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# On Superior's Southern Shore: Land and Identity in Selected Works of Louise Erdrich and Jim Harrison

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ON SUPERIOR'S SOUTHERN SHORE:  
LAND AND IDENTITY IN SELECTED WORKS  
OF LOUISE ERDRICH AND JIM HARRISON

By

KYLE A. BLADOW

THESIS

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## SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This thesis by Kyle A. Bladow is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate Studies.

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## ABSTRACT

### ON SUPERIOR'S SOUTHERN SHORE: LAND AND IDENTITY IN SELECTED WORKS OF LOUISE ERDRICH AND JIM HARRISON

By

KYLE A. BLADOW

Louise Erdrich and Jim Harrison have both written novels set in the South Superior bioregion: Harrison's *True North* and *Returning to Earth* are based in Marquette, Michigan, and Erdrich's *The Birchbark House* and *The Game of Silence* take place in the mid-1800's on Moningwanaykaning (Madeline Island), in the Chequamegon Bay area of Northeast Wisconsin. These authors offer distinct yet mutually beneficial contributions to this bioregion's literature. Erdrich's focus on historical Anishinaabe characters furnishes awareness of cultural diversity in the landscape; it also offers traditional ecological knowledge about how people have historically lived off the land. Harrison's contemporary works consider the exploitation of land by modern communities and comment on conceptualizations of the human-nature relationship popular in American culture.

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DEDICATION

To all my mothers.

*Chi miigwech.*

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.



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## INTRODUCTION: THE PROMISE OF BIOREGIONAL LITERATURE

But to become dwellers in the land, to relearn the laws of Gaea, to come to know the earth fully and honestly, the crucial and perhaps only and all-encompassing task is to understand *place*, the immediate specific place where we live.

– Kirkpatrick Sale, *Dwellers in the Land*

Events do indeed take place; they bear meaning in relation to the things around them. And I, too, happen to take place, each day of my life, in my environment. I exist in a landscape, and my existence is indivisible with the land.

– N. Scott Momaday, *The Man Made of Words*

In *Dwellers in the Land*, one of the pioneering texts of bioregionalism, Kirkpatrick Sale defines a bioregion as an area of land demarcated “by natural characteristics rather than human dictates, distinguishable from other areas by particular attributes of flora, fauna, water, climate, soils, and landforms, and by the human settlements and cultures those attributes have given rise to” (55). Utilizing this definition, one can see how the Lake Superior watershed comprises a larger community; its southern shoreline, running along Michigan’s Upper Peninsula and Northeastern Wisconsin, possesses a related geographic, biological, and cultural heritage. Strengthening the sense of community among inhabitants of this region can have tremendous benefits for ecological and economic sustainability on both local and global levels. One way to do this is to explore the ways the area supports a unique literary tradition.

Sale recognized that an essential component of a bioregional community is its folklore: “though not every place has kept its history properly alive, a fountain of

information still exists” which can be recovered by “projects of oral history and folk knowledge” (45). Indeed, many local knowledge systems rely on stories, arguably the oldest and most effective form of transmitting information about land, resources, and harvesting practices. As earlier communities relied on storytelling traditions to solidify their sociohistorical identities, so can contemporary bioregional communities utilize fiction to maintain theirs.

This thesis engages a bioregional literary criticism to explore four novels set on the southern shoreline of Lake Superior. Each novel satisfies Sale’s definition of land-based “lore” because each depicts local resources, shares the traditions and heritage of local inhabitants, and provides advice about how to live well within such locations.

Regardless of the feasibility of completely reshaping our political, social, and economic jurisdictions to suit a bioregional framework (as Sale promotes), certain components of a bioregional arrangement are immediately viable. The resurgence of interest in the patronization of locally-produced goods and services is one example that has already occurred. We can also learn the lore of the places we inhabit by reading novels set in our hometowns, promoting writers who explore local themes, and hosting celebrations of local literature. As bioregional literature privileges where stories take place, so there is potential for those who read with a bioregional approach to reassess their relationship to their unique location on earth.

Louise Erdrich and Jim Harrison have both written novels set in the South Superior bioregion: Harrison’s *True North* and *Returning to Earth* are based in Marquette, Michigan, and Erdrich’s *The Birchbark House* and *The Game of Silence* take place in the mid-1800’s on Moiningwanaykaning (Madeline Island), in the Chequamegon

Bay area of Northeast Wisconsin. These authors offer distinct yet mutually beneficial contributions to this bioregion's literature. Erdrich's focus on historical Anishinaabe characters furnishes awareness of cultural diversity in the landscape; it also offers traditional ecological knowledge about how people have historically lived off the land. Harrison's contemporary works consider the exploitation of land by modern communities, and they also comment on conceptualizations of the human-nature relationship popular in American culture.

I have devoted one chapter for each novel. Chapters One and Two address the first two novels in a series of children's chapter books by Louise Erdrich. Chapter One considers the prevalence of food harvests and traditions in *The Birchbark House*. The characters rely almost exclusively on a local diet, so readers learn about many edible plants and game. The availability of these resources dictates where the characters live and how they use the land. Though intended for a younger audience, the novel does not idealize the landscape. Instead, the challenges of life on Mningwanaykaning are clear, particularly the threat of starvation that grows extreme toward the end of long winters.

The second chapter discusses the ways characters read landscape in *The Game of Silence*. An individual's ability to survive in a place is shown to depend on how literate she is in reading natural signs. This idea of bioregional literacy is underscored by the increased presence of white settlers, who read the land differently. As these cultures coincide, divergent perspectives about place become more readily apparent.

Chapter Three turns to Jim Harrison's *True North*, set further east along the shore. The chapter examines the bioregional awareness presented by protagonist David Burkett, but it also suggests that his perspective towards Michigan's Upper Peninsula is a

reductive one, tinted by personal struggles. His fixation on exposing past land exploitation causes him to idolize those he sees as closer to the land, such as laborers, women, and American Indians, but to overlook them as inhabitants of the region who also utilize its resources.

The final chapter addresses *Returning to Earth*. This sequel to *True North* shifts focus away from David's concern about an exploited landscape. Instead, Donald provides insight about the continuity of life for ecosystems as well as human individuals, which he gains from performing a traditional three-day fast. Donald is closely figured to the earth. I consider him an earthbound character because he dies and is buried in the earth, but also because of his occupation as an outdoor laborer and his earth-centered spirituality.

Human interactions with the South Superior bioregion are an overarching concern for these four novels. By scaling an academic project to fit this bioregional frame, it is my hope that my work will encourage other scholars to consider similar endeavors that may enrich the local communities in which they live. Bioregional academics work against the perceptions of the ivory-tower distance a university may seem to have toward the region in which it is located by promoting sustainability and benefits for all the region's inhabitants.

## CHAPTER ONE: FOOD TRADITIONS IN *THE BIRCHBARK HOUSE*

At one time, everyone who lived near the lake was essentially made of the lake. As the people lived off fish, animals, the lake's water and water plants for medicine, they were literally cell by cell composed of the lake and the lake's islands.

– Louise Erdrich, *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country*

In her acknowledgments to *The Birchbark House*, Louise Erdrich explains how she developed the name for her main character, Omakayas: the name appeared on a census record of her own tribe (the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians). Erdrich explains the story of Omakayas as “an attempt to retrace [her] own family's history.” Emphasizing her ancestor's interactions with land and resources, Erdrich's work fits squarely within a bioregionalist paradigm. It portrays a traditional lifestyle that relies on locally available resources to provide sustenance, and any reading that fails to attend to the relevance of the setting will miss a crucial aspect of its meaning. Though fiction, the story is connected both to a historically authentic Omakayas and to an extant landscape.

The predominant action within the novel is the procurement of food—the characters spend most of their time harvesting plants and hunting animals. These primary activities emphasize the materiality of local existence, showing where and how resources become food. This likely stands as a conspicuous position for members of contemporary audiences who enjoy the conveniences of microwave entrées or pizza deliveries and have little knowledge of food sources available in their bioregions. Furthermore, *The*

*Birchbark House* is structured around the seasons; its fourteen chapters are evenly divided under four headings of *Neebin* (Summer), *Dagwaging* (Fall), *Biboon* (Winter), and *Zeegwun* (Spring). Each of these season-sections contains its own overarching occupation, from building a birchbark wigwam in the summer to harvesting food in the spring and fall. Omakayas identifies the changing seasons with these harvests. The opening line of one section reads, “It was a cool dark summer night in the first days of blueberry picking time” (47), and the opening of another, “Now it was time to harvest the wild rice that grew across from the island” (91). These expository statements demonstrate added significance to time and season on Moningwanaykaning. Each mentions a specific harvest (blueberries and wild rice) that makes the changing seasonal conditions especially relevant to the characters. Thus, the necessity of gathering food from the land ensures careful attentiveness to it.

Those who currently rely on the foods of their bioregions share this awareness, including American Indians who follow traditional gathering cycles. For instance, Winona LaDuke (White Earth Anishinaabe) asserts in an article on traditional ecological knowledge, “To be secure that one will be able to harvest enough involves more than skill; it also involves careful observation of the ecosystem and careful behavior determined by social values and cultural practices” (79). Here, LaDuke expresses the interweaving of culture and landscape to produce acute awareness of one’s environment. “Careful observation” ensures ecological preservation as much as it does human preservation through nourishing harvests.

Food remains an important theme in many of Louise Erdrich’s novels, a theme observed by several scholars. Kari J. Winter has noted that Erdrich’s work “suggests that

people are defined by where, what, how, and why they eat. The politics and erotics of food shape peoples relationships to themselves, other people, animals, and the land” (45). Winter focuses her article on the representations and uses of food in the novels *Tracks* and *Love Medicine*; in a footnote she mentions that food is central to cultural life in *The Birchbark House*. This is indeed the case, as the novel’s continued emphasis on the necessity of local foods and harvests ensures that its fundamental importance is not ignored by readers. Though not known for being agriculturally amenable, the South Superior bioregion does provide a number of foods often overlooked by the majority of its current inhabitants. Traditional diets in *The Birchbark House* include some two dozen different plants and animals, including berries, maple sugar, wild rice, roots, nuts, fish, and a variety of game.

Despite this variety, there is not always enough. Historical accounts frequently note the hardships of subsistence. For instance, Ruth Landes writes in *The Ojibwa Woman*, a record of an Ojibwe community in western Ontario, “At all times, but especially during the winter, life is an unending struggle to satisfy the elementary wants. The need for food drives hunters insistently” (1). Erdrich portrays a similar situation in the South Superior bioregion by refusing to present the landscape through a pastoral lens of plenty. Instead, hunger and fear of scarcity ensure a sense of realism about traditional food systems in this region. The dominance of food in the characters’ lives (e.g., the way that harvests mark the seasons) determines their worldviews. As a result, the novel’s themes often revolve around food and notions of satiety and hunger.

One of these themes is community. Erdrich frequently unites food with communal gatherings. In her 2003 nonfiction narrative, *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country*, she



writes, “It seems to me that Ojibwe people always eat with happy grace. Food is part of every gathering and ceremony” (115). She portrays this sentiment in *The Birchbark House*, where harvests reinforce individual and communal identity by gathering individuals together to partake in the work as well as its rewards. In the fall section, the *manoomin* (wild rice) harvest ensures not only physical nourishment, but “cousins to play with, games in the rice camps, the pleasures of talk, feasting, more talk, more visiting and feasting” (91). The repeated alternation of “talk” and “feasting” suggests how each complements and enriches the other. Just as cousins and games are cherished, so is the *manoomin*: the family makes sure to have space in their canoes for “the good seed that would sustain them through the winter” (92). The reverence for *manoomin* here comes at least partially from the knowledge that, without this staple and the cooperation of the community to harvest it, they could starve in the bareness of the following season.

During winter, the characters look forward to the maple sugar harvest, “For when the maple sap began to run it meant that warmer days, pleasant sun, all the beauties of spring were close at hand” (194-195). Again, the seasons are marked by harvests: spring comes not because of a calendar designation, but because of the quickening of a local tree. This harvest is also tied to community; when Omakayas tastes the first syrup of the year, she instantly recalls “the special day she spent with Neewo on the shore of the lake” (199). Neewo passed away during the winter, and the taste of the syrup reminds her of the time she shared maple sugar with him. Whether harvesting, cooking, or eating it, food is constantly a shared experience for the characters, and so the tastes and flavors of dishes become strong reminders of the memories tying them to their community.

