

Rooted in Language: A Comparative Study of Place in the Poetry of Louise Erdrich and Lucille Clifton

Najmah N. Althobaity¹

¹ Department of English Literature at the College of Languages, Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University, Riyadh, Saudia Arabia

Correspondence: Najmah N. Althobaity, Department of English Literature at the College of Languages, Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University, Riyadh, Saudia Arabia. E-mail: nnalthubaiti@pnu.edu.sa

Received: February 3, 2026

Accepted: May 12, 2026

Online Published: July 15, 2026

doi:10.5430/wjel.v16n6p191

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v16n6p191>

Abstract

This paper aims to examine the representation of place in the poetry of Louise Erdrich and Lucille Clifton through the theoretical frameworks of phenomenological geography and environmental psychology. It draws on key concepts from Edward Relph, Yi-Fu Tuan, Irwin Altman, Seth Low, and Harlod Proshansky to dissect how Erdrich and Clifton's poetry explore themes of place, identity, history, and memory. Key terms in place theory such as placelessness, topophilia, place attachment, and place identity are applied to representative poems by Erdrich and Clifton. The study also employs close reading and comparative analysis to investigate how the poets construct land as an emotional, historical, and lived place within the framework of place theory. To examine how place is rooted in language, close reading is used to examine poetic devices such as imagery, diction and figurative language.

In addition, the study investigates the consequences of slavery and colonization and their psychological effects from the perspective of place-based theories. It reveals that Erdrich and Clifton share the belief that attachment to land helps preserve cultural identity of Native and African Americans. Nevertheless, they differ slightly on how they depict land emotional attachment. Lucille Clifton's representation of land is marked by longing and geographical separation, while Louise Erdrich's depiction is characterized by grief and land dispossession.

By comparatively analyzing the poetry of Native and African Americans, within a place-based framework, this study contributes to broader academic discussions in place studies, Native and African American criticism, ethnic studies, and Indigenous scholarship. It also demonstrates the interdisciplinary value integrating close reading and comparative analysis with phenomenological geography and environmental psychology approaches to the study of literature.

Keywords: Louise Erdrich, Lucille Clifton, placelessness, topophilia, place identity, place attachment, existence inauthentic mode, cultural place identity

1. Introduction

As a medium, poetry provides poets with a unique opportunity to explore the intricate connection between physical environment and self-identity. Throughout different cultures and eras, poets recognized that the idea of place extends beyond the limits of its physical geography. Through their verse, Native and African American poets disclose how the landscape around them whether a familiar hometown or an ancestral land is deeply connected to their cultural identity. Land, for them, becomes a contested site of identity, memory, and history shaped by colonization and slavery.

During its early period, European colonization brought indigenous people and Africans into new and cruel conditions. With its continued expansion, Native Americans and African slaves came under violence, forced labor, land loss and displacement, though their experiences differed in various ways. This geographical and historical experience formed the meaning of land for Native and African Americans. Both groups had to struggle to keep their cultures and connections to land since the ancestral lands are directly tied to their sovereignty and cultural survival.

Throughout US history, Native Americans endured home loss, displacement, and struggle for cultural survival. Since the beginning of the founding of the United States and continuing in the twenty-first century, the United States has resulted in torture, terror, massacres, systematic military takeover of indigenous lands, the forced removals of indigenous peoples from their ancestral territories, and the separation of children from their families to be placed in military-like boarding schools (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2015; Kliegl, 2023; White, 2024). The lands of some Native nations, including those of the Sioux in the Dakotas and Minnesota and the Ojibwes in Minnesota, have been divided into several reservations, while some fifty indigenous nations that had been removed to Oklahoma were divided by the federal government into individual Native-owned allotments. This place allotment and dislocation affected people's economy and way of life (Bobroff, 2001; Child, 2012). However, the Ojibwe practiced some survival strategies that protected their culture and identity. They enacted their sovereignty through the negotiated treaties which protected their seasonal subsistence-based labor, hunting, fishing and fur

trade (Norrgard, 2014).

In the context of African American history, the experience of slavery entailed not only the forced removal of African Americans from their homelands but also a deep rupture in their identity. During the Atlantic slave trade, some 10.7 million Africans are estimated to have survived their ocean voyage, with some 10.5 million landing in the Americas (Felipe-Gonzalez, 2024; Richardson, 2016). Between 1500 and 1867, the largest oceanic forced migration in history took place and Africans from Senegambia, Sierra Leone/the Windward Coast, the Gold Coast, the Bight of Benin, the Bight of Biafra, and West Central Africa (Kongo, Angola) were taken by force and shipped to Europe and the Americas (Eltis et al., 2004; Rediker, 2008; Richardson, 2016). While many enslaved Africans died, millions of them made their way across the Atlantic to be auctioned to the highest bidder on the auction blocks of several American southern cities. As a challenge to their identity, slaves were forced to adapt to different climates, languages, class structures, and harsh working conditions and subsequently, they inherited the same system of racism and exploitation but in a modern version (Hinson, 2018; Sharpe, 2009). Like the case of Ojibwe people, African Americans realized the role of the land in their financial independence and autonomy. Some of them started to have their own farms after they gained their freedom, especially in the southern states. They believed that self-reliance and autonomy can be attained through landownership which eventually would save the race (Schweninger, 2012).

The Ojibwe poet Louise Erdrich and the African American poet Lucille Clifton both explore the theme of place and its relation to their cultural history and identity. While Erdrich writes about the landscape of loss, displacement, and forced removal, Clifton explores the place of enslavement, betrayal, injustice, and nostalgia. They use poetry to reclaim and redefine place in the face of cultural erasure and historical dislocation. They make homeland an important site of personal and collective meaning.

