

**Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now Telling the past and present of the Dakota people through maps**  
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**CATHY** This week marks a painful event in US and Dakota history. 160 years ago tomorrow, the US Congress passed the  
**WURZER:** Dakota Removal Act. It led to the exile and killing of many Dakota people who were the original inhabitants of this land. As part of the effort, the US annulled its treaties with the Dakota.

If you look at a map of Minnesota today, this story is right there. Our next guest is redrawing that map. Marlena Myles is a Spirit Lake Dakota member and the artist behind the Dakota Land Maps Project. She's with us. Marlena, welcome.

**MARLENA** Yeah, thank you for having me.

**MYLES:**

**CATHY** I am wondering if you remember when you learned about the US nullifying the treaties and the exiling of the  
**WURZER:** Dakota people from your homeland. Do you recall when you first heard that and what you thought of?

**MARLENA** My mom was born on her reservation in North Dakota. And I grew up here in Minneapolis. And we'd always go  
**MYLES:** back to North Dakota. And I'd ask, why are we in North Dakota? Why are we not in Minnesota?

Why is our reservation there? And she mentioned that we were exiled from Minnesota. And she said you're kind of young and I don't want to tell you the full sad story, I guess. So I was aware that we're originally from Minnesota just through her storytelling.

**CATHY** I heard one Dakota elder call this a disruption to Dakota culture, but not its elimination. What do you want folks  
**WURZER:** to understand about that?

**MARLENA** Well, prior to 1851 when the Treaty of Traverse des Sioux was signed, which gave away 40% of Minnesota, the  
**MYLES:** Southeastern part, to the United States government, prior to that, Europeans strove to understand Dakota people. They would be adopted in or married into our society and see the world from our perspective.

And some people think that era ended when the treaties were signed and people started to acquire land that used to belong to us. But I think that the past and the present are intertwined and that the future is still influenced by such events, but that it doesn't end-- that we can reconnect and sort of immerse ourselves through a Dakota view. And so that's why I started to create the Dakota land maps to sort of open that big picture to people who always might not have known anything about Dakota history and they never knew the lands that they lived on belonged to us.

And they might not even know what the word Minnesota means, but they grew up here their whole lives. So these land maps sort of are an introduction to our respect-m based world view of the land.

**CATHY** You have three Dakota land maps. These are watercolor maps that show landmarks and sacred sites that were  
**WURZER:** part of Dakota life-- one map for the Twin Cities, one for the Minnesota River Valley, one for the Prairie Island area. Walk us through the process of creating each map, if you would.

**MARLENA** The process starts with looking at historical maps and collecting data about the Dakota names, and also looking  
**MYLES:** at the current landmarks that are there and sort of telling these stories of being intertwined-- that our history isn't in the past, it also exists in the present-- and also creating little icons that let people sort get a hint of what these names might be.

On my website, there's the audio guide and audio pronunciation of each Dakota word. But I wanted to create the land maps icons in a way that if you didn't know English or you didn't know Dakota, maybe you could look at these icons and they would give you a hint of the name, even.

**CATHY WURZER:** The Twin Cities map includes an image of light rail. You got the Mall of America in there, both skylines. So I'm curious as to why you decided to include those landmarks, as well as the important sites like Baudette and [? Baday ?] [? Mccoska ?]

**MARLENA MYLES:** Yeah, I grew up in Minneapolis. I grew up at Little Earth, which is an urban Native American community. And I attended a Native magnet school called Four Winds. And outside of those areas, I never really saw anything that showed that Minneapolis or Minnesota was Dakota homelands just from a public art or a public building perspective.

And so creating these maps and incorporating these modern things into a Dakota worldview, I think that allows maybe a Dakota kid growing up in the city to see that everything around us can be part of our culture and that we have the words to describe these things. So I felt it was important to connect the present in the past so that our sacred sites are still here, but everyone can look-- we see the light rail and that can have a meaning in our culture too.

**CATHY WURZER:** There's an augmented reality piece to your maps. And I know you're working on fleshing that out. How does that work?

**MARLENA MYLES:** I started with the Dakota Spirit Walk, which is in St. Paul at the Bruce Vento Nature Sanctuary. And people use their phone and go to the site. And this art is activated through augmented reality.

And they can sort of see the storytelling. They can hear the language. They can meet the spirits and sort of understand our culture through my eyes, actually, using their phones. Before Europeans arrived, we didn't have a written language.

And so we used the land to store our language, sort of our stories, our data, and our knowledge. So I want to reintroduce land-based education. And our phones are fully capable of helping us do that.

**CATHY WURZER:** Are you planning to make more maps?

**MARLENA MYLES:** Yeah. I do. The Dakota homelands are pretty far in South Dakota, North Dakota, Nebraska, even Canada. So I want to just keep expanding my maps as I go along and as I grow as an artist too.

**CATHY WURZER:** I mentioned at the beginning in my introduction that this week is the anniversary of that really grim moment in Dakota history. Does art help you face stories like the Dakota Removal Act?

**MARLENA MYLES:** It does because it allows me to show that we have a much longer history than this short time period of these tragic events that have happened. And I want people to see our culture as a positive thing, as a source of power, as a source of strength, a source of knowledge. Because I do think a lot of times, we're only talked about in these sort of tragic things. And I think the art I share or create allows people to see that in perspective of who we are as a people, that we were here long before the United States existed.

**CATHY WURZER:** By the way, before you go, I know you're a self-taught artist-- how did you become interested in art and technology?

**MARLENA MYLES:** Growing up, my grandma would always send us art supplies. And my mom, and aunts, and grandma, they all did beadwork. And so we were always encouraged to do what we wanted to do with art.

And I guess I got a computer in like 1998 or something, before it was really socially acceptable to sit on a computer all day. And so I was really nerdy. I just got into coding, making websites. And I kind of grew up in a bad neighborhood, so it kind of kept me indoors, and active, and busy, I think.

**CATHY WURZER:** All right. Marlena, thank you so very much for your time. And your art is beautiful. Thank you for sharing it with us.

**MARLENA MYLES:** Yeah. Thanks for having me.

**CATHY WURZER:** We've been talking to digital artist Marlena Myles about her Dakota Land Maps Project. You can find the maps, by the way, by visiting our website [mprnews.org](http://mprnews.org). By the way, our arts programming is made possible in part by the Minnesota Legacy Amendments Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund.