacle, and the exclusion of non-white people from the nation’s “public parks.” Despite the fact that the Crow, Shoshone, Sheep Eater, and Bannock Indians all relied on Yellowstone’s resources, and the Washburn-Doane expedition did see plenty of evidence of Indian use of these “unoccupied” lands (Spence 41-44), there are no Indians in the picture painted by this foundational story. Moreover, the idea that these founding fathers “rejected the idea of private exploitation” is highly contested by the fact that the explorers on the Washburn-Doane Expedition were partially funded by the Northern Pacific Railroad Company, a corporation that also subsidized artist Thomas Moran and lobbied successfully for the formation of the parks. Unlike the fabled explorers in the campfire myth, the railroad could not claim “high altruism”; its motive was the development of a monopolistic trade corridor across southern Montana Territory. From the perspective of the railroad, government-managed nature would prevent private land claims, haphazard development, and competing commercial uses. Far from being untouched by private interests, the centrality of the railroads to early park management underscores the role of corporate influence even before the institution’s official beginnings. We can see, then, what Foucault means when he explains that “what is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity” (“Nietzsche” 142).

In the case of the National Park Service, one such “disparity” involves the ongoing tension between management for ecological health and management for tourism. Nostalgia for nature has paradoxically fostered both land preservation and the marketing of those lands to the American public—an ideological juxtaposition of protection and consumption that, often despite good intentions, privileges the latter. As Sellars shows, the NPS has traditionally erred on the side of utilitarianism, development for tourism, and management for aesthetic consumption at the expense of preservation, natural resource protection, or management for ecological

purposes.¹³ Several notable byproducts of such management decisions, especially the emphasis on tourism, include: the implicit separation of humans from nature, the reification of nature as distinct from everyday life, the assumption that the parks' attractions are democratically available, and the exclusion of native peoples' histories in the service of constructing a dominant narrative of American nature. As the work of Cronon and other contemporary scholars makes clear, the stakes of reifying a separation between humans and nature are high. Most importantly, such a distinction allows for the construction of nature as a "pristine" space where humans are absent; indeed, this was the primary ideology that enabled the displacement of native populations necessary for the parks' creation. Identified with (or more accurately *as*) natural resources, Indians were rendered part of the scenery rather than sovereign beings with rights to the land they inhabited.

The official nostalgic narrative embedded within and spread by the National Park Service combined with even more extreme versions of official nostalgia found in cultural texts, such as Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman* (and its popular film version *Birth of a Nation*) or *Gone with the Wind* (a film notable for its celebration of southern landscapes and racist nostalgia for the passing of the South's "way of life"), left little opportunity for writers of the time to deploy nostalgic nature stories for alternate purposes. However, within the "hazardous play of dominations" perpetuated by official narratives, there is always room for exploitation (Foucault, "Nietzsche" 148). One author who successfully wrote about nature counter-nostalgically is Zitkala-Ša, a Yankton Sioux whose poignant and often critical autobiographical (hi)stories infiltrated white publications throughout the early part of the century. Hers was no easy task. As Foucault argues, to successfully write history—itsself a "system of rules" enabling both domination and resistance—one must be "capable of seizing these rules, to replace those who had used them, to disguise themselves so as to pervert them, invert their meaning, and redirect them against those who had initially imposed them; controlling this complex mechanism, they will make it function so as to overcome the rulers through their own rules" ("Nietzsche" 151). I suggest Zitkala-Ša was able to "redirect" the "rules" of her time concerning nature, nostalgia, and Native Americans in order to present Indian concerns to white readers in a language they would be inclined to hear. I argue that by counter-nostalgically identifying Indian culture with nature and presenting white civilization as "unnatural," Zitkala-Ša's *American Indian Stories* capitalize on contemporary fears about overcivilization and industrialization, successfully humanize American Indians, invert the "progress" narrative implied by Turner's frontier thesis, and call into serious question the presumed benefits of assimilating to white American culture.

Many writers and anthologies that include Zitkala-Ša's work highlight her cultural "exile," explore the political pressures to which she was subject, and celebrate her ability to create literature in the face of these pressures. Yet, as Jessica Enoch points out, most anthologies fail to accentuate her "rhetorical sovereignty and pedagogical resistance or the systematic silencing that accompanied her essays," and present her instead as simply an example of American literary "multiculturalism" (137).¹⁴ My reading of Zitkala-Ša foregrounds elements of *American Indian Stories* that other critics have either not explored or have underemphasized:

her reappropriation and inversion of the civilization/savagery binary (what I call frontier rhetoric), her identification of Indians with nature and concomitant exploitation of dominant stereotypes for her own ends, and her tactical use of counter-nostalgia to achieve the “memory of another landscape.”¹⁵ A fuller understanding of her work requires an investigation of how nature, Indians, and frontier rhetoric were being interarticulated in dominant culture as well as how Zitkala-Ša manipulated and reworked these intertwined narratives via counter-nostalgia.

