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Voicelessness of Indigenous People in  
American Literature: A Transmedial Phenomenon?

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## Introduction

Growing up in a Western, Eurocentric society, I was taught a very specific image of Native Americans. “Indians”, I was told, were those living on the American continent before Columbus arrived. Their disappearance was never explained, their lives described as savage, somewhat primitive. Of course, this is an overgeneralized and extremely problematic perspective on an actually diverse group of indigenous people. However, this image was rarely challenged by the media I consumed, an unfortunate circumstance that now led to this paper.

In addition to the lack of diversity and historical accuracy in such representations, most novels, films, comics or video games dealing with the lives of indigenous people are written from the aforementioned Eurocentric perspective. The resulting voicelessness of Native Americans, both in metaphorical and literal ways, as this paper aims to show, is rooted in the pictorial and literary depiction, which is often informed by stereotypes. It is a narrative told across media and centuries, starting with natives’ depiction in seventeenth-century works and, as I will explain henceforward, remaining dominant in currently popular video games. Thus I consider the voicelessness of indigenous people a transmedial phenomenon across centuries, which I hope to elucidate in this paper. Furthermore, this particular representation establishes a trope of disempowerment within American literature. American literature in this case is considered as the totality of texts - visual, interactive or literary - that were published by American writers or artists.

Consequently, this paper analyses three works from different centuries and media with regard to the way they represent American indigenous people, how they give them agency, depict their lives - or the lack thereof. First, I will analyse various paintings by George Catlin from the nineteenth century, who attempted to portray Native Americans in their truest form and thereby make their lives more approachable to contemporary citizens. Representative for the twentieth century and the literary genre of short stories in prose is “Indian Camp” by Ernest Hemingway. Lastly, *Red Dead Redemption* by Rockstar Games appears to be the most fruitful text to choose from the twenty-first century; not only because of its interactivity, but its combination of visual and textual elements.

The reception of these works is often prejudiced, however, this paper aims to take an

objective look at the representation by analysing the Native American characters, how they are portrayed, how they interact with other characters and what they are able to do within the specific narrative. Therefore, this paper focuses on questions of voice, agency, and performance with regard to the work's context, media-specific characteristics, and stereotypes.

## 1. Theorizing Voice and Transmediality

The terminology used in this paper needs definition in order to properly argue and to determine whether the representation of indigenous people in America is prejudiced and leads to transmedial voicelessness. Thus, this chapter elaborates on the concepts referred to henceforward.

According to Werner Wolf's definition of transmediality, which Thon and Rippl, among other scholars, have discussed (cf. Rippl 12), transmedial phenomena are not bound to a specific medium, but appear in multiple ones, on multiple possible levels:

Transmedial phenomena are phenomena that are non-specific to individual media. Since they appear in more than one medium, they point to palpable similarities between heteromedial semiotic entities. Transmediality appears, for instance, on the level of ahistorical formal devices and ways of organising semiotic complexes ... . Other instances of transmediality concern characteristic historical traits that are common to either the form or the content level of several media in given periods ... . Finally, transmediality can equally appear on the content level alone. (Wolf 253)

Jan-Noël Thon summarises this idea of “transmediality as referring to phenomena that manifest themselves across media” (11) and explains that he and Eder “distinguish between three particularly influential strands of research, each associated with a more specific understanding of the term” (Thon 11; cf. Eder 140). The one that is important in the context of literary studies and this paper in particular focuses on modes of representation and semiotics, as Wolf has already argued.

Literary theories of intermediality tend to emphasize aesthetic and semiotic aspects, understanding the term “transmediality” as referring to (largely) “medium-free” or at least “medially unspecified” phenomena and usually focusing primarily on representational or, more generally, aesthetic strategies. (Thon 11)

Despite the notion that transmedial phenomena are considered, in the words of Thon, “medially unspecified” (11), I will analyse how this particular phenomenon, voicelessness of indigenous people in American literature, is depicted in different media, how the corresponding semiotic systems influence its reception and entail further consequences.