As food cements communal unity, it also reinforces individual relationships. Gifts of food demonstrate affection, as when Omakayas gathers berries for her sister Angeline, or when her mother Yellow Kettle creates a fish soup for a cousin. Old Tallow gives maple sugar to Omakayas and shares the animals she hunts with the family: “they would sometimes wake to find a haunch of venison just inside the door, or bear meat, a fish or two” (20). The prevalence of gifting food in the novel may reflect Erdrich’s knowledge of traditional Ojibwe lifestyles. Anthropologist Charles Cleland points out that

as food becomes scarce, the *Anishnabeg* are more anxious to give it away. ... Dependent as the *Anishnabeg* are on the caprices of nature, a steady supply of food could not be guaranteed by any one family. ... a reciprocal exchange system arose, allowing the survival of the group over survival of the individual. (57)

The way Erdrich portrays food accords with this perspective. Instances of eating in the novel are almost always communal. The few exceptions to this depiction tend to cause discomfort or disapproval. One such exception is Omakayas’ savoring of the maple sugar given to her by Old Tallow. Omakayas’ first thought on its consumption reads, “There was no way to share such a tough nut of sweetness. How would she divide it?” (24). Before anything else, she wonders about how to share it. Pondering this on her walk home from Old Tallow’s, she finds a patch of *odaemin* (strawberries). She plans to return to the spot with her sister to enjoy them. This concern over sharing reflects the reciprocal exchange system noted by Cleland.

A final example of food tying individuals to communities (in addition to their bioregion) shows how abstaining from food can cause social isolation. When Omakayas mourns the loss of her loved ones after a smallpox outbreak claims their lives, her withdrawal from the rest of the community is expressed through food. She stays in a loft in the family’s cabin; the narration reads, “She ate less and less ... food did not interest

her” (156). Meanwhile, life goes on below as she listens to the sounds of her family moving about, including “her grandmother, singing an old song as she stirred something fragrant in the kettle” (156). Food may not interest the isolated Omakayas here, but the fragrant kettle shows that it is an important feature for the others going about daily life. Nokomis’ singing over the kettle further suggests the connections between food and culture: preparing food becomes an opportunity for engaging in song, which becomes a performance as the others in the family listen.

Similar to her retreat, Omakayas’ return to life is also marked via food. After Omakayas has been in the loft for days, Old Tallow visits with “a bark container of rabbit soup boiled up with potatoes from the storage cache” (160). Old Tallow demands that she eat. Omakayas obliges, then closes her eyes and pretends to sleep. But after Old Tallow leaves, Omakayas cannot fall asleep: “Energy from the rabbit soup flowed through her and she drummed her fingers against the floor. ... With a sigh, Omakayas got up. She went out” (161). Old Tallow may be the one to draw Omakayas back into the community, but the energy from the rabbit soup proves to be the most immediate motivation for Omakayas to leave the loft.

Omakayas’ little brother Pinch provides some of the first instances of hunger in the novel. Omakayas’ scorn at his big appetite and greedy behavior are initially comical, whereas later in the novel the threat of starvation transforms hunger into a frightening experience. The first time that Pinch is mentioned, Omakayas admits to not liking him: “she thought there was something wrong with him—so greedy, so loud! ... He yelled at Omakayas if she was slow in giving up her willow doll, her little rock people, or anything else for that matter, including food” (11). Pinch’s demands for Omakayas’ food show his

greed: since in the culture food is something that is always shared, he should not need to demand it.

Pinch's greed becomes a serious issue in Chapter Six. His actions in this chapter are another exception to the trend of communal eating, and they are met with disapproval. His mother Yellow Kettle asks him to watch over some chokecherries she has lain out to dry while she goes to check on fishing nets. She tells him, "This is our winter seasoning and food. You'll be glad of them when we are hungry in little spirit moon" (83). This concern reflects the preemptive motive behind harvesting. While the food may be delicious or serve as a pleasant reminder of the flavors of summer once the seasons have turned, the primary reason Yellow Kettle gathered them is to mitigate the hunger that she expects them to experience.

Once Yellow Kettle leaves, Pinch cannot resist eating the berries. The narration assumes his perspective: "they didn't understand how good it felt to fill a stomach that so rarely got full. They didn't realize how good it felt to shove handfuls of berries into his greedy mouth" (83). Hunger is obviously something he has experienced, though the description of his mouth as "greedy" suggests that such deprivation has been trivial or artificial. Pinch ends up eating the majority of the berries. He tells his mother that their pet crow Andeg has eaten them, but his ensuing stomachache and stained hands and mouth reveal him as the culprit. His mother expresses her disappointment, but Pinch's act carries little consequence until a later chapter in the winter section, entitled "Hunger." The family runs low on food and Pinch experiences hunger to a new degree. Aloud, he wishes ice were food. The narration reads, "As he said this, into his mind's eye came the picture of the berries he'd stuffed into his mouth last summer. Mama was right. If only he

had them now!” (168). His desire for food is more legitimate here, and so his mouth loses the “greedy” designation. Pinch’s introduction of hunger into the novel through greediness exaggerates and thereby renders it seemingly trivial, while his experience during the brutal winter gives hunger potency.

The older characters have presumably experienced scarce winters aside from the one featured in the novel. For instance, Yellow Kettle’s collects the chokecherries because she knows she and others will be hungry during the little spirit moon. Nokomis, the eldest in Omakayas’ family, has also experienced many such winters, and continually reassures her relatives with the wisdom and guidance she provides. This reassurance often connects to the food traditions that she follows faithfully. Nokomis shows reverence each time she gathers food or plants for medicines. For example, when she plants seeds in her garden, she “bless[es] them gently” (226). Her keen awareness of her dependence on local foods makes their propagation and preservation sacred tasks. One of the clearest instances of this is her presiding over the storage of the family’s food cache for winter. After the food is packed away—meat, fish, corn, rice, maple syrup, and the few chokecherries not eaten by Pinch—Nokomis blesses the cache, beseeching the creator to see them through the winter:

“We’re very small,” she said, “just human. Help us to live this winter through. Come to us, especially, during the harshest moon, the Crust On The Snow Moon, when so often meat is scarce, when the ice is too thick to catch many fish, when disease breaks us and the windigo spirit, the Hungry One, comes stalking from house to Anishinabe house.” (101-102)

These gloomy descriptions of the winter ahead transition the idea of hunger from Pinch’s humorous greed into a formidable condition. Nokomis has experienced enough winters to

know which month in their lunar calendar will be “the harshest moon,” and the others count on her prayers to protect them from starvation.

In this passage Nokomis also mentions the *windigo*, a figure common in Anishinaabe lore, known for its ravenous appetite. In the glossary to *The Birchbark House*, Erdrich defines the *windigo* as “a giant monster of Ojibwa teachings, often made of ice and associated with the starvation and danger of deep winter” (244). This entity’s existence as a precise symbol for anxieties about hunger is also pointed out by anthropologists: “*windigo* stories may be related to the former scarcity of food in the Chippewa region” (Barnouw 239). Anthropologists have further emphasized the connection of *windigo* lore to human hunger by pointing out the ability of humans to transform into such beings: “All members of the family fear that starvation may come upon them; and when it does, they know that they will become *windigo*, crazy, desirous of eating their lodge-mates” (Landes 29). While Erdrich only gives passing reference to this figure in *The Birchbark House*, it serves as a model for characters in stories and conversation.

For example, Omakayas’ father Mikwam tells a story about three ghost sisters. Mikwam leaves Moningwanaykaning frequently to go fur trapping. On a return visit home, he tells how a thunderstorm forced him and his troupe to stop at a place called Where the Sisters Eat. In the night he wakes to the voices of three women arguing over bones and portions of meat. One says, “My stomach hurts” and “It’s been a long time since we caught this many!” (64). Mikwam realizes the voices are “bad spirits” who want to eat the men (64). Though not a *windigo* story, this tale does reflect acute human hunger because the ghosts resemble women rather than monsters. Mikwam admits, “There were,

of course, no living women within hundreds of miles, but I was groggy and didn't think of that. All I could think of was how loud these women were talking!" (63). If Mikwam is initially convinced that these voices are human, it suggests human hunger is common. That is, he does not find it unusual for human voices to be arguing over bones, only complains about "how loud" they are in doing so. The one sister's complaint about her stomach hurting corresponds with Pinch's rarely full belly, and her following statement about how many men they found reflects the common reference to catch size (e.g., Nokomis' prayer, where she mentions fish). The ghost sisters' hunger thus being human hunger, their desire to eat the men reflects the cannibalistic aspects of *windigo* lore. More importantly, it shows hunger is a readily understood phenomenon used for crafting stories or to create singularly powerful metaphors. Ojibwe characters turn to hunger and *windigo* stories to articulate their perceptions of white settlers who begin to populate the local environment.

Erdrich sets *The Birchbark House* during a period when increased contact with Anglo-Europeans and Anglo-Americans was beginning to pressure indigenous populations into relocating. According to the Ojibwe Curriculum Committee,

The years between 1836 and 1867 were a time of great change and sorrow for most of the Ojibwe people. Pressure upon them increased from all sides, and within this third of a century the white man took possession of the core of the Anishinabe land. ... This included all of the area bordering Lake Superior, most of what remained bordering Lake Huron, northern Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota, and the plains of the Red River Valley, reaching into the northeastern corner of what is now North Dakota. (28)

This situation becomes a key component in the plot of the novel and its sequel. In one scene, Omakayas and her sister Angeline hide in a bush to eavesdrop on Mikwam and his companions. The men's conversation turns to discussion of the *chimookomanag*, the

encroaching white settlers. Mikwam's friend Fishtail remarks that the *chimookomanag* will not be satisfied until they have all of their "wild-rice beds, hunting grounds, fishing streams, gardens" (80). Significantly, each place Fishtail mentions provides food. Land is valuable because of the nourishment it provides. This list contrasts with a similar one a few pages before, where the narration explains that *chimookomanag* were white people "traveling in larger numbers than ever to Ojibwa land and setting down their cabins, forts, barns, gardens, pastures, fences, fur-trading posts, churches, and mission schools" (76-77). Here, only three of the nine terms (barns, gardens, and pastures) suggest food procurement; the rest relate to other social institutions (e.g., domestic, military, commercial, educational, spiritual). Each institution is symbolized by a building that rests *on* the land, rather than a feature of the landscape, like the streams, grounds, and beds in Fishtail's list. The *chimookoman* need is for space itself more than the potential nourishment those spaces provide.

Fishtail goes on: "Not even when we are gone and they have the bones of our loved ones will they be pleased" (80). Fishtail draws an analogy to physical hunger to describe the settlers desire for land. In her study of the influences of oral tradition on *The Birchbark House*, Elizabeth Gargano points out the similarity here between Fishtail's statement and Mikwam's story about the ghost sisters. She writes, "Because this new threat to the Ojibwe is contextualized in the language of Mikwam's story of the spirit world, his narrative sheds light on the realistic events of the novel" (31). Gargano points out that storytelling informs the way the characters perceive actual events. However, she does not connect Fishtail's speech to the dominant themes of food and hunger or to the landscape from which this language emerges.



When the Ojibwe characters speak of the *chimookoman* desire for land as hunger, it suggests the fierce intensity of white expansionism. Fishtail's culminating remarks during the conversation echo *windigo* tales. He says, "Before they were born, before they came into this world, the chimookoman must have starved as ghosts. They are infinitely hungry" (80). Living through harsh winters in a landscape where food is not guaranteed and where harvests determine nearly all aspects of life, Fishtail makes an especially stark statement by qualifying *chimookomanag* hunger as infinite. The characters already comprehend great hunger; to figure it as endless further intensifies Fishtail's words. The *chimookoman* appetite for land seems especially insatiable when characters who persistently face hunger imagine even greater desperation.

Despite such formidable conditions, Erdrich does show the ability for people to live in the land if they adapt and attune themselves to it. Her studies of Anishinaabe culture helped to furnish this portrayal. Peter Beidler explores Erdrich's research for *The Birchbark House*, suggesting that "in her desire to learn about the early history and lifeways of the Ojibwa, Erdrich turned to the autobiographical narrative of a white man [John Tanner] who was a captive and later a resident of the Ojibwa" ("Facts"). Erdrich's own nonfiction supports this idea. In *Books and Islands*, she mentions Tanner's diet:

Tanner attended to animal behavior with a terrible fixity of purpose, for game was the only real food and his relationship with nature was one of practical survival. At the leanest times, Tanner's family was forced to boil and eat their own moccasins, to subsist on the inner bark of trees or dead vines. During the best of times, the food was eaten all at once and drink, if there was any, consumed until it disappeared. ... Not a life for the moderate. Not a life for the faint of heart. (45)

Erdrich employs her awareness of such feast-or-famine conditions in *The Birchbark House*. In the chapter titled "Hunger," the family comes perilously close to starvation. They are saved, however, when Mikwam successfully hunts a buck named One Horn.

This passage serves as a key scene to demonstrate Erdrich's presentation of the relationship between humans and animals living in the same bioregion.

