Haida Gwaii, situated off the central West Coast, are also known as the Islands of the People, the Islands at the Boundary of the World, and the Queen Charlotte Islands. To date this remote region has inspired three significant fictional portraits of its complex history: Christie Harris’s *Raven’s Cry* (1966), Emily Carr’s *Klee Wyck* (1941) and Amanda Hale’s *Sounding the Blood* (2001). Each of these non-Haida authors has based her imaginative journey into the Haida Gwaii past on her personal experience of the place, on her conversations with the locals, and on meticulous research of available archival documents. Despite their generational and generic differences, the three women’s responses to the “magical landscape where extraordinary things happened” share several striking characteristics (Hale, 2004). When viewed together, Harris’s, Carr’s, and Hale’s fiction offers a record of the natural as well as cultural history of Haida Gwaii from precontact times to the present. While paying a tribute to the rugged beauty of the Raincoast landscape, it exposes the ruthless exploitation of the islands’ resources. Simultaneously, it testifies to the inescapable voices of multicultural memory inscribed in the Haida Gwaii world.

The central connecting point among the three texts as well as the basic frame of this essay is the shaping influence of the Haida Gwaii bioregion. As Sale Kirkpatrick points out, the planet Earth consists of numerous natural areas that are characterized by “particular attributes of flora, fauna, water, climate, soils, and landforms, and by the human settlements and cultures those attributes have given rise to” (Sale, 55). These bioregions are of varying size and fluid borders, and “often can be seen to be like Chinese boxes, one within another” (Sale, 56). Bioregional writing thus portrays “specific localities as complex, multilayered palimpsests of geology, meteorology, history, myth, etymology, family genealogy, agricultural practice, story-telling, and regional folk-ways” (Kowalewski, 17). Harris’s, Carr’s, and Hale’s Haida Gwaii fiction is bioregional in the sense that it focuses on the deep, multiple, and overlapping layers of nonhuman as well as human history of displacement on the islands.
Geographically, Haida Gwaii is an archipelago comprising two large and some hundred and fifty smaller islands, located sixty kilometres south of the Alaskan panhandle and eighty kilometres off the British Columbia coast. The backbone of the islands is formed by a volcanic mountain chain, and in the northeast there are extensive, deep swamps. The climatic conditions are characterized by high precipitation and moderate temperatures caused by the Japanese Current flowing off the west coast (Boelscher, 21). Thus, the “darkness” and the tragic history of the place during the last two hundred years is accented by the moss that “shrouds” the place, hanging “from every branch” (Hale 2001, 16). The islands were never glaciated, maintaining a uniquely rich flora. As the forests were largely impenetrable, the Haida villages faced the beaches and most of the long-distance travel was conducted on the water along the coast. In Haida traditions, every cape, rock and cliff embodies stories of spirits who inhabit them, who give the landmarks their names, and who can appear in animal or human shape. Especially significant for the following discussion of Hale’s *Sounding the Blood* is the fact that on Haida Gwaii “the extreme points of the Islands were thought to be the homes of […] killer whales, the most powerful ‘Ocean People’” (Boelscher, 19). The killer whales continue to play a crucial role in Haida culture today, inspiring personal stories of their sightings and of drowning or near-drowning accidents, as well as the retellings of ancient tales (Boelscher, 184).

