

Acknowledgements

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Anita (Sarkees) Bahr has been a longtime supporter of South Dakota State University's English Department, especially *Oakwood*. Thanks to her contributions, *Oakwood* will continue to provide an excellent opportunity for young SDSU writers and artists to be involved in the literary arts. We have established an award in her name to recognize excellent emerging writer among the SDSU student body.

**THE 2022 ANITA (SARKEES) BAHR AWARD FOR OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTOR IS
BRINA STURM.**

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Publisher's Note

In 2017, *Oakwood* began a transition. After a long stretch of publishing mostly SDSU students, the journal opened up submissions to writers and artists across the Northern Great Plains region (South Dakota and the surrounding states). The response has been exactly what I hoped for: contributors from all over the region sending in their work and saying *Yes, I want to be part of this project*.

With the issue you're reading right now, *Oakwood's* transition is complete. While we still publish student work—and students will continue to have an editorial role—the journal moves forward with a new purpose: presenting a broad cross-section of literary work from contributors at multiple stages of their careers with a geographical connection to the Northern Great Plains.

Having a *geographical connection* implies a different relationship to a place than simply being a resident of it, and I chose those words purposely. *Oakwood* will include the work of not only contributors who live in the region now, but also those who have been shaped by it but no longer live here. The reasoning behind this is tied up in concepts of regionalism that are worth discussing.

At its most simplistic, regionalism involves a mere celebration of a place and the people who live in it. But too much of this mere affirmation

takes away an essential function of the arts: using them as tools for questioning our own assumptions about what we call reality. This oversimplified (but all too common) species of regionalism reinforces the creation and maintenance of an *us* group by focusing its attention in on “our own” — the artistic equivalent of circling the wagons — to create an identity.

Something gets sacrificed with this approach because identities are forged not only at home, but through relationships with those away from home. This is why *Oakwood* is not only for people who live here now, but also for the “Northern Great Plains diaspora” that has moved away, as well as for those whose creative vision has been significantly shaped by the region. *Oakwood* is not intended as a snapshot of this region's residents, but as a record of the encounter between the Northern Great Plains and the rest of the world. This is why publishing the work of (for instance) a writer who grew up in South Dakota but now lives in Vermont is part of our mission.

Regionalism also invites the problematic issue of who gets to be a member of the region, which can exacerbate a “circle the wagons” mentality. Imagine a writer of Cuban descent born in Miami who moves to Nebraska as a teen. In her twenties she publishes two novels set in the state and

focused on her family's unsuccessful attempts to fit in, after which she heads back to Miami – never to call Nebraska home again – to write about the Cuban diaspora there.

Is this hypothetical author a Great Plains writer? That's debatable, and I wouldn't blame you for answering "No." But *Oakwood* wants to reshape and reframe this question, de-emphasizing the ways a *person* might be designated by others and instead asking "Is this writer's *work* a part of the Great Plains?" Given this theoretical author's subject matter and setting, it would be hard to deny.

This distinction between the *person* being attached to the region and the *work* being attached to the region is crucial to my vision of *Oakwood*. At its core is not regional identity, but regional encounter and relation. *Oakwood* is a journal not only about how people live here, but also about how people from this region touch other places – as well as how people from other regions touch and perceive this one. This more expansive conception of regional literature will guide *Oakwood's* path in the future.

As you read through this issue, you'll see that four separate works have titles that involve some variation on *homecoming*. This is not intentional, but it reflects a desire that ripples through the

Northern Great Plains and our entire country right now. Individually and collectively, we want to come home. We've been distanced from home during the covid pandemic and found our homes defamiliarized by loss of loved ones, loss of human interaction, loss of belonging. We desire homecoming because we want the familiar again, but the defamiliarization we've experienced means that home won't be quite the same as it was.

Writers and artists feel this and know this intensely, and we find words and images to express it so that others don't have to look so hard for them. We're good at sensing what's about to change – and especially at sensing what already has changed without broader society noticing it. We're also good at showing the way back toward a sense of belonging, no matter how bruised. I hope you'll find that *Oakwood* takes on this task with open eyes about the state of our world and an open heart about the ways we might stand in relation to each other.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Wright". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a stylized "W".