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**A Modest Proposal:
Laura Ingalls Wilder ate Zitkala-Ša**

A Modest Proposal

Zitkala-Ša's (Yankton-Nakota) 1900 essays, "Impressions of an Indian Childhood" and "Schooldays of an Indian Girl," are shockingly similar to Laura Ingalls Wilder's 1935 novel for children, *Little House on the Prairie*. Yet the two writers never appear together: no one has ever compared them. Perhaps they are the same person—isn't that how the joke goes? This essay works its way toward a version of that joke. My modest proposal is this: *Little House on the Prairie* is a cannibal text. Wilder ate Zitkala-Ša. Michael Jeanneret reminds us that "according to Latin etymology, a satire is a dish of mixed ingredients."¹ My semi-satirical proposal is not mixed in the manner, say, of a tossed salad, with each ingredient distinct. Rather, I will show that Zitkala-Ša is to be found in Wilder after a visceral transformation described by frustrated parents of picky children in the following terms: "it all looks the same in your stomach."²

No one has compared Wilder and Zitkala-Ša. Comparison, that tool of New Critical canon formation, is about putting heterogeneous texts in proximity and deriving meaning from their nearness. Judgments may be made, but neither text is harmed in the process. In the case of Wilder's homogenizing relationship to Zitkala-Ša, older words describing the relationship of texts to one another—"collation" and "digest"—are more useful. Both are bound to a literary and a gustatory meaning. In *A Feast of Words: Banquets and Table Talk in the Renaissance*, Jeanneret proposes a theory of "bibliophagy," pointing out that for monks, the word *collation* "denotes a sermon given after a meal, but also the meal itself, as if listening and eating, discourse and digestion were identical operations" (112). Similarly, the word "digest" emerges from Latin in late Middle English to mean, simultaneously, a collection of texts or fragments of texts under a single title, and the process by which animal bodies consume, incorporate, and excrete food. The relationship between eating food and writing books is more than metaphorical, Jeanneret claims. Both bring the past into the present and create the future: "To compose is to collect, to transpose and reorganize fragments of one's heritage; it is to absorb and digest books from the past; it is therefore to eat and to drink" (129).

But observe the insinuation, into Jeanneret's sentence above, of another term, one that is neither about eating nor writing. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "heritage" as "that which has been or may be inherited; any property, and esp. land, which devolves by right of inheritance."³ For Jeanneret "heritage" is the food of writing, and the relationship of eating to writing is the generational

passing on of property, bodily and cultural, transformed through the digestions of eaters and writers and readers from the past into the future. His reference to “heritage” is a reference to European modes of monetary, propertied, cultural and political continuity.

Our context is not Europe. Yet the legal organization that controls publication and keeps a sharp eye on representations of Wilder and her books is called “The Little House Heritage Trust.” Past and future, indeed, corporate immortality, are wrapped up in that formulation. In the settler-colonial context of the United States, any notion of an American “heritage” is founded upon the violent denial of Native sovereignty and the transformation of Indian land into fungible parcels of property. Wilder is a settler-colonial writer, and the book she has eaten is a Native text. Wilder’s meal cannot be understood as Jeanneret’s nurturing digestion of European “heritage” into a transformed but recognizable future. In its settler-colonial context, Wilder’s meal is an annihilating feast that transforms Native land, Native stories, a Native child, and a Native writer into the backward- and forward-extending blank eternity of “heritage” and “trust” in the context of United States expansionism and wars of extermination. Wilder’s bibliophagy is anthropophagy.

When anthropophagy appears under its more common name—cannibalism—it recalls the American context, and tends to entangle the complexities of representation more than it describes any historical human practices, ritual or otherwise. The emergence of the word “cannibal” was one of the earliest textual digestions by Europeans of Americans. Eric Cheyfitz understands the linguistic history of the word as an act of theft and radical transformation, specifically between European and Native languages. “Cannibal,” in a visceral sort of onomatopoeisis, performs linguistically what it means physically. “Cannibal” is a Native term consumed into European languages and put to European use, its Native origins lost, but its violent meaning directed at Native and other non-white bodies:

We can understand, then, that the missing Arawak/Carib term that Columbus translates as *canibales* follows a particular ideological trajectory; cut off from its proper (cultural) meaning in Native American languages, it becomes a purely political figure in European tongues, a figure that tries to erase its own rhetoricity by claiming a proper, or ethnographical, referent—the “fact” of cannibalism—which, even if it could be proved, would not justify or explain the colonial/imperial process of translation that displaces the original native term.⁴

As Kyla Wazana Tompkins puts it, “the act [of cannibalism] annihilates the difference between self and the eaten other, making one body of the two. In this way cannibalism acknowledges and performs sameness; on the level of epistemology, however, cannibalism constructs difference.”⁵ There is both ontological and epistemological cannibalism in *Little House on the Prairie*, and this paper will explore both. Cannibalism is a sustained discourse in the text itself, and it works epistemologically in the novel to construct and protect difference. But the practices of unacknowledged citation that we might usually see in literary

works as intertextual *jouissance*, or in extreme cases as plagiarism, are best understood here as an ontological cannibal practice—the digestive making of two into one—by Wilder and her collaborator and daughter, Rose Wilder Lane. Zitkala-Ša’s autobiographical stories, which she wrote as an excoriating critique of assimilationist Indian boarding schools, are consumed by the settler writer and made to nourish Wilder’s famously blank and generic Midwest. Zitkala-Ša’s time and place—the bloodily contested land of South Dakota of the 1880s—are incorporated into the fantastically pure and bloodless 1870 Kansas of Wilder’s fantasy.

This essay is heavily focused on Wilder’s text, moving first through an introduction of the two authors, then an explication of method, then a reading of the novel’s epistemological cannibalism, and finally a revelation of its ontological violence. We arrive only late and linger only briefly with Zitkala-Ša. This is partly an enactment of the essay’s satirical element; the revelation of Zitkala-Ša’s actual words functions ultimately as a punch line and the relief for which one has waited. It is partly an effort on my part to keep Zitkala-Ša clean of Wilder, rather than interleaving their words in a sort of “conversation.” Ending with Zitkala-Ša is meant to remind us that her texts, digested though they may be in Wilder’s novel, nevertheless enact a constant and reiterative survivance;⁶ they are, simply put, in print and we can and should read them. Nevertheless, the preponderance of Wilder in this essay, the insistence that we work our way slowly through the novel, reproduces the cannibal act; Zitkala-Ša is only, perhaps, an aftertaste.

Have you read *Little House on the Prairie*? Picture the pale yellow paperback, with its sweet Garth Williams illustration on the cover. Imagine opening it—that clever invention, the codex, hinges open much like a jaw. Imagine that you are reading the words that follow left to right and back again, so like the twists and turns of the intestines. I have done exactly that many times in writing this essay. If you keep reading, you will read the choicest of those sentences, spliced into mine in the pages that follow. Just something to consider.

A Brief Side-by-Side Look

Zitkala-Ša’s pieces, first published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1900, then reprinted in a collection entitled *American Indian Stories* in 1921, are the fictionalized account of her childhood on the Pine Ridge Reservation in what we now call South Dakota and at an Indian boarding school in what we now call Indiana in the 1880s. *Little House on the Prairie* is the 1935 fictionalized account of the year Wilder’s family spent “pioneering”—another word for it is “squatting”—on the Diminished Osage Reserve in what we now call Kansas in 1870. Thirty-five years separate the publication of the texts, but Wilder and Zitkala-Ša were of a generation. Wilder was born in what is now west-central Wisconsin in 1867. Gertrude Simmons Bonnin—Zitkala-Ša is a Lakota name meaning Red Bird, which she adopted when she began writing—was born on the Yankton Sioux Agency in the Dakota Territory in 1876. Each writer was raised in what we now think of as the “Midwest,” a geopolitical descriptor that reifies the claims of manifest destiny, but which was, across the decades of their youth, a battlefield fought over by multiple nations; the United

States was expanding, and the Native nations of the plains were under pressure, often litigious, more often violent, always genocidal, to disappear.