Lousie Erdrich was born in 1954 in Little Falls, Minnesota. Her mother was enrolled member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Ojibwe (it is also called Anishinaabe and Chippewa), and her father was the son of German immigrants. Erdrich has published three volumes of poetry: *Jacklight* (1984), *Baptism of Desire* (1989) and *Original Fire: Selected and New Poems* (2003). In these works, she shows the Native individual's struggle to keep their Ojibwe spirituality and cultural identity in the face of European colonialism. Place becomes a central theme in Erdrich's poetry where she portrays the interconnectedness of Ojibwe land and ancestral memory.

Lucille Clifton was born in 1936 in DePew, New York. She studied at Howerd University, then transferred to SUNY Fredonia. Her father worked for the New York steel mills and her mother was a domestic worker and wrote poetry as a hobby. Her literary works include *Good Woman: Poems and a Memoir, 1969-1980* (1987), *Next: New Poems* (1987), *Two-Headed Woman* (1980), *Blessing the Boats: New and Selected Poems, 1988-2000*, and *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton 1965-2010*. Place, homeland, and memory are central themes in the poetry of Lucille Clifton where she connects them to the formation of African American identity.

During the trails of tears and middle passage, Native and African Americans underwent loss of homeland and disruption of identity and place. Place experience of Native Americans is defined in part by boarding schools, reservations, and trail of tears. By contrast, place experience of African Americans is outlined by slavery whether in the African seashores, the middle passage, or the American plantations. The displacement which Native and African Americans have gone through affected the collective psyche of the individual. Lousie Erdrich and Lucille Clifton write about their affinity for a place that is very deeply connected to their cultural history. Through cultural memory and descriptive and figurative language they transform the geographical locations into meaningful symbols and emotional landscapes.

This paper discusses how Native American poet Louise Erdrich and African American poet Lucille Clifton represent place and how it is connected to their cultural identity. It seeks to show how their shared and different place experiences are shaped by their cultural histories. It attempts to answer these two questions: how do Louise Erdrich and Lucille Clifton experience place and communicate the experience through poetry? And how does place experience shape their place identity?

The study is framed by major theoretical concepts from the work of the phenomenological geographers Edward Relph and Yi-Fu Tuan and by the environmental psychologists Harold Proshansky, Setha Low, and Irwin Altman. Place theory focuses on how people develop an emotional experience with place and how place creates a sense of belonging and attachment. It also provides an essential framework for understanding place identity and placelessness. Thus, the study relies on phenomenological geography and environmental psychology as its main approaches. Methodologically, it applies close reading and comparative analysis to examine the depiction of place through imagery, diction, and figurative language. Through close reading, the analysis investigates how Erdrich and Clifton transform spaces into places that are emotionally connected to identity, history, and memory.

The research addresses a key gap by applying place theory to the work of Erdrich and Clifton examining their poetry through place-based theoretical concepts such as place identity, place attachment, placelessness, and topophilia. It builds on previous research in literary criticism by offering close thematic analysis of culture, history, and memory in relation to place. It positions the poetry of Erdrich and Clifton within one theoretical framework that situates place as a central factor of identity formation, a unique comparative approach that remains underexplored in existing scholarship. Drawing on phenomenological geography and environmental psychology, and employing close reading and comparative analysis, this study expands the critical discourse around the poetry of Erdrich and Clifton positioning it within a broader framework of place and identity formation.

2. Literature Review

Scholarship on the poetry of Lucille Clifton and Louise Erdrich has explored various themes such as identity, spirituality, ecology, and cultural memory, but a comparative study of the two poets particularly from the lens of place theory remains underexplored. The

following studies provide useful insights while underscoring this gap.

Leni Marshall (2015) and Tanfer Emin Tunç (2009) examine the representation of the female body and its relation to self-perception in the work of Lucille Clifton. In her book *Age Becomes Us: Bodies and Gender in Time*, Leni Marshall studies the theme of aging and female bodies in Doris Lessing's *The Diaries of Jane Somers*, Lucille Clifton's poetry, and Louise Erdrich's *Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*. She argues that Clifton portrays aging as sign of endurance and self-knowledge and as a site of agency. Tanfer Emin Tunç's article "The Poetics of Self-Writing: Women and the National Body in the Works of Lucille Clifton" discusses how Clifton uses her self-writing-specifically her autobiography *Generations* (1976) and her body poetry to rewrite the American narrative to include a black feminist perspective. Unlike place, themes of identity in its connection to race, gender and ethnicity occupy a central position in Marshall and Tunç's critical studies.

In "The African American Woman Poet Lucille Clifton: A Feasibility, a Manifestation of Self-Awareness" Devika and Lakshmiathan (2022) discuss Clifton's proud acknowledgement of her identity as seen in her poem "Won't you celebrate with me?" Despite the authors' affirmation that the poet had been historically exiled from homeland Africa and suffered identity crisis, they fail to place Clifton's poem within the framework of place theory highlighting the connection between the sense of belonging and identity- the main focus of the present study.

The book *Wild Blessings: the Poetry of Lucille Clifton* by Hilary Holladay (2004) is considered a foundational book on the work of Clifton. The author explores the thematic concerns that unify Clifton's poetry and memoir. In the book, Holladay mainly discusses Clifton's poems about womanhood, biblical poems, and her use of the elegy. She approaches Clifton's poetic themes from an interdisciplinary literary critical framework overlooking the geographical and psychological aspects of her place representation. Similarly, in "Black Names in White Space: Lucille Clifton's South," Hilary Holladay (2002) examines how Clifton employs the South in her poetry as a symbolic site. She states that the South enables the poet to address two subjects: slavery and its impact on American life and language and its role in shaping our knowledge, ourselves, and others. Although Holladay's two mentioned works are important in Clifton studies, they remain a critical voice that requires current theoretical basis.

