

The Place Where He Went to Listen:
John Luther Adams, Conceptions of Place, and the Native People of Alaska

Justin Birchell

University of Washington: MUHST 500A
Dr. Mark Rodgers
Autumn 2021

Introduction

“As we crested the central peaks of the Alaska Range, I looked down at Mt. Hayes, and all at once I was overcome by the intense love that I have for this place—an almost erotic feeling about those mountains.”¹ This is how composer John Luther Adams describes his relationship to the landscape that was his home for over 35 years. For those (like the author of this paper) who have spent significant time in the rugged wildlands of Alaska, the feeling Adams describes here is achingly familiar. But in the case of Adams, this love of the landscape constitutes much more than a personal passion. Landscape is, for Adams, the locus of his art, as well as the keynote of his public persona.

John Luther Adams is a major American composer of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.² Born in 1953, Adams grew up primarily in the American South and on the East Coast. After an early musical career as a rock drummer, encounters with the music of Varèse via the work of Frank Zappa swayed Adams toward modern art music and composition. Adams is a graduate of CalArts, where his primary composition teacher was James Tenney. In addition to Tenney, Adams has named composer Lou Harrison as a main teacher and mentor. Adams moved to Alaska permanently in 1978 (following a number of extended trips there from 1974 onward), primarily to work as an environmental activist.³ Adams has not lived in Alaska since 2014, but the 36 years he spent there have left an indelible mark, both on his own musical personality and on the

¹Alex Ross, “Song of the Earth,” *The New Yorker*, May 12, 2008. Versions of this essay later appeared as the foreword to John Luther Adams’s own book *The Place Where You Go to Listen* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2009), and as a chapter in the collection *The Farthest Place: The Music of John Luther Adams*, ed. Bernd Herzogenrath (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2012). Ross is here quoting the words of Adams, but it is not clear in the essay where this quotation originated; presumably it is from an interview Ross did with Adams.

² This John Adams is not to be confused with John Coolidge Adams (b. 1947), who is the composer of *Nixon in China*.

³ The job title that Adams moved to Alaska to accept was Executive Director of the Fairbanks Environmental Center. I took the biographical information in this paragraph from John Luther Adams, *Silences So Deep: Music, Solitude, Alaska* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Geroux, 2020).

public's perception of him; quite possibly, audiences will permanently regard him as an Alaskan composer.⁴ As this paper will make clear, a recurring theme during Adams's years in Alaska was his ongoing interaction with Alaska's Native peoples and cultures; this interaction is a major constitutive element of the "Alaskan-ness" that is so evident in his works.

This paper will explore the pre-eminence of the concept of *place* in the works of John Luther Adams. As such, readers can consider the paper a contribution to the ever-growing field of ecomusicology. It will attempt to explore what place has meant to Adams as an artist, and how conceptions of place manifest in his artistic output. It will then attempt to discuss Adams's long-standing interactions with Alaska Native people and cultures, and to suggest resonances between Native conceptions of place and Adams's own.

Sonic Geographies

Geographic, climatological, and ecological metaphors abound in discussions of Adams's music, and in his own writings about his work. Consider the following list of titles: *The Farthest Place* (a book of essays on Adams's music), "Song of the Earth" (the Alex Ross article cited in note 1), "Music as Place, Place as Music: The Sonic Geography of John Luther Adams" (an essay by musicologist Sabine Feisst), "Place and Space" (an essay by composer and theorist Robert Carl), "The Weather of Music" (an essay considering Adams by philosopher Bernd Herzogenrath), *Composing the North* (the subtitle of Adams's own book of essays), and "Resonance of Place" (an article by Adams).⁵ Many Adams works invite the analogy, thanks in part to titles like *In a Treeless*

⁴ Humorously, in one disambiguation note, Wikipedia's editors could find no better descriptor than "formerly Alaska-based" to distinguish John Luther Adams from the "California-based" John Coolidge Adams. "John Adams (composer)," Wikipedia, last modified 10 Nov 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Adams_\(composer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Adams_(composer)).