Such an approach requires a definition of “voice” in general. Contrary to common definitions of “voice” as a literary concept, i.e. narrative instance as introduced by Genette (cf. Genette 212), I pursue an alternative, more metaphorical approach and conceptualize it as a way of expressing oneself, engaging in and even initiating a discourse; as the possibility of being able to draw attention to something and articulating one’s identity and ideology. On the one hand, this definition is loosely based on one entry for “voice”, which can be found in the Oxford English Dictionary: “the agency or means by which something specified is expressed, represented, or revealed”. On the other hand, it is based on Eric Watts’ deliberations concerning voice: He expatiates on “a notion of "voice" ... that is constitutive of the public acknowledgment of the ethical and emotional dimensions of public discourse” (Watts 179). Besides, Watts argues that

some invocations of "voice" pay tribute to the power of the speaking subject, while others question the very idea of centrality or subjectivity. On the one hand "voice" registers the life of the human being among her fellows and on the other, "voice" signifies ideology and identity. (192)

In effect, “voice” in the context of this paper means not only actual utterances, but also the general ability to convey an identity, thought, existence, and ideology. Especially the notion of recognition by means of voicing will be investigated henceforward.

## 2. Visual Representations: George Catlin’s “Indian Gallery”

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the idea of a “Manifest Destiny” legitimized territorial expansion at the expense of Native Americans and their lands, resulting in more conflicts than ever (Rodenberg 53). The dominant image of Natives was strongly connected to savagery, opposing the advance of American civilization. As Roy Harvey Pearce cynically observes,

Americans who were setting out to make a new society could find a place in it for the Indian only if he would become what they were - settled, steady, civilized. Yet somehow he would not be anything but what he was - roaming, unreliable, savage. So they concluded that they were destined to try to civilize him and, in trying, to destroy him, because he could not and would not be civilized. (53)

The perception and conceptualization of Native Americans as a template for the construction of an American identity and as part of nature rather than culture slowly shifted. Throughout the century, Lewis Henry Morgan enabled a paradigm shift in anthropology, publishing a series of "Indian journals" that shed light on American indigenous people in contrast to previous ethnological claims based on narratives (Lyons 318). Yet, paintings from the end of the nineteenth century also reflect the ongoing repression of natives following failed attempts of cultural appropriation:

Die Verdrängung der Figur des Indianers aus den Bildern der nordamerikanischen Landschaft geht analog mit der konkreten Verdrängung und Verbannung der Native Americans in die ihnen vom angloamerikanischen Amerika zugeteilten Reservate: Bezeichnenderweise sind die Indianer, die überhaupt noch in den Landschaftsdarstellungen der Zeit auftauchen, meist auf der Flucht. ... Das Land öffnet sich dem erschließenden Zugriff der siegreichen Zivilisation. (Rodenberg 63)

George Catlin and his work can be considered a counter-proposal to this development. Catlin travelled through the United States, primarily west of the Mississippi river, in order to paint indigenous people, eventually collecting hundreds of paintings to which he himself referred to as "Indian Gallery". Most of his paintings are portraits of indigenous people, others show the landscape yet untouched by civilization, while some show scenes from the lives of Native Americans, e.g. hunting.

In his Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians (1841), Catlin insists that he has aimed to preserve in portraits and scenes the true Indian; he has gone as far west as possible to see the Indian as he really is, as he really was before the coming of the white men. (Pearce 111)

In addition to opposing the prevalent depiction of indigenous people in art by portraying them in nature, tribes, or otherwise undisturbed environments, Catlin focuses on the individual person, their rituals, and living conditions, challenging the predominant

conceptualization of Native Americans as a symbol. Pearce elaborates on this status quo in relation to the oppression of Natives:

The Indian who was important to Americans setting out to make their new society was not the person but the type, not the tribesman but the savage, not the individual but the symbol. The American conscience was troubled about the death of the individual. But it could make sense of his death only when it understood it as the death of the symbol. (73)