Although Louise Erdrich's literary career started with poetry, her novels received the overwhelming focus of literary criticism due to the extensive list of her fiction work. While Erdrich's poetry articulates strong sense of place and emotional attachment to her ancestral land, studies on her poetry of place remain scarce. Most literary criticism on Erdrich's poetry address the theme of identity from the angle of Erdrich's bicultural heritage and hybrid mythology. It is rarely connected to human relationships with places. Mar á Porras Sánchez (2019) in "Hybrid mythologies: Identity and Heritage in the Poetry of Louise Erdrich," for example, explores the presence of aboriginal and classical myths in the poetry of Louise Erdrich. She interprets them as symbol of her double cultural heritage –Native American and German American– and examples of her perception of identity. She argues that Erdrich constructs identity through the blending of Ojibwe and Western mythologies. Porras Sánchez undermines the sense of place and its role in identity formation in Native American epistemologies.

Similarly, P. Jane Hafen (1996) in "Sacramental Language Ritual in the Poetry of Louise Erdrich" and Ninge Engelen (2019) in "Eating or Being Eaten: The Poetic Mythology of Louise Erdrich" argue that Erdrich relies on language and Native American ritual to explore the identity formation of the Native American individual. Hafen and Engelen add that Erdrich's poetry is built on a poetic mythology that reemploys the dynamic of the Trickster and the Wiindigoo, a tool by which she resists the settler-colonial narrative. The studies overlook the fact that for Erdrich, the Ojibwe land and history are behind the identity formation of the Native individual.

David Stirrup's article "I thought I would be sliced in two: Towards ageocultural poetics" (2010) provides important details on the bicultural aspects of Erdrich's poetry. Stirrup tackles the cultural factors that shaped Erdrich's attachment to land. He asserts that cultural landscape of her Ojibwe ancestors and oral stories, the Midwest immigrant farming communities, the urban influence of Minnesota, and the academic training she underwent are what formed the poet's sense of place. The study links land to identity without drawing on theories of phenomenological geography or environmental psychology.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by phenomenological geography and environmental psychology as theoretical frameworks for examining the representation of place in the poetry of Louise Erdrich and Lucille Clifton. Both theoretical lenses understand place not merely as a physical location, but as a meaningful, emotional, and lived experience that is informed by identity, memory, and history.

Phenomenological geography, exemplified in the work of Edward Relph and Yi-Fu Tuan views place as a space that acquires meaning through lived experience. Edward Relph's concept of placelessness refers to a weakening of place identity to the point that places start to look and feel alike and offer similar uninspiring experiences (1976). For Relph, places derive their importance from the value people assign to them. The beliefs people hold about place affect their acts which in turn give character to a place.

Yi-Fu Tuan's notion of topophilia means the emotional bond between people and place (1974). It can take the form of nostalgia, aesthetic pleasure, spiritual attachment, and attachment to home or neighborhood. Relph's and Tuan's concepts are useful in analyzing land affective bonds and spatial dislocation in the poetry of Louise Erdrich and Lucille Clifton.

Environmental psychology further strengthens this framework through Irwin Altman and Setha Low's concept of place attachment. They define the term as the symbolic relationship through which people assign shared cultural and emotional meanings to a particular place

shaping individual and collective relationships with the environment (Altman & Low, 1992). Place attachments provide people with a sense of unique cultural identity which is a bond that can be emotional, cognitive, or behavioral and it can be between individuals or groups. The framework of environmental psychology enables the study to explore the affective connection between poetic speakers and their ancestral land and the way this relationship constructs their cultural identity.

The study also draws on the work of the environmental psychologist Harold Proshansky. He introduced the term place identity describing it as a sub-structure of self-identity shaped by a person's perceptions and understandings of the physical world in which the person lives (Proshansky et al., 1983). Human personal history with places is the core of how people or individuals think of and interact with their physical settings. Physical environment plays a major role in identity formation (Proshansky, 1978). Proshansky's term is very valuable to this study since it defines the relationship between the identity of the poetic speakers and their physical environment. It also shows the poetic speakers' viewpoint on colonization and land dispossession.

The theoretical framework of phenomenological geography and environmental psychology focuses on people's connection to their physical environment and the way this bond affects their identity. Key concepts in place theory such as placelessness, topophilia, place attachment, and place identity are applied to some representative poems by Erdrich and Clifton. The aim of applying place-based approach is to explore the ways in which the two poets reflect the interplay between place and identity in relation to memory and history.

4: Methodology

This study adopts the framework of phenomenological geography and environmental psychology, drawing extensively from the foundational place theories of Edward Relph, Yi-Fu Tuan, Irwin Altman, Setha Low, and Harold Proshansky. It employs phenomenological geography to examine how place is experienced in Erdrich and Clifton's representative poems. Environmental psychology, however, is applied to analyze emotional attachment, place identity, and the psychological meaning connected to land.

The analytical method of the study is based on a close reading of Louise Erdrich and Lucille Clifton's depiction of place and identity. It involves analyzing the connection between poetic speakers and historical /cultural locations such as Ojibwe land, Turtle Mountains, North Dakota, Dahomey, and Wydah. The analysis pays a careful attention to the history of colonization and slavery and its impact on poetic speakers. It also examines themes of home longing, grief, collective memory, and attachment to places.

At the same time, the study analyzes the literary techniques of the poets such as figurative language, imagery, tone, and diction to reveal the way Erdrich and Clifton construct meaning of place, identity, history and memory in their poetic work. It also incorporates a comparative analysis through which it examines the ways Erdrich and Clifton portray the theme of place. The poets' representation of place and identity in relation to history and memory is the focus of the present study. By integrating a theoretical framework with close textual analysis, the study expands place studies by placing the poetry of Louise Erdrich and Lucille Clifton within its critical scope.

5: Literary Analysis

In Native American world view, home is understood as a physical space, ranging from a house, over homeland, to the Mother Earth, and as an abstract space such as family, body, language, literature, art, or any other phenomenon where a person finds comfort, security and sense of identity (Krivokapić, 2022). It represents a central space of origin, belonging, protection, and emotional sustenance. It shapes an individual's first connection to the world (Maracle, 2000). In her poetry, Louise Erdrich pictures the ancestral land, which was inhabited by the Ojibwe for centuries, as inseparable from their Native American identity which is defined by people's collective history and memory.

In the title poem, "Jacklight," Louise Erdrich locates the setting of the poem in nature for two reasons. The first is to capture the initial arrival of the European colonists and the second is to highlight the strong connection between the Ojibwe people and their land. She employs a highly figurative language to reveal the place identity of the poem speaker. The setting of the poem draws attention to the lost Ojibwe land and exposes the aftermath of the European colonization on her people. The poem starts with the extended metaphor "We have come to the edge of the woods, / out of brown grass where we slept, unseen" (1984, p. 3). Besides being a refrain that has been repeated throughout the poem, these two lines work as a metaphor. It shows the similarities between the situation of the couple who left their safe place inside the wood and the Ojibwe who were forcefully removed from their land. In these very first lines, the poet depicts the speaker's emotional connection to the place and how she finds it as source of safety and protection. Whereas the repetition of the word "out" signifies the loss of the land, the words 'shut' and 'hiding' stand for security and safety which the speaker finds in the wood (Erdrich, 1984, p. 3). In the poem, the couple were out in danger, after they left their natural sanctuary. They become exposed under the settler's fist of light that divided and separated them. The settler was using jacklight to hunt their game. The poet says, "we have come to the edge of the woods, / drawn out of ourselves by this night sun, /...that outshines the moon" (Erdrich, 1984, p. 3). She employs oxymoron in "night sun" and hyperbole in "outshines the moon" to show the invading force of the jacklight. The 'fist of light' stands for European colonization. The evocative symbolic language in "drawn out of ourselves" shows how the land symbolizes both memory and affection for the speaker. They are strongly attached to the land, and it becomes part of them. A relationship that Edward Relph describes as a close attachment to place and defines it as "a familiarity that is part of knowing and being known *here*, in this particular place" (1976, p. 37, *emphasis in original*). Most importantly, Erdrich's work destabilizes Eurocentric conceptions of time and space while affirming tribal identity (Ramaraju, 2025).

To further reveal the depth of the land attachment, the poem speaker displays a sensory experience of the wood. In the speaker's

description of the colonizer, they say, “They are faceless, invisible. / We smell the raw steel of their gun barrels, / mink oil on leather, their tongues of sour barley” (Erdrich, 1984, p.3). The speaker in these lines has a full awareness of the natural changes that happened to the Ojibwe land and of the killing of animals and exploitation of their fur. The sense of sight in ‘faceless, invisible’ and the sense of smell in ‘gun barrels,’ ‘mink oil,’ and ‘sour barley,’ confirms that the speaker has a meaningful experience of her place. According to Tuan, experience shapes place and it requires physical senses such as kinesthesia, sight, and touch and this repeated sensory experience is what forms place attachment. The five senses enhance each other and provide us with an emotional and meaningful experience of the world in which we live (1977).

The place that Erdrich describes in “Jacklight” is a historical place where the Ojibwe had lived peacefully for centuries. She says, “We have come here too long” (1984, p.4). The strong sense of place identity and belonging to the ancestral land is a major theme in Erdrich’s poem and she reveals it through rich figures of speech. Her identification with her ancestors’ land is her tool to keep her culture alive. Place is a fundamental component of the poet’s life. She believes that through our close study of a place and its people, crops, dialects, fears and failure, we move closer to our understanding of our reality. Location, whether to come close to it or to leave it behind, it determines where we start (Erdrich, 1999). Her perspective on the value of place aligns with Relph’s and Tuan’s theory. They state that the spirit of place can be explored when place is conceived as a multifaceted and complex experience and when its different aspects such as location and scenes are observed. Additionally, Relph and Tuan emphasize personal involvement in a place. Erdrich’s land perspective was formed in some way by her grandfather, Gourneau when he was the tribal chairman for the Ojibwe tribe and his efforts to save the Chippewa’s land from being sold as a private land. This incident instilled in Erdrich the critical relationship between Ojibwe survival and the land (Kurup, 2016).

In “Dear John Wayne,” Erdrich unveils the speaker’s attachment to the past places of the Ojibwe people through her reliance on collective memory. She pictures the battles between Native Americans and Europeans and how the latter die “tumbling like dust weeds / into the history that brought [them] all here / together: this wide screen beneath the sign of the bear” (1984, p. 12). These historical wars bring Native people and the colonizers together to witness the inevitable destiny where they must live on the same land. The ‘signs,’ ‘wide screen’ and ‘sign of the bear’ indicate certain connotation. They combine very distinct cultural places. One place is modernized through technology and the other still carries the sense of indigenous people’s cultural heritage and political sovereignty. In the poem, some Native Americans are watching a film that is starred by John Wayne whose face is described as ‘pitted’ like the land and full of ‘vengeance’ (Erdrich, 1984, p. 12). To highlight the memory of the ancestral place, the poet uses simile in the first and second example. The word ‘like’ indicates dream-like reality that resembles faint memory. The speaker remembers that the land was alive and flourishing before the arrival of the Europeans. Through the space of the colonizer’s ‘wide screen’ and Native American’s ‘sign of the bear,’ Erdrich rejects placelessness and an inauthentic mode of existence. According to Edward Relph, an inauthentic mode of existence is the situation in which individuals and societies fail to experience the world and its places for what they are (1976). Highlighting her people’s history, especially their war with the colonizer reveals that Erdrich is attached to Ojibwe’s places and culture. In fact, the fight to keep the native culture alive is fought by all colonized people. Their past and present were controlled by the colonizer who had first captured the land then rewrote history to appear in that history as the true owner of the land (Said, 2000).

Another location that influences Erdrich’s place experience is Turtle Mountains, Indian Reservation in Belcourt, North Dakota. Through this place, Erdrich defines the meaning of home for Ojibwe people. In “Indian Boarding School: The Runaways,” she pictures Turtle Mountains in North Dakota as unreachable home, which exists only in people’s dreams. The poem describes the situation of Native children who are forced to leave their families and when they try to walk the rails and go home, the sheriff takes them back to the reservation. The loss of the Ojibwe land which the speaker is still attached to is behind the speaker’s grief and pain. Erdrich pictures the children watching through cracks in boards while the land is rolling (1984, p. 11). The word ‘rolling’ signifies land appropriation and forced displacement. According to Setha Low, “place attachment through loss or destruction is activated retrospectively, through the process of losing the place and the subsequent reminiscing and re-creating through memory of a place that is now destroyed, uninhabited, or inaccessible” (1992, p.167). The attachment to the place of the ancestors is called cultural place attachment, which Low defines it as the transformation of place experience into a culturally shared and meaningful symbol (1992). This type of place attachments provides people and groups with a sense of unique cultural identity. For this reason, Erdrich asserts that Native American writers have a very different task that distinguishes them from that of other writers. She contends that because of the immense loss of their native ways of lives, Native American writers must tell the stories of survivors and protect what remains of the core of their culture (1999). When Native American authors write about the stories of the survivors, they preserve history and assert sovereignty. It is related to the itching metaphor in Wendy Rose’s book *Itch Like Crazy*, in which she asserts Native Americans need to search for identity and place in their ancestors’ history (Godfrey, 2009).

In “Indian Boarding School: The Runaways,” the speaker expresses her feelings of topophilia and placelessness. The love of the ancestral place and the grief over the loss of the land are embedded in the symbolic meaning of the words ‘rails’ and ‘lacerations.’ Around these two spaces, Erdrich tries figuratively to build her home. She employs vivid images to describe the effects of modernization on her homeland. The rails cut through the Native land just like “old lacerations” that cut through the skin. The ‘old lacerations’ are a metaphor for colonization, specifically about dislocation and land loss. In the poem, Erdrich writes, “The rails, old lacerations that we love, / shoot parallel across the face and break / just under Turtle Mountains” (1984, p.11). Erdrich’s lines express topophilia in its most extreme intensity, subtlety, and creative manner of expression. Both the love of the land and the grief over its loss are expressed in a figurative

language that transcends the meaning of topophilia and place attachment. The lacerations are metaphors for trails, but they cut through the face instead of the soil. The rails are meant to break the land and the spirit of Ojibwe people. They are described as scars on the soul that lead people to their homeland, a description that reveals the depth of the wound that the speaker feels. Erdrich constructs her historical places from scars, old injuries, and spines. Proshansky et al. contend that groups who are displaced from their homes because of governmental or social interventions often feel lost in their new environment and yearn for the old home and its surroundings (1983). The speaker's longing for tribal land affirms her attachment to the place and her strong place identity.

Similarly, Lucille Clifton's use of diction and imagery reflects her profound bond with her African ancestral land. In "ca'line's prayer," the speaker describes the life of Clifton's great-great-grandmother Caroline Donald, who was born in Dahomey, West Africa in 1822. Along with other Africans, Caroline was kidnapped by slave traders and brought by ship to America. So, in the poem, Clifton remarkably shows the poem speaker's connection to two distinct historical places. In the first place, we can see Caroline becoming old in an unpleasant country. The speaker feels alienated from the place in which she dwells:

i have got old
in a desert country
i am dry
and black as drought
don't make water
only acid
even dogs won't drink. (Clifton, 2012, p.53)

The 'desert country' is lifeless and the speaker seems to be on the verge of death. Most importantly, the speaker lacks positive feelings towards this place. The poet's choice of diction and imagery reinforces the physical deterioration of the speaker and her surroundings. The word 'desert' serves as the physical setting of the poem and a metaphor which shows the place as unfriendly and unwelcoming. The images of 'old,' 'dry,' and 'black' in a country that lacks water represent fragility, emotional negligence, and racial identity. These images signify the placelessness which the speaker experiences in America. According to Tuan's concept of topophilia, the speaker fails to have a total experience of the place and to employ her five senses to form an emotional tie to the place. Thus, she experiences shallowness and place alienation. Furthermore, the speaker has an inauthentic attitude to America as a place because she lacks a genuine and deep experience with it and a deep symbolic meaning of the place and its identity (Relph, 1976). Relph believes that one of the reasons for such inauthenticity with places is the life in industrialized and mass societies which incorporate mass values and impersonal planning in all their social, economic, and physical forms (1976). In her real life, Lucille Clifton never identifies herself with cities. When taking Baltimore city as an example, we can see how she considers herself as a poet who lives in Baltimore and not a Baltimore poet (Burkhardt, 2021).