⁵ Bernd Herzogenrath, ed., *The Farthest Place: The Music of John Luther Adams* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2012). The next four titles listed are articles in this book. John Luther Adams, *Winter Music: Composing the North* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press,

Place, Only Snow, or Become Ocean, or Among Red Mountains. But even when considering works that do not have any geographic indicators in their titles (a minority of Adams's output, perhaps), and even when the task at hand is music-analytical rather than contextualizing or biographical, commentators seem unable to resist reaching for spatial metaphors in discussing Adams: one analytical article bears the title "Wayfinding in John Luther Adams's *for Lou Harrison*,"--notice the use of *wayfinding*, a term of physical travel, to characterize the analyst's task--, and another bears the title "On Composing Place: an Analysis of *Clusters on a Quadrilateral Grid* by John Luther Adams."⁶

Adams's writings--both in published essays and score notes--make clear that he seeks a union of his music with experiences of place.⁷ In many of his writings, Adams evinces an urge to go past picturesque evocations of place, to somehow instantiate

2004). John Luther Adams, "Resonance of Place: Confessions of an Out-of-Town Composer," *The North American Review* 279, no. 1 (1994): 8–18, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25125575>. The text of the latter article, altered and expanded, also appears as a chapter in *Winter Music*. Subsequent quotation of this essay will be from the book-chapter version.

⁶ Todd Tarantino, "Wayfinding in John Luther Adams's *for Lou Harrison*," *Perspectives of New Music* 47, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 196–227, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25753702>. Erik DeLuca, "On Composing Place: An Analysis of *Clusters on a Quadrilateral Grid* by John Luther Adams," *Perspectives of New Music* 52, no. 3 (Autumn 2014): 5–68, <https://doi.org/10.7757/persnewmusi.52.3.0005>. *For Lou Harrison* (2003) is a 65-minute work for string orchestra, string quartet, and two pianos; Adams considers it a tribute to his departed friend and mentor Harrison, and described the form as an alternation of "joyful processions" and "solemn processions" (inspired by Harrison's piece *A Joyful Procession and a Solemn Procession*). Nevertheless, Tarantino presents essentially-spatial (in fact, architectural) metaphors as the mode for understanding the work. The title "Clusters on a Quadrilateral Grid" does indeed suggest a spatial layout, but in this case, it is a spatial layout of the most abstract, mathematical kind. "Clusters on a Quadrilateral Grid" is the fifth movement of the 75-minute percussion work *Strange and Sacred Noise*. According to Adams's score note for *Strange and Sacred Noise*, "clusters on a quadrilateral grid...is a sounding of the Menger Sponge: an enigmatic quadrilateral with an infinite surface area, and a volume of zero." From this description it does not seem that Adams has set out to "compose place," yet this is just the operation that DeLuca will attribute to him.

⁷ Much of the information about individual JLA works, including the texts of their score notes, comes from wisemusicclassical.com. This site makes all of Adams's published scores available for purchase and rental, and the preview of each score allows one to read the complete front matter, including score notes. The primary publisher of Adams's scores is Taiga Press in Fairbanks, AK.

placedness in a more profound way within the works. He articulates this ethos in his essay “Resonance of Place”:

“I wanted to move away from music *about* place, toward music that *is* place. I wanted not only to portray a natural landscape in music, but to create a musical landscape with an essential coherence in some way equivalent to the wholeness of a real place; music that conveys its own inherently musical sense of place.”⁸

Elsewhere, Adams writes, “I want music to be wilderness. And I want to get hopelessly lost in it.”⁹

Adams’s desire to make music that *is* place rather than being *about* place has, in recent years, morphed into an insistence on the essential abstractness of the music—a concept of music free of programmatic referents altogether:

“I’m not interested in sending messages or telling stories with music, and although I used to paint musical landscapes, that no longer interests me, either. The truth is, I’m no longer interested in making music *about* anything. ...[A]s the music emerges, it becomes a world of its own, independent of my extra-musical associations.”¹⁰

Despite this claim, Adams has continued to utilize many of his trademark techniques of “sonic geography” (discussed below), up to and including the most recent works in his career.¹¹

⁸ Adams, *Winter Music*, 14-15. Similar statements abound in many other sources by and about Adams. E.g. Ross, quoting Adams in interview, 14 years after the original publication of “Resonance of Place”: “My music is going inexorably from being about place to becoming place.” Ross, “Song of the Earth.”

⁹ Adams, *Winter Music*, 75.

