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

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ISSN 2471-190X

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## TEACHING AND PRACTICE

## DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOU ARE?

## By Laura Rockhold

Over recent years I have been on a journey, one that has deepened my understanding of, and engagement with, the Indigenous names of the place I call home: Minnesota. As a writer, poet, and visual artist, much of my work explores themes of interconnectedness between the personal, ecological, universal, and spiritual; I have found naming to be one way of praising, participating, and communing with others and nature and even myself, as so much of who we are is rooted in language and place. Robin

Wall Kimmerer writes in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, "names are the way we humans build relationship, not only with each other but with the living world."[1] In the spirit of these words, the following essay, poem, and images are a reflection on how language and place have the power to shape, change, and connect us. Since Indigenous tradition begins with the land, let us begin with the land.



Pike Island in St. Paul, Minnesota at the Minnesota River (left) and Mississippi River (right) confluence named Bdóte, "where two waters come together" in the Dakota language.

Image courtesy of Laura Rockhold.

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Minnesota is the historical and contemporary homeland of the Dakota and numerous other Indigenous peoples whose cultural, spiritual, and economic practices are intrinsic to this place. The name Minnesota comes from the Dakota name for this region, Mni Sota Makoce, which means "the land where the waters reflect the clouds." Beautiful, true, and yet for the majority of my life, I had no exposure to this name. While I am not of Indigenous heritage, learning of it felt joyous, like a necessary homecoming, but I also grieved the loss.

During the genocidal process of settler colonialism, Indigenous peoples were forced to forsake their languages for English, and lost their languages through displacement, destruction of canonical texts, and other forms of erasure. Until the passing of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act in 1978, forms of cultural expression from tribal nations were outlawed.[2]

In my experience, Minnesota's Indigenous culture was not taught in the public schools I attended in the 1980s and '90s, nor in my childhood home. I lived in a mostly white, middle-class suburb on a block with one small, undeveloped plot designated as sacred Indigenous land even though it lacked appropriate signage; sadly, it became the place where neighbors took their dogs to defecate. Today, support for and access to Indigenous cultural knowledge is improving and I have seen positive changes. For example, Minneapolis' largest lake, Bde Maka Ska, "lake white earth" was returned to its original name in 2018.[3]

In 2020, as a way to pass on the traditions and cultures of the Indigenous peoples of North America, U.S. Poet Laureate Joy Harjo gathered the work of 161 poets representing nearly 100 Indigenous nations into the first historically comprehensive Native poetry anthology. Harjo says,

What is shared with all tribal nations in North America is the knowledge that the earth is a living being, and a belief in the power of language to create, to transform, and to establish change. Words are living beings. Poetry in all its forms, including songs, oratory, and ceremony, both secular and sacred, is a useful tool for the community.[4]

A few years ago, I began to engage more deeply with the Dakota understandings of Mni Sota Makoce by writing poems about my experiences of sacred Dakota places (such as the poem at the end of this essay), and in the summer of 2023, I was invited to read some of these poems at an event hosted by The Witness Project (TWP).

Comprised of Minnesota-based writers, TWP is focused on drawing attention to ecological relationships between humans and nature, and on promoting solutions to systemic racial and economic inequities in Minnesota through community programs, projects, and monthly workshops. The program began in 2013 with the aid of a Minnesota State Arts Board grant and the support of the University of Minnesota's Robert J. Jones <u>Urban Research and Outreach-Engagement Center</u> (UROC). TWP's mission is to amplify all community voices, especially traditionally silenced voices, and facilitate dynamic cross-cultural dialogue.

At TWP workshops, teaching artists lead writing exercises that introduce participants to the creative story elements of genres like fiction, memoir, and poetry. The prompts are designed to engage participants of all experience levels, providing tools to begin their own writing projects. As a participant, I have spent some time speaking with Dakota friends and doing archival research at the Minnesota Historical Society's <u>Gale Family Library</u> and elsewhere to learn more about the Indigenous way of knowing, Indigenous treaty rights, tribal sovereignty, and the historical and contemporary injustices and erasure that continue today.[5]

One place of particular significance to the Dakota is bdóte, "where two waters come together."

