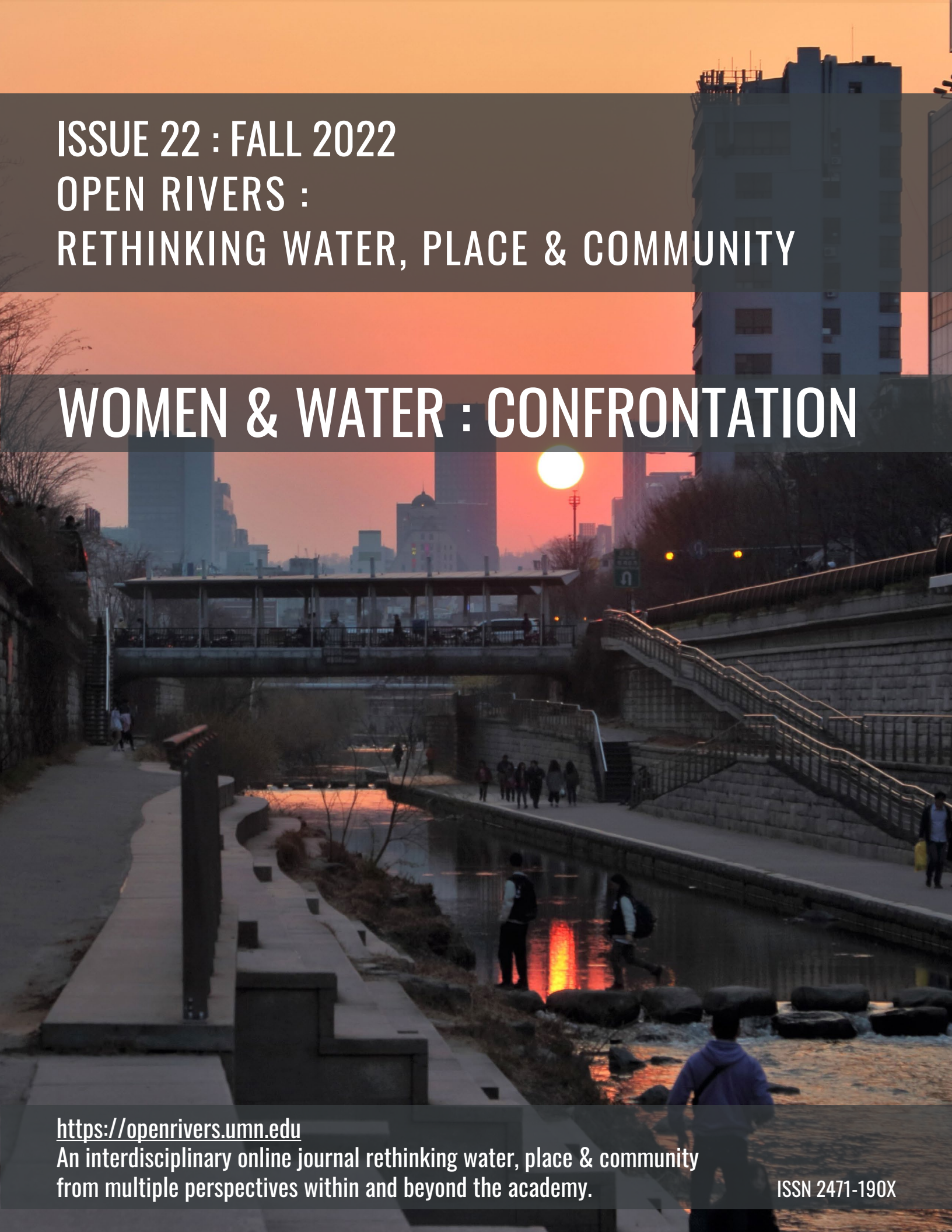
ISSUE 22 : FALL 2022

OPEN RIVERS : RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

WOMEN & WATER : CONFRONTATION



https://openrivers.umn.edu

An interdisciplinary online journal rethinking water, place & community from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

ISSN 2471-190X

The cover image is sunset in Seoul along the Cheonggyecheon stream. Image by Stefan K on Unsplash.

Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community is produced by the University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing Services and the University of Minnesota Institute for Advanced Study.

Editorial Staff

Contact Us

Open Rivers
Institute for Advanced Study
University of Minnesota
Northrop
84 Church Street SE
Minneapolis, MN 55455

Telephone: (612) 626-5054
Fax: (612) 625-8583
E-mail: openrvrs@umn.edu
Web Site: http://openrivers.umn.edu

ISSN 2471-190X

Editorial Board

CONTENTS

IN REVIEW

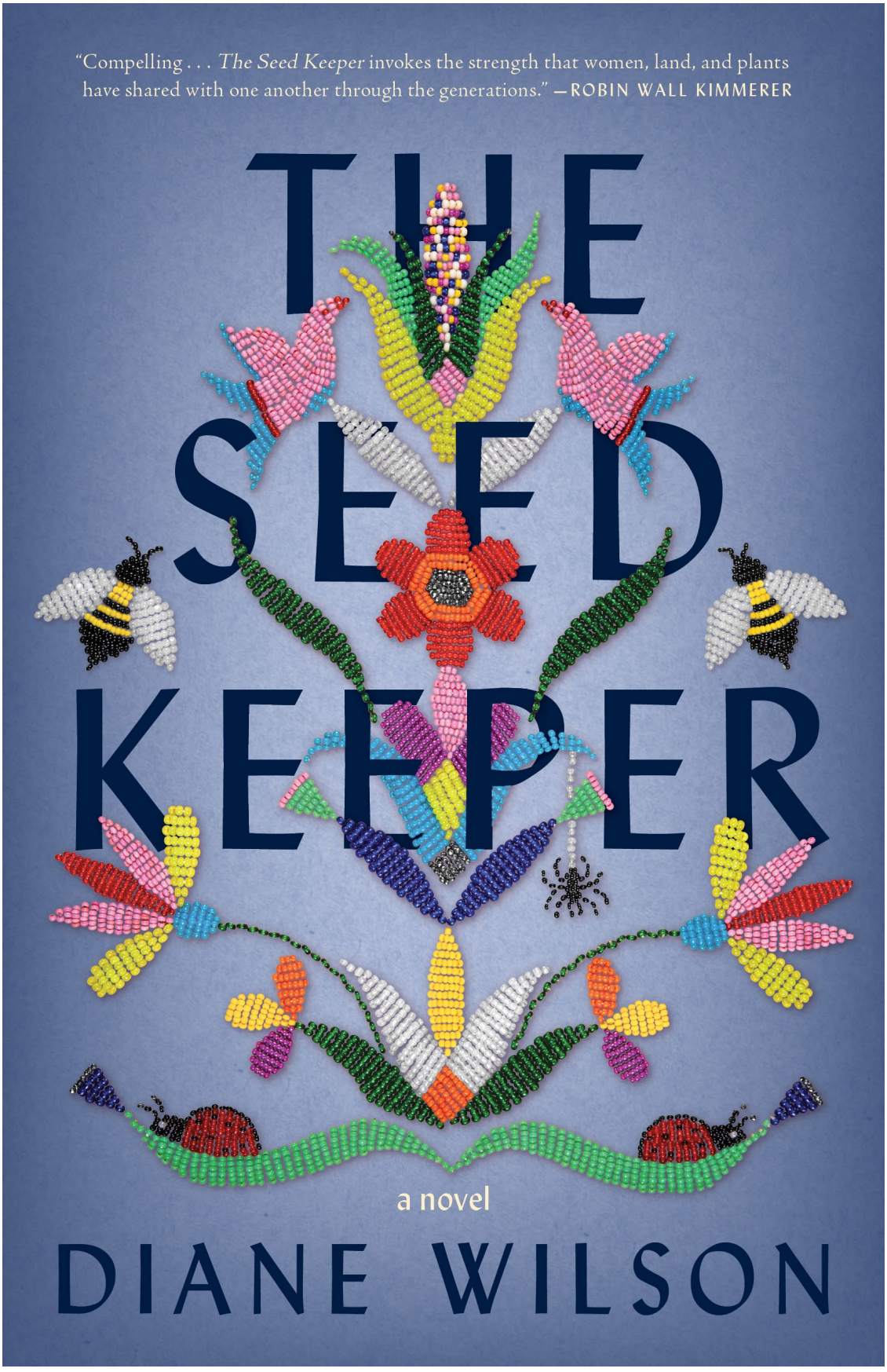
WE ARE ON DAKHÓTA LAND: A REVIEW OF DIANE WILSON'S *THE SEED KEEPER*

By Racquel Banaszak

Diane Wilson's novel, *The Seed Keeper*, explores Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and understanding through multigenerational narratives of Dakhóta women. Each generation is inherently connected to the lands and waters of Mní Sota Wakpá (Minnesota River). Within each generation there lies a balance between holding on and letting go. Each must deal with its own complex issues brought about by settler colonialism and the effects of intergenerational trauma.

In her book, Wilson explores the struggle of being Indigenous in a settler landscape in a variety of ways. One generation is hiding for their lives while the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862 erupts around them. Another generation—born with dark hair and blue eyes—is navigating what it means to survive in this new world: the return of the people to the land, the children removed by government agents, generations scarred by the boarding school systems and the traumas that came with

Bde Wakan/Misi-zaaga'iganiing (Mille Lacs Lake), a place my family always returns to. Image courtesy of Racquel Banaszak.



"The Seed Keeper" by Diane Wilson, published by Milkweed Editions, 2021.

them. Another generation is raised by non-Indigenous families. *The Seed Keeper* weaves together the generations and what they've had to survive in order for the future generations to exist. As an Anishinaabe mother, educator, and artist, I understand that I am a link between my ancestors and future generations. I am obligated to all my relatives, past and present, human and nonhuman. I did not always understand these responsibilities, but they have always been with me.