One Horn's death is presented as self-sacrifice in order to allow Omakayas' family to continue to live. Cleland presents this as a common perspective in Anishinaabe traditions: "It is not the hunter's skill with a bow that brings down the deer, but the deer's willingness to give its body to the hunter. If the spirit of the deer is willing, the hunter's arrow cannot miss" (67). Such a concept harmonizes with the reciprocity inherent in bioregional philosophy: the land and its inhabitants are interdependent, each benefitting the other.

The scene of One Horn's sacrifice begins when Nokomis dreams about the animal; she instructs Mikwam on the buck's location and says "he will wait for you" (182). Mikwam prepares himself by carefully washing and dressing before setting out to hunt One Horn. After finding and successfully shooting him, Mikwam offers tobacco in gratitude. When the family later eats, Omakayas savors the stew made from his meat and "thanked the animal for saving her life" (185). Instead of exclusively praising her father's hunting ability, Omakayas thanks the direct source of the food. This focus complements a bioregional perspective. By thanking One Horn, Omakayas shows her gratitude for the resources provided by the land, not merely the methods used to extract them. This aids her awareness of her impact on and situation within her landscape. And when Erdrich depicts One Horn as choosing to help the family, she resists the predominant presentation of animals in children's fiction as subordinate or amusing creatures. Instead, animals have agency and status as autonomous members of the bioregional community.

In the acknowledgments to *The Birchbark House*, Erdrich remarks that when readers speak Omakayas' name aloud, they will be "honoring the life of an Ojibwa girl who lived long ago." Even greater an honor would be to adopt and adapt some of the traditional food knowledge that this girl knew about her land. As a bioregional text, the novel encourages modern readers to think of their own food cultures. For those who live in the same region of the Upper Midwest, it demonstrates that the supermarket need not be the only place to obtain nourishment; a variety of foods are available in the local landscape. Revitalizing sustainable harvests of these foods would also help promote the biodiversity of this region, a place where "at least 32 traditional foods are now at risk" (Nabhan 259). Attuned to local resources as well as their seasonal availability, inhabitants would be better equipped to perceive the environmental threats looming over their own bioregion and to become committed to changing them. Such respect for and commitment to the land, inhabited by Omakayas historical and fictional, by current tribes and other peoples, would ensure an even more profound honor is bestowed upon those who have lived on it before.

## CHAPTER TWO: ISLAND HOME IN *THE GAME OF SILENCE*

I could read more in the swaying of the trees and the way they spread their branches and leaned to the wind than I could read in any books that they had at school.  
– John Rogers, *Red World and White: Memories of a Chippewa Boyhood*

Characters' conceptions of the places they inhabit are an important facet of bioregional literary criticism. Throughout literature, characters rely on conceptions of place to formulate their own identities and to explain their motives, and readers habitually inquire about characters' geographic origins. Readers pose the question "Where are you from?" to new characters and voices as often as they do to new acquaintances. The occurrence is pervasive enough to be underestimated, yet when readers and writers privilege place as a key influence on character behavior, they recategorize literature along bioregional lines. Emphasizing place fosters newfound awareness of it as a dynamic entity from which characters draw crucial components of their identities.

Conceptions of place relevant to bioregional criticism include cartographic orientation, physical and cultural interactions with geographic and biological features, and interpretations of natural phenomena. Responses to the works by American Indian writers often discuss the treatment of these concepts, as dominant society has repeatedly figured (however inappropriately) indigenous people as especially tied to natural landscapes as inhabitants and stewards. Many American Indian writers embrace the idea

of themselves as writers of place. As Lee Schwenger points out, “there is ample historical and literary evidence to suggest that individual members of many tribes across North America do (and did) perceive their relationship with the land differently (and as more environmentally sound) from the European settlers and their descendents” (34).

N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa) is one American Indian writer whose works repeatedly emphasize the human tie to landscape. His collection *The Man Made of Words* is arguably the most notable example of his call for renewing sensitivity to place and recognizing how it determines identity. In “An American Land Ethic,” Momaday writes, “We have sooner or later to come to terms with the [physical] world ... if we are to realize and maintain our humanity” (47). This is a broad appeal for *all* people to conceive of their connections to place. In another essay, he draws explicit connections between land and American Indian identity: “the Native American is someone who thinks of himself, imagines himself in a particular way. ... His idea of himself comprehends his relationship to the land” (“First American” 39). Though Momaday comes from a different landscape and heritage than indigenous writers from the South Superior bioregion, much of his writing aligns with pan-Native movements, and his observations are mirrored in works by authors from many traditions. His explicit call for renewed appreciation of the connections between people and place in his nonfiction resonates with the plot and themes of American Indian fiction from a variety of bioregions, including Louise Erdrich’s novels of Southern Lake Superior.

Like Momaday, Erdrich asserts a close bond between American Indians and natural environments, particularly when it comes to storytelling. In an essay entitled “Where I Ought to Be,” she writes, “In a tribal view of the world, where one place has

been inhabited for generations, the landscape becomes enlivened by a sense of group and family history” (43). Landscapes become homes as they house ancestral memories and cultural beliefs; separation from such places greatly affects communal and individual identity.

Erdrich presents the setting of *The Game of Silence* as a fundamental influence on the characters’ hopes, anxieties, and subsequent actions. As in its prequel, *The Game of Silence* takes place on Moningwanaykaning (Madeline Island). The prologue contains an initial illustration (one of several drawn by Erdrich) above the first sentence, an image which neatly depicts Omakayas’ prevailing situation in relation to the land: standing on the shore of her island, Omakayas’ small figure faces the water. She looks out at several dots (canoes) approaching from the horizon. She stands with legs apart, rooted in the land, arms open and ready to act. The image represents the stance she maintains in the novel, one in which she is anxious about the outside world imposing on her island home, but remains aware and does her best to prepare for it. This chapter will focus on Moningwanaykaning as home for Omakayas and her family; the unique characteristics of this island home contribute to the way the characters construct their identities and inhabit the land. It will also consider their keen anxiety over potential displacement from it.

Erdrich shows the Ojibwe characters’ love of their homeland through their attunement to its ecological systems. The novel, like its prequel, is divided among the four seasons, and most of the plot’s action depends on seasonal conditions. Erdrich also used the seasons to structure her nonfiction memoir *The Blue Jay’s Dance*, a move Lee Schweninger points out as the “most immediately obvious” way she chooses to show her “acknowledgment of the importance of her interaction with the natural world” (100).

Like the memoir, the events in the novels are contained in changing seasons that influence character behavior.

In *The Game of Silence*, temperature difference seems the greatest seasonal factor. For example, the bitterly cold winters compel the family to relocate from their summer wigwam to a warmer wood cabin. In his study of the history of Anishinaabe cultures in the Great Lakes, Charles E. Cleland also notes the impact of the seasons: “*Anishnabeg* family life in the first part of the nineteenth century consisted of two distinct annual phases, the cold, winter months that were spent in the company of close kin and the summer, the time of village life” (186). Shifting temperatures dictate social life, and the idea of “home” becomes a fluid one for the family. Rather than a single residence serving as a primary homestead, the wigwam and winter cabin are twin residences of equal value, each occupied during its own appropriate season.

This seasonal migration distinguishes the family from the white residents of La Pointe, who remain in the same homes year-round. The comments of Omakayas’ sister Angeline show how lifestyle patterns influenced by climate contribute to a distinct identity. As Angeline and Omakayas walk through La Pointe,

[t]hey grabbed each other’s shawls and joked and laughed as they carefully picked their way through the mud and garbage left out by the chimookomanag. “It’s because they live in the same place all the time,” said Angeline. “Their garbage piles up. If they moved the way we do all summer, it wouldn’t be so bad.” (131)

In Angeline’s view, the seasonal migration of her family signifies more than a difference in preference from the white characters. Instead of a mere reaction to climate, the family’s movement also preserves the ecological integrity of their environment. Angeline sees multiple residences as more beneficial than a fixed residence, which produces the

piles of garbage she and Omakayas carefully avoid. Angeline interacts with her bioregion by moving with the seasons, finding this behavior more attuned to the land and more capable of preventing its pollution.

Omakayas also uses climate-driven migration to distinguish her identity from the white characters. As she learns about the homeland of Father Baraga, the European missionary, she notes that it is a place “where huge numbers of people were concentrated, cities where the houses were made of stone and nobody moved from place to place, but stayed in one house all their lives” (187). Whatever Omakayas may have learned of European cities, she mentions only the static concentration of its inhabitants. This focus recalls Angeline’s negative opinion of stasis; at this point in the novel, the idea of nobody moving around has already been associated with an unsanitary lifestyle that contaminates the land. In addition, Omakayas notes that in Father Baraga’s country there exist “tiny fenced-off pieces of land” (187), suggesting that when so many people live in such close quarters, it perpetuates the idea of land as property that should be cordoned off from those who do not own it. This contrasts with her family’s own non-possessive stance toward the land, influenced by the fact that they do not reside in one place, but move periodically throughout the landscape.

Of course, the influences that adaptations to seasonal climate changes have on identity formation are not the primary reason for their practice: the main reason the family moves to the cabin in winter is to survive the cold. Erdrich shows the dangers of this season in a scene where Omakayas and her grandmother Nokomis venture out to maintain a trap line. They get caught in a cold snap and Nokomis has to carry a hypothermic Omakayas back to the cabin. As she recovers, Omakayas feels “deeply



impressed by the power of the cold. It had reached into her with phenomenal swiftness, and taken hold of her warm life with no warning” (175). This observation about the cold shows that the environment is not always hospitable. Its ability to take life without warning suggests the need for the characters to be aware of their land. Ecological attunement is not a romantic sentiment, but an imperative for survival.

It is in this regard that the characters become skilled at comprehending the natural occurrences in their environment. Insofar as they “read” the signs around them, nature becomes a text. They are fluent in the language of the weather patterns, animal tracks, and lake conditions of their home bioregion, and their lives depend on this literacy.

In the *biboon* (winter) chapter where Omakayas and Nokomis go out to set the snares, Omakayas looks “carefully at the ground, reading the long oval tracks of the waaboozoog [rabbit]” (171). This attention shows her awareness of local fauna; she can identify the animal that has made the tracks and can accurately speculate about its movement. Erdrich’s decision to use “reading” here reinforces bioregional awareness as literacy. Erdrich reinforces the comparison between this ecological literacy and textual literacy with the scene immediately preceding this one. She titles the section, “Learning the Tracks” and it shows the girls learning English at the school in La Pointe. When she walks home from school, Omakayas sees “swirling figures and patterns. She had tried so hard to make sense of all the teacher had said that she couldn’t shake the marks out of her head” (169). In naming these symbols “figures,” “patterns,” and “marks” instead of “numbers” or “letters,” Erdrich focuses on their appearance more than she does their meaning. This suggests Omakayas’ learning process is primarily visual. At another point, Omakayas notes that English writing consists of “tracks across paper or slate boards or

birchbark that stood for words spoken” (20). The deliberate use of “tracks” in both this line and the section title reminds readers of the characters ability to read animal tracks. Already experienced in reading the landscape around her, Omakayas sets to interpreting the symbols she learns at school the same way she has learned to interpret rabbit tracks.

Just as Omakayas is able to read meaning from animal tracks, her father Mikwam is similarly able to read the weather of his home environment. In a late winter scene, he tries to lead the European missionary Father Baraga through the landscape. The two get into an argument about how to proceed. The priest urges that they press on, but Mikwam hesitates. He later says of the priest, “He doesn’t know how to read the ice. ... He has told me himself that he sometimes gets lost and wanders in circles” (205). Mikwam’s evaluation of Baraga’s inability to read the ice is another precise demonstration of bioregional literacy. Mikwam sees the inspection of the ice as reading, and the ability to determine whether or not it is safe to cross shows that bioregional literacy is crucial to survival.

Though he agrees to lead Father Baraga to another Anishinaabe settlement, Mikwam becomes discouraged after seeing the ice. He warns that it is an unsuitable time to make the voyage. Mikwam later recounts the trip to his family: the two forge ahead, and his doubts prove justified as they become stranded. It is not until Omakayas has a dream of their whereabouts that they can be recovered. Mikwam describes how his opinions conflicted with Father Baraga’s: “I told him that the air smelled like the ice would break. Baraga said no. He insisted we go the way we came” (219). Bioregional literacy surpasses solely visual processing as Mikwam uses his sense of smell to read the landscape. While textual reading incorporates visual and auditory perception, the scent,

taste, or feel of the pages rarely if ever contributes to the process, whereas reading a landscape can include any combination of such sensory information.