¹⁰ Banff Center for Arts and Creativity, “John Luther Adams: Music in the Anthropocene,” YouTube video, 47:35, Jan 25, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wWG0zpPOGcQ>. The talk was given while Adams was in residence at the Banff Center in the summer of 2015. The unabridged quote may provide further illumination for some readers: “From the titles of my works—*songbirdsongs*, *In the White Silence*, *Become Ocean*—it’s clear that I draw inspiration from the world around me. But when I enter my studio, I do so with the hope of leaving the world behind, at least for a while. Of course, it’s impossible to sustain that state of grace for very long. Inevitably, thoughts intrude. Sometimes, I think about people, places, and experiences in my life. Sometimes, I think about the larger state of the world and the uncertain future of humanity. Even so, I’m not interested in sending messages or telling stories with music, and although I used to paint musical landscapes, that no longer interests me, either. The truth is, I’m no longer interested in making music about anything. Though a piece of music may begin with a particular thought or image, as the music emerges, it becomes a world of its own, independent of my extra-musical associations. In the end, those initial inspirations may remain as a title, or a program note: invitations to the listener to find their own way into the music. However, the last thing that I want to do is to limit the listener’s imagination. So, if a listener feels constrained by any words that I may offer along with the music, then I encourage her to ignore them. And few things make me happier than when a listener hears something, experiences something, discovers something in the music that the composer didn’t know was there.”

¹¹ As best I can tell, Adams’s first published use of the term “sonic geography” to describe his own work was in the subtitle of his large-scale theatre work *Earth and the Great Weather (A Sonic*

Two questions now arise: how does Adams conceptualize *place*? And how, then, does he instantiate this conception in music, such that the music can be said to *be* place rather than being *about* place? I believe that we will answer the first question by answering the second. That is, the salient features of Adams's concept of place will become apparent by how they show up in his compositional technique.

In what ways, then, does Adams write music that *is* place? What are his compositional techniques of *sonic geography*? The following list will, no doubt, be an incomplete one, though it is an attempt to be thoroughgoing.

(1) *Data sonification, musical translation, and use of natural sounds.* In his sound-light installation *The Place Where You Go to Listen*, Adams uses computer algorithms to sonify, in real time, an ongoing stream of natural factors in the lands around the installation. Located in the Museum of the North in Fairbanks, AK, *The Place* creates music from the sun and moon angle, weather conditions, aurora borealis activity, and earthquake activity within about a 250-mile radius of Fairbanks.¹² In his "theatre piece" *Earth and the Great Weather*, the string parts in many sections are adjusted transcriptions of the sounds made by wind moving through an aeolian harp at specific sites in Alaska's Brooks Range; this constitutes a different sort of sonification of real physical data--in this case, the wind in specific places--, although not in real-time as in *The Place*.¹³ *Earth and the Great Weather* also incorporates sound recordings of natural phenomena, including calving glaciers, fire burning, and birdsongs.

Geography of the Arctic), of 1994. A few years later, in 1998, Adams used this term to encapsulate his compositional ethos overall, in an interview with Gayle Young. Gayle Young, "Sonic Geography of the Arctic: An Interview with John Luther Adams," *Musicworks* 70 (Spring 1998): 38-43. Since then, "sonic geography" has been an oft-repeated keynote phrase among scholars and critics when discussing Adams.

¹² John Luther Adams, *The Place Where You Go to Listen: In Search of an Ecology of Music* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2009).

¹³ John Luther Adams, "A Sonic Geography of the Arctic," Liner Notes for John Luther Adams, *Earth and the Great Weather*, with John Luther Adams and Musicians, John Luther Adams, cond., with James Nageak, Doreen Simmonds, Lincoln Tritt, and Adeline Peter Raboff, spoken word, recorded 1994, New World Records 80459-2, 1994, CD.

(2) *Aesthetic resemblance to landscape.* Adams's works often feature multiple independent lines, which, when superimposed, blur into a field or mass of sound. In many cases, different layers are proceeding in independent tempi. The use of this kind of texture reaches its apex in *Become Ocean*, but versions of it are widespread in Adams's works for medium and large ensembles from the early 90's onward. This construction mirrors the reality of a large landscape, where many different processes--from the flights of insects to the motions of streams--are subsumed, at sufficient distance, into the unitary impression of the landscape *in toto*.