Part of that genocidal plan involved the “education” of Native children in assimilationist boarding schools far from home. At the age of eight, Zitkala-Ša was taken from the Yankton Agency to school in Indiana, where she completed six years before going on to college at Earlham. Wilder spent ten peripatetic years, from the age of two until the age of twelve, living all over the northern Midwest; the Ingalls family was following railway and other work, in a route that didn’t always go directly east to west, though these facts are suppressed in the books in favor of an east-to-west narrative of heroic self-sufficiency.⁷ In 1879, the family was part of the founding of the town of DeSmet in the Dakota Territory, where Wilder spent her teenage years. Both Wilder and Zitkala-Ša became schoolteachers. Zitkala-Ša taught at Carlisle Industrial Indian School, the first and most influential of its kind, for one year; she left in 1901, after publishing the pieces that damned Indian boarding schools. Wilder taught for two years in DeSmet’s tiny schoolhouse, leaving when she married.

Both women were self-consciously didactic writers who used autobiographically informed fiction about children to intervene into the childhoods of those who came after them: each text was intended to create change *for* and *in* young people. Zitkala-Ša wrote the magazine pieces in her early twenties, when the suffering she had experienced was still being visited upon children not much younger than her; she hoped to change adult perceptions in order to immediately alter the horrific experience of children and immediately intervene into the decimation of Native nations and cultures. Wilder was sixty when she began writing her novels in collaboration with her daughter; the world she described, however accurately or inaccurately, belonged to the past when she picked up her pen. But like Zitkala-Ša, Wilder wrote prompted by anxiety for the future of her nation; she hated Roosevelt and the New Deal. She aimed to intervene into the feared degeneracy of a socialist future by reaching to a happy past of muscular self-reliance. An admirer of Frederick Jackson Turner’s thesis of the frontier, Wilder believed that her childhood could serve as a model of white American character development in a post-frontier world:

I had seen the whole frontier, the woods, the Indian country of the great plains, the frontier towns, the building of railroads in wild unsettled country, homesteading and farmers coming in to take possession. I realized that I had seen and lived it all—all the successive phases of the frontier, first the frontiersman, then the pioneer, then the farmers, and the towns. Then I understood that in my own life I represented a whole period of American history.⁸

Wilder wanted her fiction to inculcate an understanding of American expansion as an expression of virtuous white American character. In *Little House on the Prairie* in particular, she aimed to intervene into children’s understanding of how the “emptying” of the west of Indian people proceeded, and what it enabled. Needless to say, these differently directed child-driven goals of the two writers serve as a case study of Jose Muñoz’ critique in *Cruising Utopia* of Lee Edelman’s *No Future*. Wilder’s dedication to producing an understanding of a

whitewashed past into order to indoctrinate white children into a white future certainly participates in “reproductive futurism” and the imposition of “an ideological limit on political discourses,”⁹ as Edelman notes, but, as Muñoz reminds us, her futurism is not simply the result of a generalized interest in “reproductivity.” Wilder is interested in the future of white children, and her settler-colonial white children actually thrive and gain sustenance from the foreclosed futures of non-white children. Wilder’s novel actively repudiates as Muñoz puts it, “another time and place, a ‘not-yet’ where queer youths [and youths] of color actually get to grow up.”¹⁰ And it does so with the remains of a Native text in its very guts, as fodder.

The connections between the two texts that might lead us to compare them (remembering that comparison allows each text to remain safely heterogenous), are legion. I will outline them here quickly. Each woman wrote about America’s violent westward expansion, and they each wrote about it as an experience of girlhood. Their main characters, “Laura” and the unnamed child, are each boyish girls. Each writer examines how Indianness and whiteness adheres to boyishness and girlishness in that space and time. Indeed, both books feature startlingly queer scenes of gender shift in relationship to racial formation.¹¹ Each girl is also always hungry, and hunger organizes each child’s experience of race. Each child ingests either Indianness or whiteness through eating; Laura is taught to have a taste for Indians, while the unnamed child in Zitkala-Ša’s pieces yearns at first for the food of whiteness, becomes herself food, and through that process of being digested understands, too late, the toxicity of the white food she must both prepare and eat. Zooming in to the prose itself, the connections between the two texts continue, sentence to sentence. I will elucidate some of them; to enumerate them all would take many more pages than I have.

If Wilder’s and Zitkala-Ša’s writing is self-consciously political, the afterlives of their texts have been shaped by the politics of canon formation, and each writer has been reevaluated along the axes of her political beliefs. Zitkala-Ša spent the rest of her life, after leaving Carlisle, as a writer and an activist. She served as the secretary of the Society of American Indians, edited the *American Indian Magazine*, and founded the Indian Welfare Committee. From 1926 until her death in 1938, she was an organizer for and then president of the National Council of American Indians. In spite of a life lived in dedication to justice for Native people, her opposition to peyote use tarnished her memory among later generations fighting for Native American religious freedom. More recent considerations have exonerated her; James H. Cox provides an elegant explanation of her seemingly elastic opinions: “Rarely focusing on a single ideological position for an extended period, often contradicting and qualifying what appear initially as clear statements against assimilation or against Native religious practices . . . Whether she abandoned some of these strategies as only temporarily or marginally successful is less important than that she was always ready to act for the survival of Native communities.”¹² Read by communities of readers with cultural or activist connection to her work, as well as by scholars, Zitkala-Ša’s importance to Native Studies has grown exponentially.¹³

Meanwhile, *Little House on the Prairie* has been and remains one of the

most popular children's books in history. As Anita Clair Fellman points out, the numbers (well above 60 million copies sold) don't begin to describe the magnitude of the books' influence in the United States. The series is "fully woven into American culture. . . . Hundreds of millions of children have sampled the books in school while learning reading, language arts, or social studies. Millions of people have visited the homesites where the Ingalls and Wilder families lived over the years. References to the books and their author have been ubiquitous in every imaginable form and venue in American life."¹⁴ But the series' robust good health continues in spite of an ongoing movement to awaken the reading public to the books' right-wing pedagogy, ahistorical representations of settler colonial life on the great plains in the late nineteenth-century, and its racist and dismissive treatment of Native people, particularly, in *Little House on the Prairie*, of the Osage.

In 1993 Michael Dorris wrote about his revulsion when reading the novel aloud to his Native children, and in 1994 Dennis McAuliffe, Jr. (Osage) wrote of his horror of the novels as an Osage reader and wondered why scholars hadn't noticed their aggressively ahistorical, anti-Indian ideology.¹⁵ Before the turn of the century all other scholarly investigations of the novel either ignored or went to great lengths to excuse its racism.¹⁶ Then, in 2000, Frances W. Kaye's essay in *The Great Plains Quarterly*, "Little Squatter on the Osage Diminished Reserve: Reading Laura Ingalls Wilder's Kansas Indians," changed the course of Wilder scholarship forever. Kaye opens with a bold rejection of all preceding scholarship: "It seems to me," she writes, "that Wilder's proponents are fundamentally mistaken. I honestly cannot read *Little House on the Prairie* as other than apology for the 'ethnic cleansing' of the Great Plains."¹⁷ Kaye turns to the historical record, and succinctly points out the devastating falsehoods in *Little House on the Prairie*, placing Osage experience and history front and center.

No scholar since has been able to ignore Kaye, and work on Wilder is much stronger for it; Anita Clair Fellman's *Little House, Long Shadow* is, for example, a *tour de force* example of what can be made of Wilder and her contexts once her racism is accepted. Nevertheless, the debate continues to rage where it continues to count the most—among parents, teachers and librarians. Waziyatawin Angela Wilson (Wahpetunwan Dakota), in "Burning Down the House: Laura Ingalls Wilder and American Colonialism," tells the story of how her daughter came home from school in tears over the line, "the only good Indian is a dead Indian." Wilson tried to stop her daughter's school from teaching the entire series as history, two books at a time, from the third through fifth grades. Wilson dismantles the argument that excluding the books would be a breach of the Second Amendment by pointing out how many other materials aren't taught to children precisely because they are racist. "The real issue, then, is not that Americans are opposed to banning literature—or at least replacing problematic existing literature with more appropriate literature. Instead the question is, why does our society today still advocate the indoctrination of American youth in racist and genocidal ideologies regarding Indigenous People?" Her answer: "It does so because the United States government is still in power, it still considers the Indigenous population an expendable one, and it is still in the business of

exploiting Indigenous lands and resources with the eager help of the corporate world.”¹⁸

Very recently, this scandal that refuses to fully break has bubbled to the surface of media attention, with articles in *The Boston Globe* and *Salon*, titled things like “Little Libertarians on the Prairie” and “Little House on the Prairie: Tea Party Manifesto,” respectively.¹⁹ These ever resurfacing revelations have little effect on the books’ popularity. Wilder’s highly seductive story of Indian dispossession continues to be read by millions with reverence and delight.