Three of Catlin's paintings in particular epitomize his work and exemplify the ways in which he offers a voice to Native Americans by means of a medium that was easily accessible for those supposed to recognize, i.e. Americans. *Fort Union, Mouth of the Yellowstone River, 2000 Miles above St. Louis (see fig. 1)*, for example, is a representation of the American pastoral. The term was coined by Leo Marx in 1964, who analysed "its emergence as a distinctively American theory of society, and its subsequent transformation under the impact of industrialism" (4). The American pastoral stands for seemingly limitless space, relating to prelapsarian ideas of an equilibrium of human existence and nature. "Pastoralism has flourished as a genre and a cultural activity because it contains and, through a dialectic, attempts to resolve key tensions manifest in the culture at large" (Scheese 5), as for instance wilderness opposing civilization or indigenous cultures at odds with Euramerican values (Scheese 5). The painting by Catlin shows a lavish green landscape, grasslands, forests, and mountains. The aerial perspective indicates freedom and grants an overview while the focal point directs the spectator's view towards three Native Americans standing on a hill in the middle of the painting. Above them, one can see the eponymous Fort Union. Catlin contrasts the wilderness and advancing civilization as well as native culture, focusing on coexistence with nature, and the American culture, conquering nature and attempting to control it. The Yellowstone River divides the land, a trope often found in Catlin's landscape paintings. It symbolizes the liminality of the land, emphasizing the notion of the American pastoral, and, by extension, lamenting the loss of the natural landscape and imminent expulsion of natives from that land.

*A-wun-ne-wa-be, Bird of Thunder (see fig. 2)* is one of Catlin's typical paintings, depicting a Native American standing in front of a village, spears in one hand and a pipe in the other. The man wears a lavish headpiece made of feathers, a necklace made of what appears to be teeth, and a shield. The garments on his clothes and the spears point either upwards or

downwards, which emphasises the notion of living in one particular place in contrast to the westward expansion of American settlers. The colour scheme of his clothes resembles that of the village in the background, indicating a connection between the two elements and supporting the previous argument. Furthermore, the same beige and light brown colours were used for the environment, again, alluding to a connection between the indigenous man, the village, and nature. The landscape itself is monotonous and unobtrusive, hence directing the viewer's attention to the Native American in the middle of the painting. His facial expression suggests pride, but also caution. His gaze is directed to the right-hand corner of the painting, hinting at the direction from which Americans would come, i.e. east. Accordingly, the village is positioned in the lower left-hand corner. Besides pointing out the indigenous man's connection to nature and the village, the painting foregrounds the notion of tradition by portraying the man bearing various signs of Native American culture, such as the pipe and the feathers. While the painting of Fort Union indicates the tension between indigenous and Eurocentric American culture, this one focuses on Native American culture and tradition only.

Yet another painting, however, entitled *Wi-jún-jon, Pigeon's Egg Head (The Light) Going To and Returning From Washington* (see fig. 3) juxtaposes both cultures. It shows a Native American man going to and returning from Washington, the quintessence of American civilization. The left side of the painting shows the man bearing signs of indigenous tradition, similar to the man in the second painting. He wears a headpiece made of feathers, a pipe, and beige clothing with colourful embellishment. He blends in with the environment surrounding him. His facial expression and posture imply calmness and pride. The right side of the painting shows the same man returning from the city, now wearing black clothes and white gloves. Instead of his headpiece he is now wearing a top hat with a single feather attached to it. He also exchanged his pipe for a cigarette, a fan, and an umbrella. He seems excited, leans slightly backwards and examines the fan in his hand, a symbol of another culture he now seems to have appropriated. His gesture as well as the colour scheme symbolize the juxtaposition of both cultures. Apart from that, the colour black also serves as an indicator for viciousness as it is often used in visual media to signal antagonism and villainy.



Catlin foregrounded indigenous tradition and culture in his paintings, attempting to depict Native Americans as accurately as possible. This last painting, however, also comments on the clash of cultures in America in the nineteenth century, advocating the preservation of Native tradition and deploring the loss of authenticity the Native man instigated by visiting Washington. The mere fact that Catlin pursued this ambitious project of depicting indigenous peoples as accurately as possible is noteworthy. His paintings convey an authentic image of Native Americans, highlighting their way of living in communion with nature, peacefulness, and showing that the Native cultures cannot be reduced to stereotypes, let alone annihilated by American culture. In summary, these paintings indeed offer an insight in indigenous culture and thus have the ability to catalyse a discourse, enabling Americans to access Native American perspectives.

