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## Constructing Representation

### Dakota and Ojibwe in Minnesota Literary and Media Narratives

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This paper aims to examine how groups of Indigenous Peoples, specifically Dakota and Ojibwe in Minnesota, are currently being portrayed and perceived by the general audience in the contemporary cultural environment. To this end, an analysis of two complementary elements of discourse has been conducted. These are (a) literature as an important and in-depth way of describing local

reality through both fiction and non-fiction, and (b) local media, which provide everyday knowledge about the state's Indigenous communities, with a special emphasis on Minnesota's acclaimed public media. The article's goal, therefore, is to highlight the similarities and differences between narratives presented by literature and media.

**Keywords:** Native American heritage in Minnesota, contemporary Ojibwe fiction, contemporary Ojibwe non-fiction, Native American media coverage, trauma, resilience

## Introduction

The growing presence of Indigenous Peoples in contemporary cultural narratives invites closer examination not only of their inclusion but also of the forms and structures through which these narratives are constructed. The key question, therefore, is how these narratives are constructed and by whom. Inclusion of Indigenous Peoples in dominant cultural discourse, however, does not necessarily ensure accurate or equitable representation. Visibility often comes with the risk of appropriation or distortion, especially when narratives are frequently shaped without the involvement of those communities themselves (EchoHawk).

This process of narrative construction is particularly critical to analyze because it plays a central role in shaping public perception. Media and popular culture, in particular, contribute to the creation and circulation of recurring images – some reductive or stereotypical, others grounded in self-representation and cultural continuity. As Peter Leavitt and colleagues have shown, mediated representations of Indigenous Peoples can influence identity formation and self-understanding, both within and outside Indigenous communities (Leavitt *et al.*, 39-53). Analyzing the mechanisms behind these images is therefore essential to understanding their social, cultural, and political impact.

Minnesota offers a compelling regional context for such an analysis. As the homeland of both the Dakotas and the Ojibwes, the state has long been shaped by Indigenous presence. While the population identifying as "American Indian and Alaska Native" constitutes approximately 1% of Minnesota's total population, the cultural significance of those communities is evident across many areas of public life ("Native American Population").

Given this context, our study focuses on how representations of Dakota and Ojibwe are constructed in two distinct yet complementary fields of

discourse: literature and local media. The aim of this article, therefore, is twofold: to analyze how selected literary works and public media content portray Indigenous communities in Minnesota; and second, to consider what these portrayals suggest about the broader dynamics of cultural representation and narrative authority.

The article draws on literary texts by prominent Ojibwe writers including Louise Erdrich, Gerald Vizenor, and David Treuer, who explore themes of historical trauma, survivance, sovereignty, and cultural continuity. We examined both fiction and non-fiction works, recognizing their shared role in constructing narratives about Indigenous identity, resilience, and agency. In parallel, we analyze coverages of Indigenous issues in Minnesota's public and community-based media – notably Minnesota Public Radio (MPR), the Association of Minnesota Public Educational Radio Stations (AMPERS), and Minnesota Native News – with particular attention to their framing strategies and institutional positioning. The comparison aims to highlight both convergences and divergences between literary and media representation, emphasizing the different narrative tools.

Our methodological approach is interdisciplinary, combining elements of discourse analysis, cultural studies, and American Studies. We understand discourse, following Chris Barker and Dariusz Galasiński, as a symbolic system through which meaning is produced and circulated, shaping how subjects and communities are made intelligible (Barker & Galasiński, 4). In our approach, discourse analysis, therefore, goes beyond the study of language use *per se*; it is understood as the examination of cultural practices through which meaning is constructed and contested. We are particularly interested in how literature and media function as discursive formations that not only articulate but also perform and institutionalize cultural knowledge, power relations, and identity narratives. Literature and media thus function as “speaking subjects” – institutions of narrative production that frame Indigenous Peoples in particular ways. Simultaneously, we situate our research within the broader critical tradition of American Studies, which emphasizes the relationship between cultural production and structures of power (Campbell, 11).

We remain attentive to the ethical and epistemological implications of studying Indigenous representations, especially since we are non-Indigenous scholars based in Poland, approaching this topic from a position of cultural and geographical distance.<sup>1</sup> We are aware of the limitations

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<sup>1</sup> It must be noted that the study presented here is a result of a long-term study conducted between 2022 and 2024, which included the research trip to the

this position entails, particularly concerning lived experience, community embeddedness, and local epistemologies. Our intention is not to speak on behalf of Indigenous communities, but rather to critically analyze how their presence is constructed and mediated through literature and media. We hope that this perspective — explicitly situated and methodologically reflective — contributes to ongoing discussions about representation, visibility, and narrative agency within the interdisciplinary field of American Studies.

## Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The article adopts an interdisciplinary framework rooted in American cultural studies, combining tools from discourse analysis, literary analysis, and media studies. Rather than privileging one methodological tradition, we draw on a cross-sectional set of approaches to highlight the interaction between narrative, ideology, and cultural production.

The theoretical basis of our study is, thus, grounded in discourse analysis, as understood by cultural theorists Chris Barker and Dariusz Galasiński, as explained in their book, *Cultural Studies and Discourse Analysis*. As they argue, “language constitutes material objects and social practices as meaningful and intelligible,” and “[t]o understand culture is to explore how meaning is produced symbolically through the signifying practices of language within material and institutional contexts” (4). In our case, literature and local media are precisely such signifying practices: they participate in constructing collective imaginaries, contributing to public knowledge and Indigenous communities, their past, and their present. Such approach to discourse analysis aligns with the broader tradition of cultural studies, which treats discourse not only as language, but as a system of meaning-making embedded in cultural forms, narrative conventions, and institutional frameworks. We do not limit our focus to textual or linguistic features; rather, we examine how literary and media representations operate as cultural practices that shape perception, identity, and power relations.