Europeans first sighted Haida Gwaii in 1774. Within a hundred years the Haida population declined by eighty percent, and only two villages, Masset and Skidegate, have maintained permanent settlement status. Some of the sites of the ancient villages are today seasonally patrolled under the Haida Watchmen Program. Even though John R. Swanton arrived at Haida Gwaii in 1900, that is after the two smallpox epidemics, he was able to collect enough material for three seminal ethnographic publications, *Haida Texts and Myths: Skidegate Dialect* (Swanton 1905), *Haida Texts: Masset Dialect* (Swanton 1908), and *Haida Songs* (Swanton 1912). These sources place the Haida culture among the best documented North American Native groups. In 1984, the Haida visual artist Bill Reid and his non-Haida friend, the poet Robert Bringhurst, published a thin but influential collection of traditional Haida stories, *The Raven Steals the Light*. Since the 1960s, cultural anthropologists such as Mary Lee Stearns, Margaret Blackman, and Marianne Boelscher have conducted extensive fieldwork at Masset. As far as I know, *Raven’s Cry*, *Klee Wyck*, and *Sounding the Blood* are the only book-length fictional portraits available to date.
Harris’s, Carr’s, and Hale’s imaginative representations of place engage multiple environmental and social topics. In particular, they refocus the geographical imagery of the western edge of Canada toward ecofeminist concerns with interdependence and the necessity of diversity within the ecosphere. Their Haida Gwaii writing employs landscape as “social topography,” as a “dynamic form of cultural practice” that “enacts the various […] power struggles of the age” (Comer, 12). In *The Ecology of Freedom*, Murray Bookchin draws a connection between environmental protection and social justice, asserting that “the domination of nature by man stems from the very real domination of human by human”\(^1\). Since the 1980s, the environmental justice movement has shown that the most devastated areas in North America are most often areas that are inhabited by Native peoples and the poor (Killingsworth et al., 197). While some nature writing “works partly by shutting out social and cultural complexities” (Campbell, 24), Harris’s, Carr’s, and Hale’s environmental prose exposes the tendency of colonial and neocolonial powers to exploit the conquered land as well as the subjugated peoples.

A brief summary of some of the key events in the two hundred years of Haida Gwaii postcontact history, as portrayed in the three fictional works under examination, clearly shows the close connection between ecological variety and human multiculturality. Additionally, it demonstrates that these works can be seen as literary representations of ecological racism. Harris’s novel reaches deepest into the past, focusing on the traumatic changes in the Haida social life that were initiated by the fur trade in the 1770s and the 1780s. Harris also mentions the beginnings of the lumber and mining industries in the first half of the nineteenth century, which continued the environmental degradation of the local ecosystems and the cultural devastation of the native communities. Carr’s partly autobiographical recollections of her travels in Haida Gwaii in the summer of 1912 repeatedly comment on the fish canneries and their reverberations in the everyday life of the local communities, including the emergence of the hybrid Chinook language. Hale’s novel is set at the Rose Harbour whaling station in the years 1915 through 1916, a place and time in which the Haida are present only through the stories remembered by old Jake and the spirits that haunt the landscape. However, these stories now interweave with the English, Chinese, and Japanese voices of the whalers. Each of the three texts thus employs evidence from the natural history of Haida Gwaii to rewrite the cultural history of the islands.

\(^1\) Qtd. in Killingsworth et al., 196.
Christie Harris’s novel *Raven’s Cry* was inspired by her stay in Prince Rupert between 1958 and 1961. She moved there because of her husband’s job appointment, and since she was in the area, she agreed to do a series of school broadcast scripts for CBC radio “on those great old North West Coast Indian cultures” (Harris 2004). Harris became immersed in the Haida culture and decided to write a biography of Charles Edenshaw, Haida Eagle Chief Edinsa and an internationally known carver. She was welcomed in Masset on Haida Gwaii by Edenshaw’s daughter, Florence Davidson, who told Harris many stories about her artistic ancestors. Eventually, Harris’s writing developed into a three-generation saga. It opens in 1775 with the first direct contact between the Haida and the European fur traders and traces the matrilineal line of Edenshaw’s family. Bill Reid, Edenshaw’s great nephew and also an established Haida artist, illustrated her novel.

As Alexandra West points out, in most of Harris’s nineteen books on Western Canadian history, “the natural landscape and its effect upon character are central” to Harris’s artistic purposes (West, 7). *Raven’s Cry* blends Harris’s concern with environmental issues and her life-long commitment to the preservation of the multicultural heritage of the West Coast. Moreover, partly thanks to Harris’s friendship with Florence Davidson and partly because of Harris’s own objectives, the story of the Haida women’s cultural adaptation is seamlessly interwoven with the story of the developing art of Edenshaw’s male ancestors. For instance, the detailed description of Maada’s, the Haida princess’s, wedding cloak and her brave behaviour when faced with the humiliations effected by the English traders is given as much if not more attention than the appearance and behavior of the male Haida chiefs. Harris’s writing has had a direct environmental as well as social impact on the life in the region. From the Haida’s perspective, among the most important consequences is that the novel has helped a new generation of Haida artists rediscover their cultural roots. It has also resulted in the dedication of several of the Haida villages as National Historic Sites and Ninstints as a World Heritage Site, dramatically improving the Haida’s position in their ongoing negotiations about land claims and conservation. In her commitment to preserving the natural and cultural heritage of Haida Gwaii, Harris can be seen as following in the footsteps of the painter and writer Emily Carr.

