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Activism and Empathy: Abstract

“They’re savages! Savages! Barely even human!”: Resisting Native American Stereotypes in
Children’s Literature

During the nineteenth century, manifest destiny encouraged United States populaces to migrate across the country towards the Pacific coast. The historical notion asserted that white people are destined by God to settle the western frontier. To clear the territory for white settlers, President Jackson declared the Indian Removal Act of 1830, requiring military authority to force southern tribes to settle West of the Mississippi. The government-approved command initiated the treacherous Native American journey known as the Trail of Tears. Children’s literature focusing on western expansion reveals opposing depictions, and therefore opinions, of Native Americans.

Both Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie* and Tim Tingle’s *How I Became a Ghost* feature Native American characters. Wilder’s novel focuses on the main character Laura, in retelling a semi-autobiographical tale of the Ingalls family venturing out on the frontier and temporarily settling the Osage Diminished Reserve. Contrastingly, Tingle’s story follows Isaac, a Native American boy, belonging to the Choctaw tribe, and his family’s journey on the Trail of Tears. Laura’s perspective allows Wilder to portray the Osage tribe as “wild men” whereas Isaac’s reveals the Choctaw perspective during the nineteenth century (Wilder 138). In this essay, I argue Tingle’s *How I Became a Ghost* contradicts Wilder’s barbaric depiction in *Little House*, in an attempt to humanize Native Americans. Undermining negative Native American stereotypes encourages children readers to consider a new historical viewpoint and negate pre-existing prejudices with empathy.