(3) *Structural correspondence to space and place.* Adams employs structures that yield a non-narrative, non-teleological, or structurally-static "object" as the resulting artwork; this static object may be understood as landscape or even architecture. Many of Adams's works are realized as strict soundings of a formal process or structure, whether a complete set of strict rotations of a tone gamut, as in *for Lou Harrison*, or the sounding of an exact mathematically-determined symmetrical or palindromic structure, as in *Dark Waves* (2007) or *Become Ocean* (2013).¹⁴ As Tarantino points out in his analysis of *for Lou Harrison*, such structures leave no room for such analytical concepts (or audience percepts) as expectation/fulfillment/surprise, tension/release, or departure/return. Because they dispense entirely with narrative concepts which yield a directionality in time, these structures end up resembling spaces in a profound way.

(4) *Litanies of names.* In *Earth and the Great Weather*, Adams evokes a particular region of Alaska (the northeastern corner of the state, roughly corresponding to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge) by having speakers recite "Arctic litanies," of the names of places, animals, and plants local to that region. The speakers recite in Iñupiaq (the language indigenous to the northern part of this region), Gwich'in Athabascan (the

¹⁴ Tarantino, "Wayfinding." Dave Herr, "Timbral Listening in Dark Waves," in *The Farthest Place: The Music of John Luther Adams*, ed. Bernd Herzogenrath (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2012).

language indigenous to its southern area), English, and Latin. Adams revives this technique in his monumental four-choir work *In the Name of the Earth* (2018), although in this case the region evoked is the entire continent of North America.

(5) *Spatial distribution of performing forces.* Adams frequently gives specific instructions for the distributions of performing forces in his orchestral and choral works. In 2017's *Become Desert*, to cite just one example, Adams divides the orchestra into five ensembles, which he says "should surround the audience." Adams intended works such as *Inuksuit* (1998), *Sila: The Breath of the World* (2013), and *In the Name of the Earth* for outdoor performance and dictates, or allows for, the spatial distribution of the ensemble over large areas. Geography and space thus become enmeshed in these compositions in yet another way.

(6) *Scale.* Adams has noted that, as his work moved in the direction of "sonic geography," the works themselves seem to have gotten longer and required larger forces.¹⁵ Undoubtedly, a sense of space is more achievable in 40, 70, or 90-minute works than in shorter pieces.

Translating from the musical back to the physical world, we may characterize the conception of place that these techniques seem to imply, as follows. It is *integral*, that is, microcosmic aspects of place and space add up to a totality or unity. It considers the natural, physical processes of a given place to be paramount to its identity. Place appears in the aspect of expanse, and from the viewpoint of long spans of time. Human interaction with place (when it appears at all, as in the litanies of names) appears as a web or veneer cast over the landscape by humans' cultural activity within it.¹⁶

¹⁵ Young, "Sonic Geography of the Arctic."

¹⁶ Adams is apparently fond of quoting Barry Lopez's observation that "Landscape is the culture that contains all human cultures." Adams quotes this line in his interview with Ross, to name just one instance among many.

John Luther Adams and Alaska Natives

During his time in Alaska, Adams often came into contact with Alaska Native people and Alaska Native cultural practices. Adams recounts various encounters with individual Native acquaintances in his memoir, *Silences So Deep: Music, Solitude, Alaska*.¹⁷ His earlier collection of essays, *Winter Music: Composing the North* recounts an affecting experience Adams had in 1999 attending Kivgiq, the “Messenger Feast,” a major festival of Iñupiaq and Canadian Inuit music and culture held every two or three years in Utqiagvik (formerly Barrow), Alaska, the farthest-north town in the United States.¹⁸ Kivgiq brings together dancers, drummers, singers, and other participants from Canadian Inuit, Alaskan Iñupiaq, and Yup’ik communities. In Adams’s 1999 Kivgiq account, he makes particular note of how Native music affected him: “The high-impact, full-spectrum sound of the drums--reiterated all night long--has an inescapable effect on consciousness.”¹⁹ This appreciation of sound becomes linked for Adams to an experience of place:

Once, passing through a crowded urban airport somewhere down South, amid the noise of rushing travelers, I thought I heard an Iñupiaq drumbeat. Instantly, I was transported home. The memory of the sound of those drums took me there.²⁰

The drum sound is enough to “transport” Adams; for him, the sound of the Iñupiaq drum is not merely a musical parameter but a strong indicator of place (in this case, “home”).

