

Louise Erdrich's Twin Cities: A Literary Mapping



Minneapolis skyline from the Prospect Park Water Tower (Wikimedia Commons)

The Twin Cities—Minneapolis and St. Paul—are in the traditional territories of Bdewákhaw̄thuw̄waj Dakhóta. My interest in the Twin Cities stems from my research on the formation of a place Indigenous peoples call the Deep North and the formation of the settler carceral state. Reporting from Standing Rock, Ojibwe author, farmer, and activist Winona LaDuke wrote, “North Dakota did not become Alabama—or the Deep North, as it is now called—overnight. Native people in North Dakota have been treated poorly for more than a hundred years, whether by the damming of the Missouri and the flooding of millions of acres of tribal land, or by poverty and incarceration, North Dakota is a place of systemic and entrenched racism” (*Indian Country News*, November 29, 2016). The phrase “Deep North” caught my attention because of its allusion to the Deep South. Indeed, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Saskatchewan are places that have been for some time likened to Mississippi and Alabama—that is, as places of acute racism and violence against Indigenous peoples and communities. LaDuke’s work and activism compelled me to think about the Deep North as a historical formation and a place where both the U.S. and Canadian settler states built their carceral capacity. I study it as a cross-border region that includes hundreds of Indigenous homeland reserves and reservations, four U.S. states (Minnesota, South Dakota, North Dakota, Montana), and three Canadian provinces (Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta). But what other ways are these geographies experienced and imagined?

The Twin Cities are also the home of Ojibwe author Louise Erdrich, citizen of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa. Erdrich has published eighteen novels, a collection of short stories, children’s literature, poetry, and literary non-fiction. She is a three-time winner of the National Book Award and of the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction for *The Night Watchman* in 2021. As part of a broader project I am developing in which I seek to collaborate with communities and institutions to undertake a deep mapping of the Twin Cities, with this research I sought to begin

understanding place through literary geographies and the ways in which they correlate with the material making of the Twin Cities and its social worlds, as well as the broader urban and rural Deep North. The literary works of Erdrich offered a rich source to begin this investigation because so much of it is set in Ojibwe and Dakhóta geographies. Through a study of three novels—*Love Medicine*, *The Antelope Wife*, and *Future Home of the Living God*—I collected geographic and affective data on Erdrich’s literary imagining of the Twin Cities. In collecting this data, it quickly became clear that for Erdrich, the Twin Cities are inseparable from the bigger world of Ojibwe and Dakhóta homelands. Her characters move across space and time in a way that constantly reinforces this relationship. To aid this research, I attended a two-week Geographic Information System (GIS) summer institute at the Center for Geographic Analysis at Harvard University where I learned how to use GIS software to make maps. With the skills I gained at the summer institute and the data I have collected so far, I will make a literary map of the Twin Cities and the broader geographies in which they are located as I figure out the best way to express this data. Over time, I will also include other Indigenous and non-Indigenous literary authors who write about the Twin Cities as part of an examination of urban place-making.