The incident also serves as a warning for those who neither attend to reading the landscapes they find themselves in nor defer to those more experienced with them. Father Baraga's insistence to go on after Mikwam's warning shows his indifference to the signs that show whether the ice around the island is traversable. Baraga's role as a Christian missionary, coupled with the stories he tells of his urban homeland, asserts his European identity. Representative of Eurocentrism, his unwillingness to heed Mikwam suggests colonial hubris. Underestimating the land-text or overestimating his own reading ability, Baraga's behavior reveals that he is not fluent with the language of the bioregion. He speaks Mikwam's language in a similarly confident yet flawed fashion: "He spoke the language of the Anishinabeg ... although the words stuck in his mouth as though he carried a pebble under his tongue" (134). The analogy associates language and land by using a suitably bite-size piece of the physical earth to represent the cause of his imperfect speech. Just as Baraga cannot yet shape his mouth to properly pronounce Anishinaabe words, neither has he refined his awareness of the Anishinaabe homeland to exist harmoniously within it—at least to avoid trapping himself on broken ice.

A glance at Erdrich's nonfiction reveals that land's connection to language is clearly on her mind. She writes in *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country*:

Ojibwemowin is one of the few surviving languages that evolved to the present here in North America. For an American writer, it seems crucial to at least have a passing familiarity with the language, which is adapted to the land as no other language can possibly be. Its philosophy is bound up in northern earth, lakes, rivers, forests, and plains. Its origins pertain to the animals and their particular habits, to the shades of meaning in the very placement of stones. (85)

Erdrich's observations about the inextricability of place and language can be categorized with those of other American Indian writers to demonstrate a pan-native perspective. N. Scott Momaday is arguably the best-known writer to express this viewpoint. Land and language are fundamental themes to many of his works. "I am interested in the way that a man looks at a given landscape and takes possession of it in his blood and brain," he writes in "An American Land Ethic" (47), and this possession takes place through language. Words used to describe environment anchor the speaker to it. "For Momaday," Schweninger points out in *Listening to the Land*, "the land is always already sacred, and imagination and language make that sanctity real for the human being" (138). In her quote above, Erdrich completes this sentiment about the interchange between land and language by explaining how Ojibwemowin assembles itself from its speakers' natural environment.

As landscape affects language, it also impacts other cultural manifestations and practices. The previous chapter explored how natural cycles dictate the characters' primary occupations in *The Birchbark House*. Erdrich continues this portrayal in *The Game of Silence*. Following the varying vegetation and temperature of the southern Superior landscape, she keenly shows the character's subsequent shifts in occupation. She again uses activities to mark the time of year: early spring is synonymous with harvesting maple sugar, as fall is with harvesting wild rice. The name of the season's primary activity can replace whatever name that season possesses. For example, instead of opening Chapter Five with, "It was a fine day in late summer," the narration declares, "Now it was time to make jeemaanan [canoes]" (67). It is important for the characters to follow this work cycle of creations and harvests as it is for them to read nature and to

know the demands of the seasons. Their survival depends on completing these various tasks when each is most suited to the seasonal climate and availability of resources.

Marrying cultural practices to the land ensures that ritual and custom involve natural cycles. Therefore, as the adolescent Omakayas begins to learn about cultural roles and expectations, she simultaneously gains ecological knowledge. In one scene, her family travels to ricing camps to harvest *manoomin* (wild rice). Omakayas and her cousin Two Strike decide to sneak out in a canoe to gather *manoomin* early in hopes of winning the praise of their relatives. But when they return from the endeavor with a full canoe, Mikwam scolds them. He explains that they did not wait for the elders' approval to begin the harvest:

“You struck the *manoomin* too green into your boat,” he said abruptly, “ruining the plants. My daughter, there is a way we do things. We do it to take care of the rice. We listen to the old people—they who check the rice and watch for the exact right moment for us to humbly accept the gift. You went against the way things are supposed to go. You didn't listen to your old ones, your own grandmother among them.” (81)

The speech underscores the profound respect the family has for their homeland, and it emphasizes the need for balance in order to maintain a healthy ecosystem. Mikwam relies on those who've had the most experience with the land, his elders, to say when it is “right” to harvest. This episode teaches Omakayas how cultural traditions promote the wellbeing of both her community and the plant on which they depend.

Erdrich maintains the primacy of land in Ojibwe culture when she describes Nokomis' garden. Nokomis received the garden “from her mother, who had inherited it from hers. The earth had grown rich from generations of careful replenishment” (28). That the family's legacy inheres not in a house, not in any object, but in the soil, reinforces the fundamental link between heritage and land resources. The fertility of the

garden is testament to the history of the family that tends it; memories of ancestors thrive there, contributing to a sense of home more profound than the cabin or wigwam, so that Omakayas feels that if she were ever forced to leave the land, “her heart might fall right out of her body to lie forever on the ground it loved” (30). The wild rice harvest and Nokomis’ garden both suggest that removal from the particular landscape of Moningwanaykaning would disrupt well-established cultural traditions. *The Game of Silence* takes this anxiety of displacement as its primary theme.

*The Game of Silence* is set in 1849, during a period of upheaval for the Ojibwe of the South Superior bioregion, as “a series of treaties, purchases, and agreements from 1781 to 1927 ... resulted in the establishment of reserves in both Canada and the United States and the ceding of most of the traditional [Ojibwe] homelands” (Peacock 51). Erdrich includes *chimookomanag* in both *The Birchbark House* and *The Game of Silence*, but they surround the Ojibwe characters to a greater degree in the latter. The white settlers have a continued presence on the island at La Pointe. The faint threats of relocation posed on the Ojibwe in *The Birchbark House* become a constant pressure from the beginning of *The Game of Silence*, when bedraggled and travel-weary relatives of Omakayas’ family arrive on Moningwanaykaning to seek shelter after being forced to relocate.

The prologue and first chapter focuses on the Ojibwe refugees, providing detailed descriptions and showing the shock of the Moningwanaykaning Ojibwe. Omakayas notices the starved bodies of distant relatives as the refugees are swiftly adopted into her own community, symbolized by the sharing of food and clothing. A baby whose mother did not make the journey is adopted by Omakayas’ family, and an older boy, whom

Omakayas calls Angry One, appears in many of the later chapters; his dour countenance and voracious hunger serve as a reminder of the refugee's desperation in the opening scene.

The plight of the refugees fuels Omakayas' fear of being torn from the island. After fleeing from their own homes to evade the white settlers, the refugees moved into the territory of the Bwaanag, the Dakota and Lakota peoples. Upon their arrival on Moningwanaykaning, one woman reports, "The Bwaanag wiped out our village. ... Some people even got left behind in the crazy mess. They were captured" (7). While the pressures on Omakayas' family to relocate come from encroaching white settlers, the experience of the refugees shows how the situation is further complicated by another indigenous population. Though the Bwaanag remain physically absent in *The Game of Silence*, they persist in the awareness of the Ojibwe characters as another group that borders their own lands and culture.

So it is that the island home becomes doubly significant both as a physical place and as a sustained metaphor, one which posits the Ojibwe characters as islanded between other populations depending on the same physical resources. Erdrich expands this idea further with the *chimookomanag*. For example, Father Baraga's obstinate demand to continue traveling after Mikwam's warning results in their being stranded "on a narrow piece of ice" surrounded by "swift, black water, deadly cold" (219). Later, they manage to depart this ice for a small island. That these two islands, one of ice and the other of actual land, appear in the story while Mikwam interacts with Father Baraga reinforces the idea that the *chimookomanag* are surrounding his family. The white settlers can also be read as the water surrounding an island in the scene when Omakayas listens to Angry

One talk about his own displacement. After Angry One declares he never wants to move again, Omakayas surprises herself by “grabbing a rock and bashing it at the waves. . . . She was furious at how her family was told to leave their island” (44). Considering again the island as metaphor for Omakayas’ placement between two other cultures, here the waves can be read as the *chimookomanag* that threaten to evict her family from Moningwanaykaning. Omakayas’ grandmother Nokomis also associates the white settlers with water imagery, as when she explains their expansion to Omakayas: “The chimookomanag we see here are only the first drops of rain. A storm of them lives past the sunrise, in the east. They can flood us like a river” (29). Nokomis’ description of the white settlers as rain, then as an overflowing river, emphasizes the same overwhelming quality as when they are seen as hostile waters that island the characters.

Though the *chimookomanag* can be perceived metaphorically as dangerous water, the actual Lake Superior waters surrounding Moningwanaykaning provide Omakayas with comfort. As reports arrive that the U.S. government is forcing Ojibwe communities further west, the family decides to permanently depart from the island. Anxious about leaving, Omakayas goes to the lakeshore, where the sound of the waves soothe her: “*All things change, all things change, they said to her. All things change, even us, even you*” (235). Omakayas resolves to herself, “You will not take leave of your beloved and beautiful home in bitterness or in anger. . . . You will leave your home in gratitude” (236). The reading of the waves here does not yield physical information, such as ice conditions or a plant’s readiness for harvesting. Instead, they reassure Omakayas of her place in an eternally changing world. Reading the landscape offers both knowledge of the physical



world and spiritual comfort. For Omakayas, living amidst such challenging conditions renders the latter just as important to her survival.

Omakayas comes to this stage of acceptance after she has experienced a vision. The penultimate scene in the novel, the vision-seeking reflects a traditional Ojibwe rite of passage: “One of the most important sources of power is dreams and visions acquired by young people who fast and undergo privation in order to obtain this source of power. Often it comes in the guise of spiritual helpers or guardians that protect the person through life” (Cleland 68). The ritual begins with Omakayas receiving parting gifts from her family and departing from the home, which effectively enacts a rehearsal of her eventual departure from the island. Nokomis leads Omakayas to a prepared spot in the woods. After several days alone, Omakayas encounters several bears, her spiritual guides, and they remind her “of the way people visit when they’ve come to say good-bye” (230). Thus begins Omakayas’ leave-taking of the island, and afterwards she is increasingly more comfortable with departing from her home. By reading the bears’ behavior as bidding her farewell, she is encouraged that her family’s plan to leave has been recognized and sanctioned by the land. Upon returning to her family, Omakayas is calm and accepting when presented with the family’s decision to leave the island.

In the closing pages of the novel, a final instance of reading the land strengthens the poignancy of the family’s departure. Omakayas reads the landscape as the family canoes away from the island:

Omakayas could feel the difference as they left the bright, open spaces of the island and the big lake, and went into the mouth of the mainland stream. Soon the leaves closed overhead. The air went dappled green. The river was a long road of water through the tree-confined woods of the country of the dangerous Bwaanag. The little family drew their canoes close together. (247)

Moving into a new land, Omakayas is able to sharply distinguish the differences between the lakeside landscape and the forest. Her attunement to her island environment is such that a neighboring forest feels like another world. The change in the air and light also marks their entry into another country, and this reading causes them to band closer together. Once again, they rely on natural phenomenon to serve as a guiding text.

Though Omakayas is sad to leave the island, the novel closes with the sense of hope that she can learn to live in harmony with other peoples and the unique characteristics—geological, meteorological, and biological—of other lands. This hope rounds out the central theme of home in *The Game of Silence*, established in the opening by the refugees' arrival. Islands function in the novel both as the family's literal home and as a metaphor for their enclosure by other cultures. Omakayas' willingness to pursue a vision readies her for the greater change of leaving Moningwanaykaning, and the sorrow of the departures is assuaged by the way she interprets the occurrences in her physical surroundings as signs of farewell. Reading signs is crucial for the characters throughout the novel, and can be seen as a form of bioregional literacy that better enables them to make decisions and to be enlightened about the conditions of the places where they live.

### CHAPTER THREE: THE EROTICS OF PLACE IN *TRUE NORTH*

O you ancestors  
lumber schooners  
...  
you bastards  
my fathers  
and grandfathers, stiff-necked  
punchers, miners, dirt farmers, railroad-men  
...  
Your itch  
in my boots too,  
—your sea roving  
tree hearted son.  
— Gary Snyder, “Dusty Braces”

Few Upper Peninsula regional authors have received as much literary praise as Jim Harrison. Best known for his novella *Legends of the Fall*, on which the film is based, he has authored over two dozen works. His novel *True North* marks him as a writer of the South Superior bioregion. Set in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula (U.P.), it tells the story of David Burkett, an upper-class Marquette resident with a passion for the outdoors. David struggles with an unsavory family history: the source of their wealth comes from his forefathers’ exploitation of local timber resources, which resulted in the displacement of indigenous communities. David’s psychological issues with his family become enmeshed with his understanding of his homeland, and as a result depictions of nature become loaded with personal relevance.

Harrison carefully attends to place in *True North*, emphasizing both the distinguishing features of its setting and expressing a bioregionalist ethic through David's narration. As in other texts of this bioregion, the predominant physical feature is Lake Superior. Harrison uses the lake to orient the story. The second sentence of the opening chapter describes the Upper Peninsula as the land "which forms the southern border of Lake Superior, that vast inland sea of freshwater" (5), and the novel's closing paragraph returns to the lake: "There was a cool north wind and Lake Superior was ruffled with whitecaps" (388). While the characters travel beyond the U.P.—some move elsewhere, and David goes on vacation to Mexico and France—the novel begins and concludes with these images of the lake. Presiding as a key element to the landscape, it also serves as a focal point for David when he waxes contemplative. He reveals, "I declared my intentions to Lake Superior on a stormy night ... that I wasn't going to use up my life thinking about myself" (7). The seemingly boundless waters instill enough of a sense of mystery in him that he chooses to address them as if they represented whatever forces, even more boundless and mysterious, that reign over his life's path. When David later says that his aging father should be "sitting in a lawn chair in a warm coat looking out at Lake Superior with an air of receptive melancholy" (303), he again shows this sentiment. For him, the lake serves as an ideal provider of meditative space to reflect on one's life as well as the water.