At every level, then, from Wilder’s and Zitkala-Ša’s generation and location, to the didactic goals of their writing, to their interest in changing the lives and perceptions of children, to the effect of their political opinions on their reception, to the fact that they both write about girlhood experiences of Native-settler relations in the Midwest during the 1870s and 1880s, these authors are comparable. Is that why their texts—*Little House on the Prairie* and “Impressions of an Indian Childhood” and “Schooldays of an Indian Girl”—look so alike? I think no. The urgent enmity of their relation is anatomical rather than adjacent, murderous rather than discursive, and it is the result of digestive violence of one author—Wilder—against another—Zitkala-Ša.

Forensic Method

I have no proof that Wilder or Lane read Zitkala-Ša. In 1900 Wilder was living a relatively hardscrabble life in Missouri; Rose was fifteen-years-old. Meanwhile, *The Atlantic* was an east coast magazine catering to an educated elite. By 1921, however, both mother and daughter were established journalists. Wilder wrote columns for her local paper, and Rose Wilder Lane was a nationally published journalist with a growing interest in politics and history and an increasingly influential circle of friends. Professional and personal interest in a Native writer from South Dakota, where Wilder spent most of her childhood and young adulthood and where Lane was born, may well have led one or both of them to read Zitkala-Ša sometime before writing their *Little House* books.

Luckily for me, I am only making a proposal, and a modest one at that. I don’t really need proof. But I do need method. In her essay “Close but Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn,” Heather Love argues for a new mode of literary analysis in which close, descriptive rather than analytical readings eschew the reach toward “depth” that decades of ideology critique have made *de rigueur* in literary studies. Love’s method, she claims, makes possible a criticism that engages an “alternative ethics, one grounded in documentation and description rather than empathy and witness.”²⁰ I would argue that my reading isn’t ideology critique. In the case of *Little House on the Prairie* the ideological investments of the novel are more than well established by others, and early scholarship that reaches toward empathy and witness has been rebutted by scholarship that situates the series within the past, present and future of settler-colonial fantasy. I rely on that scholarly history here, but what I am doing is better understood as a version of Love’s “redescription.” I think of my method as textual forensics. The crime I propose to describe is simple: Laura Ingalls Wilder ate Zitkala-Ša. I will have to read deeply to make this redescription, but it is

neither ideological nor emotional depth for which I reach. I am going to rip that pale yellow paperback open and reach my knackers' fist deep into its viscera, and I am going to rummage there in its guts for the remains of a Native author.

Love retains something of the basics of the New Criticism. I, too, want to salvage pieces of that antique mode. I have rejected comparison as too dedicated to heterogeneity, but close reading has in its original formulation the violence I need.. John Crowe Ransom, writing two years after the publication of *Little House on the Prairie*, posits a poem as a living body, and the act of prose-based criticism as a “rude and patchy” exploratory surgery, necessary because “the poet wishes to defend his object’s existence against its enemies, and the critic wishes to know what he is doing, and how:”

Something is continually being killed by prose which the poet wants to preserve. . . . For each poem [there is] a tissue of irrelevance from which it does not really emerge. The critic has to take the poem apart, or analyse it, for the sake of uncovering these features. . . . Two terms are in his [the critic’s] mind: the prose core to which he can violently reduce the total object, and the differentia, residue, or tissue, which keeps the object poetical or entire.²¹

When we engage in “close reading” we are “continually killing” a text, and thrusting our hands into its guts, sifting its entrails—the “differentia, residue, or tissue”—through our fingers. When I spread *Little House on the Prairie’s* innards out on the bright, clean, green prairie grass that has carpeted so many of our imaginations, I am not in search of the text’s poetry. What I share with Ransom is his belief that the method’s violence is important in and of itself. I am going to use that violence to reveal, in one particular beloved novel’s belly, its last meal.

What Does Laura Want?

Until very close to its actual publication, *Little House on the Prairie’s* working title was “Indian Country.” Both Wilder and Lane thought of it as the “Indian Book” in the series. And indeed, Osage people provide the drama in the novel, starting on page one: “Pa promised that when they came to the West, Laura should see a papoose. ‘What is a papoose?’ she asked him, and he said, ‘A papoose is a little, brown, Indian baby.’”²² By using the “deceivingly pseudo-authentic” word papoose, Pa teaches Laura to mystify the native as racially other,²³ but also not to fear Indians. Rather, she is invited to find them intellectually interesting, to look forward to seeing them, to have a taste for them. Taste quickly becomes craving, and Laura becomes obsessed, pestering her parents about seeing a papoose across the length of the novel. It isn’t until the final pages that the promise is delivered. It is the moment of Osage removal from Kansas and the entire Osage Nation walks across the prairie from east to west, yards from the Ingalls’ house. Violent pressure from illegal white settlers in the Osage Diminished Reserve mounted across 1870. The Osage Removal Bill was approved, after much debate and grief, by all but one of the Osage leaders on September 10, 1870. The removal, across which many hundreds died, happened across two years, in groups ranging from 300 to 3000 people. But in *Little House on the Prairie* it happens all at once:

More and more and more ponies passed, and more children, and more babies on their mothers' backs, and more babies in baskets on the ponies' sides. Then came a mother riding, with a baby in a basket on each side of her pony.

Laura looked straight into the bright eyes of the little baby nearer her. Only its small head showed above the basket's rim. Its hair was as black as a crow and its eyes were black as a night when no stars shine.

Those black eyes looked deep into Laura's eyes and she looked deep down into the blackness of that little baby's eyes, and she wanted that one little baby.

"Pa," she said, "get me that little Indian baby!"

"Hush, Laura!" Pa told her sternly.

The little baby was going by. Its head turned and its eyes kept looking into Laura's eyes.

"Oh, I want it! I want it!" Laura begged. The baby was going farther and farther away, but it did not stop looking back at Laura. "It wants to stay with me," Laura begged. "Please, Pa, please!"

"Hush, Laura," Pa said. "The Indian woman wants to keep her baby."

"Oh, Pa!" Laura pleaded, and then she began to cry. It was shameful to cry, but she couldn't help it. The little Indian baby was gone. She knew she would never see it any more.

Ma said she had never heard of such a thing. "For shame, Laura," she said, but Laura could not stop crying. "Why on earth do you want an Indian baby, of all things?" Ma asked her.

"Its eyes are so black," Laura sobbed. She could not say what she meant.²⁴

The promise is delivered in surfeit. Indeed, Laura doesn't even seem to realize until she locks eyes with one of the babies. The "seeing" that fulfills Pa's promise occurs only when the gaze is exchanged. When an Indian baby meets Laura's eyes, Laura is filled with desire, and "seeing"—which is all that she was promised—isn't enough. Laura "wants" that baby. "'Pa,' she said, 'get me that little Indian baby!'" (308).

This is the only imperative demand made by Laura in the entire series of *Little House* Books. It is illegible to everyone. Neither the all-knowing Pa nor the eternally self-righteous Ma can make sense of it, and in her turn, "Laura could not say what she meant." She could not say, and generations of literary critics have tried to translate. Almost every article about the book takes a stab at the problem..

Eat, Look, Read: The Making of an Epistemological Cannibal

Soon after the little house is built, Pa takes his two oldest daughters to an empty Osage village, which he treats as if it were the remains of an ancient and lost culture.

Pa . . . showed them tracks of two middle-sized moccasins

by the edge of camp fire's ashes. An Indian woman had squatted there. . . . The track of her toes inside the moccasins was deeper than the track of her heels, because she had leaned forward to stir something cooking in a pot on the fire.

. . . Then he told them to look at the bones around that camp fire and tell him what had cooked in that pot.

