

UDC 811.111'42:821.111(73).09

DOI <https://doi.org/10.32782/folium/2026.9.15>

THE LINGUISTIC REPRESENTATION OF INDIGENOUS IDENTITY IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S *TRACKS* AND LESLIE MARMON SILKO'S *GARDENS IN THE DUNES*

Iryna Dumchak

Candidate of Philological Sciences, Assistant Professor,

University of West Bohemia in Pilsen, Czech Republic

ORCID ID 0000-0002-3491-6960

dumcira2018@gmail.com

Key words: *Indigenous identity, linguistic representation, cognitive linguistics, cultural linguistics, Native American literature, land, ethnicity, literary discourse.*

The article examines the linguistic representation of Indigenous identity in Louise Erdrich's novel *Tracks* and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes*. The purpose of the study is to determine how recurrent lexical and semantic patterns construct Indigenous identity through the interconnected domains of land and ethnicity. The research combines conceptual, lexical-semantic, contextual, comparative, and quantitative methods. It also draws on Cognitive Linguistics, Cultural Linguistics, and Indigenous approaches to place and relationality. The corpus consists of the two novels, from which lexical units associated with land, territory, home, people, tribal belonging, language, ancestry, and colonial classification were selected and interpreted in context. The findings demonstrate that identity is represented not as a fixed individual attribute but as a relational formation grounded in ancestral territory, communal memory, kinship, ecological knowledge, and cultural continuity. In *Tracks*, the land domain is shaped primarily through the discourse of dispossession: woods, lake, reservation, allotment, paper, and taxation form a lexical network that contrasts Indigenous continuity with colonial administration. In *Gardens in the Dunes*, botanical and spatial vocabulary – garden, seed, river, dune, plant, and home – constructs a model of mobility, regeneration, and the transmission of ecological knowledge. The ethnicity domain is verbalized through ethnonyms, collective nouns, kinship expressions, references to Indigenous languages, and colonial labels. The opposition between self-designation and imposed naming exposes the unequal power relations involved in defining Indigenous peoples. Quantitative data support the qualitative interpretation: the most frequent units are Indian, people, Chippewa, earth, and ground, while context shows that frequency alone does not determine conceptual centrality. The novelty of the research lies in integrating lexical-semantic evidence with culturally grounded interpretation and in comparing two distinct linguistic models of Indigenous identity: Erdrich's model of threatened territorial continuity and Silko's model of ecological resilience. The study concludes that the two semantic domains function as an integrated network through which literary discourse preserves, negotiates, and transmits Indigenous cultural knowledge.

МОВНА РЕПРЕЗЕНТАЦІЯ ІНДИГЕННОЇ ІДЕНТИЧНОСТІ В РОМАНАХ ЛУЇЗ ЕРДРІК «СЛІДИ» ТА ЛЕСЛІ МАРМОН СІЛКО «САДИ В ДЮНАХ»

Ірина Думчак

кандидат філологічних наук, доцент

Університет Західної Богемії у Пльзені, Чехія

Ключові слова: індигенна ідентичність, мовна репрезентація, когнітивна лінгвістика, культурна лінгвістика, індигенна література США, земля, етнічність, художній дискурс.

У статті досліджено мовну репрезентацію індигенної ідентичності в романах Луїз Ердрік «Сліди» та Леслі Мармон Сілко «Сади в дюнах». Мета статті полягає у визначенні лексико-семантичних і дискурсивних засобів, за допомогою яких ідентичність конструюється через взаємопов'язані домени землі та етнічності. Методологія поєднує концептуальний, лексико-семантичний, контекстуальний, порівняльний і кількісний аналіз із положеннями когнітивної та культурної лінгвістики, а також індигенними підходами до місця, реляційності й екологічного знання. Матеріалом слугували два англомовні романи, з яких виокремлено одиниці на позначення землі, території, дому, народу, племінної належності, мови, спорідненості та колоніальної класифікації. Результати засвідчують, що індигенна ідентичність постає не як стабільна індивідуальна властивість, а як система відносин із предковічною територією, громадою, пам'яттю, мовою та світом природи. У романі «Сліди» домен землі формується насамперед через дискурс позбавлення власності: лексеми *woods, lake, reservation, allotment, paper, taxation* протиставляють живу тяглість спільноти колоніальному адмініструванню. Вислів *a tribe of file cabinets* демонструє перетворення живої громади на бюрократичний запис, а образ *pressed trees* пов'язує вирубування лісу з паперовими механізмами контролю. У романі «Сади в дюнах» ботанічна й просторова лексика *garden, seed, river, dune, plant, home* створює модель мобільності, відновлення та передавання екологічного знання. Метафора викорінення передає травму переміщення, однак насіння й сад водночас символізують здатність культури до повторного вкорінення. Домен етнічності вербалізується за допомогою етнонімів, колективних іменників, назв спорідненості, згадок про індигенні мови та колоніальні ярлики. Опозиція між самоназиванням і зовнішньою класифікацією виявляє нерівність влади в процесах найменування. Кількісні показники підтверджують помітність лексем *Indian, people, Chippewa, earth i ground*, проте контекстуальний аналіз показує, що частотність не тотожна концептуальній центральності. Наукова новизна полягає в інтеграції лексико-семантичних даних із культурно обґрунтованою інтерпретацією та в зіставленні двох моделей індигенної ідентичності: моделі загроженої територіальної тяглості в Ердрік і моделі екологічної стійкості в Сілко. Зроблено висновок, що домени землі й етнічності утворюють єдину семантичну мережу, через яку художній дискурс зберігає, переосмислює та передає індигенне культурне знання.