While bdóte can refer to any confluence, the Minnesota River (Mnisota Wakpá, "waters that reflect the clouds") and Mississippi River (Hahawakpa, "river of the falls" or Wakpá Tháŋka, "Great River") confluence at Pike Island in St. Paul, Minnesota is the most important bdóte to the Dakota people, a sacred place of physical and spiritual creation. This bdóte is believed to lie directly over the center of the earth and directly under the center of the universe.

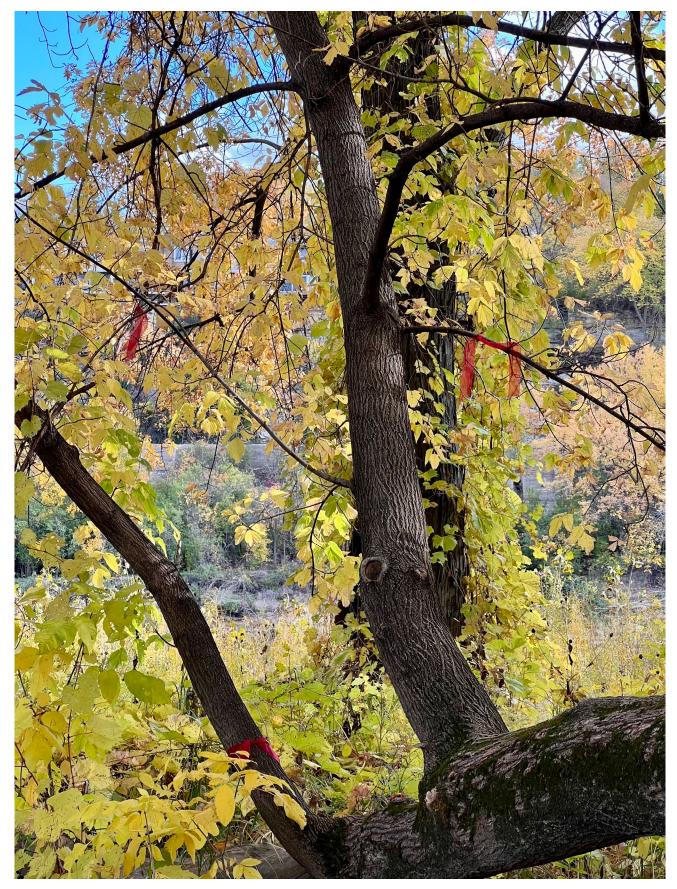
[6] According to oral tradition, the spirits of the seven Dakota tribes descended from Caŋku Wanaġi, "the spirit road" made up of the stars of

the Milky Way, from the seven stars of Orion's belt, the center of the universe. When they arrived on Earth, the Creator shaped the first people from the clay of Maka Ina, "Mother Earth," at Bdóte, the center of the earth. The people are the Oceti Śakowiŋ, "Seven Council Fires," a society that reflects their cosmic origin. [7] Oceti Śakowiŋ tradition tells how the people came to be, teaches that all land and water are sacred, and explains that human beings hold responsibilities to one another, to the land, and to the water at places such as Bdóte. [8]



The Minnesota River and Mississippi River confluence at the tip of Pike Island in St. Paul, named Bdóte, "where two waters come together" in the Dakota language.

Image courtesy of Laura Rockhold.



Prayer ties at Bdóte. Image courtesy of Laura Rockhold.

Bdóte also refers to the surrounding landscape which includes many sacred Dakota sites such as Wita Taŋka (Pike Island), the location of the Bdóte and a place where they hunted, fished, made maple syrup, and gathered. Today, the Dakota still hold ceremonies and remember their ancestors at Wita Taŋka.[9] Other sacred Dakota sites for gathering, ceremony, healing and prayer include: Taku Wakaŋ Tipi (Morgan's Mound) and Wakaŋ Tipi (Carver's Cave), Mni Owe Sni (Coldwater Springs), and Oheyawahi (Pilot Knob).[10]

Minnesota's historic Fort Snelling sits on the bluff at Bdóte and played a central role in the US-Dakota War of 1862. My early Fort Snelling education consisted of touring its grounds, buying rock candy, and watching reenactments of military drills and women churning butter. The terrible reality is that Fort Snelling was a place of genocide, a concentration camp where approximately 300 Dakota people died and 1,600 were imprisoned during the winter of 1862–63 before the survivors were forcibly removed from Minnesota in the spring.[11]

These learnings and the works of those I admire, such as U.S. Poet Laureate Ada Limón, who want to "praise our sacred and natural wonders and also speak to the complex truths of this urgent time," inform and inspire my creative practice, which usually begins with hiking ancient woods



Borer lines in tree bark at Bdóte. Image courtesy of Laura Rockhold.