They looked, and they said "Rabbit." That was right; the bones were rabbit bones.

Suddenly Laura shouted, "Look! Look!" Something bright blue glittered in the dust. She picked it up, and it was a beautiful blue bead. Laura shouted with joy. (176-177)

Pa's lesson on absent Indians hones in on a meal that others hungered for and others ate. Pa is training the taste he called forth in Laura on the novel's first page. She is to read the traces of other people's diet, or, if we go to the Greek root of diet, *diaita*, "ways of life." She is to visually digest Indian remains rather than share Indian appetites. As Denise Gigante explains, taste is at the heart of the project of "civilization," and thus functions as the exact opposite of hunger, which is figured as savage:

All the major enlightenment philosophers of taste were involved in the civilizing process of sublimating the tasteful essence of selfhood from its own matter and motions, appetites and aversions, passions and physical sensibilities. Above all, what the culture of taste energetically resisted was the idea that human beings were propelled not by natural cravings for virtue, beauty, and truth, but by appetites that could not be civilized or distinguished from those of brutes.²⁵

The girls successfully read the signs of Indian cooking, and Pa's synesthetic lesson in taste recalls Jeanneret's synesthetic definition of the word collation: "discourse and digestion were identical operations." Indian food is successfully digested through the anthropological gaze. But immediately afterwards, the "beautiful blue bead," which turns out to be one of many, transforms the girls from cool social scientists to ravenous hunter-gatherers, and Pa's careful calibration goes awry as the girls give in to a visually induced hunger for the beads that is strongly marked as savage. The pedagogical closure of the chapter is left to Ma. When Laura gets home she has become the Indian woman: sight, touch and hunger have collapsed into one another; the beads in her palm are the rabbit in the pot; the visual satisfaction they give Laura exceeds the distance that seeing-not-touching should place between Indian and white observer. Cookishly, "Laura stirred her beads with her finger and watched them sparkle and shine. 'These are mine,' she said. Then Mary said, 'Carrie can have mine.' Ma waited to hear what Laura would say. Laura didn't want to say anything. She wanted to keep those pretty beads." Under Ma's stern gaze, Laura does relinquish her beads, and sight is again disciplined into a distancing tool. She learns to gain a meager satisfaction from the memory of seeing rather than the tactility of having, of stirring, of eating: "But it had been a wonderful day. She could always think about that long walk across the prairie, and about all they had seen in the Indian

camp.”²⁶

These seemingly childish exercises in the subjugation of desire away from the tactile and visceral and toward a visually structured taste turn hunger into an Indian, or savage, affliction and vision into white rationality, or thought. This education in the primacy of the visual is part of what Martin Jay calls the “scopic regimes of modernity,” and which Peter Jackson reminds us is the “visual appropriation of space that corresponds to the material appropriation of land.”²⁷ Laura is turned from an eater into a watcher and then into a rememberer and a thinker . . . and from thence into a writer. Laura could always think about that long walk. She could write about it. And there is where the final transformation occurs, from Wilder the writer . . . to *you* the reader. *You* can always read about “all they had seen at the Indian camp.”

“All they had seen . . .” But what is that they see? They see something that they, and we, have always already seen, always already read. They see the universal sign of the cannibal, right here in the middle of the novel. In *Robinson Crusoe*, Crusoe examines the footprint in the sand closely: “there was exactly the print of a foot-toes, heel, and every part of a foot.”²⁸ Pa takes a close look at the Indian woman’s print, so close that it is like he’s examining her skeleton: “The track of her toes inside the moccasins was deeper than the track of her heels.” In *Crusoe*, the discovery of the footprint is followed by the discovery of the remains of an Indian meal. Like the little girls who immediately recognize rabbit bones, Crusoe has no trouble identifying the bones in the ashes:

The shore [was] spread with skulls, hands, feet, and other bones of human bodies; and particularly I observed a place where there had been a fire made . . . where I supposed the savage wretches had sat down to their human feastings upon the bodies of their fellow-creatures.²⁹

Laura and Mary guess that the bones they see are rabbit bones, but it is not the all-knowing Pa who tells them they are right. The answer is given in free-indirect speech that mimics Pa’s tones: “That was right; the bones were rabbit bones.” Here, the pedagogical energy of the scene shifts from Pa’s authority over his daughters to Wilder’s authority over her readers. As Shirley Samuels and Philip Deloria have both pointed out, early European representations of Native women often contained scenes of cannibalism. Samuels describes a circa 1580 Theodor Galle illustration of Vespucci encountering “America” as a naked woman, lounging invitingly in a hammock but gesturing to scenes of cannibal feasting in the background including pots with legs sticking out of them,³⁰ and from that moment onwards it is the utterly generic possibility—no, the certainty—that a white explorer would find human bones beside the remains of an Indian fire. Wilder’s overarching narrative authority tells us that while Indians should indeed be cannibals. The generic certainty of cannibalism has been acknowledged in the novel, the expectation set. But the Indians eat rabbits, and it is Laura whose cravings threaten to overwhelm her.

A Queer Little Kind of Tunnel in the Grass

In the *Little House* series, as in American westering ideology in general, whites

travel westward into a future, and Indians travel westward into the past. The frontier runs north-south. The east-west roads of white people end at that line. On the other side are Indians, in trackless wastes. The Ingalls family rolls to that line to build their new “Little House,” but exactly there a road appears where there shouldn’t be one. Its appearance is uncanny, and unsettles the “explorer” who finds it: Laura. Wilder writes,

There was nothing more to do, so Laura explored a little. . . . She found a queer little kind of tunnel in the grass. You’d never notice it if you looked across the waving grass-tops. But when you came to it, there it was – a narrow, straight, hard path down between the grass stems. It went out into the endless prairie.

Laura went along it a little way. She went slowly, and more slowly, and then she stood still and felt queer. So she turned around and came back quickly. When she looked over her shoulder, there wasn’t anything there. But she hurried.³¹

This is the road that at book’s end the Osage Nation will follow out of Kansas, out of presence, into the west and the past. It bisects supposedly “empty” land, marking it as Indian land. It runs counter to the teleological arguments of the geotemporal frontier. Laura’s travels on the road involve slowing downs—“she went slowly, and more slowly”—stoppings—“she stood still and felt queer”—and speedings up—“she came back quickly . . . she hurried.” The road makes Laura temporally queasy. It will turn out to threaten the entire family:

Indians came riding on the path that passed so close to the house. They went by as though it were not there. . . . “I thought that trail was an old one they didn’t use any more,” Pa said. “I wouldn’t have built the house so close to it if I’d known it’s a highroad.”

Jack hated Indians, and Ma said she didn’t blame him. She said, “I declare, Indians are getting so thick around here that I can’t look up without seeing one.” (225-26)

Is the trail old, in the past, or is it in the present? Pa assumed the pastness of Indian presence. Now, “It’s a highroad,” Pa says, belatedly recognizing the presence of the Osage and the infrastructure of their national space. Ma and the racially discriminating dog think that the road brings an Indian future: “Indians are getting so thick around here.”

The temporal and spatial shiftiness of the trail—its queerness—is resolved to straightness when the Osage Nation marches out of time, from east to west.³² When Laura demands the baby, she is partly trying to intercede in the flow of time along the road. “‘It wants to stay with me,’ Laura begged. ‘Please, Pa, please!’”³³ Then she bursts into frustrated tears. Redemptive readings of *Little House on the Prairie* want to read Laura’s desire for the baby as resistance to genocide. Other readings suggest that Laura’s grief is selfish and for her own loss. Under either reading the child is left bereft, either because she is condemnatory of the magnitude of the injustice, or because she is a correctly calibrated colonist, who knows that the best way to kill Indians is to steal their children.

But is Laura bereft? The scene ends with an ominous sense of repletion:

“More and more and more Indians came riding by. . . . They looked and looked and looked at Indians riding by.” This is a scene of feasting the eyes—a metaphor that is called up by the carefully delineated digestive temporality of the scene: “It was dinner-time, and no one thought of dinner. Indian ponies were still going by, carrying bundles of skins and tent-poles and dangling baskets and cooking pots. There were a few more women and a few more naked Indian children.” One of the women must be the woman of the footprint. She has returned from the anthropological past to march at dinnertime along the queer road, along with her pot in which that rabbit that wasn’t a man was cooked. Finally, “that long line of Indians slowly pulled itself over the western edge of the world. And nothing was left but silence and emptiness.” Ma’s next thought is for food.