### 3. Literary Depictions: Ernest Hemingway's "Indian Camp"

After looking at visual representations of Native Americans in the nineteenth century, this sub-chapter elaborates on literary depictions, exemplified by Ernest Hemingway's short story "Indian Camp". The work, published in 1924, tells the story of a young boy called Nick, his father and his uncle George, who travel to the eponymous "Indian Camp" in order to deliver a baby. A boat brings them there and as soon as they arrive, the birth begins. Complications occur and the pregnant woman screams in pain, even bites uncle George. After the baby has been delivered, they discover that the baby's father has slit his throat, unable to bear the emotional pain that is caused by the physical pain of the baby's mother. Without further ado, Nick and his father leave, take a seat in the boat and row as the sun rises.

The narrative situation creates the impression of experiencing the events through the boy's perspective. Despite the heterodiegetic narrator and the authorial narrative situation, which usually indicate distance between readers and characters, the story employs various elements that stress Nick's perspective. First, the narrator seems to have knowledge of the character's thoughts, but appears to emphasise Nick's. Regarding the father, the narrator states that "[when] he was satisfied with his hands he went in and went to work." (Hemingway 68), about the Indian woman the narrator says that "[she] was quiet now and her eyes were closed. She looked very pale. She did not know what had become of the

baby or anything” (Hemingway 69). While these observations could be deduced from the characters’ actions and the situation itself, the narrator claims that “Nick did not watch. His curiosity had been gone for a long time” (Hemingway 69), which requires further insight into Nick’s thoughts and thus suggests that the narrator indeed focuses on Nick, allowing readers to identify with him more than any other character. There are few instances as such in which the narrator actually discloses how the characters are feeling, which increases the reader’s distance from the events. However, by switching between zero focalization and internal focalization, emphasising on Nick’s perspective, the story achieves the aforementioned impression of closeness.

In his typical manner, also referred to as iceberg theory (cf. Giger), Hemingway succeeds in telling the story in such a way that it is perceived as neutral, even objective due to the lack of free indirect discourse and psychonarration. The story relies mainly on descriptions of what is happening and what the characters are doing in addition to direct speech. Moreover, the fact that “Indian Camp” starts in medias res creates the impression of temporarily witnessing a brief moment from the outside without ever being fully immersed in the story. This detaches the reader from the events depicted and enables a rather neutral reading of the short story. However, the narrator also grants access to Nick’s thoughts from time to time, interrupting the otherwise distant narration. In doing so, the short story encourages a particular reading, addressing the loss of innocence as the young boy witnesses the man’s suicide and the particularly shocking and complicated birth. By implication, the story also addresses the objectification of indigenous people. As Gelfant points out, “Indian Camp” exemplifies

the expert ability to pull readers into a story’s world and force them to make meaning out of it, while concurrently forcing them to face certain harsh and treacherous truths. ... By directing the reader’s focus to Nick’s naive, unformed response, the story compels one to consider the impact of the events on him, and on oneself. ... On the other hand, the reader may also be wondering about the perspective that is largely left out: the American Indian father, mother, and child, who have suffered a much more immediate and vicious loss. (289)

None of the Native Americans has a name, they are simply referred to as “young Indian” (Hemingway 67), “Indian lady” (Hemingway 67), or insulted by Uncle George: “Damn squaw bitch” (Hemingway 68). They are reduced to their ethnicity, viewed as an