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American bellflower at Bdóte. Image courtesy of Laura Rockhold.

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and regional trails near my home, listening and paying attention to the world's gifts and teachings.[12] When I learned of the Bdóte, I set an intention to go to the confluence at Pike Island and write about the experience. U.S. Poet Laureate Joy Harjo says, "We are creators of this place with each other. We mark our existence with our creations. It is poetry that holds the songs of becoming, of change, of dreaming, and it is poetry we turn to when we travel those places of transformation."[13]

The gift of my "Confluence" poem below came to me while visiting the Bdóte with my husband and daughter on a clear day in October 2023. Chickadees flitted among the brush. Swaths of borer-laden bark edged the trails like a script

without semantic meaning but the pulse of a universal language. A narrow path through tall grasses led to the confluence at the island's point. Before walking it, I sat on a bench in silence and stillness, amidst red prayer ties undulating on tree branches, the river beyond glinting between the leaves, humbled and awed by all that surrounded me. Native scholar Greg Cajete says we understand a thing only when we understand it with all four aspects of our being: mind, body, emotion, and spirit.[14]

I hope these words encourage us to witness more, to pay attention to our surroundings and, if you are in Mni Sota Makoce, to experience Bdóte—its immanent beauty, its wounds, its offering.

## **CONFLUENCE**

Bdóte, where two waters come together where cottonwood and maple meet in air light October sky on fire where roots grip shoreline's deckled edges holdfast on tentative pages where unseen creatures river infinite script scatter unbroken poems on the path a traceable language closer to listening do you know where you are? indigo stars American bellflower above the understory do you know where you are? vermillion ribbons go softly through tall grass where Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers merge where centers of Earth and Universe converge where bone black driftwood floats where you are even if you have come with nothing

"Confluence" is currently featured in one of my two exhibits at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport now through October 2025. I invite you to visit *Minnesota Waters* at Terminal 1, Gate E8 and *Minnesota Landscapes* at Terminal 1, Gate F10.