“You must eat something, Charles,” Ma said. “No,” said Pa. “I don’t feel hungry.” He went soberly to hitch up Pet and Patty, and he began again to break the tough sod with the plow.

Laura could not eat anything, either. She sat a long time on the doorstep, looking into the empty west where the Indians had gone. She seemed still to see waving feathers and black eyes and to hear the sound of ponies’ feet. (309-10)

The family that has *looked* all day is not *hungry*, as if looking were eating. The obvious reading is that they are deeply moved. But perhaps they are instead perfectly satisfied. The chapter is sprinkled with gothic horror, from the eerie cry of an owl, to the Indians described as stiff and dead except for their glittering eyes, and it ends with dismemberment. Staring out at the “empty west” (why is it empty if the Indians have gone there?) Laura sees feathers and eyes and hears feet (notably not described as hooves). The synesthesia between eating and seeing as well as the anatomizations of this scene carry us back to the rabbit bones and footprints and beads and further back again to Robinson Crusoe’s footprint and “the shore spread with skulls, hands, feet, and other bones of human bodies.”

It is tempting to use the ubiquity of epistemological cannibalism in the novel to say that when Laura “could not say what she meant,” she actually means she wants to eat the baby. Cannibal imagery surrounds her moment of meltdown, certainly. But Laura the character and her feelings are not my quarry here. I think it is best to allow the child character to be, in fact, dumbfounded. I am not going to join the chorus of opinions on this issue. She could not say what she meant, and more importantly, neither can we. Instead, thinking forensically, I will take the recurrent cannibal themes in the text as a clue, and I will pursue that moment of silence as an example of the dog that did not bark. I’m now going to reach my hands into and past the messy incision that Laura’s meltdown of narrative explanation allows me to make in the text, and see what ontological shards and half-digested traces of a cannibal feast come to my questing fingertips.

See What You See

In the face of Laura’s tears over the Indian baby, her father consoles her in a strange way that seems to have nothing to do with her meltdown:

Look at the Indians, Laura,” said Pa. “Look west, and then look east, and see what you see.”

Laura could hardly see at first. Her eyes were full of tears and sobs kept jerking out of her throat. But she obeyed Pa as best she could, and in a moment she was still. As far as she could see to the west and as far as she could see to the east there were Indians. There was no end to that long, long line.

“That’s an awful lot of Indians,” Pa said. (310)

Looking at the long line comforts the character of Laura the little girl, and pulls her back from her desire to rupture the space and time between the white family and the Native nation and have “that one little baby.” Why? Wilder never saw what is described here, or if she did, she could not have remembered it. *Little House on the Prairie* is the one book in the series written out of order with Wilder’s actual childhood experience: she lived in Kansas with her family when she was a baby, not when she was a little girl. What is it about that sight that seems so calming to Laura?

The Ingalls family lived in Kansas in 1870. The transcontinental railroad, which ran from the border of Iowa and Nebraska (several hundred miles north and a little bit east of where the Ingallses lived in Kansas) to Alameda, California, had been opened, to great fanfare, on May 10, 1869. The Ingallses, in other words, are not sitting on the westernmost line of civilization. The continent has been split in two before they settled in Kansas. The historical child Laura Ingalls’ father followed the steel tracks of railroad work where the fictional Pa followed freedom and wide-open spaces. Fellman shows that the railroad is suppressed in the series, just as Indian presence is denied both before and after Wilder’s one and only “Indian Book.”³⁴ For the historical child, the sight of the prairie split by a railroad was not only an everyday sight, but a world-organizing sight.

Pa has Laura look at the long line of Indians cutting the Prairie east to west, and then “that long line of Indians slowly pulled itself over the western edge of the world.” The *line* of Indians is described as a thing empowered in and of itself, and from the front of itself, a thing that pulls itself. This is a strange way to describe a group of human beings moving along on foot and on horseback, but it is a good way to describe a line of cars being pulled by a steam engine: a train.

A train takes over this scene of Indian Removal. Earlier in the book the prairie is described as an entrapping circle in which time doesn’t pass: “In a perfect circle the sky curved down to the level land, and the wagon was in the circle’s exact middle. All day long Pet and Patty went forward, trotting and walking and trotting again, but they couldn’t get out of the middle of that circle.”³⁵ Now Pa teaches Laura to see the prairie itself as space organized from east to west, a line. Earlier when she herself stood on that road, Laura felt queer. But now, seeing the Indians’ movement into the west and into the past along the “queer” road becomes comforting for Laura. She sees the Indians as an east-west travelling train,

dividing the entrapping sphere. Entrapping space becomes moving time, time that moves backward for Indians, forward for whites. The “queerness” of the trail is now resolved, and time and direction is organized correctly, with whites in the future, and Indians in the past. The quick springing forwardness of post-Indian white time is quite baldly stated in the first sentence of the chapter after “Indians Ride Away”:
“After the Indians had gone, a great peace settled on the prairie. And one morning the whole land was green. ‘When did that grass grow?’ Ma asked, in amazement” (312).

Wolfgang Schivelbusch argues that railway travel reorganized the way that people understood land, landscape, and time itself. Railway travel replaced a sense of being “joined” to the landscape with “panoramic perception.”³⁶ We see this clearly in the early chapters of *Little House on the Prairie*. The long chapters describing the family’s travel westward detail both the slow passage of time and the slow change in landscape around the watching and participating child, who can walk beside the covered wagon. But rail travel, Andrew Pickering explains, supports a panoramic (and purely visual) grasp of the terrain, in which the immediate foreground vanishes (due to the relative speed of the observer) while the background is seen synthetically, and translations between towns, countryside, and villages are grasped as a whole. It is as though the landscape appears as a movie projected on to the screen of the window.³⁷

This, then, is the lesson of “seeing what you see,” and the lesson of Wilder’s “Indian Novel” altogether. The child is taught to be passive in the face of what she can see in panoramic vision. Pulling back from the singular baby Laura is taught to see Indians as a panoramic whole, in motion into the past. This lesson also cures the synesthesia that has threatened Laura. She finally only sees what she sees. She does not hunger for what she sees..

Lulled, Laura concludes the chapter slumped on the doorstep, staring at the empty screen of the west, the cinematic highlights of her day replaying across her mind’s eye in dismembered pieces. “She seemed still to see waving feathers and black eyes and to hear the sound of ponies’ feet.” She has finally really learned the lesson of the rabbit bones and the beads: look, don’t touch. The best way to consume Indians is to stare at them. Just as you stare at the pages as you read, watching those long lines of black text pull themselves to the end of the book.

Two Prairies in One

Wilder rearranges family and national history in order to make her series march westward with the fantasy of the frontier into the fantasy of the future, and it should come as no surprise that she also reorganizes the chronology and geography of United States Indian policy, turning the arrow of its history backwards. The climax of the novel relies on scenes of Indian Removal. The Indian Removal Act dates to 1830, and by 1870 it was all but replaced by wars of

extermination. The Osage were among the last to experience it. Wilder is traveling a queer little kind of tunnel in the grass here, folding the Midwest upon itself in space and time, so that in the six novels that follow, her prairie is cleared of Indian presence. In a dreamlike, non-remembered past, the Osage march out of Kansas and with them Indians march out of the series, stage west, stage past, families nicely intact and traditional clothing proudly worn. The Osage stand in for all Indians, and this handsome vision of Removal stands in for all American Indian policy, from the extreme violence and devastation of the reality of Removal, to the killing fields of the high plains. What this allows Wilder to do in following books is very important. If Wilder gets rid of Indians early in the series, then she need never write about them when she gets to the place and the time that she certainly could remember, namely, De Smet, South Dakota, in 1879 and the following, bloody decade of the 1880s.