As my discussion of the Indian Field Days shows, contemporary ideas about American Indians were based on elegiac myths and historical elisions designed to justify their continued oppression by white Americans. Constructions of Indians coevolved in tandem with conceptions of wilderness: sometimes Indians were the “natural” occupants of wilderness areas, other times a “problem” for management—an unpleasant blemish on natural landscapes that needed to be erased in the service of creating “pure” natural spaces. (The Field Days are interesting, in part, because they juggle these seemingly contradictory ideologies.) In the early nineteenth century, Indians were often depicted as “picturesque and ‘noble’” cultural “foils” for dissatisfaction with “nascent industrial and urban growth, increased immigration, and bitter political campaigns alter[ing] established patterns of work and community” (Spence 14). By the end of that same century, however, Indians were more frequently described as outlaw tribes who occupied “coveted lands within the national domain and [had] regressed into ‘treacherous, bloodthirsty savages’” (30). Far from a clean break or an absolute paradigm shift, both depictions of Indians—the noble, romanticized Indian and the savage, trespassing Indian—persisted throughout the early twentieth century, informing park management and public perception. Philip J. Deloria’s work explores the long history of imagining “Indianness” as a versatile, often contradictory, foil for constructions of white American identity. During the Revolutionary War, Indians were “noble and customary, and they existed inside an American society that was not British. But Indians were also savage, existing outside of a British society that included both colonists and officials” (26). The Indian Field Days illustrate a modern manifestation of this paradoxical position both inside and outside the nation: Yosemite Indians—considered part of the nation’s nature and so essential to national identity—were at the same time still deemed “savages” insofar as they could be treated as exploitable resources, and so they remained outside the “civilized” nation in that sense.

In post-frontier America, nature and Native Americans were often posited as pre-industrial antidotes for a quickly changing nation. “Playing Indian” in the modern period—like the tourists at the Indian Field Days did—promised an authentic connection to the nation’s “origins” by “help[ing] preserve a sense of frontier toughness, communal warmth, and connection to the continent,” especially its coveted nature (Deloria 129). As spectacular geography began to overshadow native presence as the primary indicator of wilderness in the American mind, being “close to nature” could function, paradoxically, as either a disparaging association, if you were a person of color, or a desirable connection—provided you were a white male and only temporarily dabbling in the wilderness for the ultimate benefit of civilization and the nation.¹⁶ Situating Indians as both “self” and “other” enabled

white Americans to affiliate themselves with the natural, “savage” elements of Indian culture—a kind of domestic cultural imperialism akin to the tourism of nature that was becoming trendy—but still justify abhorrent treatment of these “others.” Indians were reified as part of the nation’s distinctive origins, but the violence involved in their histories remained absent, just as their continued mistreatment in the present was legitimated by official origin stories. Contact with wilderness became a patriotic duty, and both nature and Indians were rendered “past-tense”—origins, of sorts, to which an unreflective, consumptive “return” was encouraged (Spence 124).

Zitkala-Ša emerged on the literary and political scene around the turn of the century, when many of these myths were making their way into national organizations and institutional rhetoric. As Indians faced the loss of their oral traditions, the partitioning of tribes on reservations, the fragmentation of tribal communities, and declining populations, some Indians undertook to create written records of their tribal legends, folktales, and personal stories (Fisher v). Zitkala-Ša was among the earliest American Indian writers to begin making the transition from oral to written culture¹⁷ and, as a result, to begin negotiating the tensions between traditional Indian culture and the expectations of assimilation into white America—tensions between “the remembered past and the alien present” (Fisher vi). As such, Zitkala-Ša began writing amidst mounting pressures to work within the confining expectations of the ethnographic narrative: to write on behalf of the concerns of her “race,” to represent those concerns accurately, and to subjugate creative endeavors to more political pursuits. Further, as the “darling” of white readers of *Harper’s* and *Atlantic Monthly*, where she first published her work, Zitkala-Ša’s ability to keep her writing in print hinged on meeting the criteria for “attracting attention” determined by her audience (Fisher vii).

Even within the rigid guidelines of these expectations, the ever-present negotiation of cultural norms, and the overwhelming material limitations facing Indians at the time, Zitkala-Ša was able to find a surprising amount of creative leeway through which to make political statements. Exploiting the genre of sentimental autobiography allowed Zitkala-Ša some writerly freedom, extended her audience appeal, and enabled her to embed a political critique within her ostensibly sentimental fiction. Many of Zitkala-Ša’s stories are fraught with ambivalence (see Newmark); often, the same story will both celebrate and decry the white “civilization” to which she was expected to conform. Even her adoption of sentimental autobiography is incomplete, in a sense, as she refuses to fulfill the generic contract of the narrator’s ultimate resolution into a whole, complete individual (see Cutter). Sometimes characterized as an inevitable result of trying to engage white audiences, her ambivalence can also be read as tactical, contrived, and deliberate. Far from embracing assimilation or merely lamenting her position between two cultures, I suggest Zitkala-Ša deploys counter-nostalgic ambivalence to emphasize the “breech” between two binary positions—past and present, Indian culture and white (over)civilization, Western landscapes and the industrialized East—in order to coax the reader into identifying with the former over the latter.