Introduction. Identity is one of the central categories through which individuals and communities understand belonging, continuity, and difference. In literary discourse, however, identity is not merely named or described; it is produced through recurrent lexical choices, narrative perspectives, metaphors, spatial relations, and culturally specific models of

the world. This is particularly important in Indigenous writing, where language frequently carries histories of dispossession, assimilation, resistance, and cultural renewal. A linguistic study of Indigenous identity must therefore attend both to the verbal forms present in a text and to the systems of knowledge that make those forms meaningful.

The term Indigenous identity requires careful use. It does not designate a single homogeneous experience shared by all Indigenous peoples. Tribal nations possess distinct histories, languages, political statuses, and cultural traditions. In the present study, Indigenous identity is treated as a relational and historically situated formation represented in two literary texts: Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*, centred on an Anishinaabe community in North Dakota, and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes*, whose Sand Lizard protagonist moves between Indigenous and Euro-American cultural spaces. The comparative approach does not collapse these communities into a universal model. Instead, it identifies shared linguistic tendencies while preserving the different narrative and cultural functions they acquire in each novel.

Tracks (1988) depicts the early twentieth-century erosion of Anishinaabe landholding under the combined pressure of epidemic disease, taxation, allotment, missionary intervention, and administrative control. Its alternating narrators, Nanapush and Pauline, offer competing linguistic and ethical orientations. Nanapush links land, memory, kinship, and communal survival, whereas Pauline increasingly adopts the vocabulary and classificatory logic of Christian assimilation. *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999) follows Indigo, a Sand Lizard girl separated from her family and taken into Euro-American institutions. Her encounters with gardens, plants, travel, and colonial collecting practices reveal identity as mobile but not rootless: ecological knowledge and family memory allow her to interpret unfamiliar places without surrendering her cultural orientation.

The novels have been widely examined from literary, feminist, postcolonial, ecocritical, and Indigenous-studies perspectives. Considerably less attention has been devoted to the systematic linguistic mechanisms through which identity is constructed across both works. Earlier conceptological approaches often relied on dictionary definitions and core-periphery lists detached from discourse. Such procedures are useful for identifying lexical fields, but they cannot by themselves explain why the same word acquires different cultural functions in different contexts. The present study addresses this gap by combining lexical-semantic description with contextual interpretation and culturally grounded theories of place, relationality, and conceptualization.

The aim of the article is to identify and compare the linguistic means through which Indigenous identity is represented in *Tracks* and *Gardens in the Dunes*. The objectives are: (1) to establish a theoretical framework connecting Cognitive Linguistics, Cultural Linguistics, and Indigenous

approaches to land and identity; (2) to identify recurrent lexical units belonging to the semantic domains of land and ethnicity; (3) to analyze their contextual and conceptual functions; (4) to compare Erdrich's and Silko's linguistic strategies; and (5) to determine how the interaction of land, ethnicity, memory, and language constructs culturally specific models of Indigenous belonging.

The novelty of the study lies in treating land and ethnicity not as isolated 'subconcepts' but as interacting semantic domains within a broader discourse model. This shift makes it possible to move from simple lexical inventory to an explanation of how literary language organizes Indigenous experience. The central hypothesis is that Indigenous identity in the selected novels is represented through a relational semantic network: land provides spatial, ecological, historical, and spiritual coordinates, while ethnicity supplies names of collective belonging, kinship, language, and cultural difference. Their interaction produces a linguistic model of identity grounded in cultural continuity rather than individual self-definition alone.

