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“IT’S ALL ABOUT THE FOOD:” FOOD, LAND, AND SOVEREIGNTY  
ON THE WHITE EARTH RESERVATION, MINNESOTA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology from  
The College of William and Mary

by

Colleen Marie Truskey

Accepted for \_\_\_\_\_  
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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Williamsburg, VA  
May 4, 2017

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Colleen Marie Truskey  
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### Acknowledgements

Behind every academic undertaking is a team of people who helped ensure its realization. For this project in particular, that team is especially large. I owe so much to so many who sacrificed their energy to help me at every stage, and I hope that the final product will suffice as evidence that their time has not been wasted. My family deserves extensive praise—twenty-two years is a long time to put up with a budding anthropologist, but they have managed the task with the utmost aplomb. To my parents especially—I could not have asked for better people to introduce me to the world.

To all of my professors at William & Mary, thank you. Your insight and guidance has shaped me as both an academic and a person. I would like to draw special attention to Professors Brad Weiss, Danielle Moretti-Langholtz, Joseph Jones, and Kara Thompson. More than committee members, they have served as intellectual cornerstones, and without their influence this project would have been in no way successful. I would also like to thank Ellie Dassler—it is my sincere hope that a friendship forged in the fires of a year writing theses is one that will last. My gratitude also goes to the Roy R. Charles Center for Academic Excellence, the Anthropology Department at the College of William & Mary, and friends and family who made this project possible through their financial support.

Finally, I must thank all of those with whom I worked and conversed during my time on the White Earth Reservation. There is no way I can fully capture the impact they have had on my life's direction, much less this thesis, and I will always carry the gifts they have given to me. My particular gratitude to "Ruth," who so kindly welcomed me into her life and home, and "Mr. Larson," RRI, who was never afraid to ask of me far more than I thought I could possibly do. *Chimiigwetch.*

“THE SOVEREIGNTY WE HAVE COMES FROM  
A RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIP WITH THE GIFTS OF CREATION.”

*Mr. Larson, July 2016*

“INDIAN PEOPLE HAVE AN ABILITY TO STRETCH THEIR MINDS,  
TO SEARCH FAR BACK AND FAR AHEAD. THE CHIPPEWA WERE  
THINKING IN THOSE TERMS AT TREATY TIME—THINKING OF  
THE LONG PROCESSION BACK TEN THOUSAND YEARS OR MORE,  
THINKING OF AN EQUALLY LONG PROCESSION OUT AHEAD.”

*Charles F. Wilkinson, 1991*

## Introduction

Ruth lived on a hill, a little ways south of the geographic center of the White Earth Reservation. If I were to take a left out of her driveway, I would shortly find myself adrift in a great sea of flat farmland and unobstructed, washed-out sky. There would be tall straight corn stalks, long straight roads. If I were to take a right instead, it wouldn't be long before I would end up in densely packed forest flecked with languid pockets of water. I might cross paths with a bear or a beaver or a turtle meandering along the winding roads. In the center of it all, though, was Ruth on the hilltop, sitting on her back step and tossing chunks of stale bread to Duke, her pit bull. In the shade of the house the air was still and cool. The yard and field behind it sloped down in waves before colliding with a buttress of trees further off.

This past summer, Ruth grew squash, tomatoes, radishes, and several different peppers at the edge of her property. Her garden was small; she wasn't even going to have one that year (her ex-boyfriend took the tiller), but a neighbor showed up and offered to help and it would have been rude to refuse. She spent every other morning clearing the small rows of weeds and gathering the ripened produce. In mid-July it was mostly radishes. Ruth kept them in a bowl of water on the kitchen table, and on evenings when she did not work at the casino we sat at the table and harvested them from the dish, eating them like apples. If I had been butchering chickens with John and Joseph down by Round Lake, Ruth and I would have wild rice and chicken soup for dinner. If not, we would have deer she prepared last winter. Every once in a while, Ruth pulled out a small Tupperware of maple sugar candies she had made much earlier in the year, and we would savor the sweet, brittle pieces on our tongues as the afternoon turned to evening.

Radishes and maple candy, stale bread thrown to the dog. Wild rice, organic chickens, chunks of rich red-purple venison. Within each of these foods is a history, one that explains how they came to be consumed on a remote reservation in northwestern Minnesota. The histories of these foods, when taken together, speak to the deep and multifaceted history of the White Earth Reservation. They speak of loss and continuity, oppression and resistance, change and adaptation. They speak of sovereignty and survivance, experienced through food.