In this context, we approach literary works by Louise Erdrich, Gerald Vizenor, and David Treuer through close reading, focusing on how their

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Twin Cities region in August 2023, and a number of conducted interviews with representatives of Indigenous Peoples of Minnesota, and conference papers presented in the mentioned timespan.

works reframe historical narratives and explore cultural persistence, identity, and trauma. While our literary analysis is grounded in textual interpretation, we also prioritize the concept of survivance, introduced by Gerald Vizenor in *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance* (1994), which denotes both survival and resistance beyond the confines of victimhood. Therefore, survivance functions in our work as a lens through which to interpret narrative strategies deployed by Indigenous authors to assert their cultural agency.

Our media analysis is based on two methodological components. First, we conducted a qualitative discourse analysis of selected public media sources in Minnesota, including Minnesota Public Radio. Second, we supplemented this analysis with a series of semi-structured interviews carried out in August 2023 with journalists and producers working in these institutions. The interviews focused on the structure of Indigenous media representation, editorial strategies, and internal perceptions of coverage. While we acknowledge the exploratory nature of this research component, it offers important insights into how Indigenous narratives are framed, prioritized, or marginalized in local public discourse.

Ultimately, we situate the study within American studies as an interdisciplinary methodological approach that emphasizes the analysis of cultural narratives, power structures, and contested representations. Rather than offering a single lens, American studies encourage critical engagement with how meaning is produced and who controls its articulation. As American studies scholar Neil Campbell highlights in his *American Cultural Studies* book: “America, a nation of differences, has to be examined with close consideration of how those differences relate to those who have the loudest voices, the most authority, status and wealth, and those who do not” (Campbell, 11). The orientation informs our focus on the cultural positioning of Indigenous voices in literature and media, as well as our attention to the dynamics of visibility, marginalization, and narrative agency.

Conclusively, we acknowledge that any engagement with Indigenous representation necessarily intersects with postcolonial and decolonial questions of epistemic authority or cultural appropriation. The legacy of Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s seminal book *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2012) served as an inspiration for conducting this research, while it was not positioned as the primary theoretical framework. Such critical context informs our reading of literary and media narratives, particularly as they pertain to the ways Indigenous communities resist imposed identities and reclaim discursive space.

## Indigenous Peoples in Minnesota

Minnesota is home to two major Indigenous nations — the Dakota and the Ojibwe — each with distinct historical trajectories, languages, and cultural systems. While the term “Indigenous Peoples” may be used at times for broader comparative or demographic purposes, our focus remains on these two nations, whose presence and cultural significance have shaped the region’s identity. A nuanced understanding of their distinct histories and experiences is crucial for interpreting how they are portrayed in both literature and media.

The Ojibwe are known for their westward migration driven by a prophetic vision, which led them to the Great Lakes region and wild rice waters that became central to their culture (Treuer, 45). In contrast, the Dakota have long inhabited the Minnesota River Valley and surrounding plains, whose cultural and spiritual life is deeply connected to the land (Westerman & White, 60). The violent rupture of this connection during the 19<sup>th</sup> century is a foundational trauma that remains a critical part of Dakota cultural memory and representation.

While census data suggests that those identifying as members of Indigenous Peoples make up approximately 1% of Minnesota’s population (“Native American Population”), the cultural visibility of Dakota and Ojibwe peoples extends far beyond such indicator. Their presence has profoundly influenced both rural and urban spaces across the state, including the Twin Cities. The 1970s marked a critical turning point, particularly in Minneapolis, where the American Indian Movement (AIM) was founded in 1968 in response to police brutality, systemic discrimination, and the failures of the federal relocation policy (Smith, 112; Fixico, 67). AIM’s origins and sustained presence in Minnesota signal an ongoing assertion of sovereignty, resistance, and — most importantly in the context of this article — public discourse engagement. Parallel to this, the development of tribally run enterprises — especially casinos operating under federal Indian gaming regulations — has played a transformative role in the region’s Indigenous economies. While not without controversy, these institutions have contributed to a greater degree of financial self-determination, funding language programs, cultural institutions, and infrastructure on reservations (see: Gabe *et al.*).

Such dynamics are especially evident in large and politically active reservations such as Red Lake, White Earth, Mille Lacs, and Leech Lake, which exemplify the multifaceted nature of contemporary Indigenous life in Minnesota. These communities face persistent disparities in health,

education, and income (Kocherlakota), with a poverty rate of 28.6% among Indigenous populations compared to 6.9% among white Minnesotans, and only a 51% high school graduation rate among Indigenous students, comparable to 88% for white, non-Hispanic students (Kaul).

The COVID-19 pandemic hit Indigenous communities in Minnesota especially hard, amplifying existing health and economic disparities. High infection and mortality rates, combined with limited healthcare access, revealed structural inequalities long present on and off reservations. Such a process has brought to the forefront the urgent need for more targeted public health strategies and support systems (Carroll et al.).

Still, those processes tell only part of the story. Efforts to revitalize language and culture — such as the Ojibwe Language Revitalization Program in 2019 — and initiatives like the American Indian Cultural Corridor in Minneapolis as well as tribal colleges and immersion schools represent powerful forms of cultural continuity and innovation (Tynjala; Hazzard). The renaming of Lake Calhoun to Bde Maka Ska in 2018 exemplifies not only a shift in public memory but also the growing impact of Indigenous activism in reshaping the state's symbolic landscape (Huynh). That change, initiated and sustained by Dakota voices, underscores the broader struggle to reclaim identity, space, and representation.