anonymous collective instead of individuals and, by extension, equals. This depiction mimics the Eurocentric perspective on America's indigenous people that pervaded American literature as Pearce has pointed out (cf. previous chapter of this paper). Furthermore, the pregnant woman has no independence, her well-being solely depends on the visitors. Her screams are rendered unimportant. On the narratological level, they are indeed of mediocre importance as they are only mentioned once; on the plot level, the woman's pain simply does not matter when the doctor attempts to do his job. He even explains that "her screams are not important. I don't hear them because they are not important" (Hemingway 68). Thus, the family's tragedy is considered less significant, their perspective less relevant than the loss of innocence the boy and reader experience (Gelfant 289). This is also reflected in the literal voicelessness of indigenous characters in "Indian Camp". None of them utters a word, hence they are not granted autonomy. The initial reaction towards the silence of the baby's father reflects this depiction of indigenous people, which can also be found in conqueror narratives: "he took it all pretty quietly" (Hemingway 69) alludes to the voicelessness of Natives in light of European intruders and shows the lack of empathy. This literal voicelessness as depicted in "Indian Camp" results in not being able to utter thoughts, wishes, hopes, concerns. Hence, the mother "did not know what had become of the baby or anything" (Hemingway 69) and the father's suicide was discovered only later, not while it happened right beside Nick and his relatives. The Native's thoughts and fears do not matter for the protagonists of the story. The story does not grant them a voice and thus seems to eliminate the possibility of them having a personality, being a human being that matters and is equal to the other characters of the story. While this is a rather definite reading of the story, Katalin G. Kállay comes to a similar, albeit more hopeful conclusion. She asks whether "well-written literature [can] help us to a greater degree of understanding 'the other'" (Kállay 207), leading to an improvement of intercultural communication, which the characters in "Indian Camp" certainly lack. Nonetheless, both readings eventually showcase the nuisance related to agency and voice of indigenous people as portrayed in the story, alluding to a greater problem of intercultural discourse.

The story offers no clear solution, but implicitly hints at the issues at hand. The sudden death of the baby's father in the end functions as an epiphany for the reader. It is the moment when one is supposed to realize that intruding another culture might not be the

best idea. This moment of transition is reflected in the environment as the “sun was coming up over the hills” (Hemingway 70), symbolizing an awakening in this literally liminal space, the river, between helping the natives, but eventually causing more pain, between advancing civilization and accepting other forms of living, between innocent childhood and the harsh realization of pain in the world and the realization that the one perspective one has is only one among many. I argue that this turning point is the most important message the story aims to convey. As George F. Whicher has observed, “there is moreover in [Hemingway’s] fiction an instinct for human dilemmas of greater import than the social malaises which fatally attract lesser novelists in search of larger objects” (882). Ending the story here and leaving interpretations, reflections, and consideration of consequences to the reader emphasises the notion of an implicit call for action. As Katalin G. Kállay points out, “[the] reader is also initiated without anaesthetic: no soothing thoughts are offered for solving the problems of failure, of the impossibility of intercultural communication, in spite of the best of intentions” (212), referring to the direct depiction of events and supporting the argument made earlier.

To conclude, “Indian Camp” exhibits voicelessness of indigenous characters on multiple levels, ranging from the mere fact that none of them utters a word, to the indifference with which their emotions are treated. The short story appears to focus on Nick, however, by excluding the Native American perspective, the story draws attention to it and challenges the reader to consider other perspectives than one’s own.

#### 4. Interactive Encounters: Rockstar Games’ *Red Dead Redemption*

A fairly recent example of the portrayal of Native Americans in new media is the game *Red Dead Redemption* developed by Rockstar San Diego and published by Rockstar Games. It was published in 2010 and lets players take the role of John Marston. It is defined as an action-adventure, i.e. a game that grants players autonomy while framing the actions with a story. This main plot is called main quest and has to be distinguished from so called side quests, which can be played and hence interrupt the main quest at any point, but constitute smaller stories in themselves, which can always be linked to the main quest in some way (cf. Schlechtweg-Jahn 249). The main quest revolves around John Marston, a former gang member, whose family is held hostage until he assassinates or captures all

other previous gang members for the US government, represented by the so called Bureau of Investigation. *Red Dead Redemption* is set in 1911 and reimagines the aesthetics of the Wild West. In contrast to common dualistic representations of characters and ideologies related to this setting, the game allows players to alter the history as told in the game, while maintaining genre conventions that promote according ideologies and incline the player's perception of the game. As Melissa Elston points out, *Red Dead Redemption* attempts to challenge these predetermined readings by offering players the possibility to actively engage with the trope and make decisions that influence the plot. Still, this approach is not flawless:

Unsettling and teeming with ethical dilemmas as well as epistemological ambiguities, Marston's interactive journey echoes many other contemporary efforts to reframe the violence and simplistic moral dualism of previous pop-cultural representations of the Old West. By combining visual and dialogic conventions of the American frontier's colonial imagery with the immersive, open-ended qualities of a video game, *Red Dead Redemption* invites players to relive - and, at times, collaborate in rewriting - the corresponding westward expansion narrative in inhabiting the body of the world-weary gunslinger on his travels throughout the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, encountering cannibalism, necrophilia, and other troubling phenomena along the way. (Elston 142)

Throughout the game players meet several characters, who ask for help in return for information or support. This is the standard structure of a quest, which begins with an inquiry and ends with an exchange of services. While the list of characters in *Red Dead Redemption* is quite long, the list of indigenous characters is fairly short. There is Chogan, for instance, who dresses like an American and engages in a mini game players can play. He is completely irrelevant for the main quest. The only Native American NPC (i.e. non-player character), who actually is cordial and engages in more or less elaborate dialogue with the player is Nastas. He works for the US government and is thus considered a "good" Native American in the realm of the game. Yet, the player does not know too much about Nastas, on the contrary, his indigenous heritage is rarely mentioned.

The way that the game script treats Nastas himself is additionally problematic. On one hand, he ostensibly gives voice to indigenous experiences under colonization. On the other, within the dominant culture's narrative framework, there are limits to the type of story Nastas is allowed to tell. ... He has no family, no successor. He remains, to borrow a phrase from Reid Gómez, 'trapped within the narrative frameworks that declare ... subjugation and eventual and inevitable extinction,' narrative frameworks shared by Manifest Destiny advocates, writers of Westerns, and nineteenth-century scientists. (Elston 149)

Nastas, therefore, remains a part of the fictional story and is rarely granted a voice to express his heritage. Rather, he is reduced to a certain image that the developers refused to extend beyond stereotypes. Interestingly, the cultural background of another, hostile Native American character called Enepay is rendered more important, at least for the development of one particular quest: “For Purely Scientific Purposes” features an elderly professor, Harold MacDougal, who epitomizes the white, middle-class American of the early twentieth century. In this particular quest, MacDougal aims for “a meeting of the minds”, uniting Native Americans and white Americans in an attempt to comprehend the differences he conjectures. Nastas arranges a meeting with members of a hostile gang, however, the conversation does not last long and Enepay attacks Nastas as the latter attempts to calm the opponents. Enepay calls Nastas a “treacherous snake”, having committed “treason” after abandoning his Native American heritage and working for the US government (cf. fig. 4). Furthermore, he accuses the white men, Marston and MacDougal, to have urged indigenous people in this marginalized position, which made it imperative for them to commit crimes in order to sustain life (cf. fig. 5). The rather short monologue ends with Enepay pointing out the differences both groups face due to their cultural backgrounds (cf. fig. 6) and shooting Nastas in the head.

In fact, most of the Native American characters in *Red Dead Redemption* are members of a certain gang called Dutch’s gang, ruled by Dutch van der Linde, an American with possibly Dutch heritage. Dutch is one of the main antagonists Marston has to defeat in order to succeed and rescue his family. This hierarchy (Native American outlaws being commanded by a white man from Europe/America) is already problematic, as is the rendering of indigenous NPCs as expendable enemies. Those working for and with the Americans, represented by the government and the protagonist John Marston, are considered friendly NPCs while those following their own agenda and trying to reconcile a life away from civilization with the advancing industrialization are hostile NPCs. Of course, the superficial explanation offered by the game is that they actually attack citizens and are outlaws who do not obey the law. However, one must question the reason for this and *Red Dead Redemption* fails to situate this development properly and instead characterizes Native Americans rather loosely, utilizing their struggle as an exposition and their characters as flat archetypes.

