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## Looking Down, Up, Forwards and Backwards: Telling the Story of the Menominee Sustainable Forest

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# Looking Down, Up, Forwards, and Backwards: Telling the Story of the Menominee Sustainable Forest

Kate Van Haren

## USING IMAGES TO BEGIN THE STORY

“That’s a lot of green!” “Why is that all a darker green than the rest of the area?” “Is that all woods?”  
“There must be a lot of big trees!” “Were there ever any trees cut down there?”



Figure 1. Satellite Image of Menominee Reservation, July 27, 1999  
(University of Wisconsin-Madison Space Science and Engineering Center, 1999)

I had just given this photo to my fourth-grade students as part of our study of Wisconsin communities. Although I had not shared any background information with my students yet, I had provided them with a satellite image of the Menominee Reservation located in the northwest corner of the state of Wisconsin. Taken over twenty years before the beginning of this lesson, the photo remained one of the best aerial representations of the forest and its surrounding land. This land had not changed much between the time when the satellite flew over the forest and when I talked about it with my students, thanks to the efforts of the Menominee people who live in and around that large patch of dark green.

Continuing with the long stream of questions, one student asked, “Is this what Wisconsin used to look like?” In fact, the photo offers a limited sense of how intensely forested Wisconsin, along with most of North America’s Eastern, Midwestern, and Great Lakes regions were before the beginning of settler colonial logging in the 1600s. According to reporter Frank Vaisvilas (2020), “The Menominee Forest on the Menominee reservation is often touted by experts as the largest single tract of virgin, native timberland in the Great Lakes region.”

This conversation launched a student inquiry unit into the long, complicated history of the state of Wisconsin’s relationship with its once bountiful forests and lush treescapes. The Menominee Indian Tribe, the Indigenous inhabitants of a region that includes Wisconsin and parts of Michigan and Illinois,

have been involved in efforts to protect their ancestral land since their earliest interactions with European settler colonialists. This story, which continues today, provides a compelling counternarrative to the dismal story of the destruction of forests and the efforts of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples working to survive and thrive within them. That striking patch of a modern dark green, healthy forest amidst vast deforestation in modern times offers students an opening into the history of people who viewed trees as an essential component of community survival as they contended with those who saw the forest as an object for harvesting and profit.

I am not a member of the Menominee nation. I am a white, cisgender female educator. The majority of fourth graders in the exchange mentioned above were also white. One student in the class identified as Anishinaabe, a different Indigenous group in Wisconsin. The conversation about this photo took place as part of the state-wide fourth-grade state history curriculum. Although neither myself nor my students were Menominee, I considered it essential that my students understood that the Menominee were among the original inhabitants of the land that would become Wisconsin and that Menominee continue to live in Wisconsin and to work for the health of their lands and forests. Students also need to understand that many of their European ancestors bought into and perpetuated the destructive principals of settler colonialism including, as Seawright (2014) describes, how European philosophies often idealized land domination and the overuse of resources. This belief system has led to the genocide of many Indigenous people and the destruction of cultures of sustainable land practices.

Indigenous scholars and educators have written extensively about how to challenge the destructive ways settler colonialism is perpetuated in K-12 education. Sabzalian's (2019) *Critical Orientations of Indigenous Studies Curriculum* provides "a necessary step toward engendering land-based solidarities and inclusive conceptions of citizenship and justice that account for the well-being of land and all it sustains" (p. 334). Although all elements are important in a full curriculum plan, this particular lesson focused on Sabzalian's first three elements of the framework; place, perspectives, and presence. The student discussions around the satellite image; the following lesson encouraged students to begin to challenge the colonial mindset by considering how over hundreds of years the Menominee continue to maintain and sustain their community and their treescape, despite ongoing efforts by the settler community to destroy both.

The destruction caused by the settlers became evident to my students when I showed them a second photo.



Figure 2. Wisconsin Cutover District (Lee, 1937)

Students' comments about this photo were very different from their reactions to the satellite image. They included: "Where are the trees?" "Why is it so dark?" "That doesn't look fun! That looking really hard." "Why is he pulling up all the stumps?" "Well, that is just depressing!"