In the second stanza of "ca'line's prayer," Caroline appears as a lovely child running in the town of Dahomey. Dahomey as a place in this part of the poem is very different from the desert country that is mentioned in the previous stanza. It is a place of beauty, prosperity, and blossoming:

remember me from wydah
remember the child
running across dahomey
black as sweet papaya
juicy as sweet berries. (Clifton, 2012, p.53)

Instead of the 'drought' and 'dry' place in America, the speaker sees 'sweet' and 'juicy' papaya and berries in Dahomey. The images that Clifton employs in this stanza are opposite from the ones she used in the first stanza. The imagery which she utilizes here is essential in revealing the speaker's connection to her place. The visual image in 'black' and 'running,' suggests freedom and sovereignty while the gustatory imagery in 'sweet' and 'juicy' symbolizes liveliness and beauty. The two images reflect the speaker's familiarity with her hometown, Dahomey. Her attachment to her hometown is emotional since the place becomes a source of memories and sustenance (Tuan, 1974). In her place experience, the speaker integrates feeling with thought, which consists with the human condition. Human place experience is composed of memory, anticipation, and sensory impacts (Tuan, 1977). Clifton represents place as a means of empowerment for African Americans. It gives them meaning and asserts their authority in a world that has "deemed black populations and their attendant geographies as 'ungeographic' and/or philosophically undeveloped" (McKittrick, 2006, p. xiii).

The affective ties which the child has with her hometown Dahomey is topophilia which Tuan describes as the emotional transformation of abstract space into meaningful place (1974). While the word 'black' signifies racial identity in the first stanza, it indicates pride and connection to place in the second stanza. The speakers' memories and feelings related to Dahomey constitute her place identity. It is this symbolic relationship with the place which evokes her cultural valued experience (Low, 1992). In "Invention, Memory, and Place," Edward Said contends that to preserve the cultural history, colonized people need to explore the collective memory of their race,

community, religion, and family to discover their own history (2000).

Through the representation of history and identity, Clifton constructs her distinctive places where African Americans can remember their past, reach to their roots, and understand their present situations. She views slavery, violence, marginalization, discrimination, and the ongoing disenfranchisement that African Americans endure as sources of powerful traditions. Past experiences function as a means of cultural resistance that have benefited the entire society whether the traditions of her own family history or the larger collective history of the people (Harding, 2014). Clifton is among the African American poets who translates “personal experience into cultural work that questions oppressive systems and opens up new avenues for understanding history, identity, and community” (Mohammed & Fattah, 2025, p.2342).

In the poem “the ‘70s,” Clifton shows how the speaker’s place attachment evolves from intense love of the place to a deep longing for the hometown Wydah, west of Africa. In the poem, the speaker drives through New England and suddenly remembers the fruits and gardens of Wydah. She says,

i long for the rains of wydah
and the gardens
ripe as history
oranges and citron

limefruit and African apple. (Clifton, 2012, p.86)

The speaker’s nostalgia and yearning for home makes Wydah an intimate place where she finds happiness and emotional sustainment. Tuan defines intimate places as the “places of nurture where our fundamental needs are heeded and cared for without fuss” (1977, p.137). Therefore, Wydah, for the speaker, is a home not just a space. The poet emphasizes the idea of the gardens of Wydah as a home through the stanza’s soft and hushed tone which is reinforced by the sensory imagery and musicality of the language. What comes before the garden is rain. So, the poet’s use of the word ‘rain’ is symbolic. Rain usually stands for life and growth. So, the speaker longs for the space which becomes a place (garden) through the rain. The visual images of the garden and its colorful fruits reinforce the speaker’s emotional connection to the place. The use of assonance sound of the long ‘i’ in ‘I,’ ‘rains,’ ‘ripe,’ ‘history,’ ‘limefruit,’ and African’ enhances the musicality of the lines. And the visual images of the words ‘rain,’ ripe’ and ‘limefruit’ add to the sensory experience that the speaker has in the garden. The pronoun ‘I,’ and the words ‘history,’ and ‘African’ affirm the speaker’s place cultural identity. In the last three lines of the same poem, Clifton asserts her racial identity in the way she views the place; Wydah. She differentiates between springtime and fruits and plants of Wydah and the springtime and wheatfields of New England. Wydah for the speaker isn’t only the past of her childhood, but the home she loves and longs for. Wydah represents also a cultural symbol. In her book *Generations: A Memoir*, Clifton writes, “I look at my husband and our six children and I feel the Dahomey women gathering in my bones” (2021, p.2). In the poem “hag riding” she writes, “maybe it is the afrikan in me / still trying to get home” (2012, p.495). Her insistence on connecting with Africa and her family history is what defines Clifton’s cultural place identity. According to Proshansky et al., place identities in different ethnic groups within certain cultures expose not only distinct ways of experiencing place and space, but also corresponding differences in the social values and meaning which underlie the use of those spaces (1983).