I was born far from my ancestral homelands, in the land where the prairies meet the mountains on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming. It is an undeniably beautiful place full of big skies, sagebrush, and distant mountains all around. Despite this beauty my family missed the familiar green grasses, rustling oak trees, and flowing waters of Mní Sota Makhóčhe, otherwise known as Minnesota. Similar to the book's Dakhóta family, mine too made the decision to move back closer to the land that we know not just in our minds, but in our spirits as well.

In the novel, Wilson examines what it means to be a person of this land in eloquent, beautiful, and at times heartbreaking ways. As Indigenous people, the land and water define who we are, but we are also defined by those who hold power over them. We have been marred by the legacies of war and capitalism, land cessions and broken treaties, forced removal and genocidal policies, assimilationist agricultural practices and education systems, and disruption of family structures and languages. It is all this and more that we must contend with if we want to hold on to that which makes us Indigenous—our relationships to the land and water.

> *"An Indian farmer, the government's dream come true." (p. 9)*

Throughout *The Seed Keeper,* readers are reminded that there are Indigenous ways of knowing and settler understandings. We are initiated into the life and thoughts of Rosalie Iron Wing, the book's main protagonist. She is a Dakhóta woman who marries a settler man whose family has occupied the very lands in New Ulm, Minnesota that were stolen away from her family following the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862. In spite of the forced exile, boarding schools, and foster care, she is seemingly lucky to be able to live on her ancestral lands. However, always lurking in the background is the underlying question of who the land really belongs to—Dakhóta people or settlers.

While she carries Dakhóta knowledge of the land, plants, and animals with her, she is often at odds with her husband's settler knowledge that is continually shaped by capitalism:

> She has a garden.
>
> He has a farm.
>
> She nourishes the land with her songs.
>
> He feeds it chemical concoctions.
>
> She greets the bird relatives.
>
> He talks to his church community.
>
> She returns to the water and wonders about its health.
>
> He continues his ways, even if it hurts the water we all depend on.
>
> These differences have been shaping the lands for generations.
>
> Settler colonial policies have been shaping the lands for generations.
>
> Generations of Indigenous people have been shaped by settler colonial policies.