Adams had further contact with Native music in the processes leading to his *Five Yup’ik Dances* and his *Five Athabascan Dances*.²¹

¹⁷ Adams, *Silences so Deep*. For example, pages 35-37 narrate an early encounter with the Kobukmiut Iñupiak Thomas Mouse and Don Sheldon during a 1980 boating trip down the Kobuk River in extremely remote northwestern Alaska.

¹⁸ For a full account of Kivgiq (or Kevgiq) and its history, see Susan W. Fair, “The Inupiaq Eskimo Messenger Feast: Celebration, Demise, and Possibility,” *Journal of American Folklore* 113, no. 450 (Autumn 2000): 464-94.

¹⁹ Adams, *Winter Music*, 67.

²⁰ Adams, *Winter Music*, 66-67.

²¹ Adams describes the sources of his materials in the score notes for each work. The Yup’ik dances, dating from 1994, are based on four dances culled from an ethnomusicological source and another “loaned” (Adams’s term) to Adams by a Yup’ik singer and dancer, Chuna McIntyre;

Adams also had opportunities to engage with a Native sensibility in contexts where Native musical content was not the main focus. In *magic song for one who wishes to live and the dead who climb up to the sky*, Adams sets two poems of Inuit origin without utilizing any Indigenous musical elements.²² In his theatre piece *Earth and the Great Weather*, Adams collaborated with the Iñupiaq reciters James Nageak and Doreen Simmonds, and the Gwich'in Athabascan reciters Lincoln Tritt and Adeline Peter Raboff, in presenting the "arctic litanies" mentioned earlier in this paper. A recurring refrain throughout Adams's career is his use of Native terms as the titles of pieces and movements. An incomplete list of works with Native-derived titles is given as Appendix A to this paper.

In 1996, Adams began composing *Make Prayers to the Raven*, a soundtrack commissioned for addition to a pre-existing 1987 documentary of the same name. The documentary, produced by KUAC-TV in Fairbanks and broadcast on various PBS affiliates, is based on the book *Make Prayers to the Raven: A Koyukon View of the Northern Forest* (1983), by anthropologist Richard Nelson.²³ Nelson is credited as a

the Athabascan dances, from 1996, are ascribed to Adams's interactions with the Athabascan culture bearers Joe Beetus, of the Koyukon, Peter Kalifornsky, of the Dena'ina, and Adeline Peter Raboff, of the Gwich'in. Greater detail on this transmission/loaning process can be found in two places: "Resonance of Place," in a subsection titled "The Indigenous Context" (*Winter Music* 18-23), and an interview Adams did with Molly Sheridan for *NewMusicBox*, which can be read here: <http://johnlutheradams.net/winter-music-interview/>. The latter source will be of particular interest for readers concerned with possible issues of appropriation.

²² The poems of *magic song* and *the dead who climb* are not indigenous to Alaska. The composer's note in the score attributes them to the "Thule Eskimo" and "Ammassalik Eskimo," which would link these poems to Inuit people in Greenland (*Kalaallit Nunaat* in Greenlandic, an Inuit language). Of course, prior to colonization by Europeans, Alaska, Canada, and Greenland as separate political entities did not exist, and the Thule (Qaanaaq) and Ammassalik Inuit would have existed as part of the broad-spread Arctic Inuit continuum whose territory stretched all the way from Northwestern Alaska to Eastern Greenland. I direct the reader interested in this broad-spread continuum to John F. Hoffecker, *A Prehistory of the North: Human Settlement of the Higher Latitudes*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005). A reader could also gain great deal of insight about the geographic distribution and ethnic relation of the Native groups mentioned in this paper by taking a quick glance at the Alaska Native Language Center's Indigenous Languages and Peoples of Alaska map, which can be viewed here: <https://www.uaf.edu/anla/collections/map/>.

²³ Richard K. Nelson, *Make Prayers to the Raven: A Koyukon View of the Northern Forest*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

writer on the documentary, which features footage of Koyukon Athabascan people in interviews and “in the field” going about their traditional subsistence activities. Nelson’s ethnography of the Koyukon amounts to an in-depth exploration of their traditional beliefs about, and their relationships to, their home environment in the northern interior of Alaska. Nelson’s ethnography will be one reference for our discussion of Native conceptions of place.