This thesis has two goals: (1) to unpack the complexities of food procurement and consumption on the White Earth Reservation, and (2) to reevaluate food sovereignty as it is experienced in the daily lives of the residents of White Earth<sup>1</sup>. “Food sovereignty” refers to both a concept and an experiential movement. Its dual existence as theory and practice, used in a myriad of academic contexts and social communities, has frustrated numerous attempts to develop a singular set of terminology and methodology that applies across a variety of settings. Broadly speaking, however, this “multidimensional rights-based political framework...situates contemporary resource depletion, economic crisis, and environmental degradation within the context of neoliberal trade and production, with negative consequence for peoples’ access to healthy, sustainable, and culturally appropriate food” (Gulrukh Kamal et al. 2015, 564).

Indigenous communities, intimately familiar with the layered violence associated with colonial conquest, experience and understand both food and sovereignty in ways that disrupt and expand upon this framework. Many indigenous academics and activists, along with some environmental scholars, have outlined an indigenous approach to food sovereignty that emphasizes both political and cultural resistance and adaptation in the face of hegemonic settler-colonial imposition. Of particular importance, outlined by Potawatomi scholar Kyle Powys

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<sup>1</sup> There is an incorporated city on the White Earth Reservation also called “White Earth” (pop. 580), where the Tribal Headquarters is located. Unless otherwise noted, the use of “White Earth” in this paper will refer to the reservation, not the town.



Whyte (2016), is that indigenous peoples have engaged in projects that mirror the goals of today's food sovereignty movement throughout their histories of interaction with settler populations. Sam Grey and Raj Patel (2015) note that "food sovereignty is (and should be) a...radical anti-colonial project" (433). For indigenous populations, it always has been.

However, this thesis is not a treatise on indigenous foodways and sovereignty. Over the course of my fieldwork it became obvious that the conclusions I arrived at—while perhaps instructive for similar conversations taking place in other American Indian communities—could not be wholly removed from the context in which they originated. The arguments made in this paper are born of the unique circumstances of White Earth as a physically, socially, and historically constructed space. This pertains to one of the primary objectives of this paper, noted earlier, which is to explore food sovereignty not in the abstract, but in the daily lived experiences of residents of the reservation. How do the White Earth Ojibwe<sup>2</sup> understand and engage with this "radical anti-colonial project" (Grey and Patel 2015, 433)? To understand indigenous food sovereignty in practice requires an approach rooted in intimacy and the steady rhythms of daily life—an approach that recognizes that commentaries on history and politics exist in quiet dinners, grocery trips, and afternoon drives around the reservation.

After a brief discussion of methodology (along with an aside regarding engaged anthropology), this thesis will introduce the White Earth Reservation and its contemporary circumstances. This will be followed by an extended examination of historical context, which will serve to situate later discussions of food on the reservation and food sovereignty. Finally,

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<sup>2</sup> The White Earth Band of Ojibwe is also known as the White Earth Band of Chippewa Indians. "Chippewa" is simply a Euroamerican corruption of "Ojibwe," occasionally spelled "Ojibway." Their autonym is "Anishinaabeg" (this is the plural form; when used as an adjective, it is "Anishinaabe"). However, there is some disagreement over to whom the word "Anishinaabe" applies. While some use it to refer to all Ojibwe peoples (and sometimes the related Potawatomi and Ottawa peoples), others use it to refer to those whose lifestyle falls in line with certain Ojibwe values. During my fieldwork, it was my understanding that Anishinaabe/g referred to the latter interpretation, and I have thus chosen to use the more broadly understood "Ojibwe." "Native American," "American Indian," and "Indian" are used when appropriate, and are understood here to be interchangeable.

wild rice will be discussed as an example of theory in practice, before the paper is concluded with some final thoughts.

### *Methodology*

This research relied extensively on ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation, both of which are fundamental anthropological tools. I spent two months (June and July of 2016) and another week in March of 2017 living and working on the White Earth Reservation (*Gaa-waabaabiganikaag*<sup>3</sup>), located in northwestern Minnesota. During that time, I worked as a research intern for the White Earth Land Recovery Project (WELRP), a community-based nonprofit founded in 1989. WELRP works primarily to facilitate the return of reservation land lost to non-tribal ownership. Since its founding, it has grown to incorporate several other related projects. These include a community radio station (Nijji Radio); an online store for foods and goods prepared on the reservation or by other indigenous communities (Native Harvest); and numerous grants for a variety of food and energy initiatives throughout White Earth (WELRP 2013). These subordinate initiatives—along with WELRP’s sister organization Honor the Earth and an unrelated organization known as Toxic Taters (a local pesticide action group)—all reside in the same repurposed school building in Callaway, a small village in the southwestern corner of the reservation.