DeSmet, South Dakota came into being when the railway reached that part of the prairie in 1879. That same year the Wilder family turned up. Laura was twelve. She would live in DeSmet for fifteen years. 1879 was a very bleak year for Native people in the Dakotas. The railway enabled the semi-systematic slaughter of the bison that had supported high plains cultures: Buffalo Bill Cody described killing 100 animals in one stand; one buffalo hunter claimed to have killed 20,000 animals in a few years. The Dakota prairie that the Ingalls family “settled” was regularly described as covered in the rotting carcasses and bleached skeletons of thousands of slaughtered animals; photos reveal piles of bison skulls as tall as houses. In addition, the Great Sioux War of 1876–1877 was only recently over when the Ingallses arrived in DeSmet. In the Battle of Little Big Horn, or as the Lakota call it, the Battle of Greasy Grass Creek, a combined force of Lakota and Northern Cheyenne men and boys killed all 700 of the U.S. cavalry ranged against them, including General George Armstrong Custer. The battle was a bittersweet triumph; immediately military presence in South Dakota was increased, and the Dakota, Lakota, Yankton Sioux and Cheyenne Nations were brutally suppressed, their horses and weapons taken from them and their religion violently denied them. Food, shelter, and supplies promised by the U.S. government either didn’t arrive or were stolen by corrupt Indian agents. The decade of the 1880s, which Wilder describes bucolically in her later Little House Books, were a period of desperation, starvation, and decline for the Native Nations of the Dakotas.

The signs of these terrors were fully and horrifically imprinted on the landscape that Wilder describes as empty and welcoming and beautiful. Writing in 1883, Mark Brown, the son of the minister in DeSmet, describes how the prairie where the town was being built looked in 1879, the very year the Ingalls’ arrived: the little town “four years since [in 1879] was but a vast wilderness of prairie grass, whitened by the bones of the bison, and the poles of Indian wigwams still standing.”³⁸ This killing field, this charnel house, was the landscape that the Ingallses *actually* encountered.

Under this reading, *Little House on the Prairie* stages a non-remembered scene of the Kansas prairie and one abandoned fire and tiny rabbit skeleton, but contained within it are the traces of what must have been a well-remembered

scene of a tent-pole and bone-strewn South Dakota prairie. Wilder describes an idealized peaceful scene of Indian Removal, but contained within it are the traces of Dakota wars of extermination. The temporal shiftiness and the geographic sleight of hand of *Little House on the Prairie* allowed Ingalls Wilder to write a Kansas idyll, while quietly incorporating and gaining narrative energy from the violence of Indian-white relations in South Dakota.

Wilder's "Indian Novel" is a digest of Indianness within the series. The sign of that crime is the cannibal footprint at the book's center. The alimentary canal through which Indians pass is the queer tunnel in the grass that turns time and direction around—the Indians come via that trail and they exit along it at book's end. But it is also the queer little kind of tunnel of the text itself, word following word. Indians enter this tunnel on the first page with the promise of a papoose, and with the final page Indians are unceremoniously evacuated from the book and out of the series, and the next day everything is clean and bright and new.

Zitkala-Ša

Zitkala-Ša was born in 1876, the year of the Battle of Little Big Horn. She was three when the Ingallses turned up in South Dakota in 1879. Born and raised on a reservation well to the west of DeSmet, Zitkala-Ša didn't know the Ingallses, but the year 1879 was important to her, and to her entire generation, for another reason. In 1879 Carlisle Indian School was founded in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. It took as its mission the forced assimilation of Indian children. Between 1879 and 1918 when the school was closed, thousands of Native children from across the United States were taken from as early as five years old, traveling to Carlisle by train. . Their hair was cut (a symbol of dishonor and mourning among High Plains people). They were dressed in suits and dresses and forced to speak only English. The goal, as the school's founder repeatedly said, was to "kill the Indian and save the man." The mortality rate at the school was very high, and included many suicides. Survivors weren't allowed to return home for three to five years after arriving. Among the very first students of the school were High Plains boys and girls. They traveled all the way to Pennsylvania by train, and on their way many of them passed through DeSmet. Wilder arrived in DeSmet in 1879, the year the railway arrived *and* the year Carlisle opened. A train ghosts that fantastical scene of Osage removal from Kansas. As a teenager, Laura Ingalls must regularly have witnessed trainloads of Native children being carried eastward, out of the Dakotas. The Ingalls house was two blocks from the tracks, two blocks from the depot. She must have stood at that depot; she must have seen the trains carrying the children; she must have stared.

In "Impressions of an Indian Childhood," the unnamed little girl is tempted by missionaries to leave her mother and go to school far away in the east. They tell her that in the east there is a "great tree where grew red, red apples; and how we could reach out our hands and pick all the red apples we could eat. I had never seen apple trees. . . . and when I heard of the orchards of the East, I was eager to roam among them."³⁹ The child is lured away from home by a promise that resonates with *Little House on the Prairie*—she is offered red apples just as

the fictional Laura is offered a papoose (a promise of a different kind of redness). In *On the Way Home* (written 1894), Wilder's posthumously published (1962) journal of leaving the Dakotas and moving East, Laura lures her own daughter out of the Dakotas by promising her that she will get to eat apples in the east. Laura, now reenacting the role of Pa trying to convince a child to move across country, refers to the Ozarks, where they are going, as "The Land of the Big Red Apples."⁴⁰ The first chapter of Zitkala-Ša's "The School Days of an Indian Girl" is entitled "The Land of Red Apples." She describes the prairies in language that Wilder eerily echoes ("In a perfect circle the sky curved down to the level land, and the wagon was in the circle's exact middle"): "We had been very impatient to start on our journey to the Red Apple Country, which, we were told, lay a little beyond the great circular horizon of the Western Prairie."⁴¹

Seduced, the little girl leaves her mother. She finds herself on a train. With other Indian children gathered from all over the region, she begins to travel:

We had anticipated much pleasure from a ride on the iron horse, but the throngs of staring palefaces disturbed and troubled us. On the train, fair women, with tottering babies on each arm, stopped their haste and scrutinized the children of absent mothers. Large men, with heavy bundles in their hands, halted near by, and riveted their glassy blue eyes upon us. I sank deep into the corner of my seat, for I resented being watched. Directly in front of me, children who were no larger than I hung themselves upon the backs of their seats, with their bold white faces toward me. Sometimes they took their forefingers out of their mouths and pointed at my moccasined feet. Their mothers, instead of reproving such rude curiosity, looked closely at me, and attracted their children's further notice to my blanket. (47-48)

The connections between this scene and the scene of Osage removal in *Little House on the Prairie* are legion. In both the reproductive fecundity of the ethnic other is emphasized. "More and more and more" babies fill Wilder's scene (in fact, the Osage were living in near-starving conditions, their population already decimated). The Osage mother has two babies: "Then came a mother riding, with a baby in a basket on each side of her pony." Zitkala-Ša fills her scenario with reproductive white families, and again, the mother who is so fertile as to have two babies features: every mother seems to have a baby on each arm. In both texts, eyes—the strangeness of the eyes of the other—figure largely. Laura's fascination for the baby's black eyes, which remind us of her scrabbling after the blue glass beads in the dust, bump up against Zitkala-Ša's miserable experience of being stared at, not only by children, but by entire white families (the entire Ingalls family gathers outside the house to watch the spectacle of removal): the white men's "glassy blue eyes" (again, the beads), the children's "bold white faces," and the mothers who "look closely at me." Even the attention to dress and specifically blankets appears in both scenes. Wilder takes great care to show her little girl character looking at the Indians with a scholarly eye to traditional dress: "She thought she would never be tired of watching those ponies coming by, but after a while she began to look at the women and children on their backs . . . she

looked and looked . . . The Indian children's mothers were riding ponies, too. Leather fringe dangled about their legs and blankets were wrapped around their bodies, but the only thing on their heads was their black, smooth hair."⁴² Like Wilder, who looks first at children then at their mothers, Zitkala-Ša's character, travelling away from her own mother, notices the white children first, then turns her attention to their mothers, who direct and train their children's gaze, much as Pa trains his little girls to look at the remains of Native domesticity and women's labor with the interested gaze of the anthropologist. The white mothers "attracted their children's further notice to my blanket."