Recent activism, particularly in environmental justice movements such as resistance to pipeline construction in 2021, also reflects a continuation of traditional land stewardship framed in contemporary political terms (LaDuke, 157). These campaigns demonstrate the intersection of ecological knowledge, sovereignty claims, and cultural continuity — themes that are increasingly visible in media and literature, and which challenge static or romanticized images of Indigenous Peoples.

## Literary Voices of Indigenous Minnesota

Minnesota is home of several important Indigenous authors, but, for the sake of brevity, we would like to concentrate on most acclaimed Ojibwe writers such as Louise Erdrich, Gerald Vizenor, David Treuer and historians Brenda Child and Anton Treuer. Their contribution includes both fiction (novels, short stories) and non-fiction (memoirs, history books and literary theory works). In this part, our focus is on the most notable narrative works, because we would like to demonstrate that the aforementioned authors not only excel at these particular genres but put similar emphasis on some decolonization strategies proposed by Tuhiwai-Smith



such as celebrating survival, indigenizing by providing alternative concepts of the world and value system and creating Indigenous solutions to problems stressing abilities to adapt and transform. Additionally, the interpretation will focus on the idea of discourse introduced by Michel Foucault (in *The Archeology of Knowledge* 1969) who claimed that reality is linguistically constructed, and an individual becomes a subject upon accepting the rules of a given discourse. In contemporary Indigenous fiction, the discourse is shaped by both Indigenous methodology of decolonization and western postmodernist tradition, which is particularly evident in the works of Louise Erdrich, who has always emphasized her Ojibwe legacy inherited from her mother and the German-American immigrant tradition of her father.

Erdrich is the most acclaimed author as she has received the National Critics Circle Award, the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, among others. Her home reservation, Turtle Mountain in North Dakota, is a model for a fictional reservation from her novelistic cycles. The first cycle is about the Pillager clan, and it encompasses eight novels<sup>2</sup> whereas the second concentrates on the families of Shawano and Coutts and it includes six texts<sup>3</sup>. To this collection of fiction, we would like to add *The Night Watchman*, 2020, and *The Sentence*, not connected to previous cycles and non-fiction; two memoirs, *The Blue Jay's Dance* and *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country*.

Native American and Ojibwe history manifests itself in all texts produced by Erdrich, reflecting upon such important processes, events and legal acts in the fight for stolen land including the history of treaties and the Dawes Act and its consequences for different reservations (*Love Medicine* 1984, *Tracks* 1988, *The Bingo Palace* 1994, *Four Souls* 2004 and *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* 2000). Another important theme is boarding schools and multigenerational trauma (*Love Medicine*, *Tracks* and *LaRose* 2016) ethnic genocide (*Tracks*, *LaRose*, *The Antelope Wife* 1997, *The Antelope Woman* 2016, *The Plague of Doves* 2008), salvage anthropology (*The Painted Drum* 2005), termination of Native American nations (*The Night Watchman*), rape and other crimes on reservation land and in the

<sup>2</sup> *Love Medicine*, *The Beet Queen*, *Tracks*, *The Bingo Palace*, *Tales of Burning Love* and *Four Souls*.

<sup>3</sup> *The Antelope Wife* (1997, revised editions 2012, 2014), *Antelope Woman* (2016), *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, *The Painted Drum*, *The Plague of Doves*, *The Round House*; depending whether we count all editions of *The Antelope Wife* as separate texts.



cities including protests after police violence (*The Round House* 2012, *the Sentence*) and a fight for tribal sovereignty and visibility (*Love Medicine*, *The Plague of Doves*, *The Night Watchman*). We would like to argue, however, that all these texts (and particularly memoirs) celebrate survival by suggesting Indigenous solutions to problems and stressing adaptability of Ojibwe culture<sup>4</sup>.

Erdrich celebrates the complicated and diverse Indigenous life in her fiction not only by elaborating on the consequences of historical events and processes I have already listed, but by constructing memorable and psychologically credible feminist characters such as Fleur Pillager and Father Damien Modeste/Agnes DeWitt in her earlier novels (e.g. *Love Medicine*, *Tracks*, *The Bingo Palace*, *Four Souls*, *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*) or Tookie in her comparatively recent *The Sentence*. Even though the novels are set in different times and places and the fictional worlds incorporate the elements of different genres and styles — the earlier works are historical reconstructions of Native American history and *The Sentence* refers to contemporary history (the murder of George Floyd) and contains more gothic elements than the previous texts — I would like to argue that Erdrich's woman characters from these novels realize a very similar Indigenous feminist agenda. Fleur Pillager is a practitioner of traditional Ojibwe medicine and a businesswoman. Her role goes beyond being a mother to Lulu or a partner to the different men she encounters in her life. Deeply aware of historical neocolonial wrongdoing of white settlers who steal her land in *Tracks* and force her to leave her daughter in a boarding school, Fleur transforms into a charismatic avenger who regains her family and land. She is empowering for other women, even though her courage is at times intimidating, but Erdrich makes it clear that at the time of forceful assimilation and land theft after the Dawes Act and introduction of the boarding school system, Fleur has no choice and she has to, in magical realist fashion, join forces with the Ojibwe mythological creature Misshepeshu and strike back against the neocolonial system. Additionally, in the character of Fleur, Erdrich deconstructs the stereotypes of Indian princess and Indian sage, because instead of relocating her protagonist to some fairytale

<sup>4</sup> There are numerous examples of this in Erdrich's fiction; in the Pillager cycle characters such as Nanapush and Fleur win their battles for stolen land, in *LaRose* protagonists overcome the trauma of boarding schools, in *Love Medicine* Ojibwe characters find love and create families despite inheriting multigenerational trauma, in *The Night Watchman* Ojibwes protect their nation against termination, etc.

past, she gives us a flesh and blood character, very modern in her feminist quest for autonomy and justice.