Theoretical framework and literature review. Cognitive linguistics regards meaning as embodied, encyclopedic, and dependent on patterns of conceptualization rather than as an autonomous system of formal definitions. Categories are typically structured around more and less central members, and linguistic expressions activate domains of experience that exceed their dictionary meanings (Taylor, 2003). The concept of land, for example, may activate topography, ownership, agriculture, home, ancestry, sacredness, and political jurisdiction. Context determines which dimensions are foregrounded, while recurrent patterns reveal culturally significant conceptual associations.

Cultural linguistics extends this insight by examining cultural conceptualizations shared, negotiated, and transmitted through language. Sharifian (2017) argues that cultural schemas, categories, and metaphors are distributed across communities rather than contained only in individual minds. Literary texts can therefore be approached as sites where culturally meaningful conceptualizations are represented, contested, and reconfigured. This framework is especially productive for analysing Indigenous writing because words such as land, home, tribe, Indian, garden, and language carry histories that cannot be reduced to general English-language definitions.

Conceptual metaphor theory also clarifies the role of expressions such as Mother Earth, roots, disappearance, and the unravelling of a tribe. Metaphor is not merely ornamental; furthermore, it serves "as the basis for building emergent

experiences” (Bystrov, 2025: 81) and organizes complex experience by mapping one domain onto another. Contemporary approaches emphasize that metaphor operates in interaction with context, culture, discourse, and bodily experience (Kövecses, 2020). In *Tracks*, the conceptualization of land as mother or living relation contrasts with colonial representations of land as taxable property. In *Gardens in the Dunes*, cultivated plants and seeds become models of memory, adaptation, and survival.

Indigenous theories of place challenge the separation of land from knowledge and social relations. Watts (2013) describes Indigenous ‘Place-Thought’ as an understanding in which land is alive and thinking, while people are part of networks of agency rather than external observers. Tuck and McKenzie (2015) similarly emphasize that place is material, historical, political, and relational. Whyte (2018) connects settler colonialism with environmental injustice by showing how colonial disruption attacks the relationships that sustain Indigenous collective life. These approaches help explain why lexical references to woods, lake, garden, seed, reservation, and home carry epistemological and ethical significance in the novels.

The relational dimension of Indigenous identity has also been articulated through the concepts of resurgence and grounded normativity. Coulthard (2014) uses grounded normativity to describe ethical frameworks generated through long-standing relationships with land. Simpson (2017) emphasizes practices of Indigenous resurgence rooted in community, embodied knowledge, and reciprocal relations. These accounts do not imply a static return to an untouched past. Rather, identity is sustained through adaptive practices that maintain responsibilities to people, place, and future generations. This distinction is important for the comparison undertaken here: Erdrich foregrounds the violence of interrupted territorial continuity, whereas Silko foregrounds the portability and regenerative capacity of ecological knowledge.

Indigenous literary scholarship has long challenged representations of Native peoples as disappearing, inauthentic, or confined to the past. Vizenor’s concept of survivance combines survival and resistance and rejects narratives of victimry and absence (Vizenor, 1999). Erdrich’s and Silko’s novels enact survivance differently. *Tracks* preserves communal memory through competing voices and exposes the bureaucratic mechanisms of dispossession. *Gardens in the Dunes* follows a young protagonist whose knowledge remains active across cultural borders. Both novels resist the colonial demand that Indigenous authenticity be either fixed in an imagined past or abandoned in the name of assimilation.

The present analysis therefore uses linguistic representation as its principal category. Representation refers to the patterned verbal construction of people, places, relations, and values in discourse. It includes lexical choice, repetition, semantic opposition, metaphor, naming, collocation, and narrative framing. The domains of land and ethnicity are treated as analytical groupings that organize these patterns. They overlap through such notions as homeland, reservation, tribe, ancestral territory, Indigenous language, and collective memory. This overlap is not methodological noise; it is evidence that identity is represented relationally.

Materials and Methods. The primary material consists of Louise Erdrich’s *Tracks* (1988) and Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999). The novels were selected because both center Indigenous protagonists and communities while constructing identity through markedly different spatial narratives. *Tracks* is territorially concentrated and organized around the loss of Anishinaabe land. *Gardens in the Dunes* is a travel narrative in which the protagonist encounters multiple landscapes, institutions, and classificatory systems. Their comparison makes it possible to distinguish shared semantic domains from author-specific linguistic strategies.