The black and white photo (Figure 2) was taken in 1937. It is of an area called the Cutover District and is visible as the deforested, light-green areas on the satellite photo (Image 1). Although the stumps have been removed and the area is no longer farmed with horses, it helps students visualize the contrast between a healthy, thriving forest and the starkness of a landscape where the trees have been clearcut.

I revealed to students that, although the photos were taken almost one hundred years apart, they were both from Northern Wisconsin in an area that European settlers nicknamed the Wisconsin Pinery. The Pinery is a term used to describe the vast acres of white pine (*Pinus strobus*) and old-growth forests that used to cover the northern part of the upper Midwest. Scott Knickelbine states, "It was said that a squirrel could jump from tree to tree all the way from Northern Michigan to Minnesota without touching the ground" (Knickelbine, 2012, p. 16). Father Peter Premin, a priest from the town of Peshtigo in the 1870s, described how there were "trees, trees everywhere!" in his journal (cited in Knickelbine, 2012, p. 12).

The satellite image of the Menominee Forest helped students imagine what the Pinery might have looked like. Thanks to the continuing efforts of the Menominee people, it is fair to say that if Father Premin had seen the 1999 photo, he would still have commented appreciatively on the number of trees.

Although no images exist of what this once awe-inspiring treescape looked like, many primary and secondary source texts are available, written by people who have dedicated their careers to protecting the legacy and the trees of the Menominee Forest and to exploring the complicated history of the logging industry in Wisconsin. The resources are accessible to upper elementary students as tools to learn about the Menominee Forest.<sup>1</sup>

## PERPETUATING A COMMON NARRATIVE

As I worked to present the history of the Menominee forest and the work of the Menominee tribe to protect it, I found that most available textbooks were of little help. They typically presented the story of Wisconsin's logging industry.

This striking treescape served as the setting for tales of gruff, but enterprising lumberjacks. The stories of exploration, fortunes being made, and the uncertainty of one's survival feel like tales out of adventure novels. The diaries of Wisconsin lumberjacks describe the hardship, camaraderie, and adventure that was part of their daily lives.

John Nelligan is one of many examples. John made his way up the ranks of the jobs available in the lumber camps and amassed a small fortune over the course of his career. John Zimm (2015) has used Nelligan's journal to write a children's nonfiction book about him. One of the most exciting, but dangerous jobs was floating the white pines down the rivers from the woods to the sawmills. Lumberjacks rode on the logs and used long spiked poles to prevent the logs from becoming jammed. Getting over waterfalls was the most difficult part. Zimm took the following passage from Nelligan's journal:

There we began cleaning up the timbers that were stranded around the head of the falls. Paddy kept working and closer and closer to the danger spot, where a tremendous volume of water thundered over the edge and took an abrupt plunge 40 feet to the riverbed below.

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1 There are no books written specifically for fourth-grade audiences, but the primary and secondary sources used in this article are appropriate for use in upper primary grades. These sources were chosen to show how to create a text set for student use.

The inevitable finally happened. Paddy made a misstep and was thrown into the terrific current and carried over the falls before anyone could raise a hand to help him. We were quite dumbfounded and stood paralyzed for a time. When we regained our wits, we realized that it was useless to have any hopes. No man, we were sure, could live after going over the falls and being battered about in the seething caldron below.

About an hour later, Paddy appeared on the scene again. We stared at him in awe, for it was like welcoming a person back from the dead,

“I’m alright boys,” he said in a voice that sounded a bit shaky. “But I lost my hat.”  
(Zimm, 2015, p. 62)

The stories of John and Paddy have happy endings, but many did not. Countless men died in accidents both in the woods and on the water. Like so many boom-and-bust businesses reliant on a finite supply of natural resources and cheap labor, very few of the labors doing the actual work were able to get rich.

The once great forests of Wisconsin, forests that had taken thousands of years to grow, were destroyed in a matter of decades. Not only were forests demolished and the livelihood of loggers destroyed, the lack of any sort of understanding of fire prevention led to one of the most devastating forest fires in American history. On October 8, 1871, over 1,800 acres of forest were burned in what was called the Peshtigo Fire. Between 1,200 and 2,500 people died, although it’s unlikely an exact count will ever be known. The fire was the result of multiple factors, including natural events like drought and extremely warm fall temperatures, but the brush and debris left in the woods by the lumberjacks were major contributors. This tragedy is not as well known in American history because it was eclipsed by another fire that occurred on the same day, the Great Chicago Fire (Knickelbine, 2012).