My work with WELRP, directed by Mr. Larson, served as a vital entry point to the larger White Earth community. Through it, I was able to access community events I otherwise would not have been able to attend, such as smaller ceremonies, tribal council and treaty authority

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<sup>3</sup> There is some use of the Ojibwe language (*Ojibwemowin* or *Anishinaabemowin*) in this paper. There are numerous ways to write and spell Ojibwe names, terms, and phrases, based on a variety of historical and linguistic considerations. Because I am neither extensively familiar with the relative merits of these writing systems, nor fluent in the language (not to mention its plentiful regional variations), I have elected to follow whatever spelling the particular source material being quoted utilizes. This may result in some inconsistencies, which will be addressed as they arise.

meetings, and camps and workshops intended for Native community members. I actively participated in the events where it was appropriate for me to do so, and volunteered at others. I also ended up working closely with the White Earth Tribal and Community College's Extension Service, which is responsible for hosting several programs focused on nutrition and wild foods. Moreover, WELRP arranged for my housing on the reservation. I rented a room from a local woman named Ruth, who later became both a friend and a "host mother" of sorts.

Thus, my time on the reservation was split between formal fieldwork and work done for WELRP in the capacity of an intern. Both experiences, however, allowed me to get a sense of what was important to the residents of White Earth, particularly when it came to the relevant matters of food, land, health, and sovereignty. In addition, I supplemented this work with extensive reading to gain a better historical and theoretical foothold on the material.

While participant-observation and traditional, reading-reliant research provided valuable information, the development of personal relationships proved to be far more important. I had never been to Minnesota before I left for White Earth, and had never spent longer than a day on any reservation. I needed direction, and was fortunate enough to meet community members who were willing to serve as guides and companions and grant me access to their daily lives. These relationships drastically influenced my experience and perception of life on the White Earth Reservation. Informal interactions and conversations with community members were another significant component of my research methodology, and while some of these individuals will be mentioned under pseudonyms in this paper, the rest will go unnamed per the anonymity requirements of my IRB.

### *Engaged Anthropology in Native Communities*

I intentionally conducted the fieldwork for this project with the tenets of engaged anthropology in mind. This is not a strictly theoretical thesis—the raw and the cooked have no place here. It is grounded in land loss, treaty violations, and historical circumstances that have shaped White Earth since its inception. These realities have significant consequences for the residents of the reservation, particularly in terms of community cohesion and social and individual health. Food is not an isolated topic; it is caught up in the interwoven webs of economy, ecology, and politics, on both a local and global scale. I set out to design and implement an engaged project that recognized the tangible costs of the sociopolitical, economic, and cultural issues I would encounter.

While many anthropologists have “engaged” with their subjects and the defining issues of their generations since the earliest days of the discipline, this particular approach to “doing” anthropology did not coalesce around a defined framework and set of terminology until the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Setha Low and Sally Merry (2010) outlined the following groups by which forms of anthropological engagement could be categorized: “sharing and support,” “teaching and public education,” “social critique,” “collaboration,” “advocacy,” and “activism.” I kept these in mind throughout my fieldwork and final write-up, but focused on the “social critique” and “collaboration” elements of Low and Merry’s outline. These categorizations, effective as they may be in describing the nature of completed research endeavors, do not adequately outline potential research methodologies that could best promote academic engagement. For this, I turn to John Jackson’s (2010) discussion of sincerity and authenticity in anthropology, briefly summed up in the quotation below:

An attempt to remember the significance of laughter, love, and the everydayness of affect is an important methodological, epistemological, and political

intervention, a differently animated ghost in the ethnographic machine. To talk about the ethnographic value of sincerity along with authenticity is to poke and prod at our field's undertheorizing of research methods and procedures during ongoing anthropological debates about "the real." (S283)

When it comes to anthropology's engagement of Native American communities, the need for Jackson's sincerity is particularly urgent. Anthropologists have long been accused of abusing their roles as researchers in indigenous communities, turning Indian peoples into exotic "others" while restricting their ability to "talk back" or otherwise speak for themselves. Most are familiar with Vine Deloria, Jr.'s blistering critique of anthropology in *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1969), where he poignantly remarks that "the massive volume of useless knowledge produced by anthropologists attempting to capture real Indians in a network of theories has contributed substantially to the invisibility of Indian people today" (81).

Research that is mutually valuable and sincere in its engagement with the researched community has the potential to make Indian peoples visible in a way that is productive for them, as opposed to productive solely for the researcher. Projects that adopt this approach are not only useful, they are necessary, especially if anthropologists hope to redress the failures of the past and design more collaborative and constructive research endeavors. This can only be done, however, through sincere relationships, especially in indigenous communities. During a discussion on indigenous approaches to academia at the 2017 Indigenous Farming Conference, hosted annually on White Earth by WELRP, a woman from the nearby Leech Lake Reservation (*Gaa-zagaskwaajimekaag*) remarked "if you're a researcher, make sure you're part of the collective, that you've got a team responsible for you." By "team," the woman meant members of the researched community who could support and vouch for the researcher, while also ensuring that the research being done was sensitive to the needs and expectations of the community. This speaks directly to the need for a methodology that embraces "relationships" as

a principal component of the research project. It is an approach I hope to have successfully implemented here.

### *The Intimacy of Food*

This brings me to the next element of my methodology: a recognition of intimacy. Food is inherently intimate. It is consumed and incorporated into the body, where it becomes part of our physical being in the most literal possible sense. It reveals intensely personal features about our lives—our socioeconomic status, our resources, our value systems. Moreover, to procure and consume food with other people—whether it is a hunting trip, a family dinner, or a quick lunch with a colleague—is to expend time, financial and/or material resources, and emotional capital. To eat with a person is to gain access to space and time that otherwise may not be available. My experience at White Earth was no different. During the course of my fieldwork, I was granted access to peoples' refrigerators, their freezers, their pantries, their cupboards, and their gardens. Some of the most informative conversations I engaged in took place around dimly lit dining room tables or at kitchen counters, preparing or cleaning up from a recent meal.

This intimate access to homes, lives, and time came to be a defining feature of my research methodology and the project as a whole. However, intimacy is not isolation. These quiet, private moments always extended outwards, reflecting a microcosm of macrocosmic forces. While I do not feel at liberty to freely invite the reader into some of those moments, I will be certain to discuss the broader context that shaped those conversations.

### Contemporary Context

The White Earth Reservation is one of eleven reservations in Minnesota, and one of seven originally reserved exclusively for Ojibwe peoples. At around 1,300 square miles in size, it is one of the larger reservations in the state, and takes up the whole of Mahnommen County along with parts of Becker County and Clearwater County (WEEDO 2013). Notably, White Earth is divided into two distinct environmental zones. The western half of the reservation, where the Red River Valley begins, is dominated by flat prairies and fields, while the eastern half is heavily forested with numerous lakes and other water features (Weil 1989; Meyer 1994; Peterson 2012; WEEDO 2013). This demarcation is clearly visible in satellite views of the reservation.

As a result of its position in northwestern Minnesota, west of the Great Lakes, White Earth's seasons are marked by relatively drastic climatic variations. Winters are snowy and cold, with temperatures occasionally dropping to  $-50^{\circ}\text{F}$ , while summer temperatures sometimes reach to  $100^{\circ}\text{F}$ . Compared to surrounding areas, natural resources are ample and high quality (WEEDO 2013). Many residents of White Earth are proud of the "cleanliness" and "abundance" of these resources. For example, this past summer, while off-reservations areas were struggling with water-borne parasites (particularly the flatworm that causes "swimmer's itch"), many residents of White Earth noted that this was not a problem in their lakes. Even the abundance of summer insects was understood to be evidence of a relatively well-functioning reservation ecosystem.

Notably, land ownership on White Earth is "checkerboarded," meaning that property is broken up between competing tribal, private, and government (federal, state, county) claims. It is estimated that only 10% (approximately 57,000 acres) of the original reservation is still in the possession of the White Earth Band of Ojibwe (Peterson 2012; WEEDO 2013; WELRP 2013). This property consists predominately of water features (lakes, groundwater, etc.) and the land

beneath tribally constructed homes and buildings. Most of the privately owned land is cultivated land on the western half of the reservation, largely used for industrial agricultural production. This checkerboarding has made it difficult for the Tribal Council to implement effective development and infrastructure projects, since the Council must deal with multiple actors who often have conflicting interests (WEEDO 2013).

As a result of the aforementioned checkerboarding, the majority of the nearly 10,000 people who reside on White Earth are not tribal members. Moreover, while the greater portion of Native residents on White Earth are members of the White Earth Band of Ojibwe, there are those who are enrolled with different Ojibwe and Dakota communities (predominately from elsewhere in Minnesota or in North Dakota), as well as more distant American Indian nations. With the exception of a handful of incorporated cities and villages that are home to several hundred residents, most of the reservation's population is widely dispersed (WEEDO 2013).

As is the case with many reservation communities, unemployment rates and poverty levels are significantly higher at White Earth than in the rest of Minnesota. On the whole, however, the reservation is by no means "impoverished." Major employers on the reservation include the Shooting Star Casino, the White Earth Tribal and Community College (WETCC), the White Earth Health Center, and the Tribal Government (WEEDO 2013). Additionally, White Earth is home to numerous resorts, campgrounds, and recreational sites that capitalize on the reservation's physical landscape. These features attract non-Native tourists and permanent residents who have the financial and material resources to live comfortably in spite of the reservation's isolation.



## Historical Background

The land on [the White Earth] reservation was so diversified as to render it an exceedingly desirable home for the Indians. It contains nearly every natural resource necessary to their subsistence and happiness, except coal. It embraced practically 796,000 acres. It had very valuable forests of pine, probably 500,000,000 feet board measure, and an ample quantity and variety of hardwood for fuel. There were several small streams and a large number of beautiful lakes abounding in fish, many of them bordered with the wild-rice marshes. The rice served as an inducement to game and was used by the Indians as wheat is by white people. Large portions of this land was of great fertility, and being prairie was easy to break and cultivate. To the north stretched a great territory, sparsely settled and calculated to furnish good hunting for a long time in the future. In other directions and not far distant by rail or highway are growing cities, and it was but a little over 200 miles to Minneapolis and St. Paul. The Northern Pacific Railroad is close on two sides, and one of the main lines of the Soo system runs north and south directly through the reservation, along which, within the reservation, are many stations and villages. It was a valuable heritage. (U.S. Congress 1913, 5)

By the time the Graham Commission, quoted above, was published in 1913, over eighty percent of the land on the White Earth Reservation was owned by non-Indian settlers (Beaulieu 1984; Weil 1989; Peterson 2012). The speed with which such a “valuable heritage” slipped out of tribal hands (it had been less than fifty years since the establishment of the reservation) prompted a lengthy federal investigation and numerous hearings in an effort to “get to the bottom of the thieving” at White Earth (R.G. Valentine, as quoted in Peterson 2012, 93). The investigations exposed extensive fraud on the part of timber companies, government officials, and independent Euroamerican settlers and speculators, but little was done to redress the losses. By 1933, the tribal government of White Earth owned just over one-tenth of one percent of the reservation’s original land base (Peterson 2012, 99).

This early history of land loss has indelibly shaped life on White Earth. In addition to the limitations it placed on the tribal government regarding its jurisdictional and physical influence on the reservation, it prevented Ojibwe peoples from fully taking advantage of the resources on

the reservation. This history is well documented. Nevertheless, a brief run-through in which aspects most relevant to later discussions of food, land, and sovereignty is necessary for this paper.

### ***The Ojibwe: A General Introduction***

The Ojibwe are one of the largest indigenous groups in North America by virtue of both their population and territory, the latter of which extends from east of the Great Lakes to what is now central Canada. Up until relatively recently, the Ojibwe were not a single sociopolitical group as they are considered today. Rather, the people now known as the Ojibwe lived in widely dispersed collections of bands and villages that shared meaningful cultural and linguistic ties, as well as kinship and clan relations (Meyer 1994). These groups, while not “nomadic” per se, were highly mobile, and moved around designated territories throughout the year to areas where resources were most abundant. Seasonality had a significant influence over Ojibwe practices and movement. The passing of seasons throughout the year was based on a lunar calendar wherein each “month” was named after a defining characteristic of the landscape at the time. These often reference foods available during the months (e.g. *Namebini-giizis* [Suckerfish Moon], *Iskigamizige-giizis* [Sugarbushing Moon], *Odemiini-giizis* [Strawberry Moon], and *Manoominike-giizis* [Ricing Moon]) (Meyer 1994; Noodin and Pitawanakwat 2016).

As each season passed, community members, concentrated in independent villages, adopted a variety of roles to make the best use of the available resources. Shortly after the beginning of the transition to spring, families left the winter hunting camps for their sugar bushes—stands of maple trees from which sap could be collected and boiled down to sugar. After the sapping season, families would return to the main villages where they planted gardens for squash, pumpkins, corn, and other indigenous foods. The advent of summer shortly thereafter

saw the ripening and collection of numerous wild berries—chokecherries, blueberries, and raspberries being some of the most notable. In early autumn, large ricing camps were set up along the shores of lakes, where men and women worked together to gather and prepare the wild rice (an important food discussed in more detail beginning on page 35). This was usually the last time Ojibwe peoples would converge in large groups before the arrival of winter (Meyer 1994).

Notably, women took on much of the primary responsibility when it came to managing the activities associated with fishing, ricing, sapping, gardening, and other food-related activities. Even when the men formed hunting bands, it was the women who would gather the fresh meat from the woods, prepare it, and divide it up (Buffalohead 1983; Meyer 1994). Political and social upheaval dramatically disrupted these gendered divisions of labor, and men took on significantly larger roles in these practices towards the end of the nineteenth century, sometimes nearly usurping women's roles entirely.

The consequences of the disruption in gender roles are felt today. During a warm snap in early March, Ruth brought me out to her family's sugar bush to help with sap collection. Her father and brother, along with several uncles, had already been emptying the bags of sap for several hours that day. Ruth and I arrived to laughs and facetious taunts: "Thank god the women are here! Now we'll finally get some work done!" "How many buckets do you want, ladies? Four? Five?" The comments were obviously sarcastic; this was a male-dominated space, and our presence was clearly unusual. For those interested in further discussion of the shifts in the perceptions and responsibilities of men and women in Ojibwe communities, I would recommend Priscilla Buffalohead's (1983) work.

The subsistence-based lifeways of the Ojibwe peoples had comfortably sustained them for numerous generations in the areas surrounding the Great Lakes. Importantly, these lifeways

were imbued with a certain set of ethics regarding interactions with the natural world that governed Ojibwe ideologies and practices. As the *Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg* writer Leanne Simpson (2008) notes, “decisions about use of resources were made for the long term. *Nishnaabeg* custom required decision makers to consider the impact of their decisions on all the plant and animal nations, in addition to the next seven generations of *Nishnaabeg*” (37).

### ***The Treaty Era & the Creation of White Earth***

By the time Americans made their first formal attempt to establish a relationship with the tribes concentrated around the Great Lakes, various Ojibwe communities had already been engaged with European traders and settlers for nearly two centuries. They first allied themselves with the French during the latter half of the seventeenth century, followed by the British in 1763 after the French were defeated in Seven Years War (Kugel 1998). The advent of the fur trade brought more Europeans into Ojibwe territory, prompting some Ojibwe to provide furs and seasonal staples like maple sugar, wild rice, and game to trappers and merchants in exchange for manufactured goods. The Ojibwe created new opportunities out of these relationships, and were soon integrated into the developing economy and changing sociopolitical realities of the region (Meyer 1994). A new population of “mixed” peoples with both European and Ojibwe heritage arose, and eventually grew to create a population with an identity that combined elements of both of their lineages, akin to the Canadian Métis. Often referred to as “mixed-bloods” on the American side of the border, they served as traders, merchants, go-betweens, political leaders, and attachés in both Ojibwe and European circles, and came to play a significant role in later political dealings, treaties, and land allotments (Beaulieu 1984; Meyer 1994; Kugel 1998).

In 1805, twenty-two years after the end of the Revolutionary War, the first official meeting was held between Ojibwe leaders and American representatives. However, it was not

until after the War of 1812 that the Americans more vigorously sought to build upon earlier attempts at a relationship. Subsequently, multiple expeditions were undertaken in Ojibwe territory. These early meetings were generally cordial. Nevertheless, competition and infighting amongst different Native nations in the region hampered American access to land and discouraged settlement. As a result, an 1825 peace council was held at Prairie du Chien between the federal government and multiple tribes, including the Minnesota Ojibwe. This council resulted in the Treaty of 1825, which declared peace between the local tribes and formalized their alliance with the United States. Notably, this treaty included no land cessions. This treaty also marked the creation of the “Chippewa Nation” as a distinct political entity, a determination made by the United States government, which struggled to make sense of the dispersed and autonomous nature of Ojibwe villages and bands. As author Melissa Meyer (1994) notes, “some treaties established ‘bands’ and ‘nations’ whose entire legitimacy rested on nothing more than the paper on which the treaties were written” (36). These political terms proved important, however, in later court cases regarding Ojibwe land rights and use, and are often still used today.

By the 1830s, a notable shift had taken place in the American attitude towards the US-Ojibwe relationship. As more settlers arrived—including families and missionaries along with a continuous stream of traders, petty merchants, and trappers—the United States grew more demanding and condescending, referring to the Ojibwe as “children” rather than “brothers” (Kugel 1998). The fur trade, which had once brought prosperity to tribes around the Great Lakes, was beginning to collapse and could no longer reliably sustain indigenous Great Lakes communities (Meyer 1994; Kugel 1998). The introduction of commercial logging compounded the problem. Logging demanded more land and resources, and brought far more settlers than

trapping (Meyer 1994; Kugel 1998; Peterson 2012). Thus, it more drastically disrupted Ojibwe lifeways in a far shorter period of time. As historian Rebecca Kugel (1998) writes:

The Ojibwe lost important seasonal foods such as berries, seeds and nuts, numerous medicinal plants, and forest materials they relied on to construct their houses, tools, and equipment ranging from mundane daily items such as bowls and spoons to larger items like cradleboards, snowshoes, and canoes. As forest resources declined, the daily quality of Ojibwe life became increasingly impoverished. (59)

By the 1850s, the situation had become desperate. In September of 1854 and February of 1855, treaties were signed that contained massive land cessions, including much of present-day central and northern Minnesota. Technically, per the conditions of these treaties, the Ojibwe retained their rights to hunt, fish, and gather on this ceded land. In practice, however, they were cut off from accessing much of their former territory and increasingly relied on annuity payments from the federal government. These annuity payments were infrequent, and the system was prone to abuse; many promised payments never reached their intended Ojibwe recipients (Meyer 1994; Kugel 1998).

Finally, in 1867, the White Earth Reservation—never the historic home of any Ojibwe group—was created in northwestern Minnesota following a treaty between the United States government and the Mississippi Band of Chippewa Indians. Ojibwe bands that moved to White Earth were promised compensation in the forms of goods and services to aid in the transition to a “civilized” lifestyle. Per the conditions of the treaty, the federal government was required to construct a clinic, schoolhouses, family homes, a sawmill, and a gristmill among other structures. Moreover, they promised to provide individual plots of land, cattle, horses, and tools to Ojibwe who would agree to pursue agriculture as envisioned by the United States. Originally, the US intended to move all Minnesota and western North Dakota Ojibwe to White Earth, but this was a difficult endeavor and did not come to fruition (Meyer 1994; Kugel 1998).

Following the passage of the Dawes Act in 1887 and the Nelson Act in 1889, a policy of land allotment was implemented on the reservation to foster the development of “civilization.” Originally, the land allotted to Ojibwe could not be sold to non-Natives. The intention was to give the reservation Indians time to acclimate to a “civilized,” yeoman-farmer lifestyle, with the goal of removing federal oversight following assimilation (U.S. Congress 1872; Committee on Indian Affairs 1904; Meyer 1994). The land that is now White Earth was specifically chosen with this goal in mind—its varied ecology gave it significant economic potential that federal officials thought would both encourage and sustain indigenous industry modeled after Euroamerican economic practices (Meyer 1994; Peterson 2012). Even today, some Ojibwe refer to White Earth as the “medicine chest” because of its abundant natural resources.

However, the same resources that made this land “an exceedingly desirable home for the Indians” also made it a desirable location for Euroamerican settlers (U.S. Congress 1913, 5). Shortly after the reservation’s founding, formal moves were made to strip the White Earth Ojibwe from their land claims. The passage of multiple acts, including the Dawes Act of 1887, the Nelson Act of 1889, the Clapp Act of 1904, and the Snyder Act of 1906, provided the legal framework by which land assigned to Natives could be bought and sold, directly resulting in today’s contemporary “checkerboarding” of the reservation.

Throughout the twentieth century, as the various bands on the reservation coalesced to establish the “White Earth Band,” this pattern of land loss and disenfranchisement continued. The White Earth Ojibwe found themselves largely cut off from the resources that had sustained them for generations, and their ability to adapt was limited by political restrictions that prevented them from fully utilizing the reservation’s resources.

### *Race, Rights, & Recognition*

Race played a significant role in how land was originally allotted on White Earth, as well as the later laws that made such land easier to buy and sell. Originally, “full-blood” Ojibwe, along with minors, were legally considered incompetent and unable to sell their allotted land. “Mixed-blood” individuals, on the other hand, were permitted to sell their allotments since they were believed to be competent enough to do so by virtue of their ancestry (Beaulieu 1984; Weil 1989; Peterson 2012). The distinction, while initially not legally defined, was nevertheless clearly dependent on Euroamerican notions of descent. Historically, the Ojibwe distinction between full-blood and mixed-blood was made based on lifestyle—full-bloods were those who adopted an Ojibwe lifestyle, while mixed-bloods were those who lived as settlers, irrespective of ancestry (Beaulieu 1984, 288).