The study employed a multi-stage procedure. First, lexical units directly or contextually associated with land and ethnicity were selected from the novels. The land domain included general spatial nouns and culturally significant expressions referring to territory, earth, ground, woods, lake, reservation, garden, field, home, country, and related places. The ethnicity domain included ethnonyms, collective nouns, tribal names, kinship-related expressions, Indigenous-language references, and colonial labels. Units were not included solely because they appeared in a dictionary synonym set; their relevance had to be supported by the narrative context.

Second, lexical-semantic analysis was used to determine relations of synonymy, hyponymy, opposition, and contextual association. Third, contextual analysis established the narrative function of each item: whether it represented belonging, memory, spirituality, dispossession, administration, assimilation, kinship, self-designation, or external classification. Fourth, conceptual analysis reconstructed the broader models activated by recurrent patterns, including LAND AS LIVING RELATION, LAND AS ANCESTRAL CONTINUITY, COLONIAL RULE AS PAPER ADMINISTRATION, GARDEN AS CULTURAL MEMORY, and IDENTITY AS RELATIONAL BELONGING. Fifth, comparative analysis identified similarities and differences between the novels.

A quantitative component was retained from the initial lexical inventory. The counts show the relative frequency of selected units within the two-novel corpus. They should be interpreted as descriptive indicators rather than as a fully lemmatized computational corpus analysis. Inflectional and naming variants were consolidated where appropriate, but the study's primary emphasis is qualitative. Frequency indicates textual salience, whereas conceptual centrality depends on contextual function. A low-frequency expression such as Mother Earth may carry greater interpretive weight than a frequent but semantically broad noun.

The study follows an interpretive linguistic design. It does not claim to reconstruct the complete conceptual systems of the Anishinaabe, Sand Lizard, or other Indigenous peoples represented in the novels. Nor does it treat literary characters as transparent ethnographic evidence. The analysis concerns the language of two works of fiction and the cultural-discursive models produced within them. The use of Indigenous scholarship reduces the risk of interpreting land only through Western categories of space and property, but the conclusions remain limited to the selected corpus.

Results and Discussion. Indigenous identity as a relational linguistic construction. The analysis demonstrates that Indigenous identity in both novels is represented as multidimensional and relational. It emerges from connections among people, ancestral places, ecological knowledge, kinship, memory, language, and colonial institutions. Neither novel treats identity primarily as an internal psychological essence. Characters understand who they are through responsibilities and relationships, while colonial power attempts to redefine those relationships through schooling, religion, property law, ethnological classification, and administrative naming.

Two semantic domains organize this representation. The domain of land includes physical environment, home, territory, cultivated space, sacred relationship, and political dispossession. The domain of ethnicity includes collective self-naming, tribal affiliation, kinship, language, and labels imposed by outsiders. Their interaction is visible whenever a place name identifies a people, whenever the loss of territory threatens communal continuity, and whenever cultural knowledge makes it possible to interpret an unfamiliar landscape. Thus, identity is not encoded by isolated words but by networks of recurrent associations.

The novels also distinguish between Indigenous and colonial regimes of meaning. Indigenous-oriented discourse tends to represent land through continuity, reciprocity, memory, and life. Colonial discourse represents the same land through surveys, taxation, leases, schools, documents, and

ownership. Similarly, Indigenous collective nouns and tribal names express belonging, while colonial labels frequently generalize, exoticize, or rank communities. The linguistic conflict is therefore epistemological: competing vocabularies define what land is, who Indigenous people are, and who possesses the authority to name them.

The semantic domain of land in *Tracks*. In *Tracks*, land is the principal material and symbolic condition of Anishinaabe continuity. The dominant lexical network includes land, earth, ground, woods, lake, reservation, allotment, trees, and home. These units do not simply establish setting. They connect family history, subsistence, spirituality, governance, and memory. The novel's central conflict arises because colonial administration translates a living network of relations into taxable and transferable property.

Nanapush's narration establishes temporal continuity through repeated references to what is 'last'. His account joins the disappearance of animals, trees, relatives, and land into a single structure of loss.

I saw the passing of times you will never know. I guided the last buffalo hunt. I saw the last bear shot. I trapped the last beaver with a pelt of more than two years' growth. I spoke aloud the words of the government treaty, and refused to sign the settlement papers that would take away our woods and lake. I axed the last birch that was older than I, and I saved the last Pillagers (Erdrich, 1988: 2).

The anaphoric repetition of last turns separate events into a cumulative history of colonial disruption. The objects of loss belong to different semantic categories – animals, trees, people, and territory – yet the repetition makes them parts of one ecological and communal world. The phrase our woods and lake is particularly significant. The possessive does not function only as a statement of private ownership; it marks collective belonging and responsibility. By contrast, settlement papers introduce the vocabulary of a legal system that can erase this relationship through documentation.

