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MENOMONEE RIVER

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Visibly Indigenous

MILWAUKEE'S NATIVE COMMUNITY WORKS TO BE UN-ERASED FROM A TORMENTED PAST AND A FRUSTRATING PRESENT - AND WRITTEN INTO A HOPEFUL FUTURE.

The Native Past, Present and Future of Milwaukee

BY TEA KRULOS

ILLUSTRATION BY CHRIS CORNELIUS

ARTIST'S STATEMENT: The physical traces of Indigenous people in Wisconsin are evident in the proliferation of mounds. Those mounds were carefully documented by Increase Lapham, who extensively surveyed the land in the 19th century before Wisconsin became a state. In his notes, he meticulously recorded the ways that Indigenous people were maintaining and cultivating the landscape. His maps and notes represent a layer of the physical history of Wisconsin that has been erased over time. This graphic is intended to demonstrate the relevance of that important physical history. Milwaukee was not only an important meeting place for Indigenous people, it was also a fertile source of wild rice that fed many. - CHRIS CORNELIUS

It's just a couple hours

before the calendar flips from 2021 to 2022, and the gymnasium of the Indian Community School in Franklin is full of music, dancing and life.

The grand entrance of the New Year's Eve Sobriety Pow Wow features dancers dressed in vibrant traditional ceremonial clothing, dancing around a drum circle at half court. But the most beautiful moments of the evening, put on by Gerald L. Ignace Indian Health Center as a sober holiday alternative for the indigenous community, are the "intertribal" songs in which all are encouraged to join the dance. The gym floor fills with participants, some wearing traditional dance regalia, some wearing jeans and T-shirts. They are of all ages – an elder slowly shuffling in time to the drums, holding hands with his grandson; sisters in step with each other; military vets; college students – all dancing forward together.

"It's a gathering to ring in the New Year and try to keep people sober and away from drugs, opioids, meth," says Mark Denning, an educator, lecturer and consultant on Native culture who tonight is one of the emcees of the pow wow. "We want people of peace and happiness to come together, celebrate that joy that maybe this year will be different. We are coming off of the solstice, which is an important time for us."

The celebration, like its host venue, focuses on Wisconsin's 12 tribal nations and communities, along with visiting tribes from around the Midwest.

Denning, a member of the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin, describes this culture as "economically and politically diverse – Republicans, Democrats, independents, everything in between. Our points of view are all over the board, just like other populations, but one thing we have is our culture and ethnicity of being Native. We identify with each other." Something else Indigenous people identify with, Denning says, is having themselves and their struggles go unseen by society at large. The most recent difficulty: COVID-19, which hit Native communities hard, taking elders at a high rate. Denning says it was only at Native health centers like Ignace where the community's vulnerability to COVID was treated like the health emergency it was.

"Being invisible in this culture is a very dangerous thing," Denning says. He feels Indigenous people are ignored in other ways – after 32 years, the Indian Summer Festival was

PHOTO: BY ERIN BLOODGOOD (MARK DENNING) VIA PUBLIC DOMAIN (KAMLOOPS)

Educator and consultant Mark Denning advocates for the visibility of Indigenous people and Native culture in Wisconsin.

canceled in 2019, for example.

"Nobody sees us. Nobody talks about us, thinks about us. The one place I can think about now is the Milwaukee Public Museum. We're in there with the dinosaurs," Denning laughs wryly.

He's describing something well understood in Native culture: a sense of erasure, of being viewed as some chapter of history that has closed. But that feeling of invisibility has inspired some projects that hope to put indigenous culture, past and present, back on the map.

PHOTO: BY ERIN BLOODGOOD (MARK DENNING) VIA PUBLIC DOMAIN (KAMLOOPS)

FACTORIES OF ERASURE

"I CAN'T THINK OF A NATIVE person I know who doesn't have this history in their family," says Samantha Majhor, the Marquette assistant professor who heads the Indigeneity Lab's boarding school research program. That includes herself – Majhor, of Yankton Dakota and Assiniboine descent, says that her grandfather was sent from his home on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation in Montana to a boarding school in Salem, Oregon, called Chemawa Indian School.

That kind of physical separation was common and by design, Majhor says. "They were strategically sent away from their homes because the idea was to assimilate them. There is a sense of trauma being taken from your home, told that the way your family does things is not only wrong, but words like 'dirty,' and 'savage' are used – words we find readily and regularly in documents we look at," Majhor says. "There is a mindset behind it that is incredibly destructive to the human spirit."