Father Damien Modeste, who is, in fact, a white woman, Agnes De Witt, is a very similar case. What does a white woman, former nun, now disguised as a missionary, have in common with Indigenous feminism and celebration of Indigenous experience? The answer is in *The Last Report*, the novel in which this character, similarly to Fleur, becomes the practitioner of Indigenous spiritual tradition and tries to reverse the effects of the harmful neocolonial practices of white settlers. Just like Fleur was fighting with Pauline Puyat, the mixed-blood nun who represented the aggressive Catholic missionary tradition, Agnes De Witt combats the consequences of the forced conversion of the Ojibwe, giving them, instead of the imposed religious tradition, a new syncretic spiritual cult based on the indigenized Mary of God/Mary of Serpents, similar to the Latin American Virgin of Guadalupe. Even split though it might be tempting for some readers to interpret the case of Agnes as the case of cultural appropriation, Erdrich makes it clear in *The Report*, *The Tracks*, and *The Sentence* that the essentialist perspective, that concentrates predominantly on the blood quantum criteria creates more problems than solutions in contemporary identity politics. Father Damien/Agnes De Witt is a very complex character who evolves and faces the consequences of her often-controversial choices. As a protagonist, she helps Erdrich to address the issues of religious syncretism in Ojibwe culture and the Indigenous tradition of including others. These aspects of Ojibwe culture stand in sharp contrast with past and contemporary New Age appropriations of Native American cultures where we observe commodification of Indigenous tradition instead of the authentic spiritual quest of Agnes who lets her Ojibwe parishioners indigenize her.

The last Indigenous feminist character I would like to discuss is Tookie, an ex-convict from *The Sentence*, who has to exorcize the ghost of the Wanabe Indian from the Indigenous bookstore in Minneapolis. Despite the fact that in this novel Erdrich changes the setting dramatically, because she takes us from Ojibwe reservation in North Dakota (resembling her home reservation) to the urban space of the Twin Cities, Minnesota, the combat between the white Catholic forces and Ojibwe tradition is almost the same. *The Sentence* illustrates the city protests and the clashes with the police after the murder of George Floyd that reminded the world that systemic racism was very much alive in the US. Apart from bringing depressing pictures of burning streets and public unrest, the events following the murder of Floyd also brought together Native American and Black protesters. Before Erdrich's Tookie is ready to join the protests, she needs to overcome the

trauma of her troubled past and win her private battle with the ghost who paralyzes her with fear, so again we observe the character's transformation from a helpless victim to an empowering woman, and again it is reckoning with historical injustice and discovering one's cultural and spiritual path.

To conclude my comparison of three feminist characters created by Erdrich, I would like to note that with time her woman protagonists grow less radical. Fleur Pillager is the angriest avenger who at one point brings a tornado to Argus, whereas Agnes De Witt uses more subtle weapons such as the gradual changing of Christian rites or letter writing. Tookie achieves similar goals of exorcizing the past and subverting the neocolonial practices by reconciliation with her enemy Flora. Tookie gets rid of the white woman's ghost by saying "migwech" (thank you in Ojibwe) which makes sense because Flora at one point helped Tookie's mother. The act of kindness lets Tookie interrupt the circle of violence. It is a really powerful scene set against the background of the burning streets of a fighting Minneapolis. By saying "migwech", Tookie also takes control over the narrative and becomes the subject of her own story, just like her predecessors, Fleur and Agnes, because contrary to Christian exorcist tradition, Ojibwe practice works. No longer troubled by white ghosts, no longer dependent on white saviors or settler colonial frame, no longer stuck in the past, these three protagonists truly celebrate Indigenous survival and imagine their future.

Vizenor also published novels (*Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles*, *The Heirs of Columbus*, *Griever: An American Monkey King in China*), but he is, first of all, in my opinion, an excellent scholar known for such influential studies as *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance*, *Fugitive Poses: Native American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence* or *Native Liberty: Natural Reason and Cultural Survivance*. He is credited with the coinage of critical terms for Indigenous theory and methodology such as "survivance". The writer and academic is the example of how to combine Western culture paradigms with Native American tradition and even though some might classify his writing as postmodern, we would like to argue that there is a lot of decolonizing agenda in his ideas and propositions, starting from his first idea of setting Native people free from Eurocentric clichés and encouraging them to create *postindian* space and look for apt definitions of diverse and evolving Indigenous traditions. What is crucial, similarly to Erdrich, he includes the survival humor in his fiction which often works through the trickster figure. This serves as his method of providing Indigenous solutions to problems and celebrating a wise transformation of tradition.

David Treuer is an author of several novels, out of which *Little, The Hiawatha* and *Prudence* are of particular importance, and three acclaimed non-fiction works *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual*, *The Rez Life: An Indian's Journey Through Reservation Life* and *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee: Native America from 1890 to the Present*. I would like to argue that despite some differences Treuer also joins the decolonization agenda of Erdrich and Vizenor. The example of his contribution might be *Little, The Hiawatha* and *Prudence* which explore historical contexts of land theft, boarding schools, ethnic genocide, termination policy and crime, both affecting the Indigenous population and committed by characters identifying with this tradition.