Like Erdrich, Clifton depicts her people’s collective memory that is embedded in land and sea. She displays place-oriented memory rooted in loss and survival for both African and Native Americans. She reflects on the historical trauma of the trail of tears and the middle passage. In “the news,” she writes,

the bodies broken on
the trail of tears
and the bodies melted
in the middle passage
are married to rock and

ocean by now. (Clifton, 2012, p.88)

Clifton refers to the forced removal and killing of Native Americans in the trail of tears and the transatlantic slave trade that brought Africans to America under inhumane conditions in what is called the middle passage. The bridge that Clifton forms between the collective memory of Native and African Americans and America reflects the speaker’s cultural place identity. Although the ‘bodies’ were ‘broken’ and ‘melted,’ they reject erasure and choose to be part of the natural place in which they live. The speaker’s physical environment becomes a place imbued with cultural significance (historical trauma) and emotional meaning which is expected since physical environment is interwoven with social environment (Proshansky et al.1983). Places are blends of human and natural order and the center of human experience of the world (Relph, 1976). The defiance tone of the poem is reinforced by the enjambment in the last lines and by the image of the union between the bodies and the natural elements. Native and African American’s rootedness to the place reveals their resilience and deep connection to the American landscape. The parallelism of the first and second line and the third and fourth line of the poem signify the shared fate of Native and African Americans.

Louise Erdrich and Lucille Clifton mirror their ancestral homeland as a secure place before the arrival of the European settlers. They show their close attachment to the ancestral land and their emotional and meaningful experience of it. They picture the aftermath of European colonization on the land and people. Clifton affirms memory as a place of cultural identity and a political challenge to the patriarchal hegemony of the American society. Nevertheless, Erdrich asserts a cultural identity that is bound to the ancestral land even though the land is transformed and dispossessed. Erdrich and Clifton use the physical geography of their ancestor's land and their poetic language as setting for cultural sovereignty and survival.

6. Conclusion

By integrating the phenomenological geography and environmental psychology frameworks and the literary method of close reading, this study expands existing scholarship on Louise Erdrich and Lucille Clifton by redirecting the focus from thematic reading of place and identity to a critical examination of spatial experience and place identity. The analysis contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship by bringing Native and African American criticism in dialogue with place-based theories. The intersection of Native American and African American studies creates broader scholarly implication by showing how place and identity operate across diverse ethnic groups.

Erdrich and Clifton see place as a site of displacement, dispossession, and historical trauma rather than just a physical location. Their poetic works reveal themes of history, memory, and identity formation. Studying their poetry through the lens of place theory is valuable since it uncovers the interconnection between spatial experience, cultural survival, and identity formation. In addition, close reading of representative poems by Erdrich and Clifton complements place theory by examining the images, diction, and figures of speech through which the poets represent place and identity.

Erdrich and Clifton expose how attachment to land helps preserve cultural identity and resist the effects of colonization. Although the two poets perceive place as inseparable from memory and cultural history, their emotions toward ancestral places differ slightly. While Clifton's love for Wydah is interwoven with pride and yearning, Erdrich's affection for the Ojibwe's land is intertwined with pain and sadness. Clifton celebrates the beauty of Wydah realizing the fact that it continues to exist. By contrast, Erdrich recognizes the land theft, dispossession, allocation, acquisition, forced removal and place displacement. Thus, she laments the loss of the land that once was whole and embraces cultural place identity to preserve her Ojibwe land. By treating place as a lived, meaningful, and emotional experience, not merely a geographical setting, Erdrich and Clifton situate their poetry within place-based theoretical framework.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the editor and the reviewers for their valuable time and effort in reviewing this manuscript. Their constructive feedback and suggestions have significantly strengthened the clarity and quality of the study.

Author contributions

Not applicable

Funding

This study was conducted without the support of any external funding agency.