If these elements are shared between the texts, they are shared as mirror images. Everything Wilder takes from Zitkala-Ša is turned around and put to an opposite use. For the Nakota, it is unpardonably rude to stare, and the white children are repulsive to the child. Indeed, after the scene of staring whites is described, Zitkala-Ša explains that the child "sat perfectly still, with my eyes downcast, daring only now and then to shoot long glances around me."⁴³ But in the Wilder text, Indian children lock eyes with and stare right back at white children, and the white child is filled with desire in that exchanged look: "Laura looked and looked and looked at the Indian children, and they looked at her. She had a naughty wish to be a little Indian girl."⁴⁴ Wilder's long line of Indians travels by foot and on ponies westward, the entire Nation together, with families intact and mothers caring for and "wanting to keep" their babies. They are said to "pull themselves" over the western horizon, a description which makes their disappearance voluntary, but which also, as I have shown, invites railway travel into the scene. For Zitkala-Ša, the children on the train are "the children of absent mothers," mothers who desperately did "want to keep" their children, but whose children were lured away from them with promises of apples. The Native children in Zitkala-Ša also travel, also in a line, but eastward—the opposite of westward, which is the only direction acceptable for Indian travel under Turnerian theories of American historical development. The Native children do not pull themselves, but are pulled.

There is one thing upon which both writers agree: Native children are the diet of white supremacy and colonization. "Though we rode several days inside of the iron horse," Zitkala-Ša writes, "I do not recall a single thing about our luncheons."⁴⁵ The child's digestive amnesia recalls Laura's inability to say what she means about her desire for the Indian baby. But where Laura's failure of meaning hides a cannibal impulse, Zitkala-Ša's amnesia occurs because the child herself has become the meal. She describes herself as engulfed by the incomprehension of what is happening to her, "inside of the iron horse." The child is taken into the gut of the train as if swallowed into the belly of a beast. She is, herself, the fodder driving the engines of genocide.

But the unnamed child, digested though she may be, resists from within. I want us to consider the turnip-mashing scene in "The School Days of an Indian Girl."

One day I was called in from my play for some misconduct. I had disregarded a rule which seemed to me very needlessly binding. I was sent into the kitchen to mash the turnips for dinner. . . . I hated turnips, and

their odor which came from the brown jar was offensive to me. With fire in my heart, I took the wooden tool that the paleface woman held out to me. I stood upon a step, and, grasping the handle with both hands, I bent in hot rage over the turnips. I worked my vengeance upon them. All were so busily occupied that no one noticed me. I saw that the turnips were in a pulp, and that further beating could not improve them; but the order was, "Mash these turnips," and mash them I would! I renewed my energy; and as I sent the masher into the bottom of the jar, I felt a satisfying sensation that the weight of my body had gone into it.

Just here a paleface woman came up to my table. As she looked into the jar, she shoved my hands roughly aside. I stood fearless and angry. She placed her red hands upon the rim of the jar. Then she gave one lift and stride away from the table. But lo! the pulpy contents fell through the crumbled bottom to the floor. She spared me no scolding phrases that I had earned. I did not heed them. I felt triumphant in my revenge, though deep within me I was a wee bit sorry to have broken the jar.

As I sat eating my dinner, and saw that no turnips were served, I whooped in my heart for having once asserted the rebellion within me.⁴⁶

Turnip flesh is white and the jar is brown, but Zitkala-Ša's character is attacking the white "food" of colonization fed to brown bodies, a nourishment that is, of course, toxic.⁴⁷ Note that the child bends over the jar just as Wilder's cooking woman "leaned forward to stir," but here the "stirring" is a violent "beating." The child "digests" it with the violence of her resistance, and she finds that she is "satisfied." Indeed, that satisfaction comes in the moment that she feels as if she might have refilled the brown pot with her own brown body. Wilder's Indian woman who stirred the pot is made to disappear twice. First into an immemorial anthropological past when the girls read her traces, and then we actually see her and her pot marching away in the removal scene. Zitkala-Sa's Indian child who stirs a pot is triumphant, even, I would argue, magnificently cannibal in her resistance. She turns white flesh to pulp with violent, revengeful intent. In destroying white flesh the child is nourishing her own Indianness. The pulp cannot be served at the colonist's table because, through her intervention, the child has used white flesh to heal the rift between her brown body and her brown self.

The Monster at the End of the Book

Have I lost you along the way? Are you inclined to say that the similarities between Wilder and Zitkala-Ša show us the same historical trauma, experienced by two little girls, one on the train heading west, one standing by the tracks and watching? Of course they wrote from different perspectives about the same thing. Why, you might ask, do I take it that extra step and insist on Zitkala-Ša being interior to *Little House*?

The reason lies in the difference between "a vast wilderness of prairie grass, whitened by the bones of the bison, and the poles of Indian wigwams still standing," and "in a perfect circle the sky curved down to the level land, and the

wagon was in the circle's exact middle." It lies in the difference between a newly established town bisected by rails that day after day carried away "the children of absent mothers," and a "long line of Indians [that] slowly pulled itself over the western edge of the world." When Wilder takes up arms against the New Deal and argues that "in my own life I represented a whole period of American history," she places herself at the center of a vast blankness: "All day long Pet and Patty went forward, trotting and walking and trotting again, but they couldn't get out of the middle of that circle."

Wilder's lessons in the anti-visceral—in satiating one's desire through seeing rather than eating—are an alibi. She was in Kansas before the possibility of memory, and her "Indian Novel" is set in that non-remembered space of fantasy. But Wilder absolutely smelled and touched the "differentia, residue, or tissue" of settler colonial violence when she was big girl. But simply revealing that Laura Ingalls saw the engines of genocide carrying away Native children, or that she must have helped her father take down "the poles of Indian wigwams" and clear away the bison bones before building yet another little house, only turns a children's book into an adult book. The Indians still disappear in that tussle over historical accuracy. The living discourse of survivance that did and does continue in the face of these "facts" remains unheard.

My insistence that I have found Zitkala-Ša there in that children's novel, that I can discern her words among Wilder's in the face of no evidence beyond the forensic gropings of close reading, is in part Swiftian satire, an effort to use the outrageous limit of argument to bring (again, mind you, and again) the not-so-hidden racism of Wilder's fiction to light. And it is also an attempt to use satire to point out what should be obvious. Native people haven't pulled themselves over the edge of the world. Native people lived and spoke and live and speak against these sorts of narratives every day. Variations on disappearance are not the only story. Zitkala-Ša is in Wilder, and although we find her story digested there, it is still in print. 60 million pale yellow paperbacks is a lot, but we could choose to read Zitkala-Ša too, or even instead. Native life and speech emanate from within the belly of the beast. Native life and speech pound away at the white flesh of settler-colonial fantasy. They are an emetic, and such an effective emetic that the Wilders of the world and those that love them must continue to write and read "Indian novels" in an effort to keep those lives and those voices down.

I began by reminding us that the word "cannibal" is itself a cannibalistic translation from Arawak or Carib into English. When we speak of cannibalism, and when we speak of digestion, we are always speaking of textual and bodily practices, of alimentary and cultural processes. The child character of Laura Ingalls is trained from eating to seeing to writing . . . and at that point we enter, as readers. The child character of Laura sees the Indian baby, and "she could not say what she meant." But we, who read and re-read and delight in reading again, we want what Laura wants. At that point we take over from the child character. We want that Indian baby. And when we read, we actually partake in what the child character could not.

The book itself is the feast, and the trick of it is, it is only eaten when you or I venture down the queer little kind of tunnel of its prose. We read *Little House*

on the Prairie, we savor it, we share it with children, nourishing them with it, believing it to be good for them. In the hours that we spend with this novel we give the book its own bloody nourishment and thereby its strange immortality. We are the recipients of what Laura wants—an Indian child. Is it the fat and healthy Osage baby of Laura’s fantasy, the one that blots out the reality of Osage experience and history, or the unnamed Nakota child written by Zitkala-Ša but incorporated by Wilder into her novel?

The fact is, it’s a good old-fashioned two for one deal. an “Eat Kids Free” special. We feast on both children when we indulge ourselves in *Little House on the Prairie*.

¹ Michael Jeanneret, *A Feast of Words: Banquets and Table Talk in the Renaissance*, trans. Jeremy Whiteley and Emma Hughes (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 132

² I take the title of this essay from Jonathan Swift’s satirical 1729 essay, “A Modest Proposal,” in which he suggests that impoverished Irish sell their babies to be eaten by the upper classes. Jonathan Swift, “A Modest Proposal,” Dublin: S. Harding, 1729.