Apart from fiction, he also offers strictly educational projects such as *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual*, *The Rez Life: An Indian's Journey Through Reservation Life* and *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee: Native America from 1890 to the Present*. The first text is a literary criticism that inspired a lasting debate on representation and identity reflecting upon two traditions in contemporary Indigenous scholarship, i.e. literary nationalists and integrationists. Two other books attempt to teach Native American culture and history to the general public both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, addressing particularly the theme of stereotype deconstruction. In *The Rez Life* Treuer shows his Leech Lake reservation as just a homeland with pros and cons, avoiding the stereotype of Native American reservation as a place of underdevelopment and despair, whereas in *The Heartbeat* he dismisses all harmful clichés of Indigenous peoples (such as, among others, "Vanishing Indian", "Noble Savage" or "Indian Princess") portraying Native American nations collectively and individually focusing on their representatives. From Treuer's perspective, Indigenous peoples of America are diverse, resilient and innovative. He explores their long history and vivid traditions: linguistic, spiritual and literary. He also presents individual examples of talent, diligence and creativity such as his mother, who was born in a poor struggling family, but found enough courage and stamina to become a tribal judge.

Describing his life in the Leech Lake Reservation, David Treuer concentrates on the issues which are most important for a local population paying homage to Indigenous tradition of putting what is collective and community-oriented above individual experience. That is why he describes how difficult it was and still is to harvest wild rice and why it is still necessary to control legal regulations who open the reservation for white businessmen who want to deprive Leech Lake Ojibwe of their hunting and harvesting rights. One of the most memorable stories from the book is

the story of David Treuer's grandfather who made the whole family pay a high price forcing them to live in extremely difficult conditions, but that was his way of keeping the place of his ancestors. Treuer lets us imagine the sacrifice by providing vivid details from the past and disclosing controversial decisions that were made in the uneven confrontation between the Ojibwe and the neocolonial system. Finally, I would like to emphasize the fact that what I consider his biggest achievement as far as *The Rez* is concerned is teaching Native American history by focusing on the concrete story of one particular reservation that he knows from his own experience and convincing the readers that, despite the often shocking information on reservation violence that is spread by mainstream media, reservations are homes for Native Americans that we should neither romanticize nor demonize. It is much better to use energy for learning their history.

Brenda Child published academic and popular history works such as *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families, 1900-1940*, *Holding Our World Together: Ojibwe Women and the Survival of Community* and *My Grandfather's Walking Sticks: Ojibwe Family Life and Labor on the Reservation*. Similarly to other Ojibwe authors, Child sets herself the objective of educating both Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences on concrete histories of Ojibwe people, including, among others, her family members. She also deconstructs stereotypes of "New Age" or "hippie culture Indians" belonging to some pan-Indian romantic spiritual space<sup>5</sup>. Instead, Child investigates lives of Native American children sent to boarding schools, Ojibwe women who created the jingle dress tradition in response to cultural annihilation and trauma of the Indigenous survivors of epidemics brought by white colonizers and the last book reflects his grandfather who was a part of a vibrant hard-working and sovereign Red Lake reservation.

Anton Treuer, also a university professor, wrote many works popularizing Ojibwe history, culture and language. Among his best known works, it is worth enumerating *Everything You Wanted to Know About Indians But Were Afraid to Ask*, *The Language Warrior's Manifesto: How to Keep Our Languages Alive No Matter the Odds*, *Warrior Nation: A History of the Red Lake Ojibwe* or *The Cultural Toolbox: Traditional Ojibwe Living in the Modern World*. In his texts he educates on Native American history and culture, similarly to Louise Erdrich, David Treuer and Brenda Child, but his most important mission seems to be the protection of Ojibwe language and fight for its survival. Apart from teaching this language, he also records Indigenous

<sup>5</sup> By „pan-Indian“ we mean Indigenous cultures commodified as homogeneous commodified product, e.g. in New Age cultural appropriation.

storytelling and introduced the practice of providing bilingual information in public institutions in his hometown Bemidji.

To conclude, all Minnesotan Ojibwe authors, whose works we briefly analyzed, write against the culture of victimization of Indigenous people and from their perspective, stories of success matter more than stories of defeat. They deconstruct harmful clichés of Native Americans, proposing autonomous self-representation and creative solutions to difficult problems of cultural trauma, systematic racism and the still vivid legacy of cultural appropriation of Indigenous people. The common denominator of their publications has been best summarized by Tuhiwai-Smith and it includes such postulates as celebrating survival, indigenizing by providing alternative concepts of the world and value system and creating Indigenous solutions to problems stressing abilities to adapt and transform. Last, but not least, it is worth to mention other important Ojibwe authors from Minnesota such as Marcie R. Rendon, Mona Susan Power, Diane Wilson, Heidie Erdrich or Gwen Nell Westerman, who are living proof of the vitality of Indigenous cultures in the region.

## **Media's Narrative on Indigenous Peoples in Minnesota**

Another part of the public sphere relevant for our deliberations is the realm of media. Much has been written about the mass communication platforms' potential to create or alter images of ethnic or racial groups (Bryant and Finklea, 260-262; Mendelberg, 134-157). While the actual power of media in this regard has been at times over- or underrated by the research community (McQuail and Deuze, 507-517), there is no denying that they do enjoy considerable influence on their audience, even if "there's many a slip twixt cup and lip" and their impact may be not as direct as once thought (Potter, 53-64). Especially significant here is the danger of stereotyping, which may lead to socially harmful prejudice and discrimination (Bryant and Finklea, 301-323).