It is clear that Adams not only had abundant opportunities to imbibe and learn from Alaska Native people, but also that he placed a high value on their understanding and cultural tradition. In “Resonance of Place,” Adams writes:

“The rest of us have much to learn from the First Peoples of the North. And the survival of Native cultures in the face of the incredible social upheavals confronting them is a source of continuing hope and inspiration.”²⁴

Conclusions: JLA and Alaska Native Conceptions of Place

Gregory A. Cajete, a member of the Santa Clara Pueblo and a professor of Native American Studies at the University of New Mexico, writes about the understanding of landscape among the Tlingit people of southeastern Alaska:

These [traditional world-origin] stories also imply the inherent and dynamically changing processes of a complex adaptive system of earth and cosmic processes. This is a system in which every action, including that of human beings, affects everything else. All things in this system are considered living and sacred. All things are seen to be in constant motion, interacting and interdependent at many levels of being. It is a system in which everything is paradoxically in chaos while at the same time moving toward some sort of dynamic balance.²⁵

Phrases like “all things are in...constant motion, interacting and independent at many levels of being,” and “chaos...moving toward...dynamic balance,” may strike the reader as also being fair characterizations of John Luther Adams’s music, in which, as

²⁴ Adams, *Winter Music*, 18-19.

²⁵ Gregory A. Cajete, “The Cosmos: Indigenous Perspectives,” in *The Alaska Native Reader*, ed. Maria Sháa Tla Williams, (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009).

mentioned earlier, independently-active voices congeal into unities and totalities of sound.

Anthropologist Richard Nelson did pioneering ethnographic work both among the Iñupiaq people of Alaska's far north, and among the Athabascan peoples of Alaska's interior.²⁶ One of Nelson's Koyukon teachers echoes Cajete's notion of a landscape as "interacting and interdependent at many levels of being":

The country knows. If you do wrong things to it, the whole country knows. It feels what's happening to it. I guess everything is connected together somehow, under the ground.²⁷

I observed above that John Luther Adams's conception of place "considers the natural, physical processes of a given place to be paramount to its identity." Nelson writes this about the Koyukon:

The Koyukon see it as a hard and forceful world. Their lives must be patterned to the landscape, the cycles of light and darkness, and the inexorable turning of the seasons.[...]Although they are an inland people, their lives are dominated by water and the habitats it creates[...]It is small wonder, then, that people make prayers to the river and to the ice as breakup begins, asking them to move along easily and do no harm.²⁸

Clearly, to the Koyukon, too, the natural and physical processes of a "habitat" are fundamental to its character.

Perhaps the most telling resonance becomes apparent when considering Adams's practice of litanies of names. Through their use, Adams evinces a belief that the history of human interactions with a landscape contribute to that landscape's identity. Nelson writes this about Koyukon relationships to the histories of individual places:

²⁶ A good biography of Nelson is Hank Lentfer, *Raven's Witness: The Alaska Life of Richard K. Nelson*, (Seattle: Mountaineers Books, 2020). Nelson's ethnographic work with the Iñupiaq of the Arctic Ocean coast can be found in Richard Nelson, *Hunters of the Northern Ice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), and Richard Nelson, *Shadow of the Hunter: Stories of Eskimo Life*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). His work with the Koyukon Athabascan people is in Nelson, *Make Prayers to the Raven*. His work with Gwich'in Athabascan people is in Richard Nelson, *Hunters of the Northern Forest: Designs for Survival Among the Alaskan Kutchin* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

²⁷ Nelson, *Make Prayers to the Raven*, 241.

²⁸ Nelson, *Make Prayers to the Raven*, 33-37.

The Koyukon create another kind of imprint, one that is known only through the mind, through traditions that unite the people with the environment that has sustained them[...]They create in this forested wildland a nearly intangible human imprint. This imprint can be illustrated by describing the cultural and personal meanings with which Koyukon people vest places on the landscape[...]Traveling through the wildland, a Koyukon person constantly passes by these places, and the flow of land becomes also a flow of the mind.²⁹

Later in his life, Nelson, a one-time writer laureate of the state of Alaska, turned away from “hard” anthropology and devoted himself to propagating the wisdom of his Native teachers through writing and public speaking. One means through which he did this was his radio program *Encounters*, produced by KCAW radio in Sitka, AK and broadcast on the Alaska Public Radio Network. In an episode entitled “Place,” Nelson broadly summarized the relationships of his Native teachers to their home landscapes:

[Alaska Natives] have come to consider themselves to have true, participating membership in one great community that includes not only human beings but also the plants, the animals, and the land itself. There’s a closeness in that relationship that’s almost beyond fathoming for an outsider.