Events like the Peshtigo Fire and dismissal of any concern that the lumber might be a finite resource led to the devastation that is evident in the second picture. Once the trees were gone, the lumber industry came to an end. Many of the workers left Wisconsin to find lumbering elsewhere. Some tried to switch to farming on the land, now devoid of trees, alongside recent immigrants. These immigrants were tricked into thinking they were buying prime farmland by the lumber companies looking to make a quick profit. The former lumberjacks and new immigrants soon discovered that the land was riddled with giant stumps and contained degraded soil, making it mostly useless as farmland. The soil in the Northwoods of Wisconsin could sustain the growth of trees but did not contain enough nutrients to grow the amount of cash crops needed for farmers to make a living. This barren land became known as the Cutover District (Zimm, 2015). The second picture represents this period in Wisconsin history.

The story of how the Pinery became the Cutover District is not a happy one. However, the textbooks available to my students would have us believe that this was not the fault of the Europeans using the land. The history provided is one of progress and individuals achieving success.

As it turns out, not everyone thought the Wisconsin pinery would last forever. In the late 1800s, in the heyday of the Wisconsin lumber industry, scientist Increase Lapham was warning about the effects of destroying the Pinery. In a wide-ranging report published in 1875, Lapham describes his hypothesis that “land with all its trees cut down dries out more quickly because the ground is not protected by the sun. Soil washes away more quickly in heavy rain. Trees help clean the air and make winters less cold by blocking the wind” (Zimm, 2015, p. 27). Understanding that even at the time, the destruction of woodlands was not an innocent, ignorant decision is part of what my students had to contend with, along with the fact that Lapham’s report was ignored. The impacts on the Wisconsin treescape are still seen throughout Wisconsin today.

The Wisconsin history textbook used by many students does briefly mention the Menominee tribe's sustainable forestry efforts. It also dedicates some space to describing the effects of the Cutover District, but the actual words of those who experienced the events are not included in the text (Malone et al., 2016). During my first attempts to teach this lesson, I had students read the text before introducing the primary sources material. As I became familiar with the materials, I found it more meaningful to rely on the primary sources and let students use them to piece together the timeline and narrative, as historians would do.

## THE MENOMINEE NATION

What is typically glossed over in the stories of Wisconsin logging is that the Menominee Nation has always been in Wisconsin, and they have always worked to preserve the Wisconsin Pinery. Patty Loew is a journalist, historian, and member of the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Ojibwe. Her young adult and children's books on the Indigenous cultures of Wisconsin are an invaluable resource for educating youth about Wisconsin Indigenous tribes and tribal sovereignty. In her 2013 book, *Indian Nations of Wisconsin: Histories of Endurance and Renewal*, she offers the following description of the Menominee.

The Menominee call themselves Omeaqnomenewak, an Algonquian word meaning People of the Rice, invoking a resource that became a feature of their identity and shaped their understanding of the seasons and landscape around them. Menominee identity is also rooted in the white pines and towering sugar maples of the western Great Lakes. The forest sustained the tribe before Europeans arrived on the continent and to this day the forest continues to provide cultural and economic sustenance to the Menominee. (Loew, 2013, p.18)

A present-day Menominee descendent says, "We are the forest" (Loew, 2013, p. 22). The Menominee are people of the forest, but they are often left out of the common narrative. The history of the destruction of Wisconsin's forests, neglecting the stories of the Menominee people, often left my students with a sense of helplessness and resignation. Even as I understood that centering the history of the Menominee was central to doing justice to Wisconsin history, I wondered whether engaging with the history and efforts of the Menominee and their relationship with the Wisconsin Pinery could be a source of hope and guidance for my students.

David O'Connor, a member of the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Ojibwe and American Indian Studies Consultant with the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, and Paul Rykken, a Wisconsin history teacher, state, "If we begin with the premise that conventional versions of history frequently neglect the stories of traditionally marginalized communities or, at best, offer superficial narratives of those communities, then our challenge is to change our conversations with the past among ourselves and with our students." They ask, "How do we reframe our pedagogy to incorporate multiple narratives within our classrooms, so our future alumni reflect on what they learn in their education?" (O'Connor & Rykken, 2021).

I used O'Connor and Rykken's framing questions to help my students rethink how the complex story to the Wisconsin pinery is taught—focusing on the Menominee. The satellite image served as the opening exploration. Rather than a nostalgic story of the inevitable decline of Wisconsin's pioneer spirit and "natural resources," students were asked to explore a more detailed description of what happened in the forest. Given the opportunity to function as historians, examining primary sources to learn about the past, students began to ask questions about why this large forest existed in the middle of clearly heavily harvested areas. This question led to the Menominee, and their past and current relationship with the forest.



Frank Vaisvilas, part of the Yaqui, the Indigenous people of Mexico, covers Native American affairs throughout the United States. In a photo essay, “Our Spiritual Home: Wisconsin’s Pristine Forest: A Model for Sustainable, Living Logging,” presents a telling of the story of the people who live and work under the trees. He explains that “the Menominee Forest is much healthier than others in the region, as it was spared from the exploitative waves of heavy logging in which millions of acres of forests in the Northwoods in Wisconsin had been clear-cut for timber in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s” (Vaisvilas, 2020). Studying the Menominee and this history gave students the opportunity to reflect on the fact that clear-cutting was not inevitable. For thousands of years, the Menominee engaged in forestry practices that allowed the forest ecosystem that allowed inhabitants in the area to thrive. It provided opportunities to explore why in so many other places clear-cutting reigned as the dominant practice. The students and I slowly read through Vaisvilas’ photo essay. I stopped at various points to make sure students were understanding the goals of the Menominee’s sustainable forest practices.

A healthy forest does not have to mean a forest free from interactions with humans. The Menominee have been harvesting trees and using the resources for thousands of years. Although the images in the second photo show how through the use of heavy equipment loggers can harvest a lot of trees very quickly, Menominee loggers have a different mentality than lumberjacks like John Nelligan. John Dixon, a modern-day Menominee working in the forest, describes how his livelihood and his ability to take care of his family is tied up with the livelihood and the ability of the Menominee Forest to sustain its trees. He says that the forest “is the most important thing to me other than my family” (Vaisvilas, 2020). University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point reporter Doris Karambu Onesmus notes that the Menominee philosophy of sustainable forestry is built on three major principles:

- The forest must be sustainable for future generations.
- The forest must be cared for properly to provide for the needs of the people.
- All the pieces of the forest must be kept, maintaining the diversity.

(Karambu Onesmus, 2008, citing a 1998 report on the sustainability plan for the Menominee forest)

Presenting the story of the small tract of land that is the Menominee Forest allows students to think about logging in ways that are more critical and ultimately more hopeful and empowered. Part of this lesson is to understand that the success of the Menominee Forest was not and is not inevitable. Past and present members of the Menominee nation suffered hardship and worked hard to preserve the forest that exists today. There are important lessons to be learned from this story. If students think of the health of the forest as an ongoing concern grounded in a history of conflict and care, they can focus more on the hows and whys related to the survival of the Menominee people as a nation and to their valuable treescape, despite the hardships created by the outside threats from European settlement and the incorporation of the land that became Wisconsin in the modern nation.

Sabzalizan (2019) emphasizes the need to understand that Indigenous communities represent more than tragic stories of the past. By showcasing the modern efforts of the Menominee to sustain their forest, students see that Indigenous peoples are thriving and contributing members of contemporary society. My students can center the modern-day members of the Menominee nation as active participants and leaders in the sustainability movement. These leaders are using generations of knowledge learned through their ancestors. Why do they care about the forest, and how do they do it, are common questions. In order to answer these questions, students were asked to explore the rich and complex history of the Menominee people.

## MENOMINEE ACTIVISTS BUILD ON THE EFFORTS OF THEIR ANCESTORS.

Menominee origin stories place their ancestors in the land that would become Wisconsin from the beginning of history. They have a long record of different groups moving in and out of their territory. On many occasions, the Menominee shared the land with other Indigenous groups and settlers in their efforts to protect the forest. They began losing their land in the early 1800s. Other Indigenous groups found themselves pushed onto Menominee land after being removed from their ancestral homelands in the eastern United States. The US government forced the Menominee into signing various treaties that kept taking away bigger and bigger chunks of land. According to the Menominee, “At the start of the Treaty Era in the early 1800s, the Menominee occupied a land base estimated at 10 million acres; however, through a series of seven treaties entered into with the United States Government during the 1800s, the Tribe witnessed its land base erode to little more than 235,000 acres today” (The Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin, n.d.).