Similar instances of stratification based on the character's cultural background are provided by MacDougal himself. He believes to be superior to Native Americans, which becomes particularly evident in dialogues between him and Nastas. He also assumes to have extensive knowledge of Native American culture and fuses his attitude with natural science, which leads to the tragic meeting in the first place. Nastas, by contrast, articulates his fears concerning the loss of nature ("There is no respect for the land anymore"), objecting MacDougal's ethnocentric ideology. Despite their opposing worldviews, they aid each other. Nonetheless, "For Purely Scientific Purposes" demonstrates the lack and failing of intercultural communication, which has already been recognized in Hemingway's "Indian Camp". The desire for understanding others here, however, is not led by good intentions, but out of an ethnocentric worldview. The game and especially this quest attempt to depict distinguishing features of cultures, but ultimately demonize Native Americans. The dialogue provides the textual certainty of the pictorial depiction, bristled with stereotypes. Additionally, the interactive layer of the game, arguably the most important one, supports the indicated image and reinforces racist ideologies as Marston has to kill emerging Native American enemies in order to save himself and MacDougal at the end of the quest.

In addition to the depiction of Native Americans, their lack of agency and depth, the ideologies conveyed by American characters are equally problematic. Bonnie MacFarlane, another NPC, and John Marston defend her ranch from intruders, who are Native American gang members, without reflecting on historical occurrences that led to this situation in the first place and employing stereotypes such as the savage Native American.

The implication that natives are somehow more savage or threatening than the problematically denoted 'white trash' terrorizing the MacFarlanes is hackneyed and plays to a shopworn colonial trope. But perhaps even more insidious is the fact that the dialogue 'unsees' Marston and Bonnie's roles in the expansionist appropriation and occupation of native lands and absolves them of any complicity. The only injustice or displacement that the two are concerned with is the potential relocation of Bonnie's ranch, should the gang's lawless tactics prevail. But how did Bonnie's family obtain the land and from whom? The lives and homes of the land's indigenous occupants are effectively erased via the discourse. (Elston 152)

Once again, the game relies solely on stereotypes and demonizes Native American

characters. The few cases in which *Red Dead Redemption* tries to reconcile the conflicting motifs are counteracted by the fact that the only possibility for Natives to regain their agency and land in the realm of the game is violence or appropriating white American culture.

### 5. Recurring Semiotics of Voicelessness

Following the analysis of three distinct works, which were (and, in fact, still are) presented to varying contemporary audiences, loaded with implications, and received in divergent ways because of their media-specific properties, the question now arises whether there are omnipresent signs and in how far the works contribute to voicelessness of indigenous people. In short, is there a transmedial semiotic system strengthening voicelessness of Native Americans in American literature?

In order to answer this question, I have previously analysed the pictorial and textual representation of Native Americans across centuries, exemplified by three well known works. On the one hand, the portrayal promotes stereotypes, depicting indigenous people as savages and emphasizing their, in the context of the specific plots, irrational connection to nature by contrasting it with civilized America, either rendered through the perspective of adolescent Nick in “Indian Camp” or John Marston in *Red Dead Redemption*. On the other hand, they are rarely allowed to speak, literally as well as metaphorically. As already pointed out several times, many Native American characters are utilized as tools to catalyse the plot or antagonists that are as stereotypical as they are minor and expendable. This narrative, of course, has lasted for centuries and, as Steven Frye argues, has always been “clouded by a Eurocentric bias” (Frye 2). The conceptualization of indigenous people in America in the examples presented here tends to neglect Native American agency in favour of an access to their culture that is mediated by a white American perspective. Frye explains this with the importance of the American West for the construction of an American identity:

The American West has always been a locale both physically real and ideologically substantial, with a distinctive topography and a history the contours of which have no record precedent. From the colonial period forward, the region has helped to define the European as well as the American imagination. The lines of demarcation have perpetually changed. (1)



An exception to this approach seems to be Catlin's "Indian Gallery", which at least tries to offer the most truthful depiction of indigenous cultures. Moreover, portraiture as such can be considered a visualization of voice. Rather passively, but nonetheless effective, Hemingway highlights this bias by completely omitting the Native American perspective and thereby challenging contemporary perceptions.