They’ve also embellished the land with thousands of names, like the word *Quilamittagvik* in the Iñupiaq language, up on the North Slope; it means ‘place to hunt ducks with ivory bolas.’ Or *Ulguniq*, the name of the village of Wainwright, just down the coast from Barrow, it means ‘where a standing thing fell, and left its traces.’ Or in the Koyukon language, *Ts’aateyhdenaadekk’onh Denh*, the name of the village of Huslia; it means, ‘where a forest fire burned the hill all the way to the river.’ Or *Dilbagga ts’oolnihoo*, ‘where somebody grabbed a ptarmigan.’ Beautiful and evocative place-names, like these, epitomize the ways that Native people, and their history, are woven into their homeland.³⁰

To conclude, I will let Nelson highlight perhaps the most salient link between Adams’s and Alaska Natives’ worldviews: love for the Alaskan land.

The Koyukon people’s intimacy with the landscape is also expressed in a very different way—in a fondness or affection that transcends any dangers the Earth may pose. This is often revealed in conversation, when they speak of the land’s beauty or personal meanings.³¹

²⁹ Nelson, *Make Prayers to the Raven*, 242-43

³⁰ “Place,” narrated by Richard Nelson, *Encounters*, [encountersnorth.org](https://www.encountersnorth.org), <https://www.encountersnorth.org/listen-index>.

³¹ Nelson, *Make Prayers to the Raven*, 35.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

- Adams, John Luther. *Earth and the Great Weather*. Fairbanks, AK: Taiga Press, 1993.
- . *Five Athabascan Dances: For Harp and Percussion*. Fairbanks: Taiga Press, 2017.
- . *Five Yup'ik Dances*. Fairbanks: Taiga Press, 1994.
- . *The Place Where You Go to Listen: In Search of an Ecology of Music*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2009.
- . "Resonance of Place." *The North American Review* 279, no. 1 (1994): 8–18.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25125575>.
- . *Silences So Deep: Music, Solitude, Alaska*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Geroux, 2020.
- . "A Sonic Geography of the Arctic." Liner Notes for John Luther Adams, *Earth and the Great Weather*, with John Luther Adams and Musicians, John Luther Adams, cond., with James Nageak, Doreen Simmonds, Lincoln Tritt, and Adeline Peter Raboff, spoken word, recorded 1994. New World Records 80459-2, 1994, CD.
- . *Strange and Sacred Noise*. Fairbanks: Taiga Press, 1997.
- . *Winter Music: Composing the North*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004.
- . "Winter Music." By Molly Sheridan. *NewMusicBox* (2004).
<http://johnlutheradams.net/winter-music-interview/> .
- Banff Center for Arts and Creativity, "John Luther Adams: Music in the Anthropocene," YouTube video, 47:35, Jan 25, 2016,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wWG0zpPOGcQ>.
- Ross, Alex. "Song of the Earth." *The New Yorker*, May 12, 2008.
- Young, Gayle. "Sonic Geography of the Arctic: An Interview with John Luther Adams." *Musicworks* 70 (Spring 1998): 38-43.

Secondary Sources

- Cajete, Gregory A. "The Cosmos: Indigenous Perspectives." In *The Alaska Native Reader*. Edited by Maria Sháa Tláa Williams. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009.