In addition to depictions of the lake, descriptions of nature in the novel include David's many camping, hiking, and fishing trips. His frequent excursions grant him repose and time for reflection as he researches and documents his family's destruction of the land. As he becomes more attuned to the places he visits, David begins to make

observations that resonate with the bioregional ethic presented by Kirkpatrick Sale. On one outing David attempts to name all the trees he comes across, remarking, “I thought it was a little strange that we choose not to know all the ingredients of where we live” (169). By calling the trees “ingredients,” David suggests that they play an active role in creating a unique, whole landscape. Sale would likely agree with this statement. In *Dwellers in the Land*, he puts “knowing” the land as the first in a list of “the processes most central to the bioregional idea” (47). Sale writes, “We may not become as sophisticated about the land we live upon and its resources as the original inhabitants, those who ... knew every tree in the forest. But any one of us can walk the territory and see what inhabits there” (44). Both David and Sale find it necessary to know the various nonhuman species that also occupy a place in order to truly belong to it.

David later has a conversation involving American regionalism with his sometimes-lover Vernice: “We talked about how we think of ourselves as Americans but there are many worlds in the United States if you stray very far from freeways and stay away from television” (199). The statement highlights the variety existing between regions, despite their location within artificial national boundaries that promote a false sense of homogeneity alongside pervasive popular media and consumer culture. Sale’s political vision privileges identification with a smaller bioregion over a nation-state. This is, to some degree, already the case for U.S. Citizens. Sale asserts, “Regionalism has always defined the American experience, and it is by any reckoning as American as—well, as apple, peach, Boston cream, mince, shoofly, bourbon, apricot, date, pecan, or Key lime pie” (137). While neither Sale nor David appears keen on anarchy, both stress the vitality and influence of local places in the United States rather than the nation entire.

Because David's retreats into nature provide him with so much pleasure, he readily attunes himself to his bioregion. For example, on a teaching stint in Ohio, he remarks, "I wasn't homesick for my home but for the north with its vast forests and cold rivers and trout" (97). His desire for the geography, flora, and fauna of the U.P. bioregion is here devoid of any human presence or influence, and the fact that he misses nature more than his home in a populated town suggests his fascination with the idea of wilderness. Similarly, David becomes enamored of a relative's cabin in the woods near Ontonagon, where he is invited to camp. On the trip he notes the "eerily empty" quality of the cabin with its lack of "stove, toilet, pumps, or any other amenities" (62). The cabin's sparseness diminishes its potential to represent human inhabitation, and David spends less time describing it than he does the surrounding "pristine" property (62). This word again emphasizes David's preference for woods and nature he can imagine as untouched by humans.

The trouble of course is the fact that little if any of the U.P. has been left untouched. David glorifies his fishing and camping haunts because in them he can imagine that some of the bioregion has evaded plundering by timber and mining industries. Yet he never successfully convinces himself of this. Instead, his desire to experience a pristine environment is perpetually thwarted by the fact that people have (ab)used it, especially his ancestors. He realizes that he often tries to view his local land "through the eyes of Schoolcraft or Agassiz before the landscape was fatally violated" (207), and this tendency shows his participation in a prevalent conception of American land use.

In her book *The Lay of the Land*, Annette Kolodny terms this conception the American pastoral impulse, a collective fantasy created by “at least two accidents of history—the discovery of the new continent . . . and the reawakening of archetypal patterns derived, finally, from human biology and the human condition” (154). These events promoted the already established idea of natural environments as feminine, “not simply the land as mother, but the land as woman, the total female principle of gratification—enclosing the individual in an environment of receptivity, repose, and painless and integral satisfaction” (4). The act of colonization was simultaneously construed as a masculine enterprise as explorers and settlers penetrated and altered the land. Their manipulation later becomes interpreted as a deflowering or rape by other settlers seeking the same “integral satisfaction” of losing themselves within a gratifying, virgin natural environment. Kolodny’s pastoral impulse succinctly explains David’s behavior: his anger at his forefathers’ exploitation of his home bioregion stems more from his inability to experience a pristine landscape than it does from his sympathies for the devastation it caused to nonhuman species and human communities.

David’s failure to attain a perfect, fulfilling experience within nature leads him to glorify men he sees as more satisfactorily ensconced in it. He comes to privilege men who perform manual labor: miners, construction workers, and lumbermen, who all toil in and on the land. He idealizes their occupations while denigrating his own writing project. At one point, he declares, “Nearly everything I had written save the stories from old miners and loggers was stilted, junky, falsely academic, and fueled by anger. Unlike the stories the writing was purely awful” (323-324). This passage shows how much

authenticity David invests in working-class experiences, suggesting they possess more exposure to the land than David himself can attain.

David further connects laborers to the land by repeatedly observing the physical injuries they have sustained. His gaze repeatedly falls on the bodies of working-class people who are crippled or significantly injured, paralleling the ruined land. The first such character he mentions is a former miner and father to Polly, a girl David eventually marries and divorces. When David goes to pick up Polly on a date, he discovers that “her father, a miner with crippled legs from over near Republic, was quite upset” to learn David’s name (55). Identifying the Burketts as despoilers of the land, the man accuses David of coming from a bad family. Later, Polly explains her father’s combativeness with the excuse that “his legs hurt all the time” (55). Here, the degradation of a miner echoes that of the land; to the extent that David’s father and ancestors have “crippled” the latter, so too are they culpable for the injuries endured by the laborers they employ.

Polly’s father is not the only physically compromised workingman David notices. In Mexico, he hires a man to show him around; the guide shares that he was formerly a cowboy until “a horse pitched over and crushed his hips and he became a cook” (263). Later, David spots “a crippled man who reminds [him] of Polly’s father” (268). On a fishing trip in Montana, David hires Danny, “a caustic ex-logger who turned to guiding after a shoulder injury from a falling tree in the woods” (330). Danny’s role as a natural guide demonstrates his familiarity with the landscape. David’s companion on the trip later remarks that Danny is “an ‘autonomous man,’ a specialty of America that you see less in Europe” (330). This statement speaks to the American pastoral impulse, which Kolodny says evolved over time into “the exclusive prerogative of a single male figure,



living out a highly eroticized and intimate relationship with a landscape at once suggestively sexual, but overwhelmingly maternal” (134). David and his companion recognize this figure in Danny, and David himself aspires to embody a similar status by emphasizing his own physical injury and by working manual jobs.

Playing high school football, David breaks his left ankle; not long after, he breaks it again “coming out of the Peter White Library onto an icy sidewalk” (67), and a third time at a Fourth of July baseball game. He fixates on his ankle’s impaired condition when he decides to undertake some field work for his project, hiking areas that had been clear-cut: “I intended to walk all summer long but starting slow in order to give my ankle a chance to build its strength” (155). This decision to walk aggravates his injury. On an early foray he is contented to sit because his “bad ankle already hurt from stumbling on the beach in the night and [his] ankle wrap and tape were back at the cabin” (162). On a subsequent outing, he says, “At the beginning I had tried to move too swiftly and that made me thirsty and my ankle sore” (175). Noticing—and perhaps unconsciously relishing—his ankle’s flare-ups while he walks the ravaged environment, David attempts to identify with the injured laborers he sees as intimately connected to the land.

Ironically, David’s injury may have done more to separate him from his laborer-in-the-land ideal than align him with it. After one of the times he breaks his ankle, he complains, “With my gimpy ankle there was no chance I could return to the serene life of a manual laborer” (78). Though the ankle injury lets him feel more like other injured workingmen, manual labor is more compelling. His depiction of working-class life as serene shows the tremendously romantic sentiments he holds about it. His flirtations with manual work first begin when he helps his family’s yardman Clarence on a job. This is

followed by later jobs and culminates in David's funding of a small landscaping business. These experiences let him feel more like a workingman than his injury.

When David is twelve, Clarence initiates him into the workingman's world by taking him along to dig a garbage pit for a neighbor. Afterwards, Clarence gives David one of the five dollars he'd earned and takes him to a blue-collar restaurant. David recalls the "purity and simplicity" of the experience and adds, "I felt manly for the first time" (31). Though he cannot experience a completely untainted landscape, working in the dirt with Clarence provides a pure, pleasurable experience. When David turns sixteen he again gets to experience this perceived simple purity of labor by joining a construction crew with his friend and his friend's father. For David, this is bliss: "Thus began the best two months of my life up to that point, and perhaps since. ... Within ten minutes of starting that Monday morning I was back within the pleasure of helping Clarence dig the garbage hole" (54). David subordinates the particulars of his work with the construction crew to the same feeling of pleasure he experienced working with Clarence. He finds both similarly pleasurable because they draw him closer to his pastoral ideal, allowing him to occupy a masculine role that manipulates and closely interacts with a feminized landscape.

At the end of the novel, David returns to his childhood home and decides to start digging up hedges instead of waiting for landscapers arrive; the act returns him "deep into the pleasure of digging holes" (316). He decides to help fund the landscaping business, and it becomes the David Burkett Landscaping Service. David says, "I intended to alternate weeks at the cabin with weeks of hard manual work. This program would keep me on earth rather than floating above it. I liked the idea of mowing the lawns of my

parents' friends" (317). He pursues his regimen because it keeps him grounded, literally as well as figuratively. It allows him maximum proximity to gratifying natural environments both isolated in the woods and in the backyards of Marquette. His pleasure intensifies with the thought that he can live out his laborer-in-the-land role within the public view. David especially wants his parents' friends to notice, in hopes that they will perceive him as radically different from the father he despises. Knowing his father's wealth and investments, they would find it incongruent for David to be toiling around the neighborhood.

David's mother shows concern over what people will think, as he reports, probably quite pleased, "She actually said that my current manual labor might reflect badly on the family name" (325). If in undertaking landscaping David seeks to align himself with laborers as he simultaneously distances himself from his father, he must take some pleasure in noticing when the ploy works on his mother. When he spends a morning doing landscaping for her, he notes, "At one point I found my mother beginning to call me Clarence" (310). David includes this in his narration proudly, and the slip is especially meaningful because Clarence serves as an ideal substitute for David's actual father.

David respects Clarence most of all men except his uncle Fred, who points out that between Clarence and the family aide Jesse, David "had dads who were better than most anyone had" (12). Fred's statement directly figures Clarence as a surrogate father, and David's interactions with him reinforce the notion. In the beginning of the novel, David goes to his family's work shed to ask Clarence if he will fish with him, an activity that allows David the enjoyment not only of being outdoors, but also of bonding with

Clarence via a popular father-son activity. David says that the shed was where Clarence “often stayed, and where he slept on an old leather couch” (9). Clarence’s lodgings further emphasize the economic disparity between his working-class self and the Burkett family: unlike David’s leisure-accustomed father, Clarence is used to sleeping on an old couch instead of a bed, in a shed instead of a bedroom. Alongside such class differences, David is quick to observe Clarence’s ethnicity.

In the work shed scene, David describes Clarence in racial terms: “Many Chippewa are large men and so are the Finnish and Clarence was half of each” (9). Clarence’s heritage evenly represents two predominant ethnic populations in the U.P. For David, largeness means robustness as well as stature: in the sentence following the one above, David recalls how he “once saw [Clarence] unload a four-hundred-pound woodstove from his Studebaker pickup and carry it” (9). The connections David makes between race and vigor or physical capability suggest he readily associates labor with Finnish and Ojibwe men. Just as David’s class hinders him from partaking in labor, his ambiguous Caucasian heritage similarly distances him from the exposure to the physical work he thinks common for the “large men” of these ethnic groups. In Clarence, David finds an ideal opposite to his father: a man who fits the social and ethnic stereotype David has created of the quintessential northern workingman.

Clarence is known to “work sixteen hours a day” (118), and David spurns the way his actual father shrugs off this fact. When his father nonchalantly remarks that Clarence must work in order to support a lot of people, David says, “This was my first clue well before my project started that the alpha predators in the lineage from which we came didn’t have contempt for the ordinary workingman, they simply ignored him” (118).