The biggest threat came in 1848. The Menominee were required to move out of Wisconsin to a reservation in Minnesota called Crow Wing. Oshkosh, the Menominee leader, and other members traveled to see the new land. When he returned, he said, “The poorest region in Wisconsin was better than Crow Wing.” Next, Oshkosh traveled to Washington DC, where he was able to get President Millard Fillmore to temporarily block the removal order. The Menominee filed petitions, formed alliances, and delayed any further laws for removal. “The tribe’s persistence paid off. In the Treaty of 1854, the Menominee were allowed to keep 276,00 densely forested acres along the Wolf and Oconto Rivers” (Loew, 2013, pp. 26-27).

In 1887, Congress passed the Dawes Act. This law gave the government the right to break apart communally owned reservation land and give ownership to individual family units. For the Nations that tried to farm their land, the government gave individual ownership to the Native people who were currently trying to work the land (Dawes Act (1887/2021)). It was much more difficult to parcel out an entire forest like the Menominee forest to individuals. When discriminatory and racist practices caused members of other tribes to default on their land and sell to white settlers, the Menominee were able to retain communal sovereignty over the land containing the forest.

Scientists, historians, and foresters are still questioning the reasons why the Menominee reservation forest was mostly spared from the Peshtigo Fire, although it is reasonable to believe that Menominee forestry practices protected them from the devastating effects of leftover slash from logging (Meunier, 2022). No one knows how many tribal members were killed in the fire, but approximately 1,500 deaths were recorded. There are accounts of the Native Americans warning the white settlers about the approaching fire. Settler Abram Place was married to an Ojibwe woman named Elizabeth. Elizabeth’s relatives warned him of the risk of fire and told him to plow the land around his farm. Their home was one of the only places not destroyed during the fire (Knickelbine, 2012). Despite repeated attempts to take away their land, the Menominee still offered aid to the survivors of the fire. The state of Wisconsin officially recognized their efforts in 2018 (Vinehout, 2018). And although they were successful in maintaining sovereignty over the use of at least some of the forest on the reservation, the Menominee still had to deal with the encroachment of the US government on their land. They were never free of US government oversight and meddling. Ada Deer describes the events on the reservation:

In 1908, the US Congress enacted a piece of legislation called the La Follete Act. The act provided funding for the construction of the mill so the Menominees could reap greater rewards from their forests. Previously whites had processed logs from the Menominee forests (and often illegally cut them as well). The legislation was an admission that there was little future in farming and represented an effort to employ Menominee men in a different occupation.



The law mandated sustainable yield logging rather than clear-cutting. BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) agents [non-Indigenous government agents with oversight on reservations] did not share the perspective of Congress and continued clear-cutting. Under BIA management, the mill discriminated against Indians and reserved managerial positions for whites, but it still it was the main employer of Indian men on the reservation. (Deer, 2019, p. 7)

The Bureau of Indian Affairs is a government agency charged with protecting and ensuring the well-being of the Indigenous nations in the United States. Historically most workers at the BIA have been white government workers with no affiliation to the nations they are working with. Deer notes that the agents charged with oversight of the Menominee Nation lacked an appreciation for Menominee tradition and an understanding of the La Follette Act. This lack of understanding often prevented the Menominee from engaging in sustainable forest practices on their sovereign land.

In 1934, the Menominee sued the US government for mismanagement of their forest. The Menominee were awarded \$8.5 million dollars in damages. Although this money was not nearly enough to support the struggling community or make up for the lost income from selling lumber, it did make them one of the wealthier Native communities in Wisconsin. It also singled them out for termination as a recognized Indigenous group during the 1950s (Loew, 2013).

In 1954, the Termination Act was passed. The federal government refused to recognize the Menominee as a people. This meant that the reservation, including the Menominee forest, was no longer under the control of the Menominee Nation. Protests and civic action followed immediately. The tribe lobbied and received approval from the Wisconsin governor to establish their own county, which gave them more control over their land. However, unfair laws and financial deals caused suffering and hardship. In response, the Menominee organized the group, Determination of Rights and Unity for Menominee Shareholders (DRUMS). One of DRUMS' most memorable protests was to walk over 150 miles from the town of Keshena to the Wisconsin capital in Madison to protest termination and land sales. The sale of Menominee land was eventually halted by the courts, but not before 2,000 Menominee homes were sold out from under them. It took until 1972 for the Menominee to regain federal recognition (Loew, 2013).