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

Open access

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

References

- Altman, I., & Low, S.M. (Eds.). (1992). *Place attachment*. New York: Plenum Press. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4684-8753-4>
- Bobroff, K. H. (2001). Retelling allotment: Indian property rights and the myth of common ownership. *Vanderbilt Law Review*, 45(4), pp.1559-1571.
- Burkhardt, T. (2021). How Baltimore fed Lucille Clifton's poetry: From 1968 to 1985, Clifton considered herself a "poet who lives in Baltimore" rather than a "Baltimore poet." BmoreArt. Retrieved from <https://bmoreart.com/2021/05/how-baltimore-fed-lucille-cliftons-poetry.html>
- Child, B. J. (2012). *Holding our world together: Ojibwe women and the survival of community*. Viking.
- Clifton, L. (2012). *The collected poems of Lucille Clifton, 1965-2010*. (K. Young & M.S. Glaser, Eds.) BoA Editions.
- (2021). *Generations: a memoir*. New York Review Books.
- Devika, A. J. A., & Lakshmilantham, B. (2022). The African-American woman poet Lucille Clifton: A feasibility, a manifestation of self-awareness. *International Journal of Early Childhood Special Education*, 14(8), 2112-2115.
- Dunbar-Ortiz, R. (2015). *An indigenous peoples' history of the United States*. Beacon Press.
- Eltis, D., Lewis, F. D., & Sokoloff, K. L. (2004). Introduction. In D. Eltis, F.D. Lewis & K.L. Sokoloff (Eds.), *Slavery in the development of the Americas* (pp.1-28). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511512124>
- Englen, N. (2019). *Eating or being eaten: symbolic reversals in Louise Erdrich's poetic mythology* (Master's thesis, Radboud University). Radboud University Repository. <https://theses.ubn.ru.nl/handle/123456789/8773>
- Erdrich, L. (1984). *Jacklight*. Henry Holt and Company.
- Louise, E. (1999). Where I ought to be: A writer's sense of place. In H.D.S. Wong (Ed.), *Louise Erdrich's Love Medicine: A casebook* (pp. 43-50). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195127218.003.0005>
- Felipe-Gonzalez, J. (2024). Demography of the transatlantic slave trade. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.894>
- Godfrey, K. (2009). A blanket woven of all these different threads: A conversation with Wendy Rose. *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, 21(4), 71-84. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ail.0.0104>
- Hafen, P. J. (1996). Sacramental language: Ritual in the poetry of Louise Erdrich. *Great Plains Quarterly*, 16(3), 147-155.
- Harding, R. E. (2014). Authority, history, and everyday mysticism in the poetry of Lucille Clifton: A womanist view. *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, 12(1), 36-57. <https://doi.org/10.2979/meridians.12.1.36>
- Hinson, W. R. (2018). Land gains, land losses: The odyssey of African Americans since reconstruction. *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 77(3-4), 893-936. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajes.12233>
- Holladay, H. (2002). Black names in white space: Lucille Clifton's South. *The Southern Literary Journal*, 34(2), 120-133. <https://doi.org/10.1353/slj.2002.0005>
- (2004). *Wild Blessings: The poetry of Lucille Clifton*. Louisiana State University Press.
- Kliegl, T. (2023). Alexander Ramsey and the Ojibwe. *The Purdue Historian*, 11 (1), pp. 1-9.
- Krivokapić, M. (2021). Reclaiming home in indigenous women poetry of North America. *American Studies in Scandinavia*, 53(1), 65-94. <https://doi.org/10.22439/asca.v53i1.6226>
- Kurup, S. (2016). *Understanding Louise Erdrich*. University of South Carolina Press. <https://doi.org/10.1353/book43032>
- Low, S. M., & Altman, I. (1992). Place attachment: A conceptual inquiry. In I. Altman & S. M. Low (Eds.), *Place attachment* (pp.1-12). Plenum Press. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4684-8753-4_1
- Low, S. M. (1992). Symbolic ties that bind: Place attachment in the plaza. In I. Altman and S. M. Low (Eds.), *Place attachment* (pp.165-185). Plenum Press. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4684-8753-4_8
- Mann, K., & Misevich, P. (2016). Introduction. In K. Mann & P. Misevich (Eds.), *The rise and demise of slavery and the slave trade in the Atlantic world*, pp. 1-14. Rochester, University of Rochester Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781782046561-002>
- Maracle, L. (2000). Foreword. In L. Maracle & S. Laronde, *My home as I remember*. Natural Heritage Books.
- Marshall, L. (2015). *Age becomes us: Bodies and gender in time*. State University of New York Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781438456980>
- McKittrick, K. (2006). *Demonic grounds: Black women and the cartographies of struggle*. University of Minnesota Press.

- Mohammed, N. M., & Fattah, M. A. M. (2025). Poetics of survival and memory: A new historicist reading of Lucille Clifton and Toi Derricotte's selected poems. *American Journal of Social and Humanitarian Research*, 6(10), 2341-2350. <https://doi.org/10.31150/ajshr.v6i10.4050>
- Norrgard, C. (2014). *Seasons of change: Labor, treaty rights, and Ojibwe nationhood*. The University of North Carolina Press. <https://doi.org/10.5149/northcarolina/9781469617299.001.0001>
- Porras Sánchez, M. (2019). Hybrid mythologies: Identity and heritage in the poetry of Louise Erdrich. *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, 78, 157-171. <https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2019.78.11>
- Proshansky, H. M. (1978). The city and self-identity. *Environment and Behavior*, 10(2), 147-169. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916578102002>
- Proshansky, H. M., Fabian, A.K., & Kaminoff, R. (1983). place-identity: Physical world socialization of the self. *Journal of Environment Psychology*, 3(1), 57-83. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-4944\(83\)80021-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-4944(83)80021-8)
- Ramaraju, S. (2025). We story the land: Louise Erdrich and indigenous literary decolonization. *The Context*, 12(4), 51-57. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15806590>
- Rediker, M. (2008). *The slave ship: a human history*. Viking.
- Relph, E. C. (1976). Place and placelessness. Pion.
- Richardson, D. (2016). Consuming goods, consuming people: reflections on transatlantic slave trade. In P. Misevich, & K. Mann (Eds.), *The rise and demise of slavery and the slave trade in the Atlantic world* (pp. 31-63). University of Rochester Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781782046561-003>
- Said, E. W. (2000). Invention, memory, and place. *Critical Inquiry*, 26(2), 175-192. <https://doi.org/10.1086/448963>
- Schweninger, L. (2012). Foreword. In D. A. Reid & E. P. Bennet (Eds.), *Beyond forty acres and a mule: African American landowning families since reconstruction* (pp. xiii-xiv). University Press of Florida.
- Sharpe, J. (2009). The middle passages of black migration. *Atlantic Studies*, 6(1), 97-112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14788810802696311>
- Stirrup, D. (2010). I thought I would be sliced in two: Towards a geocultural poetics. In *Louise Erdrich* (pp. 34-64). Manchester University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7228/manchester/9780719074264.003.0002>
- Tuan, Y. F. (1974). *Topophilia: A study of environmental perception, attitudes, and values*. Columbia University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-7939.1976.tb01162.x>
- Tuan, Y. F. (1977). *Space and place: The perspective of experience*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Tunç, T. E. (2009). The poetics of self-writing: Women and the national body in the works of Lucille Clifton. *Hacettepe Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi*, 26(1), 187-200.
- White, B. (2024). *They would not be moved: The enduring struggle of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe to keep their reservation*. Minnesota Historical Society Press.