Even after the Dakhóta people were starved, hurt, and removed from their homelands, they

Bde Wakan/Misi-zaaga'iganiing (Mille Lacs Lake), a place my family always returns to. Image courtesy of Racquel Banaszak.

continued to be the people of the Mní Sota Wakpá. But when the U.S. government tried to take the children and turn them into Americans, it marked a new turning point.

The book parallels the experiences of many Indigenous families, including my own, who were put through American education systems that forcibly changed our way of relating to each other. Many were removed from their families and given new memories. Like my maternal family, those who kept the old memories alive struggled in this new world filled with hunger pains and cold houses. Those who were given new memories of how to live in this world turned the land into farms with houses, like my paternal family. These are the stories of letting go and holding on that pervade Wilson's narrative.

The old memories are filled with the language and lifeways these lands know. The new memories are spoken in languages these lands do not know. In *The Seed* Keeper, these differences are at odds with each other when their future generation is born of both Dakhóta and settler blood.

> *"[My father] had been trying to warn me about exactly this moment, when a child's heart was a stake." (p. 186)*

Rosalie struggles with what to call her child. Should she call him by a Dakhóta name or an American name? Her internal struggle is soothed in his early years before he goes off to school; they get to be a Dakhóta mother and her child, sharing in the gifts of their plant and animal relatives. Wilson opens up glimpses

Harvesting medicine with my child. Image courtesy of Racquel Banaszak.

Bloodroot blooming in the spring. Image courtesy of Racquel Banaszak.

into the wonders of life between a mother and child—stories of the plants and the changes of the seasons. They rejoice in the stories of their ancestors like the mouse people and beans. They gather plants in the forests along the river—wild ginger, bearberry, hog peanut, and bloodroot. They offer *čhaŋšáša (traditional tobacco)* and are reminded of the gifts of the plant and animal relatives that allow them to live.

Rosalie's struggles intensify when her son becomes a part of the American education system. Schools are sites for the kinds of social problems she experienced, such as being called derogatory names and having to decide how to respond. The names still hurt her, decades later, and now her son has to contend with them as well. There are the problems with curriculum, with whose stories are told and whose are not. There are microaggressions. There is the unwavering reality of being Indigenous in a settler society.

These are hard facts Indigenous people must contend with. As Indigenous people, it makes us uncomfortable to be who we are in our own bodies. Sometimes these struggles define too much of who we are. Some days it hurts more than others. What do we hold on to? What do we let go of? Sometimes it breaks us and sometimes it pushes us.

> *"'People don't understand how hard it is to be Indian,' Carlos said. 'I'm not talking about all the sad history. I'm talking about a way of life that demands your best every single day. Being Dakhóta means every step you take is a prayer.'" (p. 335)*

No matter what, Rosalie Iron Wing will always be Dakota, an Indigenous woman of her ancestral lands. She returns to the Mní Sota Wakpá throughout her life. It is the same water her family has always lived along. It has always been their grocery store, their classroom, and their play area.

As we walk on the lands of Mní Sota Makhóčhe, we must remember that this is Dakhóta land. With every step we take, we are walking on the same places where Indigenous people have lived, eaten, drunk, raised their children, and dreamed since time immemorial. With this knowledge is mind, *The Seed Keeper* reminds us what it means to walk along these lands as an Indigenous person.

Recommended Citation

Banaszak, Racquel. 2022. "We Are On Dakhóta Land: A Review of Diane Wilson's *The Seed Keeper*." *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, no. 22. https://openrivers.lib.umn.edu/article/seed-keeper/.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.24926/2471190X.9686

About the Author

Racquel Banaszak (Bad River Band of Lake Superior Ojibwe) is a visual artist and educator based in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She currently attends the Master of Heritage Studies and Public History program at the University of Minnesota. She earned a graduate certificate in Native American Studies from Montana State University (2018) and a bachelor of science degree from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design (2012). Her work focuses on Indigenous histories, representation, and Indigenous Education for All.