White readers, in effect, are tricked into longing to return to a natural home that is not only not what they imagined it to be—an unpopulated Eden—but was never

theirs in the first place. Zitkala-Ša's contrasting depictions of the West and the East force white audiences to see themselves as the "savages" and Indians as the original inhabitants of "Eden." What is found at the origin is the violent uprooting of a cultured, civilized people and a history of inequity. As Enoch argues, Zitkala-Ša "inscribes a kind of white savagery" through her descriptions of the Carlisle School, and so "break[s] down the false dichotomy that produces and reproduces asymmetrical power relations that define Indian culture as savage and white 'American' life as civilized" (126-127). Indeed, for Zitkala-Ša white civilization has become so *overcivilized* that it embodies the worst of the "savage" characteristics typically attributed to Indians at the time. However, because Enoch's reading does not ground the analysis of this frontier rhetoric in contemporary understandings of the natural world, it does not grapple with Zitkala-Ša's identification of Indians with nature, which was still characterized as the antithesis of (or antidote to) civilization during this time period. Introducing nature and nostalgia into the savage/civilized dichotomy complicates the simple reading of her text as merely inverting a binary and enables a richer understanding of how her stories work.

Throughout the stories, Zitkala-Ša identifies Indians with nature through formal linguistic strategies (like metaphor) and by emphasizing, rather than downplaying, cultural assumptions of Indians as closer to nature. Yet, rather than replicating the dehumanizing effects exhibited by the Indian Field Days, Zitkala-Ša's stories represent Indians as fully human by revising her white audience's expectations of the "return home." Although Indians might be closer to nature, she foregrounds then condemns the ways in which this identification has led to exploitation by whites as she longs for her lost community's positive experiences in and with the natural world. She achieves her critique through a twofold process of linking the white "civilizing machine" with images of homogeneity, antiseptic formalities, empty ritual, even death, and then contrasting this civilization with Indian culture, which she depicts, nostalgically, as natural, happy, and free (66). Her argument also works by relying on nature as a moral authority—a source of cultural righteousness and original beauty that she sets in opposition to excessive civilization.¹⁸ Such a definition of nature is consistent with the one popularized by Roosevelt and the National Park Service, and so it was recognizable to her audience.

Even while she toys with dominant understandings of nature, though, Zitkala-Ša constructs her own cultural definitions of nature—definitions she grounds in white conceptions only enough to effectively engage her audience. As in dominant nostalgic narratives of nature, a natural "home" is antithetical to civilization. But, as Enoch points out, Zitkala-Ša's home is not only natural but also cultural: "[H]er tales of Indian home life are marked by descriptions of art, etiquette, and social code" (126). The "social codes" her stories depict include children as worthy of respect, women as authority figures, and the important rule "never to intrude on others" (Bernardin 221). Each of these emphases contradicts what Zitkala-Ša finds at school—where she is objectified, tossed around like a doll, and perpetually subject to intrusions by her white "benefactors"—as well as the treatment of all Indians by the U.S. government, which has been nothing if not "intrusive." Moreover, Zitkala-Ša debunks the myth of a "pure," unspoiled natural world that is

devoid of human impact—a myth upon which the NPS relies. The natural home for which she is counter-nostalgic is most definitely inhabited, and any Edenic qualities it possesses stem from human interactions with their environment. Unlike tourists dabbling in nature as an antidote to excessive civilization, Zitkala-Ša shows that an everyday life balancing nature and culture is a more realistic and satisfying option. Rather than replicating the romanticization of Indians as a national symbol of “wildness” or the museumification of Indian culture perpetuated by the national parks, Zitkala-Ša constructs her natural home as structured, egalitarian, welcoming to all living things, and, most importantly, functioning successfully in the present. If Indians are “vanishing,” it is because of the violent displacement and cultural loss imposed on them by whites under the pretense of assimilation.