In *Klee Wyck* Carr “succeeds at retrieving aspects of native art and culture” and, like Harris and Hale, she does so “subjectively, as personal history”
Klee Wyck is a collection of sketches that are connected by the presence of an “expansive, moving landscape” (Rimstead, 33) and by Carr’s emphasis on the imposition of Christian patriarchal values on indigenous women. It is dedicated to Sophie, a native woman and Carr’s lifelong friend. The collection can be regarded as a women’s history in which Carr concentrates especially on the drastically shifting gender roles, on female activities such as weaving and domestic work, and on images of female support, female ritual, and maternity. There is Louisa, who has used her mother’s knowledge of the sea and where to find roe eggs, a Japanese delicacy, for her family’s economic survival. There is the unnamed woman who had paddled the canoe with a baby in her arms, saving both of their lives before a storm hit. This unnamed woman tells a story of how all of her biological children died. The shadow of poverty, illness, and cultural dispossession is omnipresent, but it does not overwhelm the women’s fortitude. During her travels on Haida Gwaii, Carr searched for inspiration for her visual art as well as for a refuge from the circumscribed Victorian society. The following sunrise scene depicts the female narrator’s spiritual awakening: “the sea, sky, and beach of Skidegate were rosily smoothed into one. There was neither horizon, cloud, nor sound; of that pink, spread silence even I had become part, belonging as much to sky as to earth, as much to sleeping as waking as I went stumbling over the Skidegate sands” (Carr, 78). A similar blending of historical ecology, cultural anthropology, and sensory poetry permeates the spiritual journeys of the main female characters in Hale’s Sounding the Blood.

Amanda Hale says that Haida Gwaii “has been calling her for many years” (Hale 2004). She first travelled to the West Coast in the 1970s, to do research on Carr’s life for her MA thesis. As Hale admits, she “felt a strong identification” with Carr, “particularly with the adventurous spirit which took her north to Haida country” (Hale 2004). It is not easy to get to Haida Gwaii even today, but finally, on her forty-second birthday, Hale entered the enchanting landscape of the islands. A year later she moved to Hornby Island, in the southern part of the West Coast, where she has lived ever since. Hale began writing her first novel in the summer of 1996 during her return trip to Haida Gwaii. Her guide was Susan Cohen, who at that time spent her summers at Rose Harbour. Hale also acknowledges the influence of another female friend who is a local on the coast, Joan Goddard, whose mother actually grew up at the Rose Harbour whaling station. Therefore, like Harris, and Carr, Hale drew a lot of her information and insight from her female guides.
Just as the Haida geographical and cultural world has grown out of the ocean, everything in the world of Hale’s *Sounding the Blood* “goes according to the tide” and the wind (17). Originally, Hale intended to title her first novel “Swimming with the Ghosts of Whales” (Hale 2002). While this key image fits into Hale’s overarching view of human destinies as part of the ocean’s world (Hale 2001, 322), it also brings into the forefront a special connection between women and whales. A swimming-with-the-whales scene appears in the life of each of the principal female characters, always signalling a turning point in the woman’s psychological growth. Sophia, her grandmother Nora, and Sophia’s mother Isobel each feel their own isolation resonating in the remoteness of Haida Gwaii. Through their individual responses to the presence of the whales, they grow attuned to the voices of the land, simultaneously learning to better listen to their inner selves. For Sophia, communing with the whales echoes her longing for freedom from economic and sexual exploitation. It also opens her spiritual journey into the past and provides a link with her female ancestors. Nora’s dance with the whales allows her to start processing her grief over the loss of her child and to see the wider cultural destruction that accompanies the killing of the whales. At the Rose Harbour whaling station she is surrounded by “the aroma of death” as “the smell of blood and whale guano” clings to “every shred of her life there, every fibre of her clothing” (Hale 2001, 30). Isobel’s dreaming of the whales is empowering in yet another way – the whales are her “helpers”, her “guarding spirits” who watch over her unborn child and who support her in her determination to keep the child when she is faced with the prospect of becoming a single mother. The “forsaken” world of Haida Gwaii is the site where, with the guidance of their whales, the women feel themselves change shape and metamorphose (Hale 2001, 16-17).