The opposition between living land and bureaucratic paper becomes one of the novel's most productive linguistic patterns. Nanapush later imagines the tribe as transformed into administrative text:

a tribe of file cabinets and triplicates, a tribe of single-space documents, directives, policy. A tribe of pressed trees. A tribe of chicken-scratch that can be scattered by a wind, diminished to ashes by one struck match (Erdrich, 1988: 88).

Here, the repeated noun tribe is combined with an increasingly dehumanizing series of institutional objects. File cabinets, triplicates, documents, directives, and policy replace embodied community

with records produced by the state. The metaphor a tribe of pressed trees is especially complex: trees from Indigenous land become paper, and paper becomes the instrument through which land is administered and alienated. The semantic transformation TREE → PAPER → COLONIAL CONTROL condenses the material and bureaucratic dimensions of dispossession.

The novel also represents land through the conceptual metaphor LAND AS MOTHER or LIVING RELATION. This model cannot be reduced to decorative personification. It positions human beings within a network of kinship and dependence. Land is not an inert object available for unrestricted extraction; it is the condition of birth, nourishment, memory, and social continuity. The force of this conceptualization becomes visible when the loss of land is paralleled by the fragmentation of families and the disruption of maternal relations.

Pauline's language provides a contrasting model. Her movement toward Christian assimilation is accompanied by increasing distance from Indigenous people, places, and words. She interprets Indigenous spirituality through the vocabulary of devil, purification, and inferiority. In one passage she declares that she has been assigned to '*guide Indians, to purify their minds, to mold them in my own image*' (Erdrich, 1988: 205). The verbs guide, purify, and mold encode a hierarchical model in which Indigenous identity is treated as deficient material requiring external correction. Her discourse reproduces the logic of the mission school: transformation is represented not as dialogue but as the replacement of one worldview by another.

The land domain in *Tracks* is therefore structured by a fundamental opposition. On one side stand woods, lake, earth, trees, home, kinship, and oral memory; on the other stand papers, taxes, allotments, school, policy, and institutional classification. These lexical fields repeatedly intersect. The novel shows that dispossession does not mean only the transfer of acreage. It means the attempted reorganization of identity through a new language of property and administration.

The semantic domain of land in *Gardens in the Dunes*. *Gardens in the Dunes* represents land through a more geographically expansive and botanically detailed vocabulary. The recurrent units garden, dune, river, plant, seed, flower, field, home, and country create a discourse in which cultural knowledge moves across places without becoming detached from its origins. Indigo's identity is tested by displacement, but her capacity to recognize, compare, cultivate, and remember plants allows her to maintain continuity.

The garden is the central spatial metaphor of the novel. In Euro-American contexts, gardens

may represent ownership, display, collection, and aesthetic control. For Indigo and her family, however, cultivated space is inseparable from food, ceremony, memory, and the reciprocal care of living beings. The same lexical item therefore activates competing cultural schemas. The narrative repeatedly contrasts gardens organized as possessions or imperial collections with Indigenous cultivation based on adaptation and relation.

The image of uprooting makes the connection between place and identity explicit. A character's condition is represented through the Nopal cactus: she is '*uprooted like the Nopal, her homeland torn open by war*' (Silko, 1999: 79). The simile maps botanical displacement onto human and cultural displacement. Yet the cactus also implies survival under difficult conditions. Uprooting is violent, but plant knowledge carries the possibility of re-rooting and regeneration.

Indigo's movement through unfamiliar landscapes does not erase her cultural orientation. Botanical vocabulary becomes a cognitive instrument: she understands new environments through similarities and differences among plants, soils, water, and cultivation practices. Identity is therefore mobile without being assimilated. The novel rejects the binary in which authenticity requires geographical immobility. Knowledge learned in the dunes travels with Indigo and enables her to interpret gardens elsewhere.

Colonial spatial relations are represented through administrative expressions such as Indian land, lease, Bureau, school, and institution. The sentence '*If she didn't mind being around Indians, the cheapest way to go was to lease Indian land from the Indian Bureau*' (Silko, 1999: 89) reveals the distancing force of bureaucratic syntax. Indian appears as a classifier of land and people within an economic calculation. The possessive relation is mediated by the Bureau, while Indigenous presence is represented as an inconvenience to be tolerated for lower cost. The passage shows how grammar and lexical selection normalize unequal control.