Zitkala-Ša dismantles the common equation of nature with savagery and reconfigures Indian life as “civilized” in its own right but participating in a more “natural,” healthy form of culture than white (over)civilization, which her stories critique for being extremely alienated from nature and, as such, extremely *uncultured*. In the world of Zitkala-Ša’s stories, Roosevelt’s fears of excessive civilization have come to pass: whites are pale, weak, deindividualized automatons carrying out empty routines. A central metaphor reflecting this state is the telegraph pole—an example of the “unnatural nature” created by white civilization.¹⁹ As a young girl on her way to an Indian school in the East, Zitkala-Ša observes that “along the edge of a road thickly bordered with wild sunflowers, some poles like these had been planted by white men . . . and, hearing its low moaning, [she] used to wonder what the paleface had done to hurt it” (48). Later, she invokes the telegraph pole metaphor again, describing herself as “a cold bare pole . . . planted in a strange earth” (97). In Foucauldian fashion, the civilizing machine carves such poles through institutional discipline: the uprooting and transportation of Indian bodies to the East, the physical alteration of those bodies, the partitioning of individual students, and the indoctrination of students to new cultural norms at the expense of the old. In the words of Captain Richard C. Pratt, founder of the Carlisle School, it was a process of “killing the Indian and saving the man.” In *American Indian Stories*, the civilizing machine is faceless, powerful, even violent—a combination of spectacle and surveillance in which individual students could be visibly, corporally punished as “examples” even while institutional power was “permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent . . . capable of making all visible, as long as it could itself remain invisible” (Foucault, *Discipline* 214). The “iron routine” of the “paleface day” contains a variety of disciplinary mechanisms, including rote learning, an unsympathetic approach to physical illness, and the separation of the students from each other, as they were from their homes and families. Many critics have noted the humiliation expressed in Zitkala-Ša’s description of her first haircut at school as a powerful example of the “cold” discipline of the school, after which she writes: “Then I lost my spirit” (56). The school and its teachers are described at various points in terms of military barracks and prisons, and Zitkala-Ša slowly realizes that “the large army of white teachers in Indian schools had a larger missionary creed than [she] had suspected” (95). Thrust into the cells of this educational panopticon, Zitkala-Ša shows her readers the ways in which racist white

power functions to rob its victims of their spirits through routine, isolation, and the oppressive structure of the institution's physical space. If the "palefaces" are telegraph poles—homogenous tools sculpted out of but ultimately separate from and fundamentally unlike the natural world—then she herself has become one such tool, a teacher now working to make similar poles out of her young pupils. Moreover, through indoctrination into white culture, she has "lost all consciousness of the nature world about [her]" (96) and is left feeling that "even nature seemed to have no place for [her]" (69). Given her model of nature as encompassing all life forms without prejudice, the "even" here has a significant impact: the loss of nature equates to a loss of spirit and identity that is akin to death.

The primary way Zitkala-Ša deals with her sense of cultural alienation in these stories is through nostalgia—for the landscapes of the West, for her home, and for her mother, from whom she has become estranged. Dorothea M. Susag recognizes Zitkala-Ša's nostalgia, suggesting that while we might read the stories as "nostalgic respect for a 'vanished' way of life," her writing "powerfully surpasses nostalgia" in the final analysis (21). While I concur with Susag's reading of Zitkala-Ša's stories as humanizing and empowering, I argue that it is *through* rather than in spite of nostalgia that the stories achieve their counter-hegemonic effects. Susag displays the prevalent tendency among academic writers to dismiss nostalgia as an inherently conservative, politically impotent narrative. D. K. Meisenheimer, Jr. reveals similar assumptions when he writes of Zitkala-Ša's work: "Just as there is no self-pity in Zitkala-Ša, there is no nostalgia" (121). To be fair, Meisenheimer is situating her stories within the genre of regionalism, which he defines as partly "elegiac ethnography" (121); his essay, then, is invested in formulating progressive potential for regionalism as it attempts to recuperate a "less tragic reading" of her work than the genre's "morbid expectations" typically mandate (119). Yet his definition of regionalism as inherently nostalgic—and nostalgia as inherently "tragic"—limits his reading of Zitkala-Ša's work to the point of refusing to acknowledge the presence of a nostalgia that is everywhere in her stories.

For Susag and Meisenheimer, as for many critics, nostalgia is "naturally" a narrative that simply longs for, romanticizes, and eulogizes the past rather than a narrative that imagines a future, resists dominant power structures, or enables a critique of oppressive forces. I suggest it is not necessary—or necessarily desirable—to "surpass" nostalgia or deny its existence in order for a text to resist oppression. Rather, as Zitkala-Ša's stories indicate, counter-nostalgia can invert, complicate, and ultimately challenge dominant cultural narratives. In her deployment of nostalgia for nature, Zitkala-Ša picks up on the larger national trend of nostalgia for the landscapes of the American West after the closing of the frontier. White readers of the time would identify with the anxieties about development expressed in these stories and the concomitant loss of touch with nature feared by Roosevelt and others. While these official nostalgic narratives contributed to the displacement of American Indians in the West, Zitkala-Ša is able to speak to her audience through these very narratives by carefully inverting them to contest the displacement they also justified.

