Speaking to Power: Zitkála-Šá's “America's Indian Problem” (1921)

NBE3U, Unit 3: Writing Back, Lesson 12. 75 minutes. Teacher lesson plan.

Lesson at a glance

Officials called it “the Indian problem.” In 1921, Zitkála-Šá turned the phrase around: the problem was a history of broken hospitality, stolen land and wardship without citizenship, and the solution was informed citizens who would act. Nonfiction can write back too, with irony, history and a call to action.

What students do: Students analyse the persuasive moves in “America's Indian Problem,” compare it with Johnson's 1892 essay on stereotypes, research one context fact for their essays using reliable sources, and check their gathered information for accuracy and completeness.

Curriculum expectations

Code	Students will…
C1.7	evaluate the effectiveness of texts from First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, and, as appropriate, relevant texts from non-Indigenous sources, including increasingly complex or difficult texts, using evidence from the text to support their opinions
D1.3	locate and select information to effectively support ideas for writing, using a variety of strategies and print, electronic, and other resources, as appropriate
D1.5	determine whether the ideas and information gathered are accurate and complete, interesting, and effectively meet the requirements of the writing task

From The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9 to 12: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies (2019), English: Understanding Contemporary First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Voices, Grade 11, University Preparation (NBE3U). A = First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Perspectives and Text Forms in Canada, B = Oral Communication, C = Reading and Literature Studies, D = Writing, E = Media Studies.

Learning goals and success criteria

Learning goals	Success criteria
• We are learning to evaluate persuasive nonfiction. • We are learning to locate reliable information and check it for accuracy.	• I can identify persuasive moves and their effects. • I can evaluate the essay's effectiveness with evidence. • I can find and cite reliable sources for a context fact. • I can check my information for accuracy and completeness.

Materials and preparation

- **Slides:** Speaking to Power deck.

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- **Handouts:** Persuasive Moves (page 1), Research Log (page 2).
- **Reader:** Zitkála-Šá, “America's Indian Problem” (1921).
- **Devices:** For research.

Lesson sequence

Time (min)	Part	Teacher	Students	Look for
0–8	**Hook**	Who names the problem?	Discuss.	
8–25	**Read**	The essay.	Read.	
25–40	**Persuasion**	Moves and effects.	Analyse.	Effectiveness judged.
40–50	**Two essays**	Johnson 1892.	Compare.	
50–75	**Research**	Context facts.	Research and check.	Reliable, accurate sources.

Differentiation

- **Support:** A starter list of reliable sources (Canadian Encyclopedia, NCTR, Library and Archives Canada, Britannica).
- **ELL:** Glossary: hospitality, dispossessed, wards, enfranchisement.
- **Challenge:** Research the U.S. Indian Citizenship Act (1924) and her role in campaigning for it.

Assessment

Type	Tool	Purpose
Assessment for learning	Persuasive Moves and Research Log	Evaluation (C1.7), locating information (D1.3) and accuracy and completeness (D1.5)

Speaking to power: key points

- **Irony:** The settlers were saved by Indigenous “hospitality,” and repaid it with a cross “as a sign of English dominion.”
- **History as evidence:** Spanish and English conquest, then “a long century of dishonor.”
- **Reframing:** The “problem” is wardship without citizenship and unsettled treaties, not Indigenous people.
- **Audience:** She addresses American women as partners: “cooperation of head, heart and hand.”
- **Call to action:** “Let us be informed of facts and then we may formulate our opinions.”
- **Johnson, 1892:** Also writing back in a newspaper, Johnson mocked fiction's single doomed “Indian girl”: both writers attack the stories settlers told themselves.

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Teacher notes

- “America's Indian Problem” appears at the end of American Indian Stories (1921). It quotes historical sources (on Newport and Powhatan; on De Soto) and was written for an audience that included members of the General Federation of Women's Clubs, for whose Indian Welfare Committee she later worked.
- Johnson's essay “A Strong Race Opinion: On the Indian Girl in Modern Fiction” appeared in the Toronto Sunday Globe on May 22, 1892. It mocks the single stereotyped “Indian girl” of settler fiction: always a chief's daughter with a “Winona”-sounding name and no surname, always in love with a white hero, and almost always doomed. The essay is not in our public domain sources; describe it in your own words.
- The U.S. Indian Citizenship Act was passed in 1924, three years after this essay; Zitkála-Šá campaigned for it. In Canada, First Nations people gained the federal vote without losing status in 1960.
- Research: steer students to reliable, preferably Indigenous-led sources, and to check every date in two places.
- We strongly recommend reviewing this unit with your board's Indigenous education lead and, where possible, inviting a First Nations, Métis or Inuit Elder, Knowledge Keeper or guest speaker following your board's protocols (including offerings and honoraria). Local Nations' own sources come first.

Coming up

Lesson 13, Essay Workshop.

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