Whereas *Tracks* foregrounds the destruction of a concentrated homeland, *Gardens in the Dunes* foregrounds the survival of knowledge across movement and separation. Silko's botanical lexicon constructs GARDEN AS CULTURAL MEMORY and SEED AS CONTINUITY. Seeds are small, portable, and capable of renewal under suitable conditions. They provide an especially effective conceptual model for cultural transmission: continuity does not depend on remaining unchanged, but on preserving the capacity to grow in relation to place.

Quantitative profile of the land domain. The lexical inventory confirms the prominence of

terrestrial and spatial vocabulary. Table 1 presents the frequencies retained from the two-novel corpus. The categories are descriptive and combine literal and contextually identity-relevant uses.

Earth and ground are the most frequent selected units, but their functions differ. Earth tends to activate ecological, material, and spiritual relations, whereas ground more often identifies physical location or contact. Territory and country introduce political and administrative dimensions. Mother Earth is less frequent, yet its metaphorical and cultural significance makes it conceptually central. Garden is similarly low in raw frequency but structurally important in Silko's novel because it organizes a large network of plants, seeds, memory, and cultivation.

The data therefore caution against equating frequency with centrality. Repetition contributes to salience, but conceptual importance also depends on collocation, narrative position, metaphorical density, and relation to the main conflict. A word may occur only a few times and still organize the interpretation of many other expressions.

The semantic domain of ethnicity: self-naming, community, and colonial classification. The ethnicity domain is verbalized through ethnonyms, collective nouns, tribal names, kinship terms, references to Indigenous languages, and labels used by colonial observers. The principal units include Indian, people, Chippewa, Ojibwe, tribe, clan, Chemehuevi, and ethnos, together with expressions such as white man, pagan, heathen, and ethnological reports. The domain is internally heterogeneous because naming may express self-identification, solidarity, external classification, insult, or administrative simplification.

The broad label Indian is the most frequent unit in the selected inventory. Its frequency reflects

both the historical setting and the language of non-Indigenous institutions. Yet the term's function changes according to speaker and context. It may be used pragmatically within dialogue, imposed by state or church discourse, or contrasted with more specific tribal names. Specific ethnonyms and community names preserve distinctions that the general label erases. Consequently, the contrast between Indian and names such as Chippewa, Ojibwe, Anishinaabe, or Chemehuevi is not merely taxonomic; it concerns authority over representation.

In *Tracks*, the noun tribe combines collective belonging with the threat of institutional reduction. Nanapush's 'tribe of file cabinets' passage demonstrates how a word of living community is appropriated by administrative discourse. Elsewhere, references to clans and relatives place identity within kinship and oral history. His opening address – 'Granddaughter, you are the child of the invisible, the ones who disappeared' (Erdrich, 1988: 1–2) – constructs identity genealogically. The vocative granddaughter and the phrase child of connect the listener to people absent through death and epidemic. Identity is transmitted through narrative precisely because historical violence has made parts of the community 'invisible'.

Language itself functions as an ethnic marker. Pauline recalls Fleur's cry 'in the old language' together with the repetition of names (Erdrich, 1988: 26). The expression old language signals temporal continuity, while names preserve personal and communal presence. Colonial schooling seeks to replace this continuity with English-language institutional categories and Christian terminology. The conflict between languages is therefore also a conflict between systems of memory.

In *Gardens in the Dunes*, ethnic identity is represented through encounters among different

Table 1

Frequency and conceptual functions of selected units in the land domain

Lexical unit	Frequency	Principal conceptual function
earth	51	living relation; spirituality; material continuity
ground	43	physical location; embodied belonging
country	26	political or national space; mobility
territory	21	jurisdiction; colonial administration
North America	19	continental and geopolitical frame
terra	17	earth/land reference, often classificatory
world	9	cosmological or experiential space
Mother Earth	7	kinship metaphor; generative relation
coast	6	geographical orientation and travel
garden	3	cultivation; memory; regeneration
shore	2	boundary and orientation
field	2	cultivated or open land
fatherland	1	national-political belonging
planet	1	global spatial frame

Indigenous groups and through the ethnographic gaze of Euro-American characters. The twins' defence of the Chemehuevi people and the references to quarrels among tribes show that Indigenous collectivity does not erase internal difference. The novel refuses the category of a single undifferentiated Native people. At the same time, outsiders search for '*ethnological reports on the desert Indians*' (Silko, 1999), converting living communities into objects of study. The noun report and the modifier ethnological position knowledge within an institutional frame that claims authority over Indigenous identity.

The opposition between self and other is also lexicalized through white man and related colonial labels. In both novels, whiteness often remains unmarked as the normative perspective, while Indigenous characters are repeatedly classified. When whiteness is explicitly named, the novels expose this asymmetry. The ethnicity domain thus includes not only words naming Indigenous peoples but also the relational vocabulary through which colonial difference is produced.