Two key examples of such an inversion are her chapters "The Big Red Apples"

and “Land of the Red Apples,” which combine a rewriting of the Christian Garden of Eden origin story with an inversion of Turner’s frontier narrative. In these chapters, Zitkala-Ša casts white civilization as the serpent that corrupted humanity and repositions Eden in the pre-frontier West. In “The Big Red Apples,” the final chapter in the larger story “Impressions of an Indian Childhood,” the trajectory of Western migration is geographically (as well as symbolically) reversed; rather than positing the West as the new frontier, the “wonderful Eastern land” is situated as the new land of plenty—home of civilization, progressive technologies, and orchards where “we could reach out our hands and pick all the red apples we could eat” (42). Here, Zitkala-Ša effectively rewrites Turner’s frontier narrative: in her Edenic temptation story, the East is the promised land. For the young Zitkala-Ša, the East promises a land of abundant resources, “a more beautiful country” (39), and, most importantly, freedom to “roam among [the orchards]” (42). Both physical landscape and the lure of plentiful nature help tempt her away from a home and mother she loves dearly, even in spite of her mother’s discouragement. In anticipation of happy times to come, she sets out eagerly for “the Wonderland” (40).²⁰

Yet any readerly identification with this sympathetic child’s wide-eyed excitement about her journey East is quickly disrupted as the reader finds hints that this mythical place will not live up to the image the palefaces have marketed (43). Her mother warns that her ears have been filled with “the white man’s lies . . . Their words are sweet, but, my child, their deeds are bitter” (41). While her mother is often the voice of overt critique in the stories, an even less subtle foreshadowing sentiment comes from Zitkala-Ša herself. Reminding the reader of the stories’ retrospective narration and warning the reader of conflict to come, she writes: “Alas! They came, they saw, and they conquered!” (41). This sentiment sets the stage for the “Fall” that is to come. Indeed, once she gets on the “iron horse” (42), which is to transport her East to “Red Apple Country” (47), disillusionment sets in quickly. Instead of a pleasurable ride, she is confronted by “throngs of staring palefaces” with “glassy blue eyes” that discomfit and “scrutinize” the children (47). Several white children sitting near her gawk rudely and “point . . . at [her] moccasined feet” while their mothers participate in the gazing by “attract[ing] their children’s further notice to [her] blanket” (48). Rendered an exotic commodity subject to the white gaze, the narrator is kept “embarrassed . . . constantly on the verge of tears” (48). Missionaries try to appease the bewildered children with candy—like the apples, bait for the eager “pioneers.” Throughout the stories, Zitkala-Ša’s rhetoric casts whites in the role of Eden’s serpentine devil whose apple tempts her with the promise of knowledge via civilization. Like Eve, Zitkala-Ša is exiled from her home after succumbing to temptation; unlike Eve, Zitkala-Ša does not feel shame at her “naked” exposure to the “semblance of civilization” that was supposed to be her salvation, but instead depicts the serpent as the guilty party (99). Portraying herself in sympathetic terms, Zitkala-Ša is “as frightened and bewildered as the captured young of a wild creature” (45). In contrast to a young girl’s fear and naïve hopes, the white colonizers’ treatment of the hopeful child and her companions comes across as merciless.

In “The Land of the Red Apples,” the first chapter in the story “The School

Days of an Indian Girl,” the reader is privy to Zitkala-Ša’s disappointment upon arrival. Having found only “whitewashed room[s]” (49), “throngs of staring pale-faces disturbed and troubled by [her]” (47), and a perpetual homesickness, she “dream[s] of roaming as freely and happily as [she] had . . . on the Dakota plains” (47). As her situation at school worsens, Zitkala-Ša increasingly longs for home and for her mother. Upon arrival, as she is tossed playfully into the air by a “rosy-cheeked paleface woman,” Zitkala-Ša reflects: “My mother had never made a plaything of her daughter. Remembering this I began to cry aloud” (50). Similar nostalgic moments abound, and Zitkala-Ša often connects them to her biggest mistake: “dar[ing] to disregard nature’s warning with such recklessness” and succumbing to the temptation of Eastward migration (85). In short, for the white man’s “papers [she] had forgotten the healing in trees and brooks” (97). The youthful narrative voice and repeated assertions of nostalgia work to align readers with the story’s political critique and further invert Turner’s frontier narrative. While her nostalgia is for “Western rolling lands and unlassoed freedom,” the West for which she longs is not Turner’s. The “unlassoed freedom” of her childhood stands in stark contrast to the “civilizing machine” of institutionalized learning and disciplinary authority—the very civilization Turner celebrates for “taming” the American West (66). Her nostalgia is also, to a large extent, for nature more generally: “Like a slender tree, [she] had been uprooted from [her] mother, nature, and God,” and she longs to return to the “trees and brooks” of her childhood (97). By contrasting nature with the “iron” Eastern civilization she despises, Zitkala-Ša revises negative associations of Indians with “the natural” and repositions civilization as a negative, brutal force, which works, in a sense, “against nature.” If there is a linear trajectory of degeneration for American Indians—a “fall” from a natural origin—Zitkala-Ša is clear that it has been initiated by white violence and forced assimilation.