When David perceives this ignorance, he further connects workingmen to the landscapes they manipulate. Workingmen are tied to the land because David's forebears are capable of ignoring their effort and worth in the same way they ignore the exhaustion of bioregional resources; the men who work in or on the land are exploited for their labor as much as the land is for its ore and timber. As mentioned above, the degradation of the bioregion is mirrored in the physical degradation of workingmen, including Clarence, who develops bursitis in one shoulder and later dies when "a boat hoist strap [breaks] and [a] sailboat [crushes] him" (227). The image of Clarence's death recalls all the other debilitated workingmen (e.g., the miner and his crippled legs, Danny injured by a falling tree). The death completes the depiction of Clarence as David's workingman hero, the character who first initiates David into the world of manual labor by taking him on a job and whose death places him with the other crushed or broken workingmen.

David prefers Clarence for a paternal figure because his own father abuses land and girls. This adds another dimension to David's sense of guilt over his (male) ancestor's ravishing of the U.P. and its resources. Harrison draws the connection between David's father's plundering of timber and his sexual activity early on. When David begins investigating his family's logging history he knows there are records locked in bookcases but doesn't want to search for a key "for fear of finding more of the pornography [he] had seen years before" (37). The images of records and pornography both hidden away initiates the pairing of his father's business with his sexual exploits, which finds its culmination in his predation of girls.

The novel notes several instances of this behavior, but none impact David as severely as his father's raping of his assistant's daughter, Vera. David is present the night

this occurs; he hears Vera scream and witnesses his father stumbling out of her room.

This vivid scene scars David and further unites for him his father's transgressions against the bioregion with those against Vera and other girls. He emphasizes land exploitation in sexual terms, seeing it not only as deforested, but as violated or raped.

David, with his romantic vision of laborers as the heroes of the pastoral impulse and his forefathers as corrupted exploiters, consistently figures manipulators of the land as men while conflating land and women. His fantasies of a life surrounded by unspoiled nature are futile in part because such land does not exist, but also because he is unable to confront the sexual undercurrents of such a desire. Wanting to surround himself in pristine environments (i.e., untouched by anyone) unsettlingly resembles his father's attraction to virginal girls. Kolodny explains that the pastoral impulse is also one of colonization, involving "an inevitable paradox: the success of settlement depended on the ability to master the land, transforming the virgin territories into something else" (7). She goes on to show how early settlers accused one another of "raping and deflowering" the land that had once seemed to promise continual pleasure and replenishment (7). David's accusatory project serves as a modern adaptation of this; he condemns his ancestors not because they raped the land, but because it disrupts his own exposure to it. Meanwhile, his own landscaping ventures reflect the same act of transforming the landscape. While his hole-digging comes nowhere near the destruction of clear-cutting a forest, it nonetheless shows the same willful manipulation, a step beyond merely experiencing the environment. And though David may play at being a laborer with his landscaping service, his wealth permits him to work when it pleases him and to spend the rest of the time at a

cabin in his pseudo-wilderness, a would-be pastoral hero enclosed in a feminine landscape.

David ascribes women to the land and vice versa by combining images of women with natural phenomena. For example, while viewing a river David suddenly thinks of Vernice, saying, "Rivers are decidedly female and I began to think of what Vernice's body might look like" (136). Later, Vernice engages him in a debate outside. He asks her a question, but says, "I asked the live green grass and the dead brown leaves" (189), instead of "I asked her." As with his childhood crush Laurie, whose scent repeatedly mingles with that of lilacs and the outdoors, Vernice smells "like fresh lake water and sunburn the same as Laurie had so long ago" (192). When describing a dream version of himself, he says that the figure's mind "whirled with images of Polly and Vernice and Cynthia and remembered beautiful landscapes" (244), tying earth and women together. On his trip to Mexico, David declares, "It's hot and I drink too much rum and count thirty-seven beautiful women as if I'm counting stumps" (272). This final example strongly shows the sexual undercurrent to David's project. David finds the women beautiful, then compares them to the stumps, suggesting that the stumps he counted represent to him a once beautiful and potentially gratifying landscape forever ruined by those who raped it. This reductive interpretation overlooks and objectifies the existence of both women and land, focusing instead on the relationships between men as they compete for pleasurable or valuable objects.

Sexual connotations appear in other scenes where David interacts with nature, such as when he inherits the empty cabin near Ontonagon: "I was now a landowner and the experience was nearly as extreme as losing my virginity" (71). David's excitement

over this new acquisition stems partially because the cabin is surrounded by virginal, pristine woods. Later, David's father illegally sells the cabin while David is away from the area. When David returns to visit, he discovers numerous renovations made to the once-sparse structure, making the area more inhabitable and imparting a human presence. In addition, a nearby pond has been drained, the two-track driveway "graded and expanded," and David's "favorite" oak tree cut down (121). David's formerly pristine woods have been tainted, and he directs his fury at his father. The transgression reflects the raping of Vera, whom David also desired. Once again, in David's mind the situation has little to do with the property itself; he does not consider the environmental effects the changes will have on the property, but only rages that they were not sanctioned by him for his pleasure. If for David land and women are interchangeable, this further suggests his disturbance with Vera's rape has less to do with Vera than with his disgust at his father's actions.

Another scene directly associates David's sexuality with the land. Alone, David rests on a beach at night. He thinks of his mother's body, but then transforms it into Vernice's: "Becoming erect I rolled over and tried to fuck the sand which I don't recommend. ... I pressed my face against the sand which was a little damp with dew and imagined it the loveliest pussy on earth and I didn't care whose body owned it" (160). Despite whatever complications David has with specific women, in nature he has pure pleasure—it provides him with both "the regressive pull of maternal containment *and* the seductive invitation to sexual assertion" (Kolodny 67). Insofar as natural environments are able to evoke for David the multiple forms of pleasure involved in various interactions with women, it truly is for him the "loveliest pussy."



David's failure to recognize his deeper motives for chronicling U.P. land exploitation results in a problem even he recognizes: the writing contains many details about the kinds of resources extracted and its impact on the land, but very little about the people affected. When Vernice critiques his manuscript, she points out this omission. David restates her criticism: "Trees, iron ore, and copper weren't people. Why had I glossed over the destruction or removal of the indigenous population, the Indians?" (201). Unsettled by her question, he leaves and goes outside. Vernice's critique confronts David with the fact that his forefathers' actions did much more injury to others than to himself. Though David may wish to imagine the U.P. as untouched before the timber and mining industries, in truth it had already been inhabited and utilized by humans for centuries. Vernice demands that David attend to the indigenous history of the landscape, a history which Louise Erdrich employs in her novels concerning this same bioregion. David's project does not satisfactorily include the Anishinaabeg families who were, like Omakayas and her kin, drastically affected by the likes of David's forefathers. His disregard of these people in the bioregion indicate a latent drive for his project: to tally the damages his ancestors made to the once-ideal, feminine landscape.

David further loses sight of the land's inhabitants when he uses it as a metaphor for women. He prefers to think of virgins: in the first section of the novel, he announces his knowledge of his sister's loss of virginity and is unsettled when girls express their sexuality. Equally, he prefers pristine wilderness. Vernice calls attention to David's joining of the two. "You didn't cut down every fucking tree in the Upper Peninsula," she admonishes David. "Your cheapness didn't let miners die in unsafe mines. . . . You didn't rape that young girl" (190). It is clear to Vernice that David connects his father's land

exploitation with the man's sexual crimes. David confuses the history of raped environments, falsely imagining them as previously untouched, uninhabited, virginal. His surface quest to expose his ancestor's transgressions masks his selfish desire for an unsullied, gratifying landscape/woman. His sense that his ancestors ruined the attainment of this desire results in his retaliation via the project.

If, as Kolodny suggests, the traditional American pastoral impulse involves a solitary male figure surrounded by a fulfilling, feminine landscape, David's character may provide a new phase in that impulse. There are moments when he looks beyond the pastoral hero's individual fantasy. Toward the end of the novel, he says, "the natural world wasn't meant to be soothing .... People were nature too and it was schizophrenic to try to separate them from what we ordinarily thought of as nature" (373). His recognition that the natural world is not always pleasant suggests he is maturing from the idea that it should only provide satisfaction, while his realization that people are also nature demonstrates that he might no longer overlook the presence of humans in natural environments. This new awareness allows his U.P. bioregion to exist as more than an objectified landscape: it includes women and men of various classes, ethnicities, and occupations. People lived in the land before it was manipulated by David's ancestors, and continue to inhabit it despite this manipulation.

## CHAPTER FOUR: CONTINUITY IN *RETURNING TO EARTH*

Inasmuch as I am in the land, it is appropriate that I should affirm myself in the spirit of the land. I shall celebrate my life in the world and the world in my life. In the natural order man invests himself in the landscape and at the same time incorporates the landscape into his own most fundamental experience.

– N. Scott Momaday, *The Man Made of Words*

Jim Harrison's novel *Returning to Earth* maintains the ecological and regional awareness established by David's narration in *True North*, but with a different emphasis. David's project (exposing his ancestors' abuse of the land) looms over his depictions of the environment, so that they continually remind him of personal desires and frustrations. He attempts to forge a closer connection to nature through his camping and fishing trips and his stints of manual labor. Donald, the main character in *Returning to Earth*, does not share this orientation; his Anishinaabe heritage and consistent occupation as a laborer afford him a different perspective. The two protagonists also present different stages of life, involving separate concerns about the link between land and identity. Whereas David's narration occupies a state of growth from youth to middle age, *Returning to Earth* explores the deterioration and death of Donald; the former deals more with the use of land, while the latter questions (as the title suggests) how one returns to it at death and if this signifies continued existence. David's concerns are individual, while Donald's are communal. Appropriately, Donald's story features multiple narrators—Donald, his wife

Cynthia, David (again), and Donald's almost-nephew K—and this choice underscores the collective construction of human relationships to nonhuman nature in *Returning to Earth*.

Each narrator references Lake Superior. Their comments describe this physical feature but also show how they relate to their bioregion. Donald discusses the thickness of Upper Peninsula forests and mentions that “it’s a relief to be in the hills along the coast of Lake Superior, where you can see a long ways” (7). For Donald, the shoreline offers a better view than nearby forests, and it is a pleasant rather than inconsequential difference. K goes camping in poor weather and hears the lake, then walks to watch the waves. He says he would do this even during winter storms, though “on a still night of twenty below zero Superior will begin to freeze and you have to wait until spring to see the grand waves again” (117). The lake is “grand,” impressive enough for K to trek through adverse weather to witness it. David’s narration notes Superior’s ability to clear his thoughts: “I drove the ten miles or so out of the woods faster than usual with a new and peculiar itch in my brain that I figured could be dispelled only by the sight of the harbor of Lake Superior” (155). Like Donald, David finds the lake soothing. If Donald means for the sight of the lake to be a physical relief for his eyes, David associates it with mental relief. Finally, Cynthia calms herself in Chicago by looking at Lake Michigan, though she remarks that it lacks “the clarity of Lake Superior” (216). This clarity could refer to actual water quality, mental tranquility, or both. Taken together, the narrators’ comments invite a nuanced understanding of the combined physical and emotional effects of this hallmark of the bioregion.

Characters in *Returning to Earth* also express the belief that place influences identity. The most frequent example of this is the hardworking, blue-collar Yooper

(Upper Peninsula resident) who accrues his mettle from the challenging environment. Cynthia shows this best when she tries to justify why Donald hid his illness from his family: “some old-style men in the Upper Peninsula are like that. Life is hard and you don’t complain. If you smash a hand while logging you joke about it. So many of them are broken-down and crippled early” (31). Before the general statement that life is difficult, Cynthia specifies that these men are from the U.P. They sustain injuries from logging its forests, and in turn receive hardiness for sacrificing their bodies to their work in the land.

As he does in *True North*, Harrison employs images of physical degradation in *Returning to Earth* to align diminished landscapes with the people who depend on them. The novel intensifies the metaphor of land-as-body and vice versa. Characters often mention the work-related deaths of many miners or loggers. For example, David appears more sensitive to the effects exploitative industries had on people than he does in *True North*. He recounts,

from 1890 1910, when mine disasters were at their worst in terms of fatality numbers, the victims’ families in company housing were welcome to stay in the housing but only for a month. For this time the families continued to have the use of a milk cow. I had seen old photos of these often gaunt milk cows in rocky pastures near the company row houses and women on stools milking the cows into buckets often with children watching. (161)

The description of the cow emaciated by unsuitable grazing land further stresses the vulnerability of these families. The substandard pastures show their dependence on a demanding landscape, and the gauntness of the cows suggests that no one is thriving. Caught on one side by a formidable environment, the families are trapped on the other by their subjection to the power of equally formidable industries. The mining company offers housing but the short lease is little comfort. The conditions provided by the

company have resulted in many workers dead and many families weakened; company policies have also compromised the landscape by overharvesting resources and implementing unsustainable agriculture. The novel further expresses connections between damaged land and damaged people by including other injured workingmen.