Media coverage of issues related to the Indigenous communities in Minnesota is provided in some capacity by mass communication outlets of differing outreach, be it local, state, or national (with the first category being obviously the most important, as news of Indigenous interest rarely break through to national media). A remarkable and unfortunate development in the contemporary American media system involves the vanishing of numerous community press titles, with one recent report (Medill Local News Initiative, Northwestern University 2023) determining that



more than two local newspapers closed down each week in 2023. In many parts of the country, including the state of Minnesota, this led to the emergence of the so-called “news deserts” (counties without a single commercial local paper) as well as regions with only one, usually weekly, publication (Lesnes).

In many cases, the responsibility of delivering local news falls to alternative sources, including public broadcasters (Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, Harvard Kennedy School) and grassroots media projects. Among these, much of the work regarding Indigenous news is done by entities such as the Twin Cities Public Television, Minnesota Public Radio (MPR), independent community stations of the Association of Minnesota Public Educational Radio Stations (AMPERS), as well as digital media platforms such as Minnesota Native News.

In the case of the Native American communities, electronic broadcasting might be regarded as a natural continuation or extension of spoken-language cultural traditions. The Indigenous identity “has always been conveyed through language”, and so “long before there was radio, television, or books, storytelling was used to teach Native children and adults about life and the past” (Keith, 17). Still, Native audiences have not benefited significantly from the rising prominence of radio as a medium in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Radio executive Ray Cook points out that “if you’re looking for programs that were produced to empower Native communities to help them achieve control over their own destinies and realities, I can safely say that before 1972 [...], there were no efforts to provide sustaining programming anywhere in the U.S.” (Keith, 3). It was only in the second half of the century that the situation of Native broadcasting started to change in several aspects.

Some occasional Indigenous programming has been present on the airwaves of non-Native broadcasters from the beginning. However, both the quality and, especially, the quantity of those broadcasts left much to be desired, as the commercial radio industry did not regard the Indigenous audience as numerous enough to justify a major financial investment. It might be argued that this was in large part due to the spreading of the Indian population across many radio markets, making it an unviable target for local advertisements (it should be mentioned though that – in certain regions – radio stations were not shy to use Indigenous-oriented commercial messages, sometimes recorded in the local Native language) (Keith, 7).

The Federal Communications Commission’s obligations for broadcasting public affairs have been usually mentioned as a rationale for the

non-native outlets to cover Indigenous issues in their programming: "to fulfill our Public Affairs commitment, we air a regular weekly Indian program called 'Native America Speaks' every Sunday from 5:30 to 6:00 a.m." (Keith, 7). It was not until the 1960s that the shift in social attitudes led to the broadcasting industry's more pronounced interest in programming for ethnic minorities, including Indigenous shows. Still, even in areas with significant Native communities, various reasons (such as the vastness of the area and the scarcity of population in the case of Alaska) often prevented the effective spreading of Indigenous-focused messages to the public (Keith, 6).

Non-commercial radio stations have constituted a major venue for Native programming since the advent of wireless communication. Educational broadcasters, in particular, have occasionally produced programming with Indigenous-oriented content. Pacifica Radio, a progressive California-based radio organization founded in 1946 (Engelman, 43), has been an early champion of Indian programming, airing many individual shows and whole series focused on Native issues.

The establishment of the American system of public broadcasting brought about unprecedented opportunities for Indigenous journalists and producers. Radio executive Ray Cook commented on the new development: "This was a turning point certainly. [...] People like Cook, Trudell, Harjo, and later Berryhill, were the broadcast pioneers who got the word out about Native struggles. Their programs on Public radio increased the audience's understanding of Native people. It was real valid work" (Keith, 11). The plight of Indigenous broadcasting was further helped by programming distributors such as the National Public Radio and Public Radio International, making it possible for local shows to reach a nationwide audience (Keith, 7).

One of the most significant Indigenous-oriented broadcasts is "National Native News", launched in 1987 by the Alaska Public Radio Network in Anchorage. Since 2003, it has been based in Albuquerque, New Mexico. At first, a ten-minute, now a five-minute daily news update, it is "a headline news service that provides a Native perspective" ("About", *National Native News*). Back in 1995, Michael C. Keith emphasized that "many Native-operated radio stations repeat the daily broadcast of *National Native News*, attesting to the value placed upon this first-ever countrywide Indian news report" (Keith, 12); nowadays, the distribution of the show is also done online.

It might be argued that the greatest game changer to the plight of niche programming in the United States was still the evolution of the

one-speaks-to-many model of traditional broadcasting, which came with the introduction of digital communication technologies. (Gillmor, 11-14). The possibilities offered by the Internet have effectively lowered the hurdle for becoming a broadcaster, allowing many new media outlets to emerge and flourish in the market. An additional benefit of such a development was that it has also enabled established radio and television institutions to offer much more diverse programming by using multiplexing, specialist podcasts, streaming services, etc. This emerging many-to-many communication system offers more venues for minority publicists than ever before. In order to explore the portrayals of Indigenous issues in Minnesotan public and alternative media, as mentioned before we have employed diverse research methods, including intensive interviews and content analysis of the popular radio segment/podcast “Minnesota Native News”.