- DeLuca, Erik. "On Composing Place: An Analysis of Clusters on a Quadrilateral Grid by John Luther Adams." *Perspectives of New Music* 52, no. 3 (Autumn 2014): 5–68. <https://doi.org/10.7757/persnewmusi.52.3.0005>.
- Fair, Susan W. "The Inupiaq Eskimo Messenger Feast: Celebration, Demise, and Possibility." *Journal of American Folklore* 113, no. 450 (Autumn 2000): 464-94.
- Herzogenrath, Bernd, ed. *The Farthest Place: The Music of John Luther Adams*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2012.
- Holton, Gary, et. al. Indigenous Peoples and Languages of Alaska [map]. "Alaska Native Language Archive." 2011. <https://www.uaf.edu/anla/collections/map/> .
- Hoffecker, John F. *A Prehistory of the North: Human Settlement of the Higher Latitudes*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005.
- Lentfer, Hank. *Raven's Witness: The Alaska Life of Richard K. Nelson*. Seattle: Mountaineers Books, 2020.
- Nelson, Richard. *Hunters of the Northern Forest: Designs for Survival Among the Alaskan Kutchin*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.
- . *Hunters of the Northern Ice*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972.
- . *Make Prayers to the Raven: A Koyukon View of the Northern Forest*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- . *Shadow of the Hunter: Stories of Eskimo Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.
- "Place." Narrated by Richard Nelson. Encounters. [encountersnorth.org](https://www.encountersnorth.org). <https://www.encountersnorth.org/listen-index> .
- Tarantino, Todd. "Wayfinding in John Luther Adams's For Lou Harrison." *Perspectives of New Music* 47, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 196–227. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25753702>.
- Wikipedia. "John Adams (composer)." last modified November 10, 2021. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Adams_\(composer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Adams_(composer)).

Appendix A: John Luther Adams Works with Native-Derived Titles

This is a (probably incomplete) listing of John Luther Adams's works with Native-derived names. If the name is a native word, I have followed it with its English translation inside of quotation marks, if I was able to ascertain the English translation. If the title is an English translation, the Native word that it translates is placed in Italics inside parentheses (again, if I was able to track down the Native word in question). In some cases both the Native and English words are presented as title and subtitle, respectively; such cases are self-apparent in the list below. Finally I list the language of origin, followed by any comments.

Among Red Mountains. Gwich'in Athabascan. A place in the Brooks Range, north of Arctic Village.

Ilimaq. "Spirit journey." Iñupiaq.

In a Treeless Place, Only Snow. Gwich'in. Name of a place in the Brooks Range.

Inuksuit. "Acting in the manner of a human." Iñupiaq. Plural of Inuksuk. Used as a noun, Inuksuit are huge stone cairns built by Northern indigenous peoples as geographical reference markers on the vast featureless expanses of tundra, or as aids to caribou herding. They often resemble a human form (though on an increased scale), and caribou avoid them, mistaking them for humans. Thus they "act in the manner of a human."

Nunatsiaq. "The beautiful land." Iñupiaq.

Nunataks (Solitary Peaks). Iñupiaq. This is the inupiaq word for juttings of rock that protrude from the surfaces of glaciers or icefields.

"One that stays all winter." Either Gwich'in or Iñupiaq. The name for a species of bird. Adams uses this as a title for a movement in *Earth and the Great Weather*, and, much later, for a movement in *Arctic Dreams*.

The Place Where You Go to Listen. (Naalagiagvik). Iñupiaq. Adams's most re-used title. The title of a movement in *Earth and the Great Weather*, the name of his sound-light installation at The Museum of the North in Fairbanks, and a movement in *Arctic Dreams*. According to legend, a place on the Arctic coast where a spiritually-gifted woman would go to receive messages from nature.

"Pointed Mountains Scattered All Around". (*Chiiviteenlii*). Probably Ahtna Athabascan. The Native name for Lake Louise, in East-Central Alaska. Used as a movement title in *Earth and the Great Weather* and in *Arctic Dreams*.

Qilyuan. "Object of power." Iñupiaq. The Iñupiaq name for a shaman's drum.

"River with No Willows." (*Okpilak*). Iñupiaq. A river on the North Slope. Movement title in both *Earth and the Great Weather* and *Arctic Dreams*.

Saugyatugvik: The Time of Drumming. Iñupiaq.

Sila: The Breath of the World. Inuit (Iñupiaq or Inuktitut?). Per Adams, "In Inuit tradition, the spirit that animates all things."

Tukiliit. “Stone people who live in the wind.” Inuktitut. Per Adams, “Any stone object with special meaning.”

“Where the waves splash, hitting again and again.” (*Pataktuk*). Iñupiaq. A place on the Arctic coast. A movement title in both *Earth and the Great Weather* and *Arctic Dreams*.