As in *True North*, crippled characters appear throughout. Cynthia's line about old-style men shows them crushed by timber, specifically using "crippled" and "broken-down" to describe their bodies. K's grandfather (Polly's father from *True North*) was previously a miner, but in the story he is disabled; his "legs sort of flopped from being squashed between two tramcars full of iron ore" (112). Instead of benefitting the inhabitants of the bioregion, the resources harvested (timber or tramcars of ore) only cause harm. Doing work that damages the land, these men are themselves damaged. Thus degradation becomes a theme connecting the human to the nonhuman.

The greatest instance of physical degradation, the one most significant to the novel's plot, is Donald's decline due to Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), also known as Lou Gehrig's Disease. This terminal condition commences when "motor neurons begin to degenerate and stop functioning ... which leads to progressive weakness" and eventual immobility (Miller, Gelinas, and O'Connor 3). At the opening of the novel, Donald's condition has progressed to this latter stage. The first sentence reads, "I'm laying here talking to Cynthia because that's about all I can do with my infirmity" (3). Similar to other bodies of laborers, Donald cannot move, though he has not been crushed or broken by ore or timber. Still, his debilitation does connect him to natural environments. Both are degraded, and Donald is consoled by the land when his condition worsens.

Donald comes to a greater understanding and acceptance of his illness while on a fishing trip with K in Grand Marais. He goes on a solitary walk and reclines on a low birch limb: “within minutes there was no inside or outside to the world ... my sick body disappeared .... There was a spirit in the place that gave my body some peace” (17). This meditative time allows Donald to reflect on his situation. Resting on the branch, he is soothed by the “spirit” of his natural surroundings; in his weakness, his appreciation for nature deepens. As he did while on an outdoor three-day religious fast, he again experiences visions. When K arrives and helps him out of the tree, Donald remarks, “I knew I’d never again be able-bodied” (17). His repose in the land furnishes this new self-awareness. Drawing nearer to the earth, Donald perceives himself more clearly.

Of the novel’s four narrators, Donald is certainly the most earthbound, in more ways than one: his outdoor workingman’s life and earth-centered spirituality prove nature is greatly important to him, while his terminal illness figures him as the one nearest to being buried. Significantly, Donald’s entrance and exit in the story occur with him literally in the ground. Cynthia recalls her initial attraction to Donald, when he was helping his father dig a hole to level a building on her family’s property. Cynthia makes lemonade and brings it to Donald, who was “down in the hole” (37). When he returns the glass and briefly thanks her, she notices that “his body smelled as sweet as the earth he was digging” (37). Merging Donald’s scent with that of the earth, Cynthia binds the two together. This scene initiates their love affair and Donald’s entry into the saga of the Burkett family.

K’s narration shows the couple physically parting in a closely similar situation. Donald decides to be euthanized instead of succumbing to total loss of mobility and

muscle function. He, the other narrators, and his children Clare and Herald travel to the place in Canada where Donald had performed his three-day fast before he became ill. After Herald and K dig Donald's grave, Herald injects Donald with Phenobarbital and Dilantin, and the others help Donald into the grave: "Cynthia slid down and lay beside Donald crooning softly. Within minutes Donald was dead and we helped each other out of the grave. Cynthia tossed a handful of dirt and whispered something" (141). Donald dies with Cynthia next to him in the grave; their goodbye takes place in the ground. The dirt Cynthia tosses after climbing out recalls the scene when she associated his scent with it. Standing over the grave, Cynthia symbolically returns to the same scene where she met him. Donald's life in the story (at least, his physical entry and exit) is thus bordered by dirt and earth imagery.

Donald is also earthbound because he works outdoors. His manual labor fits him with the other workingmen of Harrison's two novels, a category of people close to the earth both because they are literally covered in it—whether dirt or, in the case of a pulp cutter, the aroma of "pine resin" (165)—and because they are exploited for their labor as the landscape is for its resources. Cynthia says "Donald is the most physical person I've ever met in my life. After an exhausting summer day working construction he would take Herald and Clare fishing until darkness fell. He would sleep five hours and then be up at six a.m." (21). Vigorous and enthusiastic about outdoor recreation, Donald spends some twenty hours a day in unenclosed and natural settings. His stamina earns him praise from other U.P. laborers, who according to Cynthia have an acute understanding of physical labor. After Donald's death a cement finisher says he was "a man who could put in a day's work," a statement Cynthia qualifies as the "ultimate compliment of the north"



(239). Cynthia mentions this is an especially significant phrase for someone in this particular *place* to utter, where she might have instead qualified it as a special statement when voiced by men or construction workers. With her use of “north,” Cynthia says that exposure to this bioregion (rather than one’s occupation or gender) enables one to know what hard work entails.

Donald’s experience of his Anishinaabe heritage ties him even further to the land. Just as miners and loggers have suffered, just as the land has been exploited, so have indigenous peoples been oppressed. Donald learns about this occurrence by reading books about other indigenous cultures. He realizes, “Throughout the world none of these people got a fair shake. Some of those tribes died out completely” (67). His reading helps him to better understand social and environmental injustices that link his indigenous community to others around the globe. Donald details the ways in which Ojibwe workers became involved in the industries of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He connects American Indians with the land early in his narration. Describing his family, Donald says, “We had a bunch of relatives, especially on my mother’s side, who were more like real Indians but we thought of ourselves as city people .... All our relatives were such a mixture of Finn, some Cornish, a few Italian, and Chippewa. A lot of these nationalities turned up to get work as miners and loggers” (10). Donald understands that ethnic communities comprised the majority of the labor force for U.P. mining and logging. He also considers himself less traditional, perhaps even less authentic, than the “real” Indians who live outside of the (predominately white) towns and cities. Thus, for Donald, to be truly American Indian requires an intimate connection to natural landscapes.

In another scene, Donald presents how the new job opportunities offered by these growing industries can conflict indigenous cultural beliefs. He describes his forefathers working for mining projects and recalls his father saying one ancestor was fortunate because he did not have to work in a deep-shaft mine. Donald explains, “By and large your basic Indians don’t want to be deep-shaft miners. They’re leery because of the idea that to go deep underground would be coming close to the living world of spirits” (24). Yet in order to survive changing conditions, many had to seek employment with these new industries, including Donald’s ancestors. As the industries pillaged the land and resources depended on by indigenous people, they simultaneously disrupted the cultural traditions and worldviews formulated by generations of indigenous U.P. inhabitants. For any that became deep-shaft miners, for instance, it would be necessary to adapt or disregard longstanding cultural beliefs about going far underground.

David’s narration supports Donald’s observations about indigenous people and the land. David shows more concern for the effects land exploitation had on indigenous peoples after being critiqued for under-representing them in his project. In keeping with the novel’s themes of degradation, he explores cultural disintegration. On a retreat to his cabin in Grand Marais, David and K begin to discuss the endurance of the Ojibwe in the face of generations of conflicts with other cultures, especially white explorers, missionaries, and settlers. David quotes Cleland’s *Rites of Conquest*, selecting a passage that details the decimation of indigenous peoples due to smallpox, warfare, alcohol, poverty, and disruption and loss of land, before David says “more words about the miracle of survival” (128).

David immediately follows this discussion by asking if K remembers a time when Donald carried David “piggyback through the woods a mile back to the car” (128) after David twisted his bad ankle. David’s recollection of the scene here points to his sense of obligation to Donald. Of all the memories David could pick, he selects one that shows Donald caring for him after his ankle flares up. This memory comes directly after David discusses the destruction of Ojibwe lives and culture via white colonization. David, a descendant of colonizers, feels guilt toward colonized people and despoiled land, which he locates in Donald. In the memory, David literally weighs Donald down for a long walk over wooded U.P. terrain. Similarly, David’s ancestors depended on Donald’s for their labor force, with the former receiving most if not all of that labor’s benefits.

In *Returning to Earth*, David has finished the writing project described in *True North* and published it in several U.P. newspapers. He begins a new project, spending three-fourths of his income to assemble survival kits for Mexicans attempting illegal border crossings into the U.S. This directly philanthropic approach is a change from the previous project, which only nominally addressed social injustices. David’s new focus on people more than ravaged environments reflects his internalization of the criticism he’s received about his writing project. When K asks him how he feels about the publication, David says, “Donald’s criticism was best. I connected my family’s logging and mining to the land but gave short shrift to the people” (122-123). David’s oversight reveals his deeper wish to retaliate against his father and ancestors, who contaminated what he believed to be an otherwise pristine environment. In the first part of *Returning to Earth*, Donald summarizes his criticism of the project,

I was proud that a relative knew so much but there weren’t any real people in it. I like the stories with people myself. I mean he told the story of the bad details of

the logging and mining his ancestors were involved in but not the actual story of the people who owned the logging companies and mines and the working people. I'm not being critical; I just prefer stories. (6)

Donald thus suggests David's emphasis should be on the people who live in and affect the landscape. By only including the "bad details" and not telling the "actual story" of all involved, David's approach proves too reductive. It may suit his goal of demonizing his ancestors, but it fails to recognize the existence of others; it voids the landscape of inhabitants to make it pristine and its corruption therefore (to David) more heinous. People are less a part of nature for David than they are for Donald, since the latter suggests that the environmental critique needs more human stories. Harrison shares Donald's sentiment; in an interview he says, "We're human beings. ... We're nature, too. It's that schizophrenia that you often see ... on the dweebish side of the environmental movement -- that wants to save something. Well, save yourself too..." (Miles). David echoes this statement toward the end of *True North*, restoring people to the landscape and enabling himself to be more sincere in addressing the injustices they face.

David's second project represents his new awareness of people within place, especially those he overlooked in his own bioregion. His survival kits may be for people hundreds of miles away, but they still serve as tokens of retribution for U.P. land and residents. He is inspired to assemble the kits after he sees the photo of a "19-year-old from Veracruz who died of thirst on the Tohono O'odham Indian reservation just over [the U.S.] side of the border" (169). The girl reminds him of Vera, the girl his father raped in *True North*. This act is the most vivid embodiment of David's forefathers' rapacious behavior. When David connects the Mexican girl to Vera, his concern for border crossers entwines with those harmed by his forefathers (Vera, but also laborers

and Ojibwe inhabitants). His attention to the population numbers of both border crossers and U.P. laborers further relates his new project to the guilt he feels toward other oppressed groups. David says he began his project because border crossing deaths estimate up to “two thousand a year” (168). This number correlates with David’s preoccupation with the number of people killed in mines and logging accidents. He says, “Numbers began to appear in the landscape. ... This was an era where in three major mines nearly two thousand men had died in a twenty-year period” (161). David, having mentioned that miners’ deaths estimated two thousand, is struck by the same number estimated for border crossers’ deaths. That David sees numbers (representing people) appearing in the landscape suggests that he continues to develop an awareness of people as part of nature.

Land, which figured so strongly in David’s written project, also infiltrates his survival kit project. The income he uses to fund the survival kits comes from his share of property owned by his “father’s grotesque family” (168). He funnels the plundered wealth of his forefathers, garnered from real estate, toward the border crossers. Funded by land assets, the kits also relate to environment because they are for outdoor survival. David thinks not only of people, but specifically of their presence in a landscape. The kits can be used for any outdoor situation, as David reveals when he says to Cynthia, “We’ll take two on a walk in the mountains tomorrow” (208). His new project may be focused on people, but David still concerns himself with environment.

As David learns to see people as part of nature, including his own despoiled U.P., Harrison presents other characters closely identified with the bioregion. Their portrayals shift away from those that figure the land and its inhabitants as ruined; they offer hope

that degradation is not permanent and that life continues. Donald's second cousin Flower is the best example of such a character. Flower lives alone in the woods and makes a living cleaning cabins and selling pies and herbal medicines. She uses self-employment to provide autonomy, as she has learned not to trust government welfare: "She wouldn't take any money from the state, county, or federal government because she wouldn't sign papers. Her grandpa had lost a lot of land by signing timber leases for white lumbermen" (11). Flower knows the potential for paperwork to trick her into losing her land, and so steadfastly refuses to engage in any bureaucracy. Though her family has experienced this loss, she remains in her homeland with now-sharpened vigilance.

Her willpower is matched by her physical strength. In her seventies, Flower exudes a resilient vitality. David visits her after she leaves a hospital where she was treated for blood poisoning: "Flower escaped the hospital in the middle of the night and walked home overland on what she described to [Donald] later as the 'old Indian path to town'" (146). The passage shows her physical capabilities, but also the strength that comes from understanding one's bioregion. Having grown close to her landscape, Flower is able to find her way home in the dark along paths others are unlikely to know.

The home to which she returns contains a collection of natural objects, so that it seems more an extension of the surrounding woods than a domestic structure. David claims there is an "eerie serenity [to her] bare-bones little house .... It is hard to imagine a house so totally *on the ground*" (147). If the house is totally on *this* ground, the U.P., then its sparseness mirrors the surrounding bioregion denuded by logging. As it nonetheless shelters Flower (and serenely), so too does the bioregion still provide for human life. The land continues, as do those who live on it.