Eventually—older, disillusioned, and “worn”—Zitkala-Ša temporarily embraces the belief in education and becomes a schoolteacher herself. Although she does decide to “spend [her] energies in a work for the Indian race,” it is with a sense of conflictedness; she does not subscribe as uncritically to ideologies of “uplift” as some critics suggest (81). Her eventual resignation from her teaching job follows upon the recognition that “the encroaching frontier settlers” were still conquering, and she tires of looking for “latent good in [her] white co-workers” (96). Shifting the burden of judgment away from herself, Zitkala-Ša’s final story concludes with a challenge to readers to reconsider the presumed fruits of assimilation:

Examining the neatly figured pages, and gazing upon the Indian girls and boys bending over their books, the white visitors walked out of the schoolhouse well satisfied: they were educating the children of the red man! They were paying a liberal fee to the government employees in whose able hands lay the small forest of Indian timber. In this fashion many have passed idly through the Indian schools during the last decade, afterward to boast of their charity to the North American Indian. But few there are who have paused to question whether real life or long-lasting death lies beneath this semblance of civilization. (98-99)

These oft-cited, though somewhat uncharacteristic, final lines display the powerful

critique Zitkala-Ša is able to weave into her writing. Indeed, their placement in the final story, “Retrospection,” leaves little doubt as to her position: “real life” is not found in the schoolhouse but in the West, at home, close to nature. By identifying herself and all American Indians with the “lost” nature that has been harvested for profit and development—the “small forest of Indian timber”—she links her people with popular understandings of nature as a commodity and generates sympathy for both. This passage thus critiques the utilitarian ethos, embodied by the national parks, that treats both nature and native people as exploitable, consumable resources.²¹

In this dramatic depiction of the busy schoolchildren in the midst of furthering their assimilation, Zitkala-Ša describes the same touristic gaze inflicted upon the Yosemite Indians during the Field Days. These “examiners” inflict a similar othering of Native American culture that enables distance, objectification, then domination. Just as the Yosemite tourists were “well satisfied” at seeing their tax dollars at work in protecting both nature and culture, these “charitable” donors to the Indian schools participate in liberal notions of uplift that glorify the “civilization” Zitkala-Ša calls into question here. At what cost, she asks, is this civilization attained? And is it perhaps only a “semblance” of life that has been gained? By this point in the stories the reader has learned to identify the schools with a Foucauldian disciplinary system that is cold and harsh to the point of inhumanity, and so is prepared to hear Zitkala-Ša’s message: despite advertising themselves as an avenue to Americanization, the Eastern schools yield only “lost freedom” rather than the promised fruit of educational opportunity (52). The carrot of freedom-through-assimilation (enforced by the stick of disciplinary institutions) is revealed as illusory bait; racism prevents Indians from ever achieving a “civilized” American identity, and assimilation is revealed as a false promise.²²

Claiming that not just freedom but also “real life” has been lost, Zitkala-Ša’s stories deploy counter-nostalgia for that life, disrupting official nostalgia for “vanishing” Indian culture and locating Indian experience in real-time and real-space rather than in museumified parks, tourist scrapbooks, or national ahistory. Yet, despite her powerful claims, the extent to which Zitkala-Ša subverted dominant narratives remains contested. As with her isolated acts of rebellion at the school, where the disciplinary mechanism of the educational institution continually attempted to “neutralize the effects of counter-power that . . . form a resistance to the power that wishes to dominate” (Foucault, *Discipline* 219), it is questionable to what degree her stories’ “counter-power” was defused by the school or absorbed by her white readers. Consistent with its need to neutralize such resistance in order to maintain dominance, the Carlisle School tried to deflect Zitkala-Ša’s attacks by “saying that her critique is true of all institutions, and then reestablish[ing] its paternalistic civilized-versus-savage dichotomy by asserting that anything white America does for the Indians is better than the ‘barbaric’ state in which they are living” (Enoch 136). Far from being “true of all institutions,” though, the kind of power functioning at the Indian schools was geared toward particular ends: the schools “did not train Indian youth to assimilate into the American ‘melting pot’ but trained them to adopt the work discipline of the Protestant ethic and to accept their proper place in society as a marginal class” (Lomawaima 211). A unique history of

oppression—legitimated in part by nostalgic nature narratives—differentiates the treatment of Indians from other objects of disciplinary institutions.