The Haidas’ worldview is characterized “by permeability of the social and the mythical worlds.” Their “mythological thinking” is then based on “ambiguity and multiple meaning.” This is reflected in the concept of “animal/human/supernatural being transformation” (Boelscher, 7). Such transformations are open to various interpretations because “the form and intent of beings encountered in nature […] depend on the perspective of the person encountering them, on his or her intent and subjective state of mind” (Boelscher, 167). The importance of the “subjective state of mind” is especially relevant here since, in a way, the entire story of *Sounding the Blood* happens in Sophia’s dream. In the Haida language, the word for a killer whale and supernatural power in general is the same: *sgaana* (Boelscher, 168). The killer whale’s unique status is also manifested in the fact that it is
considered the oldest crest and it is “the only creature the Haida had supernatural dread of hunting”\(^2\). Significantly, there are no native workers at the Rose Harbour whaling station, either. The term *sgaana* signifies the ability to cause things to happen, to change shape, to overcome spatial and temporal boundaries, to extend sensory perception, and to control the forces of nature (Boelscher, 172). Apart from the last item on the list, Sophia’s, Nora’s, and Isobel’s encounters with the whales allow the women access to all of these transformative states.

Sophia, whose 1996 pilgrimage to the abandoned Rose Harbour frames the novel, is most likely single and childless, fifty-two years old (like Hale), “facing the western and final horizon of her life” (Hale 2001, 2). She comes “to take stock” (Hale 2001, 4) of her California life as a costume designer, and to search for a new purpose. Sophia first dreams about swimming with whales after a week of seclusion on the island (Hale, 2001, 6). Walking along the beach towards the evening of the following day, she realizes that she has not eaten since early morning: “I am losing myself here”, she thinks to herself. Then she “has a sudden urge to throw off her clothes and wade” into the icy water (Hale 2001, 8). After a few breast-strokes, she sees the first killer whale breaching, she feels “the plunge of the second whale’s sounding,” and then “the third and largest whale breaches, just as the first one rises again out of the water”. Sophia longs to join the whales and to “swim out with them,” and when she dives, she listens for the whalesong, “cries resounding in circles, wrapping the world in language” (Hale 2001, 9). As she continues to swim on “with the ghost of whales hauled into Rose Harbour,” Sophia symbolically “becomes” one of them, feeling the invisible hands of the whalers when they finally haul her onto the shore (Hale 2001, 10). Hale thus poetically unites the exploitation of the region’s natural resources with the victimization of women. This theme is further elaborated in the life stories of Nora and Isobel, Sophia’s ancestors.

During her stay at Rose Harbour in 1915-1916, Nora is also closely identified with whales. In Nora’s case, the link is the burden of motherhood, especially a mother’s grief over a lost child. Shortly after Nora’s arrival, her husband Leo, the manager of the whaling station, observes that she “has turned in on herself like the eardrums of whales, scattered all over the beach” (Hale 2001, 30). Nora is in a deep depression following the death of her youngest son, Teddy. One evening Nora’s inertia is aroused by excited voices calling

\(^2\) Swanton, qtd. in Boelscher, 183.
from the beach. When she gets there, she realizes that the huge dark shape is a beached whale that has “follow[ed] her calf into death” (Hale 2001, 98). As she tries to push the whale back into the ocean, Nora is “transfixed” by the whale’s eye until she notices the haemorrhaging caused by the whale’s crushed heart (Hale 2001, 98). They are both drenched, with Nora’s tears and sweat as well as “some leakage” from the whale. In her dream that night, Nora symbolically “becomes” a nursing whale. As she records in her journal:

I was adrift in an ocean, in a universe of waves, miles of water beneath and around me. A grey shape entered the outer circle of my body, nosing a slow submarine path from outer to inner circle, a slightly malevolent presence, but I was not afraid. I was overflowing. I offered my breast and the creature suckled. I became larger and larger as the whale drank and I felt the circles radiate as each pebble dropped: stones, boulders, mountains. I pulled in a universe (Hale 2001, 99).