By challenging the dominant models of historical explanation and by replacing official history with subversive counter-narratives [nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors] demonstrate that all seemingly coherent and monolithic accounts of history are but concord fictions which help man to master the traumatic influx of chaotic and incoherent historical data which, in themselves, have no significance. (Engler 35)

It is this rewriting of emplotment and recognizing historiography as but one dominant narrative that can counteract the ubiquity of a semiotic system that enforces voicelessness of Native Americans in multiple ways as presented here. Video games have the ability to accelerate this process. The combination of interaction and almost cinematic enactment of a story that allows players to identify with characters offers novel approaches. Unfortunately, the most current game that features Native Americans, *Red Dead Redemption*, depicts the most stereotypical version of indigenous people in America instead of problematizing past narratives.

It is a reciprocal action, even a vicious cycle: not being able to voice one's existence or identity due to a lack of representation or stereotypical depiction results in not being acknowledged and, consequently, an even less prominent and more prejudiced depiction in media. Voice, and thereby agency, are granted seldom and if they are, then implicitly by omission or simply portrayal as in "Indian Gallery" and "Indian Camp". To conclude, there is indeed a semiotic system, favouring a biased perspective and stereotypes, especially exemplified by *Red Dead Redemption*. However, the other works analysed are not free from problematic and arbitrary implications either. Therefore, one can consider the motif of voicelessness a transmedial phenomenon in American literature.

## Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to analyse whether the representation of indigenous people in American literature advocates voicelessness and to investigate whether there is such a notion. Moreover, by analysing works from different media and centuries, I aimed to show that this dealing with marginalized cultures is a transmedial phenomenon. As a close look at “Indian Gallery”, “Indian Camp” and *Red Dead Redemption* has asserted, depictions of Native Americans, whether visual or textual, whether accessible as artworks meant for passive consumption or new media integrating player’s actions, are biased and often rely on stereotypes. There is an omnipresent lack of agency and hence voicelessness, which is only interrupted by few instances that discredit and demonize Native Americans, such as the suicide of the father in “Indian Camp” or the murder Enepay commits in *Red Dead Redemption*.

This leads to the conclusion that the issue at hand is systemic, having existed for many centuries and, apparently, continuing in new media. While George Catlin painted Native Americans and contrasted their cultures and traditions with the advancing American civilization, presenting the most benevolent pragmatism compared to the other examples, Ernest Hemingway offered a story focussing on a white adolescent boy and omitted the indigenous perspective, resulting in a complete lack of agency and voice. Finally, Rockstar Games published a game that allows players to approach the topic on an interactive level, providing new layers of meaning to an otherwise one-sided discourse that is dominated by mediation through stereotypes and an American point of view. Of course, these are only three examples among many and in order to make a more verifiable statement, one needs to look at further paintings, texts, games, and other works. However, the examples in this paper clearly display how voicelessness of indigenous people can be considered a transmedial phenomenon that is associated with an absence of autonomy and the presence of stereotypes. The different approaches allow for varying viewpoints, but somehow they all seem to provide similar representations. If this paper has shown anything, it is the importance of an open-minded and diverse discourse as well as awareness; to give a voice to marginalized groups, acknowledge their existence via accurate depictions and according plot structures, and grant them an equal place in society - which starts with an adequate representation in literature and art.

Appendix



*Fig. 1: Fort Union, Mouth of the Yellowstone River, 2000 Miles above St. Louis, by George Catlin.*



*Fig. 2: A-wun-ne-wa-be, Bird of Thunder, by George Catlin.*



*Fig. 3: Wi-jún-jon, Pigeon's Egg Head (The Light) Going To and Returning From Washington, by George Catlin.*



Fig. 4: Enpay insulting Nastas. "For Purely Scientific Purposes." *Red Dead Redemption*. Rockstar Games, 2010.



Fig. 5: Enepay addressing American's guilt. "For Purely Scientific Purposes." *Red Dead Redemption*. Rockstar Games, 2010.



Fig. 6: Enepay pointing out different living conditions. "For Purely Scientific Purposes." *Red Dead Redemption*. Rockstar Games, 2010.

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