The interviews were conducted in August 2023 with individuals involved in the operation of the aforementioned media platforms, including journalists from the Minnesota Public Radio<sup>6</sup>. The predominant conclusions from these talks focused on the following points:

- a) Besides public media, Indigenous communities did have access to several independent media platforms, including “reservation stations doing local programming and the National Native News Kohanic broadcast, which is based in Alaska and New Mexico but is using freelancers from all around the country” (Kerr, 2023).
- b) Nonetheless there was much to be desired in terms of Indigenous participation in creative and primarily executive roles in the Minnesota media system, which might have led to incomplete (“there are some zones that could have more coverage”), simplistic, or shallow journalism (“there is a challenge reporters have when reporting on Native arts and culture, a lot of times it’s relegated to folk art and not «high art», but more like «we’re doing you a favor» sort of thing and not really understanding the brilliance behind the craft, the talent, the practice [...] so a lot of times they try to frame Native art and culture in the Western sense”) (Lemm, 2023).
- c) However, things were changing rapidly at that moment, and there was generally much hope about the increasing capacity of the Indigenous communities to discuss their issues in the public sphere (“We are going through a revolution right now and there’s a new awareness that there

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<sup>6</sup> Among those interviewed were: Stephanie Curtis, Euan Kerr, Denison Hansen, Melissa Olson, Leah Lemm, Erin Warhol, and Sean McPherson.

needs to be a huge improvement. [...] We at the MPR are in the process of setting up an Indigenous reporting unit which will have three reporters [Kerr, 2023]<sup>7</sup> covering the Indigenous communities”).<sup>8</sup>

- d) Yet, there was a danger that this progress might not have been sustainable in the long perspective, due to the cyclical character of media (a huge interest in Indigenous issues, which resulted from the tragic Red Lake shooting incident in 2005 and brought about changes in the scale of coverage, did eventually wane).

As far as the subject of the content analysis is considered, “Minnesota Native News” is a short radio segment/podcast focusing on the issues of the state’s Native American communities, produced as a yearlong project. Episodes of “Minnesota Native News” are broadcast on a – roughly – weekly basis (38 shows were produced in 2023), with the average duration of 5 minutes. Each broadcast covers recent events in the life of the state’s Native communities; the series’ creators strive to present “topics in ways that are informative and relevant to Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences” (*Report to the Minnesota State Legislature Fiscal Year 2023*, 9). “Minnesota Native News” was carried by 14 AMPERS<sup>9</sup> stations and had an annual audience of about 112,000 listeners in 2023.

It should be emphasized that “Minnesota Native News” has a noteworthy presence in social media, with more than 10,000 people following the broadcast’s profile on Facebook and more than 2,000 on Instagram. Additionally, the “Minnesota Native News” webpage was visited over 18,000 times in 2023, and the podcast version of the show was downloaded almost 5,000 times that year. The reception of the broadcast is positive; according to a listener survey cited in the network’s annual report, “of the 81% of the

<sup>7</sup> Euan Kerr, op.cit. It is worth noticing that Euan Kerr’s promise did really materialize, see: Wurzer, C. and A. Kuznetsov, *Meet Our New Team Working to Strengthen Coverage of Native Communities*, <https://www.mprnews.org/episode/2023/10/09/mpr-news-native-news-team-on-indigenous-peoples-day>.

<sup>8</sup> In an amazing coincidence, the interview with Leah Lemm, a journalist associated hitherto mostly with grassroots Indigenous media initiatives, was conducted on the very first day of her full-time job at the MPR; Leah Lemm, op.cit.

<sup>9</sup> The Association of Minnesota Public Educational Radio Stations (AMPERS) is a network of 18 local community stations, established in 1972. Initially a minor grassroots organization with a goal of obtaining funds for independent broadcasters, it is now – thanks to a much needed increase in support – “a \$1 million-plus operation that helps 18 member stations »not only survive but ideally thrive«, supporting them “through a mix of programming, underwriting and lobbying for state funding” (Falk, 2023).

respondents who said they remembered hearing *Minnesota Native News*, 98% claimed the segment gives them more access, knowledge, and information about Minnesota Native history and/or cultural heritage” (*Report to the Minnesota State Legislature Fiscal Year 2023*, 9).

The total costs of production of “Minnesota Native News” in the year 2023 did not exceed \$53,000, with \$52,319.07 assigned to programming costs and \$528.40 assigned to administration costs (*Report to the Minnesota State Legislature Fiscal Year 2023*, 98). These numbers put the show among the less expensive of radio initiatives conducted by AMPERS (below the average cost of \$63,194.49 per project).

The study was based on analysis of every “Minnesota Native News” episode broadcast between January and July of 2024 (in total: 23 episodes). The news segment, defined as a self-contained individual story included in an episode, was chosen as an analysis unit (47 such units were identified in the sample). Out of 23 podcasts included in the study, sixteen focused on a single issue, while the remaining seven were reviews of stories of the week, comprising the most important events in the lives of the Native communities.

The analysis of thematic categories of news segments points out to SOCIAL ACTIVISM as the most popular option, comprising 18 out of 47 units. These stories covered activities of Native American organizations and advocates of Indigenous causes. Examples include segments about personal changes in Native institutions, tribal elections, and miscellaneous initiatives of the Native community (such as the newly available missing and murdered Indigenous relatives’ license plates).

The second most prevalent category was EDUCATION (9 segments), including coverage of SCHOOLS (5 instances) and UNIVERSITIES (4). These included a story on a summer book club for high school students in rural parts of the state and an important segment on the new rules for research on Native communities adopted at the University of Minnesota.