Derogatory historical labels such as *redskin* and *squaw* require particular interpretive care. Their presence in a literary text should not be treated as neutral synonymy. Such words encode histories of racialization, sexualization, and dehumanization. A contemporary lexical analysis must distinguish the fact of occurrence from endorsement and identify who uses the term, toward whom, and with what narrative effect. The contextual method is therefore essential: a list that places self-designations and slurs in one undifferentiated field would reproduce the very classificatory violence the novels criticize.

Quantitative profile of the ethnicity domain.

Table 2 summarizes the selected lexical units associated with ethnicity and group identification.

The counts indicate textual prominence but must be interpreted according to speaker, specificity, and evaluative function.

The frequency of Indian and people confirms the importance of collective naming. However, these nouns operate at different levels. People often humanizes and collectivizes without imposing a rigid ethnic taxonomy; Indian is historically loaded and frequently connected with institutions, racial classification, or contrast with white society. Chippewa is both frequent and more specific, indicating the importance of tribal identification in *Tracks*. The evaluative terms *pagan* and *heathen* occur less often but reveal the ideological vocabulary through which Christian assimilation represents Indigenous spirituality as deficiency.

The quantitative profile also demonstrates why a simple core-periphery model is insufficient. A highly frequent label may be conceptually unstable because different speakers use it differently. Conversely, a rare tribal name may be central to a character's self-understanding. The ethnicity domain is therefore best represented as a layered network organized by specificity, speaker position, and power.

Comparative discussion: dispossession, mobility, and survivance. Both novels represent Indigenous identity through the interaction of land and ethnicity, yet they construct different models of continuity. Erdrich's model is concentrated, historical, and juridical. Identity depends on maintaining relationships with particular woods, waters, families, and stories, while colonial institutions seek to sever these relations through allotment, taxation, schooling, and documentation. The dominant semantic movement is from living land to administered property and from community to paperwork. The novel's linguistic energy is therefore directed toward recording loss without accepting disappearance.

Table 2

Frequency and discourse functions of selected units in the ethnicity domain

Lexical unit	Frequency	Principal discourse function
Indian	98	general historical label; institutional classification; contextual group reference
people	66	collective belonging; human community
Chippewa	54	specific tribal identification
ethnos	43	analytical or classificatory category
white man	21	colonial opposition and racialized power
Ojibwe Indians	19	specific group reference combined with general label
tribe	15	collective organization; belonging; administrative category
ethnicity	12	explicit analytical naming
clanspeople	6	kinship-based community
folk	5	collective cultural group
clan	4	kinship structure
pagan	3	Christian colonial evaluation
Chemehuevi	2	specific Indigenous identification
heathen	2	Christian colonial evaluation

Silko's model is mobile, ecological, and regenerative. Indigo is forcibly displaced, but the knowledge carried through plants, stories, and family memory allows her to interpret new environments and to return transformed rather than assimilated. The dominant semantic movement is from uprooting to re-rooting. Gardens can become instruments of imperial collection, but they can also preserve seeds, relationships, and practical knowledge. Mobility does not automatically equal cultural loss; its meaning depends on whether relationships are maintained or replaced.

The contrast may be summarized as threatened territorial continuity in *Tracks* and ecological resilience in *Gardens in the Dunes*. These are not mutually exclusive models. Erdrich also represents humour, narration, and political action as forms of survivance, while Silko does not minimize the violence of removal and institutional confinement. Both novels reject the colonial narrative of inevitable disappearance. Their characters preserve identity through practices of naming, remembering, cultivating, speaking, and maintaining obligations.

The findings support Cultural Linguistics by demonstrating that recurrent lexical patterns activate culturally specific conceptualizations. Land is not merely a universal spatial category. In these texts it is represented as living relation, ancestral continuity, political jurisdiction, ecological knowledge, and the target of colonial transformation. Ethnicity is not merely membership in a demographic group. It is represented through specific names, kinship, language, collective memory, and struggles over who has the right to classify.

The findings also refine a purely cognitive account by foregrounding power. Conceptualizations do not circulate under equal conditions. Colonial institutions possess the material authority to make their vocabulary consequential: paper can alter ownership, a school can punish a language, and an ethnological report can turn a community into an object. The novels demonstrate that linguistic representation participates in political reality. Naming is not only descriptive; it may recognize, erase, discipline, or resist.