Majhor's research delves into Marquette's record holdings from the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions. "It's an extensive resource," Majhor says. The archive includes statistical summaries and pupil attendance records from over 100 schools across 19 states.

The records are from the Catholic perspective, and part of the goal of the project is to see this history from the lens of the Native students. "Where are their voices in the record?" she asks. The next step for the project, Majhor says, is a website that can be used by students – hers or any others – or by the general public. "We always want to keep an eye on how it serves the Native community as well," she adds.

There were several boarding schools and day schools (located on or near reservations) located in Wisconsin – ones in Lac de Flambeau, Hayward, Tomah, Bayfield, two in Keshena. As part of her research, Majhor visited the Stockbridge-Munsee Reservation to look into the Lutheran Mission School in Gresham, located in Shawano County.

Most of the boarding and day schools were not in urban centers like Milwaukee; the closest experience in this area would be Native students who were sent to reform schools like the Wisconsin Industrial School for Boys in Waukesha and the House of the Good Shepherd school in Wauwatosa. Students at the Waukesha institute were sometimes whipped or given solitary confinement, according to a report from 1898.

But conditions were worse at the Native schools, where punishment was doled out not just for bad behavior but for expressing their culture. In addition to taking the culture away from Indigenous children, far from their families, Majhor says boarding school conditions were also "ripe for abuse."

"We see a lot of reports of students being reprimanded violently and harshly for speaking their Native languages, getting out of line or various other transgressions. You also hear about quite extensive sexual abuse," Majhor explains.

While the discovery last summer of mass unmarked graves at Kamloops Indian Residential School and other Canadian boarding schools grabbed headlines, the country had opened its Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2008, Mahjor notes. Such systemic effort is only just beginning in the United States, she says, and unmarked graves connected to boarding schools are generally known by Native communities here even if they're not documented.

"I would not be surprised if we found the same thing in the United States. I'd be surprised if we didn't," Majhor says. "I think it likely that if people were to do the type of looking they are doing now, beyond cemeteries, I think it's likely you would also find unmarked graves."

Those discoveries might be forthcoming. U.S. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland launched a federal investigation in June 2021 to start the "long and difficult" process looking into the "troubled legacy" of the schools. That report is due April 1.

"I was heartened to see that on Indigenous Peoples' Day this last year, Gov. [Tony] Evers issued an apology," Majhor says. "Apologies can be great, but they sometimes don't have teeth behind it. I appreciated that his call was for cooperation with the Native nations in Wisconsin working towards Deb Haaland's investigations."

One clearing-house

for these projects is at Marquette University, where the relationship to Native culture has a fraught history.

Controversy surrounded the school's Marquette Warriors sports nickname for decades. In the '60s, the team had a cartoonishly racist mascot with a papier-mâché head named "Willie Wampum." In the 1980s, Denning, as a Marquette student, portrayed the team's mascot as the "First Warrior" – the thought being that moving from a cartoon to a real person would be more dignified. But after stereotypical racism followed him on court and off, Denning became an advocate for replacing Native mascots. Marquette rebranded as the Golden Eagles in the '90s.

More recently, in October 2020, the Native American Student Association protested with a list of demands that included providing scholarships to Indigenous students, hiring staff for the Race, Ethnic and Indigenous Studies program, and changing Marquette's seal, which features an image of the university's namesake missionary leading a Native American paddling a canoe.

indigenizemilwaukeeproject.github.io/map/#12

Lake Park Mound

OnMilwaukee

The Lake Park effigy mound is a small, conical mound (2 feet tall and 40 feet in diameter) inside of Milwaukee's sprawling Lake Park that sits on top of a bluff which overlooks Lake Michigan. It is located just off of Locust Avenue, near Lake Park's baseball diamond. While the effigy mound is surrounded by various modern structures, it serves a much greater purpose: a landmark that embodies and symbolizes the presence, history, and legacy of the Mississippian civilization in and around the greater Milwaukee area millennia ago.

Interview with Dr. Bryan Rindfleisch by Cameron Fronczak
Part One:

0:00 / 3:59

While fairly little is known about the effigy mound at Lake Park, archaeologists and historians situate the mound within a broader historical context, being built by the peoples of the Middle Woodland Culture between the years 300 BCE and 400 ACE. Although the singular effigy mound is the only one remaining in Lake Park, there are several more mounds located throughout the state of Wisconsin across the state of Wisconsin – located centrally throughout the southeast portion of the state – such as the larger mounds located at the Aztalan State Park in Jefferson Co., about 50 miles west of Milwaukee. According to the Wisconsin Archaeological Society (WAS), there are nearly 2,500 conical mounds and upwards of 2,600 effigy mounds that still exist in Wisconsin. While many of these mounds are also conically shaped, some are shaped as people or animals, implying the construction of these mounds was intentional and symbolic.

Interview with Dr. Bryan Rindfleisch by Cameron Fronczak
Part Two:

0:00 / 1:50

One of the earliest written descriptions of these mounds dates back to 1838, as Richard C. Taylor described the various mounds that white settlers encountered in Wisconsin. Not knowing much about their origins, Taylor labeled the mounds as rather generic "Indian" ceremonious burial grounds.

But in the early nineteenth-century, Indigenous groups living in the region – such as the Menominee, Potawatomi, and Ho-Chunk – had no practice of mound building and thus did not explain the presence of these mounds. This prompted one theory in the nineteenth-century that these Mississippian mounds were constructed by a "Lost Race" of mound builders. It was not until archaeologist Cyrus Thomas released his "Report of the Mound Explorations of the Bureau of Ethnology" in 1894 that this and other unsupported theories were put to rest. While Thomas's report provided excellent illustrations of various effigy mounds throughout Wisconsin, most of those mounds have been destroyed today. This is why the Lake Park mound and others like it around the greater Milwaukee area are so rare and valuable, because a majority of these mounds have been either excavated and bulldozed by local and state governments, not to mention corporate entities, in the name of development.

Interview with Dr. Bryan Rindfleisch by Cameron Fronczak
Part Three:

0:00 / 1:02

While archaeologists estimate that around 20,000 mounds and other earthen structures were erected by Mississippian peoples at one time, most of those mounds no longer remain. In fact, it is

Acknowledging the Past

EARLY IN THE PROGRAM of the Women's Fund of Greater Milwaukee's annual luncheon last November, Starla Thompson took the stage in the posh Pfister Hotel ballroom and harked back to the Potawatomi, Ho-Chunk, Menominee and other Indigenous peoples who called Milwaukee home before Europeans arrived.

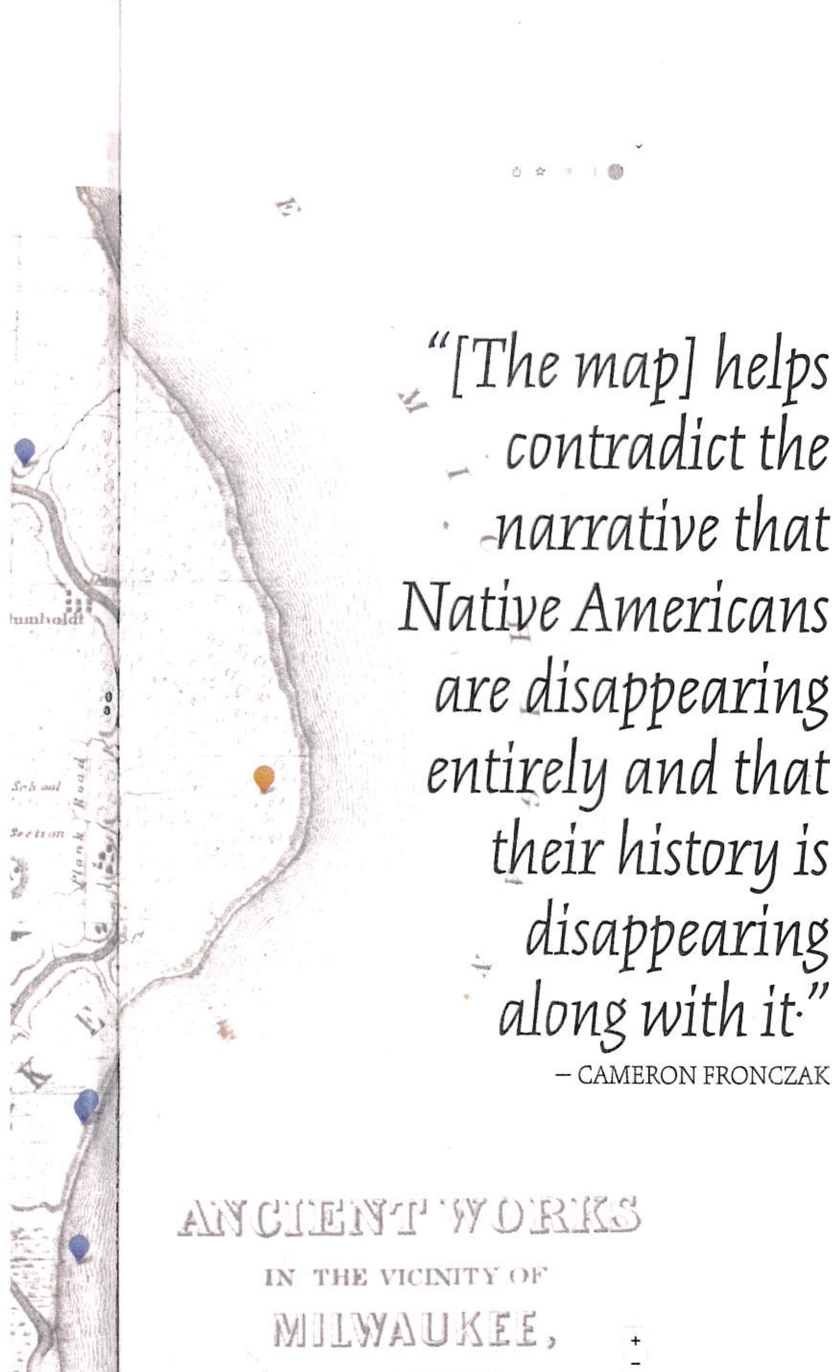
Her powerful address was a land acknowledgement, a growing practice for schools, businesses and other organizations to pay tribute to the Indigenous roots of the land they now call home.