Only slightly less frequently appearing were categories such as CULTURE (8 occurrences) and ADMINISTRATIVE ACTIONS (8). The former category was divided into several subgroups, encompassing LITERATURE, MUSIC, VISUAL ARTS AND DESIGN, THEATRE AND CINEMA, LANGUAGE, and CUSTOMS – and included stories on such diverse topics as the winning of the Golden Globe by Lily Gladstone, a Native American actress, and an Indigenous designer creating Indian culture-inspired athletic shoes. The latter focused on the actions of the state and federal authorities concerning the Indigenous community, such as the proceedings of tribal land return bills at the Minnesota legislature.

Thematic categories ENVIRONMENT and SPORT have proven to be among the least prevalent, with 2 stories each. They included, e.g. segments about reintroduction of buffalo to the prairies on tribal lands in Minnesota and the signing of a Native American basketball player, hailing from Alaska, by the Minnesota Lynx. The very least prominent category was deemed to be OTHER (only 1 hit; a story about an Indigenous girl guide rescuing her drowning mother and grandmother).

The temporal vector of the segments points to the present with almost all stories focused on current issues (45 out of 47 units). The remaining two stories dealt with topics from the past (e.g. the trauma of boarding schools).

Analysis of the geographical distribution of the messages shows the preponderance of regional, state-based news. Out of 47 analyzed units, 42 were focused on Minnesota (these included 16 segments that dealt with the entire state, 17 stories concentrated on Minneapolis, and 9 messages were focused on towns /townships/counties/regions in Minnesota), two on the whole of the United States, other two on other areas of the USA, and only one could not be defined geographically.

An important aspect of the analysis involved the perceived overtone of the segment. It turned out that 45 out of 47 segments presented predominantly positive information about the Native community's plight, while only two brought unwelcome news – specifically stories about the clearing of a controversial Indigenous encampment in Minneapolis and disallowing a Native American student drum group to perform at their high school graduation ceremony.

It might be argued that broadcasts such as the “Minnesota Native News” play a significant role in the present-day regional media ecosystems in the United States. Considering the fact that America is experiencing a dearth of local news outlets, “Minnesota Native News” appears to be a valuable source of information on the close-to-home issues for Indigenous inhabitants of the state. The results of the analysis support this observation as 42 out of 47 stories featured in the program are focused on Minnesota.

Other findings of the study prove that social activism is the predominant topic of “Minnesota Native News”, comprising more than 32% of the broadcast's content. Together with segments about education and culture (both 19%) – in total 80%, they paint a picture of a vibrant community, proud of its traditions and focused on preserving its heritage. It should be noticed that the coverage of Native American issues deals mainly with current events (98% of the analyzed corpus) and is predominantly optimistic in its portrayals of the Indigenous life (98% as well); this presents



the community as active in the public arena and competent in achieving its goals, oftentimes offering role models for the audience to follow.

Generally speaking, “Minnesota Native News” was found in the study to be a much-needed addition to the media system of the North Star State. Serving the underserved communities and delivering messages that could not be accessed anywhere else is a lofty exercise that needs to be maintained.

## **Discussion: The Image(s) of Indigenous Peoples in Minnesota**

Our analysis aimed to critically explore the common elements in the narratives about Indigenous Peoples as presented in two distinct but interrelated spheres. By juxtaposing these narratives, we seek to uncover underlying themes and perspectives that shed light on the representation of Indigenous communities, their history, and current realities. We find it of great value to acknowledge such discourses as they may directly influence how Indigenous communities are perceived by local, regional, national, or even international communities. It is so, because the discourse presented here is not only an illustration of individual opinions, observations, or artistic visions of authors, but also a result of their cultural background, expectations, and realities they witness and live in.

As we have emphasized, both literary and media narratives share a profound emphasis on the resilience and survival of Indigenous communities. Louise Erdrich, Gerald Vizenor, Brenda Child, David and Anton Treuer interweave stories of historical trauma, cultural persistence, and decolonization into their work, offering alternative perspectives and value systems. Similarly, media narratives, albeit with a historical slant, seek to educate and challenge stereotypes, focusing on the past to illuminate present conditions. Both literature and media also contribute significantly to constructing a narrative that combats victimization and promotes Indigenous autonomy and what Vizenor describes as survivance.

While literature offers a more nuanced and in-depth exploration of Indigenous experiences and histories, media narratives tend to be general and sometimes superficial, often constrained by journalistic practices and space limitations. This difference highlights the varying depths at which Dakota and Ojibwe’s issues are engaged within analyzed discourse. This discrepancy points to a gap in potential audience engagement and understanding, with literature providing a more immersive experience for those seeking deeper knowledge, while media serves as a more accessible, yet less detailed, entry point.

Acknowledgment of this process is crucial since both literature and media shape public perceptions and understanding of Indigenous Peoples in the US. In Minnesota, where Dakota and Ojibwe's histories and issues are integral to the state's identity, it is especially important to have that in mind. These discourses play a critical role in their perceived authenticity and probable impact. Literature written by Indigenous authors inherently carries the weight of lived experience and cultural understanding, while local media may not represent this level of awareness or authority, they are still more accessible and closer to their audience.

Finally, it is important to mention that discourse on Indigenous Peoples in Minnesota is, obviously, not limited to literature and local media. Other cultural expressions like public spaces, visual arts, and music also play a significant role in shaping perceptions. For instance, public monuments, murals, and music festivals can either reinforce stereotypes or challenge and enrich the narrative around Indigenous Nations. Investigating these areas could provide a more holistic understanding of how those communities are represented and perceived in society, especially on the local level.

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