The memory of the beached whale, integrating her personal maternal feelings with a mythical consciousness, continues to haunt Nora’s dreams. A month later, she sees herself “riding the green air” of the woods “in a motionless canoe, carved by the Haida for whale hunting” (Hale 2001, 106). She “crouch[es] in the bright mould and dead leaves that line this wooden casket and spirit[s] the soul of [her] poor beached whale as the tide pulls her out, returning her to the ocean” (Hale 2001, 106). On a personal level, this encounter finally releases the flood of Nora’s grieving. On a mythical level, her identification with the whale mother connects her to the Haida ancestress. She does not mourn only her biological child, but all of her children, all of humanity. Rose Harbour, Haida Gwaii, is a “place of death and murder” that goes beyond the present annihilation of whales. Nora’s sense of the series of crimes committed on the islands (that is, both the exploitation of the region’s natural resources and the cultural trauma inflicted on the local populations), is “so overwhelming that it is impossible now to tell one crime from another” (Hale 2001, 133).

Isobel, Nora’s rebellious teenage daughter, also experiences visions of whales while she lives on Haida Gwaii. As she is undergoing her sexual awaking, Isobel’s dreams emphasize the more joyous aspects of motherhood: that of the creation of life. At the same time, Isobel’s eventual abandonment by the father of her child again points towards Hale’s preoccupation with gender
The Speaking Landscape and Multicultural Memory in Haida Gwaii Fiction: A Bioregional Analysis

relations. Stranded after a storm on Dreamer’s Rock with her Japanese boyfriend, Kenji, Isobel dreams of whales breaching past the rock at dawn: “Three whales, forty tons each, rising out of the water. One by one they arced their great bodies into the first light, and plunged, splashing us with plumes of spray, and when I woke I was wet and salty” (Hale 2001, 122). In the Haida stories, the whales are said to appear like whales to people, but in their submarine towns, they are like human beings, living “underneath the bottom of the ocean near prominent landmarks” (Boelscher, 183). Additionally, Isobel’s near-drowning off Dreamer’s Rock places her in a special position on the continuum of animal/human/supernatural worlds. Among the Haida, those who drown, or almost drown, are said to become killer whales (Boelscher, 22, 183). And, as Jake remembers, “the spirits of the whales go on swimming in the sea […] forever.” The sound of the whale song, interwoven with other ocean sounds, continues to “wrap […] the world in language” that anyone who knows how to listen can hear – and be healed by (Hale 2001, 9). Hale’s novel, centred on the interconnection among environmental devastation, cultural dispossession, and gender oppression, thus echoes Harris’s and Carr’s works on many levels.

As William Howarth observes, “landscape contains many names and stories, so that learning and writing them becomes a way of mapping cultural terrain” (80). In their Haida Gwaii fiction Harris, Carr, and Hale employ landscape as a historical agent, dramatizing the integration of ecological and cultural processes. Raven’s Cry, Klee Wyck, and Sounding the Blood contain what Patrick D. Murphy has termed an “ecological sensibility of multiculturality,” recovering and recording the diverse voices that haunt the islands (45). Therefore, these works embody the bioregional impulse through which place “enters into the dialectic of history” (Snyder, 41). Each of the three writers redefines the region by emphasizing the tension between the colonial/patriarchal culture of her time and the naturalist/feminized perspective she learns to adopt on the Haida Gwaii edge of the world.

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The Speaking Landscape and Multicultural Memory in Haida Gwaii Fiction: A Bioregional Analysis