As David and Flower's relatives perceive Flower as a well-established woodland resident, so they also consider her engrained in Anishinaabe spiritual traditions. K says, "I didn't know all that much about Anishinabe religion but in contemporary terms you couldn't have more mojo than Flower. If anyone was a true Night Flying Woman it was Flower" (136). This "mojo" comes at least partially from her rustic inhabitation, best shown by Donald when he says, "David ... knows some fine places that seem to carry a weight of their own. Flower knew such places. Actually there's a tinge of resemblance between them. If you spend that many years in the woods it's bound to be a share of your body and soul" (16). Here the pronoun "them" is ambiguous; though it most likely compares Flower and David, it could also include "places" to suggest that Flower and/or David bear resemblance to the land. Whether or not this "them" further combines the two characters with the land, the final sentence certainly enmeshes the human with the nonhuman. It suggests that the essence of the woods can infuse people as surely as people can manipulate the woods.

Flower's Anishinaabe spiritual traditions factor into her portrayal as a person tied to the earth; Donald's religion likewise contributes to his multivalent categorization as earthbound. Donald repeatedly mentions the importance of his religion, but will not elaborate on his experiences with it. He describes his three-day fast in Canada, but also warns, "I'm not going to talk about my religion because it's too private" (15). Though it is possible to interpret this reticence as one of Donald's character traits, it might also be a respectful move by Harrison; as an outsider, he does not claim to know many particularities about Anishinaabe ritual nor profess to comprehend their significance to practitioners. Often, the spiritual aspects Harrison does convey (e.g., fasting for a vision,

the interconnectedness of life) are well-known as components of many indigenous spiritual traditions. With the religious beliefs Donald does share, he presents a reassuring if somber understanding of both human life and the environment, particularly the U.P.

Donald asserts the continuity of life. He spends much of his narrative part in the novel recounting his lineage of three forefathers, each named Clarence. The same name over generations can be confusing, but it affirms individuals not as ends unto themselves, but aspects of a larger (and longer) whole. Donald shares this perception while on the camping trip with K. Looking out at the landscape, Donald says, “This place was the same as it was back in the time of the first Clarence. Maybe I’m him” (16). In the land, Donald feels so connected to his ancestors that his separation from them dissolves. This interconnectedness does not confine itself to human life, but expands out to include the nonhuman as well. The first Clarence (Donald’s great-grandfather) cares greatly for a horse name Sally, which dies falling off an iron ore dock. Clarence later calls a bear he raises by the same name; Donald explains, “Clarence believed spirits were alive and moved in and out of creatures. Even birds could carry human spirits and vice versa” (28). Clarence later calls his wife Sally, reinforcing the notion that the human and nonhuman can interpenetrate. Such beliefs greatly expand the limits of personhood beyond the human individual. If spirits can move in and out of human and nonhuman bodies, distinctions dissolve into a more inclusive understanding of identity. At the end of his narrative, Donald shares insights from his fast that resonate with this inclusivity:

I was able to see how creatures including insects looked at me rather than just how I saw them. I became the garter snake ... and the two chickadees that landed on my head. ... It was good to finally know that the spirit is everywhere rather than a separate thing. I’ve been lucky to spend a life pretty close to the earth up here in the north. I learned in those three days that the earth is so much more than I ever thought it was. (70-71).



In his vision, Donald begins to see from multiple perspectives, which proceeds into his becoming other creatures. Finally, he loses all sense of *his* spirit or identity, replacing it with an observation about *the* spirit, one complete being. He considers himself lucky to have experienced a life in his northern bioregion, one which kept him bound to a small space of the earth but which also (through his fast) revealed knowledge about the greater universe.

After his death, Donald retains a presence in the character's lives through their encounters with bears, which are mentioned by all of the narrators. Aside from Donald's recollection of the Clarences' involvement with bears—raising them, unwontedly shooting them, tasting or avoiding their meat—Donald himself says, “There are bears all over the Upper Peninsula and people are never sure about their feelings for them. However, the traditional Chippewa are real specific about bears. I won't go into this because it's religious” (41). In his narration, David remarks, “It occurs to me I'm so preoccupied with things that no longer exist [i.e., U.P. forests] it's a specific tonic to see an actual bear” (151). Here David shows his relief in the knowledge that the U.P. landscape, despite having been thoroughly degraded, has persisted and still supports life. Symbolized by the sight of a bear—just as Omakayas saw bears as representatives for the bioregion—this idea of the land resonates with Donald's existence: Despite his physical degradation and death, Donald life also continues, and this is again shown through bears. Soon after David's sighting, he has another bear encounter. He realizes one has come and sat near him. He notes, “In all of my sightings and encounters in my twenty years locally I've never had a bear behave in this manner” (154). The unusual behavior of the bear strikes David, so that he reconsiders his assumptions about the bear's existence. He

slowly leaves for his car: “It was only when I opened the relative safety of the car door that I thought, ‘Maybe it’s Donald’” (155). David is not the only one to wonder; other narrators speculate about the possibility, and Donald’s daughter Clare strongly believes it. The inclusion of bears into Donald’s story, whether manifested through myths, actual encounters, or beliefs, merges the human and nonhuman and suggests a broader definition of personhood as it aligns people with the land they inhabit.

Donald’s story may be one of degradation, but it is ultimately one of continuance. The hole in the ground from which he emerges and the one in which he is buried are not dug in a lifeless soil, but a living earth alimented by the beings in and on it, by past and future generations of dwellers in the land. *Returning to Earth* further extends this idea of an expanded community by beginning with an account of multiple generations of Donald’s ancestors. The novel’s inclusion of four different narrators covering a similar expanse of time intensifies this collective effect, completing Harrison’s depiction of nature as durable community rather than an objective space roamed by isolated individuals.

## CONCLUSION

We are one species, albeit a very powerful one. But we are not alone, and we need a diverse, sometimes violent, sometimes sheltering, sometimes fruitful nature in order to exist.

– Rinda West, *Out of the Shadow*

The novels selected for this project needed to fit one criterion: each must have been set somewhere along the southern shoreline of Lake Superior. I hoped this focus would reveal some common characteristics about the bioregion. I suspected that the novels might together present how life in the area is unique, that the voices of their multiple characters would indicate how place can impress itself upon people by molding perspectives, traits, and actions.

Though separated by different sociohistorical contexts located more than a century apart, the four texts did offer similarities in their treatment of this particular environment. All emphasized a rural, relatively isolated landscape, with small communities (La Pointe and Marquette) nestled among forests. However, plenty of life exists beyond these communities. Whether in wigwams or cabins, main characters find value in life further cut off from already remote towns and villages. This residential choice reflects the characters' attraction to nature, but it also hones their values of independence and self-sufficiency: Old Tallow and Flower live largely by themselves, and they appear to thrive off closer contact to the plants, animals, and natural geography

of the land; when not staying in La Pointe or in group harvesting camps, Omakayas' family learns to rely exclusively on one another; David seeks individuation from his family by returning to the woods, where he can be the lone male hero of his American pastoral fantasy; and Donald and Omakayas go on spiritual retreats, which give them confidence and help them to perceive and strengthen their autonomy. Such time spent closer to physical environments persuades the characters to perceive nature as an entity capable of revealing insights that they could not obtain in the towns.

Other similarities include four seasons, which dramatically change the landscape, and frequent mention of the inland sea that is Lake Superior. But the greatest similarity in the portrayals by Erdrich and Harrison is the way these shifting seasons and sometimes tranquil, sometimes ferocious waters present a dynamic bioregion that continually challenges its inhabitants. Those who live in the land become hardy figures able to withstand scarcity and long, brutal winters. Erdrich highlights this point with solemn depictions of starvation, a rarity for children's literature. She features the challenges posed by the bioregion as much as she does its gifts and comforts. In Harrison's novels, meanwhile, modernization may have buffered direct exposure to harsh environments, yet injured workingmen continually show the demands made by an economically weak area and a still-formidable environment. Cynthia comments that life is hard, but people don't complain, and her observation fits the description of these characters. From Old Tallow, who loses a finger to frostbite, to the crushed, broken, or amputated Yoopers of Harrison's novels, proof of characters' hardiness and their conditioning to a difficult landscape become evident in their stoicism and altered bodies.

Though the climate of the South Superior bioregion is itself enough to challenge any inhabitant, occupancy in the land is met with further adversity: the legacy of colonialism. This is a key bioregional issue because its occurrence altered the physical as well as demographic landscape. Furthermore, the arrival of Anglo-European and Anglo-American cultures introduced new attitudes about the land. Language is landscaping, and as new words privileged different phenomena, condensing or altering perceptions of natural objects and species, so too did views on land use change. *True North* details the result of these changes to the physical land when it describes the rampant, ecologically disastrous mining and logging enterprises of recent history.

Colonization adds further meaning to the idea of hardiness. It posed (and still poses) new threats and challenges for the bioregion's inhabitants and the land itself to endure. Erdrich and Harrison incorporate colonization into their stories in a manner that presents the resiliency of the land and its characters. Though Omakayas must leave the island to avoid the coming *chimookomanag*, she does so with poise and strength. Harrison's novels, set after the environmental destruction of the ensuing decades, show that the land persists; it still provides for Flower and other Anishinaabe characters who have remained. Life continues despite degradation, as Donald's beliefs promote, and the appearance of bears in the land in *Returning to Earth* reassure David that it can recover, that it is hardier and heartier than he may have once thought.

Where Erdrich's characters express the need to keep harvests in balance with nature, and where Harrison's brood over past environmental exploitation, the novels discuss the human impact on the environment. However, neither author directly addresses the ways people affect this bioregion in our current century, now when the scale and

number of environmental threats seem more perilous than before. Surely, in their presentation of the bioregion's hardiness, they do not infer its invincibility; there are limits to what even the most resilient place can sustain. The concern that current human action is bringing us ever closer to surpassing these limits is what initially drove Kirkpatrick Sale to promote bioregionalism. Sale argues that by better learning one's immediate surroundings—to read them, know them, and appreciate them—we may reverse such trends and change some of the detrimental behaviors that are posing dangers to the land and ourselves.

Books have a welcome place in such a theory. Exhorting us to learn the lore of our home places, Sale mentions turning to indigenous oral traditions, but he does not discuss the additional benefits that contemporary literature offers. Readers can learn to see stories about their local area as “new lore.” They can read them to see what sorts of natural systems and species the author emphasizes, thereby increasing their awareness of the bioregion. They can also see if this new lore adapts and retells older stories of the bioregion, and debate whether the author offers new perspectives on the local landscape.

For the South Superior bioregion, these four novels offer all of the above. Louise Erdrich's works incorporate elements of traditional Anishinaabe culture. She honors specific plants and animals, many times including their names in Anishinaabe language, and attempts to faithfully represent how mid-nineteenth century inhabitants used area resources. Her portrayals may invite interested readers to seek out further dialogue with contemporary Anishinaabeg who still follow traditional harvesting techniques, and who may wish to share their traditional ecological (and bioregional) knowledge in an effort to promote sustainable land use.

Harrison's novels offer new perspectives on popular ideas about nature. With David's character, he employs the American pastoral impulse that Annette Kolodny so incisively observes and explains: at first, David desires to be the lone male figure enveloped in a pristine, feminine nature that offers maternal and sexual gratification. Harrison moves toward maturing this impulse as he writes David's growing realization that people are part of nature, and therefore the latter cannot be and never was a private fantasyland, but a community. Like Erdrich, Harrison draws on Anishinaabe tradition to articulate these new points: Donald's spiritual observations support the idea that the human and nonhuman are less distinct categories than traditional western culture has depicted. The pastoral impulse is less viable and probably less appealing in the light of a nature suffused with multiple, connected presences.

This selection of novels provides a small sampling of the literature of the South Superior bioregion. Close reading reveals the influence of this shared setting on the stories and characters. Each novel provides individual perspectives of the area, but just as disparate natural phenomena can be grouped into a unified ecosystem, so can books set in one bioregion combine to enrich and lend nuance to these perspectives. Connecting Erdrich to Harrison, for instance, allows readers to see the changing population as Omakayas' family leaves to evade the group of people who would eventually include David's forefathers. In Harrison's novels, other Anishinaabe characters still remain in the area, looking back on or continuing traditions that connect them to their homeland.

Bioregional literary criticism helps navigate the ecosystem of stories growing amidst the physical environments of a particular place. These stories may be traditional, contemporary, or a combination of both. Categorizing literature according to bioregion

allows readers to better understand and appreciate the diversity of a place; promoting bioregional literacy by reading both words and land, we enrich the perceptions of our homes, which may prove crucial to our survival.

We are not alone in nature; alongside our cohabitation with other species, we continually have stories that inform the understanding of our environments. Studying and celebrating these stories will help keep us grounded in our bioregions, better aware of our impacts on them, and their influences on us.



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