"Land acknowledgement is an Indigenous way; it is time immemorial," says Thompson, an educator, consultant and member of the Forest County Tribe of Potawatomi. "I think of it as something that we do every day. Whether it's a ceremony or a prayer, we acknowledge that we are guests on this land and that we maintain that perspective of being grateful and careful in our actions, how we interact with the land. It's very ceremonial for us."

Her Potawatomi people, for example, may start the day with a water ceremony. "It means so much more than what people think," she says.

Thompson moved from Chicago to Milwaukee in 2008 and has given several land acknowledgments at events in both cities.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF MILWAUKEE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY (VILLAGE)



"[The map] helps contradict the narrative that Native Americans are disappearing entirely and that their history is disappearing along with it."
— CAMERON FRONCZAK

It's in this context that Marquette created the Indigeneity Lab last summer, a faculty-mentored group of projects that focuses on researching and spotlighting Native history and issues. The lab's purpose is to actively work against "the erasure of Milwaukee's Indigenous population in the past, present, and for the future," according to Bryan Rindfleisch, an associate professor at Marquette who teaches early American and Native American history.

Its programs include a study about the possibility of reintroducing wild rice, a sacred and precious food source for local Native residents, to the Menomonee Valley, where industrialization wiped it out. Another lab project is research into the once widespread boarding schools for Indigenous children; a third is the Indigenize Milwaukee interactive map.

For the latter, students in one of Rindfleisch's honors classes researched the Indigenous roots of various Milwaukee landmarks and wrote essays that were adapted into map entries by undergraduates Cameron Fronczak and Clare Camblin.

The map (shown at left) spans thousands of years of history. An entry on the statue of Solomon Juneau in the park that bears his name describes the importance of his wife, Josette Vieau Juneau, who was of Menominee descent and worked as an interpreter and mediator. A more contemporary entry memorializes the American Indian Movement, which fought for civil rights, honoring of treaties and better living conditions. Activists occupied an abandoned Milwaukee Coast Guard Station in 1971 in protest and established the first version of the Indian Community School there.

"It's very much a work in progress," says Camblin, who is studying digital media and is a member of the Osage Nation Eagle Clan. There are many entries yet to be added, along with audio of interviews to give further context.

Camblin says the most interesting entries she put on the map were the mounds in Forest Home Cemetery and on the Congregation of the Great Spirit, a Catholic church on the South Side that incorporates Native American traditions, established on the winter solstice of 1989.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MILWAUKEE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY (VILLAGE)

"I talk about our intimate relationship with land. I think we're so far removed from that as individuals generally, what that means. We are such individuals, we think we are so important, and we have such a right to everything, especially Americans," Thompson says. Her land acknowledgements also speak to the history of the tribes who live in Wisconsin. "Our greatest strength is in our traditional ways and culture. When you remove that, it's harmful to us as a people because it's not just something that we conveniently do once in a while; it's a way of life for us."