Even as Zitkala-Ša struggled to rewrite these problematic narratives, the schools helped solidify the marginality initiated by this history. While being “systematically divested of their land and other bases of an independent life,” Indians were expected to be grateful for the opportunities the schools offered (Lomawaima 211). Much like freed slaves who were considered “uppity” if they did not continue to serve and demean themselves in front of whites, Zitkala-Ša was condemned as ungrateful for, and indebted to, her Indian education. Appearing in a 1901 edition of the *Red Man*, one of two newspapers published by the Carlisle Indian School, one revealing review of her story “The Soft-Hearted Sioux” was prefaced by this reprimand:

All that Zitkalasa has in the way of literary ability and culture she owes to the good people, who, from time to time, have taken her into their homes and hearts and given her aid. Yet not a word of gratitude or allusion to such kindness on the part of her friends has ever escaped her in any line or anything she has written for the public. By this course she injures herself and harms the educational work in progress for the race from which she sprang. (qtd. in Enoch 117)

Implying that Zitkala-Ša did not “know her place,” this reviewer dismissed her story on moral grounds because it called into question the disciplinary goals of the Carlisle School. This view was enforced by the Carlisle School through its journalistic propaganda in both newspapers—the *Indian Helper* and the *Red Man*. “Insolence” was often pointed out as something for “his boys and girls [to] guard against,” lest they be reprimanded by “the Man-on-the-bandstand”—a symbolic representation of the school’s central authority as well as a physical statue serving to recreate that authority visibly on the school grounds (Enoch 122).

Yet it is clear that even in the face of such authority Zitkala-Ša revises the dominant frontier narrative: it is not a savage wildness that has been overcome by the assimilation process, but “wild *freedom*” that has been captured and snuffed out by cultural imperialism and violent conquest (8, emphasis added). Rather than longing for an idyllic past that has mysteriously disappeared, *American Indian Stories* details how that loss came about and expresses how much was lost through the violent displacement enabled by frontier rhetoric. But this loss is precisely what generates resistance; through displaying her own nostalgia for nature and exploiting that of her audience, Zitkala-Ša effectively makes her critique. Literature, particularly the genre of sentimental fiction within which Zitkala-Ša was working, provides the ideal outlet for the manipulation of readers’ emotions in the service of fostering critical thinking and challenging the status quo. By the end of the stories, readers have been forced to ask “questions concerning [their] native land, native language, [and] the laws that govern” Americans (Foucault, “Nietzsche” 162); the natural “home” for which readers may long has become far more complicated. Capitalizing on white nostalgia for the frontier and inverting that nostalgia through redefinitions of both nature and Indian culture, Zitkala-Ša’s stories achieve a measure of resistance to white norms.²³ Indeed, her work undermines white civilization as a reliable touchstone and begins to carve out a unique natural, cultural, and

historical space for American Indians.

Counter-nostalgic longing for a natural home, where all living beings are treated with respect regardless of gender, race, or other cultural constructions, provided Zitkala-Ša with a model for socially just societies—societies as yet unrealized and thus relegated to the future even as they draw on the past. Her plea remained, as all pleas for social justice remain today, “only for those ears that are bent with compassion to hear it” (68). In order to increase the odds of such pleas being heard, however, the emotional-political narrative of counter-nostalgia warrants further attention. Zitkala-Ša’s example points not only to the flexibility—and often productive ends—of nostalgia itself, but also to the presence of overlooked narrative trends throughout the century. One can see counter-nostalgia for nature at work in various ways during different time periods, including Harlem Renaissance texts such as Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem*, seminal environmentalist texts such as Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, postmodern literature such as Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*, and contemporary fiction by women of color grappling with the forces of globalization such as bell hooks’ “Touching the Earth,” Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*, Ruth Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats*, or Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*. Each of these texts responds to unique contexts and histories, but they share a counter-nostalgic approach to critiquing hegemonic forces while suggesting alternative forms of community. Each demands attention on its own terms, especially for those interested in maximizing the potential of nostalgic narratives.

As Boym argues, “[reflective nostalgia] is nostalgic not for the past the way it was, but for the past the way it could have been. It is this past perfect that one strives to realize in the future [As a result,] the study of nostalgia might be useful for an alternative, nonteleological history that includes conjectures and contrafactual possibilities” (351). I suggest it is just such possibilities that counter-nostalgic authors explore. Moreover, as environmental concerns move, appropriately, to the forefront of global politics, a “nonteleological history” of nostalgia for nature is not just timely, but urgent. Counter-nostalgia emerges as an important tradition in American literature that holds the potential to combat white supremacy, to critique the present system of global capitalism, to re-conceptualize nature as central to everyday life and so worthy of respect, to ask readers to think about how we might produce and preserve nature in ways that are socially just, and to formulate communities that are ethical and non-hierarchical. My discussion here indicates the imperative to further interrogate the intricate roots of American nature stories, their evolutionary branches throughout the century, and the far-reaching fallout of these stories’ tangible effects on both material nature and human cultures.

Notes

¹ Following Kate Soper, this essay treats nature as both a material reality—that which exists autonomously from human control—and a social construction produced by humans within specific contexts for particular purposes. My use of “nature” invokes this “realist” position and assumes that “nature” and Nature are always imbricated in complex ways.