#### **Footnotes**

- [1] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Milkweed Editions, 2013).
- [2] Joy Harjo, When the Light of the World was Subdued, Our Songs Came Through: A Norton Anthology of Native Nations Poetry, eds. Joy Harjo, LeAnne Howe, and Jennifer Elise Foerster (W. W. Norton & Company, 2020).
- [3] For more on Indigenous naming in Minnesota, see Erik Martin Redix, "Rivers of Lake Superior's North Shore: Historical Methodology and Ojibwe Dialects," *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community,* no. 26 (Spring 2024), <a href="https://doi.org/10.24926/2471190X.11360">https://doi.org/10.24926/2471190X.11360</a>; and Kachina Yeager, Shelley Buck, and Sage Yeager, "Owámniyomni: Still We Gather," *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community,* no. 27 (Fall 2024), <a href="https://openrivers.lib.umn.edu/article/owamniyomni-still-we-gather/">https://openrivers.lib.umn.edu/article/owamniyomni-still-we-gather/</a>.
- [4] Harjo, When the Light of the World, 2.
- [5] Mike Klein, *Mendota Dakota: Stories of Land and Leadership* produced in collaboration with the Mendota Mdewakanton Dakota Tribal Council, 2021; Mike Klein, *Mendota Dakota: Erasure and Recognition*, produced in collaboration with the Mendota Mdewakanton Dakota Tribal Council, 2021; Čhaŋtémaza (Neil McKay) and Monica Siems McKay, "Where We Stand: The University of Minnesota and Dakhóta Treaty Lands," *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, no. 23 (Spring 2023), <a href="https://openrivers.lib.umn.edu/article/where-we-stand-23/">https://openrivers.lib.umn.edu/article/where-we-stand-23/</a>.
- [6] Bdote Memory Map, Allies: media/art and Minnesota Humanities Center, accessed August 1, 2024, <a href="https://bdotememorymap.org/memory-map/">https://bdotememorymap.org/memory-map/</a>; "Sacred Minnesota: Water Links Dakota Sacred Sites at Bdote," PBS, June 15, 2021, <a href="https://www.pbs.org/video/water-links-dakota-sacred-sites-at-bdote-38788/">https://www.pbs.org/video/water-links-dakota-sacred-sites-at-bdote-38788/</a>; Addie Wright, "Bdote in Mni Sota," Sacred Land Film Project, July 28, 2020, <a href="https://sacredland.org/bdote/">https://sacredland.org/bdote/</a>.
- [7] "Bdote," Historic Fort Snelling, Minnesota Historical Society, accessed August 1, 2024, <a href="https://www.mnhs.org/forts-nelling/learn/bdote">https://www.mnhs.org/forts-nelling/learn/bdote</a>; "Nation: Oceti Sakowin," Native Knowledge 360, Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, 2018, <a href="https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/plains-belonging-nation/oceti-sakowin#:~:text=The%20Oceti%20Sakowin%20Oyate%20(People,Lakota%20%E2%80%940f%20the%20same%20language">https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/plains-belonging-nation/oceti-sakowin#:~:text=The%20Oceti%20Sakowin%20Oyate%20(People,Lakota%20%E2%80%940f%20the%20same%20language">https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/plains-belonging-nation/oceti-sakowin#:~:text=The%20Oceti%20Sakowin%20Oyate%20(People,Lakota%20%E2%80%940f%20the%20same%20language">https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/plains-belonging-nation/oceti-sakowin#:~:text=The%20Oceti%20Sakowin%20Oyate%20(People,Lakota%20%E2%80%940f%20the%20same%20language">https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/plains-belonging-nation/oceti-sakowin#:~:text=The%20Oceti%20Sakowin%20Oyate%20(People,Lakota%20%E2%80%940f%20the%20same%20language">https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/plains-belonging-nation/oceti-sakowin#:~:text=The%20Oceti%20Sakowin%20Oyate%20(People,Lakota%20%E2%80%940f%20the%20same%20language">https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/plains-belonging-nation/oceti-sakowin#:~:text=The%20Oceti%20Sakowin%20Oyate%20Sakowin%20Oyate%20Sakowin%20Oyate%20Sakowin%20Oyate%20Sakowin%20Oyate%20Sakowin%20Oyate%20Sakowin%20Oyate%20Sakowin%20Oyate%20Sakowin%20Oyate%20Sakowin%20Oyate%20Sakowin%20Oyate%20Sakowin%20Oyate%20Oya
- [8] "Bdote," Historic Fort Snelling.
- [9] Bdote Memory Map.
- [10] "Sacred Minnesota"; "Special Places: Confluences Where Great Rivers Merge," Friends of the Mississippi River, November 9, 2018, https://fmr.org/news/2018/11/09/special-places-confluences.
- [11] "The US-Dakota War of 1862," Minnesota Historical Society, accessed August 1, 2024, <a href="https://www.usdako-tawar.org/">https://www.usdako-tawar.org/</a>; "The US-Dakota War of 1862," Historic Fort Snelling, Minnesota Historical Society, accessed August 1, 2024, <a href="https://www.mnhs.org/fortsnelling/learn/us-dakota-war">https://www.mnhs.org/fortsnelling/learn/us-dakota-war</a>.
- [12] Ada Limón, *You Are Here: Poetry in the Natural World*, ed, Ada Limón (Milkweed Editions in association with the Library of Congress, 2024).
- [13] Harjo, When the Light of the World, 1.
- [14] Gregory Cajete, Look to the Mountain: An Ecology of Indigenous Education (Kivaki Press, 1994), quoted in Robin Wall Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants (Milkweed Editions, 2013), 47.

#### **Recommended Citation**

Rockhold, Laura. 2024. "Do You Know Where You Are?." *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, no. 27. https://doi.org/10.24926/2471190X.11749.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.24926/2471190X.11749

#### **About the Author**

Laura Rockhold is a poet and visual artist living in Minnesota. She is a recipient of the Save Our Earth Award by the National Federation of State Poetry Societies, the Bring Back The Prairies Award and Southern MN Poets Society Award by the League of Minnesota Poets, and several International Academy of Visual Arts and Hermes Creative Awards. Her poetry is featured in two exhibits, *Minnesota Landscapes* and *Minnesota Waters*, at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport (thru October 2025) and her work is published in *Birdcoat Quarterly, Cider Press Review, Open Rivers, RockPaperPoem, The Ekphrastic Review, The Fourth River, The Hopper, Waxwing, Yellow Arrow Journal, and elsewhere.* 

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