Finally, the comparative evidence confirms that Indigenous identity is fundamentally relational. The lexical domains of land and ethnicity converge through memory and cultural continuity. Land without people becomes colonial territory; ethnicity without relations to place, kin, and language becomes an abstract classification. In both novels, identity remains viable when these relations are narrated and practised.

Conclusions. The study has shown that Indigenous identity in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* and

Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes* is linguistically constructed through interacting semantic domains rather than through isolated identity labels. Land and ethnicity constitute the principal domains, but their meanings emerge through connections with memory, kinship, language, ecological knowledge, spirituality, and colonial power.

In *Tracks*, the land domain is organized by the conflict between living relational space and bureaucratically administered property. Lexical units referring to woods, lake, trees, earth, and home are opposed to papers, triplicates, taxation, policy, school, and allotment. The discourse of dispossession attempts to transform both land and community into records controlled by external institutions. Nanapush's narration resists this transformation by restoring genealogical and ecological connections through story.

In *Gardens in the Dunes*, land is represented through gardens, dunes, rivers, seeds, plants, and travel. Botanical vocabulary creates a model of identity based on ecological knowledge and regenerative continuity. Indigo's mobility does not eliminate belonging because cultural memory supplies a portable interpretive framework. The novel conceptualizes survival not as unchanged isolation but as the capacity to sustain relations across displacement.

The ethnicity domain reveals a continuous tension between self-designation and imposed classification. Specific tribal names, kinship expressions, collective nouns, and references to Indigenous languages preserve difference and communal continuity. Generalizing or derogatory labels expose the racial and religious vocabularies of colonial power. The study therefore confirms that context, speaker position, and evaluative force are indispensable to lexical-semantic analysis.

Quantitative results identify Indian, people, Chippewa, earth, and ground as highly frequent units, but the analysis demonstrates that raw frequency does not equal conceptual centrality. Expressions such as Mother Earth, old language, garden, and seed may occur less often while organizing extensive networks of meaning. The combination of quantitative and contextual methods consequently offers a more reliable account than either procedure used alone.

The research contributes to cognitive linguistics, cultural linguistics, and Indigenous literary studies by demonstrating how literary discourse preserves and negotiates culturally grounded conceptualizations. Its main limitation is the restricted corpus of two English-language novels. Further studies could compare additional works by Erdrich and Silko, examine Indigenous-language elements and translation strategies, or apply

corpus-assisted discourse analysis to a larger body of Indigenous fiction. Such research should continue to distinguish between broad comparative patterns and the specific sovereignty, histories, and linguistic traditions of individual Indigenous nations.

By revealing the linguistic interaction of land, ethnicity, memory, and cultural continuity, the article demonstrates that identity in the selected novels is neither a static possession nor an abstract category. It is an ongoing relation sustained through words, places, stories, and practices of survivance.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Bystrov, Y. (2025). Metaphorical Conceptualization of Travel Narrative in Kulyk Keefer's Memoir *Honey and Ashes*. *Записки з романо-германської філології*, 1(54), 81–95. [https://doi.org/10.18524/2307-4604.2025.1\(54\).338545](https://doi.org/10.18524/2307-4604.2025.1(54).338545)
2. Coulthard, G. S. (2014). *Red skin, white masks: Rejecting the colonial politics of recognition*. University of Minnesota Press.
3. Erdrich, L. (1988). *Tracks*. Henry Holt.
4. Kövecses, Z. (2020). *Extended conceptual metaphor theory*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108859127>
5. Sharifian, F. (2017). *Cultural linguistics: Cultural conceptualisations and language*. John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/clsc.8>
6. Silko, L. M. (1999). *Gardens in the dunes*. Simon & Schuster.
7. Simpson, L. B. (2017). *As we have always done: Indigenous freedom through radical resistance*. University of Minnesota Press.
8. Taylor, J. R. (2003). *Linguistic categorization* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.
9. Tuck, E., & McKenzie, M. (2015). *Place in research: Theory, methodology, and methods*. Routledge.
10. Vizenor, G. (1999). *Manifest manners: Narratives on postindian survivance*. University of Nebraska Press.
11. Watts, V. (2013). Indigenous place-thought and agency amongst humans and non-humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European world tour!). *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 2(1), 20–34.
12. Whyte, K. P. (2018). Settler colonialism, ecology, and environmental injustice. *Environment and Society*, 9(1), 125–144. <https://doi.org/10.3167/ares.2018.090109>.

Дата першого надходження статті до видання: 22.07.2026

Дата прийняття статті до друку після рецензування: 28.08.2026

Дата публікації (оприлюднення) статті: 01.10.2026



Стаття поширюється на умовах ліцензії відкритого доступу (CC BY 4.0)