² Cronon points to Bill McKibben’s *The End of Nature* as a notable example of this

prevalent form of nostalgia.

³ I use the term “post-frontier” to indicate the time following the official “closing” of the frontier by the U.S. Census Bureau in 1890. This is not to suggest that the trope of the frontier does not continue to circulate—in updated manifestations and often in troubling ways—throughout the century.

⁴ I mean to invoke George Robertson’s anthology *FutureNatural*, particularly Neil Smith’s essay, which shares my goal of theorizing productions of nature.

⁵ See Philip J. Deloria’s *Playing Indian*, in which he examines and historicizes the performance of Indian identity in American culture, both by Indians and non-Indians.

⁶ Yosemite’s Field Days are but one example of a larger national phenomenon. See Marguerite S. Shaffer’s discussion of the Blackfeet Indians in Glacier National Park for another, equally powerful, instance of the nostalgic commodification of Indian people.

⁷ Spence describes the long, gradual expulsion of the native residents from the park through the NPS’s policy of “casual neglect” (128) that eventually achieved the agency’s goal of a “pure” Yosemite—free of its native occupants (125).

⁸ Historically, the same dominant narratives linking the “savage” Indians to nature pegged other groups, such as African Americans, as likewise “uncivilized.” Theodore Roosevelt, for instance, “constructed his Indians in the same terms which were currently depicting African Americans” (Bederman 181).

⁹ For a history of the idea(l) of wilderness, see Cronon 69-90. Following Cronon’s influential work, it is commonly noted that “uninhabited wilderness had to be created before it could be preserved, and this type of [spectacular, unoccupied] landscape became reified in the first national parks” (Spence 4).

¹⁰ For a more extensive discussion of Roosevelt’s politics, see Bederman 170-215.

¹¹ There are, of course, exceptions to this rule. Some inhabitants of towns bordering national parks feel deprived of access to “their” backyards and angered by park fees. Residents of Los Alamos were certainly not happy with the NPS’s prescribed burn that raged out of control in May of 2000. And the recent controversy at the Lincoln Memorial regarding footage of lesbian and gay couples during a civil right’s march being shown in the visitor center illustrates the institution’s conservative bent, which brings criticism from more liberal political groups.

¹² Ironically, Smokey the Bear was initially part of a National Forest Service campaign, so it is not a NPS icon at all. Such common allusions to Smokey the Bear reflect a general ignorance of important historical, institutional, and ideological differences between the Forest Service and the NPS.

¹³ Park biologists—who have historically battled landscape architects in attempts to manage park lands based on ecological knowledge—constitute an exception to this rule. Biologists have typically been anti-nostalgic, realizing there is “no one wild-life picture which can be called the original one” (Sellars 97).

¹⁴ For a cogent articulation of the limits of multicultural discourse, see Lowe.

¹⁵ I am referring here to Dorothea M. Susag’s reading of Edward Said’s “Reflections on Exile,” in which Said argues “the exile can never belong to the present landscape” but must recreate “the memory of another, very distant, landscape” (Susag 5).

¹⁶ This double-standard informed national park visitation as well. In a telling recommendation to the general public, George Bird Grinnell, an influential preservationist who helped create Glacier National Park, encouraged Americans to “‘uncivilize’ themselves a bit and return to the mountains on a regular basis but admonished his Blackfeet friends to become ‘civilized’ and enter the mainstream of American society” (Spence 78).

¹⁷ For a discussion of the extent to which Zitkala-Ša abandons or actually reaffirms oral tradition, see Diana.

¹⁸ As Andrew Ross has shown, positing nature as a moral authority is itself an often problematic approach to environmental politics and social justice, especially when this ideology is wielded by potential cultural imperialists.

¹⁹ For an alternate reading, see Meisenheimer.

²⁰ Ironically, her word choice mirrors that often used to describe Yellowstone National Park—the nation's Wonderland, from which Indians were expelled.

²¹ This passage echoes several other references in the stories to Indians as natural resources that have been exploited and mistreated by white pioneers. See, for example, "The Cutting of My Long Hair" and "An Indian Teacher Among Indians."

²² A particularly poignant illustration of this racism occurred in Zitkala-Ša's own life when she represented Earlham College at the Indiana State Oratorical Contest in 1896, where she was taunted by a large banner with a hand-drawn image of an Indian woman on it, labeled with the derogatory word "squaw." To her credit, Zitkala-Ša placed blame on the offending racists by turning their own language against them: in her story, she laments their "worse than barbarian rudeness," thus describing them as the "savages" they would accuse her of being (79).

²³ What she failed to accomplish with her literary endeavors, she attempted to bring about through existing political organizations as well as the one she founded in 1926: the National Council of American Indians.

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