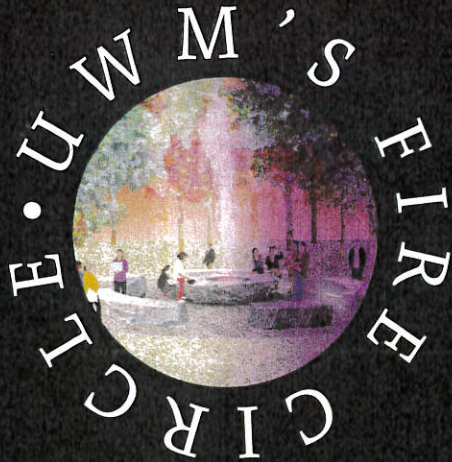
While there is growing agreement among businesses and institutions that acknowledgments are important, there is also a concern that without further action, the words are empty. "It's a talking point, a good start: I notice that organizations are doing this and that opens a conversation. If they're serious about this, then they'll ask, OK, what else can we do? Now what's next?" Thompson says. "But some places are doing a land acknowledgement, checking a box, putting it on their social media and going, yep we did our deed. That's not what it was intended to do."

Educator and consultant Mark Denning notes that land acknowledgements can help make the "invisible visible," especially when those making them "reach out and get First Nations, Native help. That's good and creates relationships and partnership."

Denning shares Thompson's concern that acknowledgements can become "routine, married to nothing of any sort of merit or weight." He saw one that was "a video of someone reading one and it was a non-Native guy, an undergraduate, drafted to read it, and it looked like a hostage video," Denning laughs.

Beyond simple recognition, Denning says, subsequent steps should include collaboration and "the very difficult work itself" of acknowledging that things are wrong and that change is necessary. "We can't say we've done a land acknowledgement and now we're done," he says. "It's to acknowledge that the work is just beginning."

UWM'S FIRE CIRCLE



THE WORK OF ONEIDA artist and architect Chris Cornelius has been exhibited far and wide from his roots in Wisconsin, but one of his latest projects is inextricably tied to the local landscape.

Last October, a fire circle designed by Cornelius, a citizen of the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin, was installed outside UW-Milwaukee's historic Merrill Hall. The ring of granite stones features a centerpiece representing Lake Michigan and the three rivers that meet in Milwaukee, as well as representations of three Indigenous settlements in the area mapped in the mid-19th century. "That's part of the history of the city, so that became part of the piece," Cornelius says.

A November "Healing Community" event centered on the fire circle was open to anyone and featured drumming, dancing, singing and free Indian tacos and gift bundles. "Indigenous students can use it for ceremonies primarily, but it's also just a gathering spot for the campus community," Cornelius says.

Cornelius' 18-year run teaching architecture at UWM ended last September when he was announced as chair of architecture at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, but the fire circle will remain a lasting part of the campus.

"We go to school on Native grounds; we're so close to so many Native populations," she says. "I know the students know this term 'Marquette bubble,' where you don't know what goes on around you, so I think it's important for the students to know. For greater Milwaukee, it's important to learn about your community and to be aware of the people here and how Milwaukee came to be, and the Indigenous population has a huge role in that."

Fronczak, a computer science major of Cherokee descent, says working on the project opened his eyes to Native history in his environment. One day, on his daily run through Lake Park, he finally noticed "a little hill with a stone on top" – the Lake Park Mound, believed to have been created sometime between 300 B.C. and 400 A.D. "I had been running by it every day with no idea what it was, and it was an important monument by mound builders I hadn't thought twice about."

Camblin and Fronczak both hope to see new students take over and add to the framework that they've started. "It helps contradict the narrative that Native Americans are disappearing entirely and that their history is disappearing along with it," Fronczak says.

Another project of the Indigeneity Lab is assistant professor Samantha Majhor's research into the boarding schools, where Indigenous children were often sent far from their homes.