³ “heritage, n.” *OED Online*. March 2014. Oxford University Press.
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/86230> (accessed May 20, 2014).

⁴ Eric Cheyfitz, *The Poetics of Imperialism: Translation and Colonization from Tempest to Tarzan* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 42-43.

⁵ Kyla Wazana Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 94.

⁶ A term coined by Gerald Vizenor in *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), survivance refers to the creative and non-static enactment of survival and resistance in the face of settler-colonial violence.

⁷ Anita Clair Fellman, *Little House, Long Shadow: Laura Ingalls Wilder’s Impact on American Culture*. (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2008), 21.

⁸ Cited in Sharon Smulders, “‘The Only Good Indian’: History, Race and Representation in Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie*,” *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (2002): 191.

⁹ Lee Edelman, “The Future is Kid Stuff” in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.

¹⁰ José Esteban Muñoz, “Cruising the Toilet” in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 96.

¹¹ The unnamed child in *American Indian Stories* returns home from school one summer to find that the teenaged boys and girls with whom she used to play are now dressing in settler-style clothes, speaking English, and participating in white rituals of courtship and gender policing. Race and gender are both targeted by assimilationist schools, and the enraged child engages masculinity as a means to try to rediscover the Indianness that has been torn from her. Mark Rifkin makes his transformative queer reading of Zitkala-Ša a core chapter of *When Did Indians Become Straight? Kinship, the History of Sexuality, and Native Sovereignty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). In *Little House on the Prairie*, Ma regularly conflates Laura’s boyishness with Indianness, while Laura yearns to be Indian when she yearns away from the restrictions of white femininity. Laura’s boyishness and identification with Indians is much remarked in the feminist scholarship surrounding the series. A useful exploration of the way racial as well gender cross-identification is at work in most representations of white American tomboys is Michelle Ann Abate’s *Tomboys: A Literary and Cultural History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008).

¹² James H. Cox, “‘Yours for the Indian Cause’: Gertrude Bonnin’s Activist Editing at *The American Indian Magazine*, 1915-1919” in *Blue Pencils and Hidden Hands: Women Editing Periodicals, 1830-1910*, eds. Sharon M. Harris and Ellen Gruber (Boston: Northeastern University

Press, 2004), 193.

¹³ Twenty-three peer-reviewed articles have been published about Zitkala-Sa since 2000. Examples useful to this study include Chiarello, Barbara, "Deflected Missives: Zitkala-Sa's Resistance and Its (Un)Containment," *Studies in American Indian Literatures: The Journal of the Association for the Study of American Indian Literatures* 17.3 (2005), 1-26; Jessica Enoch, "Resisting the Script of Indian Education: Zitkala-Sa and the Carlisle Indian School," *College English* 65.2 (Fall 2002), 117-141; Tiffany Aldrich MacBain, "Cont(r)acting Whiteness: The Language of Contagion in the Auobiographical Essays of Zitkala-Sa," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture and Theory* 68.3 (Fall 2012), 55-69.

¹⁴ Fellman, *Little House, Long Shadow*, 5.

¹⁵ Michael Dorris, "Trusting the Words," *Booklist* 89 (June, 1993); Dennis McAuliffe, Jr., *The Deaths of Sybil Boton: An American History* (New York: Times Books, 1994), 112. Dennis McAuliffe did go on to write his own scholarly essay about the novel, entitled "Little House on the Osage Prairie," in *A Broken Flute: The Native Experience in Books for Children*, eds. Doris Seale and Beverly Slapin (Lapham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2005), 49-53.

¹⁶ A few examples of many possible: in 1977, Elizabeth Segel argues that Laura "assert[s] a kinship with these people, that she . . . griev[es] for their exile, and that the tragedy unfolding around her is not lost on her" ("Laura Ingalls Wilder's America: An Unflinching Assessment," *Children's Literature in Education* 8 [1977]: 69). In 1987, Charles Frey suggests that Laura has a "deep and mysterious affinity . . . with the Indian spirit and way of life" ("Laura and Pa: Family and Landscape in *Little House on the Prairie*," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 12 [1987]:128). In 1994, Susan Maher feels that Laura "penetrates the Indians' otherness" ("Laura Ingalls and Caddie Woodlawn: Daughters of a Border Space," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 18 [1994]: 130-42). And Ann Romines, in her 1997 book-length study of Wilder's work, argues that Laura's fascination with Indians "reaches—however futilely—beyond [a] model of [Indian-white] incompatibility, suggesting a *delight* in difference that may even move toward the heightened multiplicities of *jouissance*" (*Constructing the Little House: Gender, Culture, and Laura Ingalls Wilder* [Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997], 78).

¹⁷ Frances W. Kaye, "Little Squatter on the Osage Diminished Reserve: Reading Laura Ingalls Wilder's Kansas Indians," *Great Plains Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 2 (Spring 2000), 123.

¹⁸ Waziyatawin Angela Wilson, "Burning Down the House: Laura Ingalls Wilder and American Colonialism," in *Unlearning the Language of Conquest: Scholars Expose Anti-Indianism in America*, ed. Four Arrows (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 78.

¹⁹ Christine Woodside, "Little Libertarians on the Prairie," *The Boston Globe* August 9, 2013; Caroline Fraser, "Little House on the Prairie: Tea Party Manifesto," *Salon* October 10, 2012.

²⁰ Heather Love, "Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn," *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 375

²¹ John Crowe Ransom, "*Criticism, Inc.*," reprinted in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, eds. Vincent Leitch et al. (New York, W. W. Norton Co., 2001), 1108-1118. 1117.

²² Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 3.

²³ Sharon Smulders points out that papoose is a word "cerived from Narragansett, an Algonquian language already extinct at the beginning of the nineteenth century. . . . Deceivingly pseudo-authentic, words like papoose homogenize all indigenous peoples, irrespective of vast differences in language, culture, history and geography, while distinguishing them as not-white" (Smulders, "'The Only Good Indian,'" 193).

²⁴ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 307-308.

²⁵ Denise Gigante, *Taste: A Literary History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 3-4.

²⁶ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 179-180.

²⁷ Jay Martin, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity" in *Vision and Visuality* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988); Peter Jackson, *Maps of Meaning: An Introduction to Cultural Geography* (London: Routledge, 1989), 44.

²⁸ Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 154.

²⁹ Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 164-65.

³⁰ Phillip Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 28-29; Shirley Samuels, *Romances of the Republic: Women, the Family and Violence in the Literature of the*

Early American Nation (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 5-6.

³¹ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 55.

³² This twist in my argument is entirely dependent upon the temporal turn in queer studies, especially Elizabeth Freeman's *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) and Mark Rifkin's bringing of that turn to Native American Studies in *When Did Indians Become Straight?*

³³ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 308-9.

³⁴ Fellman, *Little House, Long Shadow*, 95.

³⁵ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 13.

³⁶ Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1986), 64.

³⁷ Andrew Pickering, "Practice and Posthumanism: Social Theory and a History of Agency," in *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, eds. Karin Knorr Cetina, Theodore R. Schatzki, and Eike von Savigny (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), 168.

³⁸ Mark Brown, *DeSmet Leader*, December 29, 1883

³⁹ Zitkala-Ša, *American Indian Stories, Old Indian Legends, and Other Writings* (1921; rpt. New York: Penguin, 2003), 35.

⁴⁰ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *On the Way Home: The Diary of a Trip from South Dakota to Mansfield, Missouri, in 1894* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 8.

⁴¹ Zitkala-Ša, *American Indian Stories*, 47.

⁴² Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 307.

⁴³ Zitkala-Ša, *American Indian Stories*, 48.

⁴⁴ Wilder, *Little House on the Prairie*, 307.

⁴⁵ Zitkala-Ša, *American Indian Stories*, 49.

⁴⁶ Zitkala-Ša, *American Indian Stories*, 59

⁴⁷ I am grateful to Mel Chen's discussion of toxic ingestion, children and race. See "Toxic Animacies, Inanimate Affections," *GLQ* 17.2-3 (2011), 285