Ada Deer, one of the leaders of DRUMS, became the first woman to head the US Bureau of Indian Affairs. In her memoir, she states, “no description of the Menominee Reservation can do it justice. More than a century of sustainable forestry has produced a green canopy high above the landscape largely free of underbrush and now, unmarred by the stubble of clear-cutting” (Deer, 2019, p. 3). How were Deer and DRUMS ultimately able to protect the reservation and its forest? Loew notes that “The decision to focus on sustainable logging instead of farming allowed the Menominee to escape the fate of other Wisconsin tribes whose lands were divided and privatized under various allotment acts” (Loew, 2013, p. 28).

By sharing the story of the Menominee's historic and continuing efforts, my students learned that natural entities are crucial in community survival and that community civic engagement allowed the Menominee to protect at least some of their land. The fact that the Menominee still have sovereignty over a small section of their original homeland is a rarity in United States history. History books and primary sources are full of accounts of Indigenous nations losing their ancestral homelands. Providing students with this story of the events that occurred under the canopy of trees is likely to inspire and engage them, but it is important for them to understand that it does not have a fairy-tale, happy ending. Menominee County, home of the Menominee reservation, is the poorest county in Wisconsin. The Menominee people are still dealing with the continuing effects of settler colonialism today. The Menominee Forest alone cannot support the Menominee people economically in a modern economy (Vaisvilas, 2020).

## CONTINUING THE WORK

O'Connor and Rykken (2021) state:

In presenting history as a series of valid and often competing narratives, we provide depth and rigor to the practice of history. One way to do that is to challenge dominant voices with counter-narratives through the appropriate use of primary sources. Images, documents, eyewitness accounts, and artifacts ignite the imagination, and bring the past to life, and give students agency in the process of learning about history. It is time to creatively engage in finding appropriate access points within the story of U.S. history to broaden our lens.

By sharing the work of Wisconsin activists, historians, leaders, writers, and educators, I have tried to show how the history of one small, but mighty forest can lead to important lessons for learners.

This lesson focused specifically on the Menominee, but serves as a model for effective ways to learn about other Indigenous nations. The state of Wisconsin is home to ten other federally recognized tribes and one tribe still working for federal recognition. All these nations are actively advocating for their sovereignty and ability to protect their land. By beginning lessons with an example of environmental advocacy, students see Indigenous peoples as contemporary members and teachers within their own communities. Although it is important for students to learn about the complex and complicated European and Indigenous histories, it's more important for students to celebrate Indigenous peoples' resilience, and their ability to survive and thrive. This lesson begins to help students value the efforts of the Menominee and use the same lens to view other Indigenous nations.

This lesson addresses some of Sabzalian's (2019) critical orientations, but it is not enough for educators to teach the history and move on to other topics. I realize that I have only scratched the surface of teaching the Menominee story and their efforts to sustain their sovereignty, their well-being, and the Menominee forest. To fully engage my students in the necessary work of countering the master colonist narrative, I need to involve Menominee members themselves. Sabzalian notes that "cultivating meaningful partnerships with local Indigenous peoples, organizations, or nations is not only a policy imperative, but a foundational relational practice if public schools are to harness the power of citizenship education to uphold and support tribal sovereignty" (Sabzalian, 2019, p. 33). In collaboration with tribal members, my hope is to explore ways that my students can support the continuing efforts of the Menominee people to sustain their forest. The students can also learn new ideas and develop their own insights about how to be stewards of the treescapes and other natural spaces that sustain the communities to which they belong.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The author would like to send her sincere appreciation to Dr. Gail Boldt for her editing and framing suggestions to make this article more useful to an international audience.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Kate Van Haren** is a fourth- and fifth-grade social studies and literacy teacher at Pittsville Elementary School in Wisconsin. She is also a doctoral candidate at Penn State University. Her research interests focus on exposing young learners to themes of anti-oppression and civic engagement. In addition to teaching children, she helps create a professional development that challenges educators to question their own social studies education backgrounds and create a curriculum based on critical literacy and counternarratives.