Last summer, the story broke that the remains of approximately 200 Indigenous children were found in unmarked, undocumented graves on the grounds of Kamloops Indian Residential

PHOTOS: BY KEVIN J. MIYAZAKI (CHRIS CORNELIUS); JARVIS LAWSON (CAMERON FRONCZAK) COURTESY OF CLARE CAMBLIN (HERSELF); CHRIS CORNELIUS (FIRE CIRCLE)

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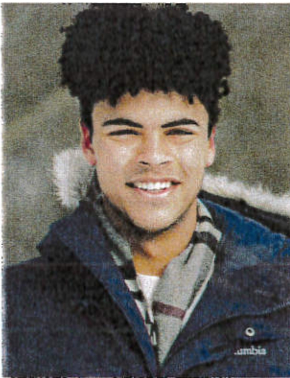
Architect Chris Cornelius outside the Indian Community School in Franklin, which he helped design. He also created the original artwork accompanying this article.

Marquette students Cameron Fronczak (top) and Clare Camblin helped build the Indigenize Milwaukee map project.



PHOTOS: BY KEVIN J. MIYAZAKI (CHRIS CORNELIUS); JARVIS LAWSON (CAMERON FRONCZAK) COURTESY OF CLARE CAMBLIN (HERSELF); CHRIS CORNELIUS (FIRE CIRCLE)

School in British Columbia, which operated from 1890 to 1978. Survivors of the school say widespread abuse occurred there. Kamloops is just the tip of the iceberg, with hundreds more such graves being discovered at similar schools across Canada. It's a grim reminder of the history of Indigenous boarding schools that were widespread in Canada and the U.S., including at least 11 in Wisconsin. These were institutional tools of erasure.

"The intention was to create non-Native people, to wipe out Native languages and beliefs," says Majhor, who works in Marquette's English department. "There was a loss of language, the insistence on becoming Christian, and the rejection of one's own culture."

One institution

working to reverse that erasure is the Indian Community School, which has approximately 370 Indigenous K-8 students, as well as a family resource center. The spectacular 15-year-old facility was designed by renowned architect Antoine Predock and Chris Cornelius, an architect and artist who grew up on the Oneida reservation in northeast Wisconsin. The building is one part of a campus in balanced harmony with nature, surrounded by forests, marsh and fields.

Inside, students are taught the Menominee, Ojibwe, Oneida and (added last year) Ho-Chunk languages to keep Native tongues alive for future generations. Other curriculum includes instruction about Native ceremonies, stories and culture. A recent schoolwide "Rock Your Mocs" art project had students create their own moccasins.

"You think about the things that were taken away [at boarding schools] and at this school we're trying to bring back what was lost," explains Cheryl Weber, the school's dean of students. "We've been given an opportunity to teach the young ones, so they can go home and teach some of the things that their parents or grandparents have lost."

"You don't get this experience anywhere else," says Sophia Danforth, an ICS alumna who has returned to the school as an Oneida language apprentice. "You learn about your culture, your heritage and where you come from."

Weber says the school's goal is to not just teach students their language and culture but also the balance of skills to find careers and opportunities in society in general. "Our staff members are committed to the goal and mission that this place is to assist the kids in every opportunity to be able to walk in two worlds, to know their cultural identity and spirituality but also to be successful wherever they end up," Weber says.

The ICS' board, seeking to expand its impact to those beyond the elementary level and beyond southeastern Wisconsin, created an endowment that in 2010 helped establish the Electa Quinney Institute for American Indian Education at UW-Milwaukee. Named after the Wisconsin territory's first public school teacher, a member of the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohicans, the institute supports teacher training, conducts research and supports art and language revitalization efforts.

"One of the aims is to have more Indigenous people engaged at all levels of education," says Margaret Noodin, the institute's director, who studies and teaches lost languages, including the Anishinaabemowin her ancestors spoke. "But the other goal is to educate others ... to help people understand [Native] history and cultural issues."

Understanding not just the past but the present of Native American's plight is essential, Denning says: "I think humanity needs to grapple with the changing face of our Native community." It's something he's put a lot of thought into.

"I'm a member of the Three Fires Midewiwin Lodge, a grand medicine lodge centered here in Wisconsin. This often comes up in our ceremonies, and I often wonder, when our ancestors look on us and see us – in the diversity of our faces, in our languages, our appearances and our clothes – what is it that they see? Will they recognize themselves?" Denning asks. He admits he's still working to understand what that answer might be. "We are in a society that doesn't see us, [but] we are following the teachings they have left us and we are giving them to the people who will carry them into the future. So, they will hear vestiges of the Ojibwe language that they spoke. They'll hear us singing, they'll see us, even though we have different clothes and faces."

MILWAUKEE WRITER TEA KRULOS DOVE INTO LAKE WINNEBAGO STURGEON CULTURE IN THE FEBRUARY ISSUE.