When local timber companies and Euroamerican settlers began to chafe at the thought of White Earth’s sparsely-populated land and abundant resources, they turned to their government officials for help. Those officials happily obliged, passing bills and riders that rapidly opened up White Earth to non-Native settlement. On top of these legal provisions, “there was massive fraud in the purchase of allotments from mixed-bloods and illegal buying of allotments from full-bloods and minors” (Bealieu 1984, 286). When the federal government attempted to intervene, it became necessary to establish legal definitions of “full-blood” and “mixed-blood” so that charges could be brought against companies and individuals who had violated the law regarding land sales on the reservation. With the help of physical anthropologists who were employed in an effort to use “scientific” means to assess the blood status of reservation residents, new, largely arbitrary definitions of “full-blood” and “mixed-blood” were applied to the White Earth Ojibwe (Beaulieu 1984; Weil 1989; Peterson 2012). All of this served to “[divide] the population along a



growing perception of social, economic, and political distinctions—between those ‘who wore hats and pants’ and those ‘who wore breachcloth and braids’—between mixed-bloods and full-bloods” (Beaulieu 1984, 291).

**“They Have Got to Dig:” Food on the Reservation**

Q. I take it, from what you say, that the mixed bloods are a little sharper people than the native Indians?—A. They get on with their work better, and they understand it. An Indian does not understand it. You take an Indian and throw his blanket away and give him a plow after he has been holding a gun all his lifetime, and he will take one day to do the same work that I could do in half an hour.

Q. He is not trained to that kind of work?—A. No, sir; he is not trained.

Q. So they are not very fond of it?—A. No, sir; it takes them some time; but they see they cannot make their living in any other way than out of the soil; there is no more game.

Q. They are obliged now to make it out of the soil or not get it?—A. Yes, sir; they have got to dig. (U.S. Congress 1887, 12)

One night during the summer, I decided to join Ruth on a rare trip for groceries. She worked at the casino until midnight, so I waited until she returned to the house to pick me up. It was an hour-long drive to Detroit Lakes, and when we finally made it to the grocery store, it was well after 1:00 AM. Aside from a handful of employees, Ruth and I were the only people there, left to browse the aisles in a vacuous silence. After twenty minutes we left with a case of bottled water, a couple of loaves of pre-sliced white bread, a box of cereal, a bag of pasta, and a small block of parmesan cheese. The cheese was for pesto; I had worked with John at the farm the weekend prior, and was paid in a large bag of garlic scapes that neither Ruth nor I knew how to use. After a fair amount of research, we decided that pesto would be best, and we were looking forward to the special treat. We put our purchases in the back seat of Ruth’s car and made our way back to her house on the hilltop. By the time we returned, it was nearly 2:30 AM.

Access to food on the White Earth Reservation is a persistent problem for many residents. There is only one small grocery store on the reservation, located in Mahnomen (pop. 1,200), a city in the northwestern corner of White Earth. Otherwise, residents have no choice but to go to one of the larger cities off-reservation if they want to purchase groceries. Estimates suggest that almost 80% of all money reservation residents spend on food is spent in off-reservation towns

like Park Rapids or Detroit Lakes, which is home to a Wal-Mart and a Central Market (a 24-hour grocery store) (WELRP 2013). For many, like Ruth, trips to these towns can take several hours. For those who cannot make it to Mahnomon, Detroit Lakes, or Park Rapids, the only viable options left are local gas stations that offer foods with limited to no nutritional value.

The lack of accessible, nutritious food on the reservation is an absurd problem on White Earth. As the Graham Commission noted, the reservation was selected specifically for its economic and ecological production potential, especially in terms of agriculture, hunting, fishing, and wild rice gathering (US Congress 1913). Nowadays, however, much of the land is inaccessible for food procurement, as it is either private property or protected federal/state land. Moreover, while most of the entire western half of the reservation is dedicated to industrial agricultural production, these foods are invariably exported. As one White Earth elder objectively noted, “The extractive industry began with timber, and continued with farming. The crops leave, the dollars leave, and we sit here with nothing.”

Capitalist accumulation and settler-colonial ecological practices on White Earth have created a very real lack of access to land and food on the reservation. White Earth is effectively a part of the global periphery, intimately tied to global systems of food and economy by virtue of its production capacity and exportation of resources valued by settler-colonial metropolises. The indigenous residents of the reservation are effectively cut off from accessing the benefits of this globalized capitalist system. As a result, Native children go hungry while living in homes surrounded by farms.

Further challenges to food procurement on the reservation include the dispersed population, the limited financial resources of many residents, and the geographic and economic isolation of White Earth. These conditions inhibit the kinds of investment and infrastructure

development that allow for healthy, accessible, and affordable sites of food procurement in communities. While White Earth participates in several federal food aid programs—including the USDA’s Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR)—the commodity foods delivered through these programs are extremely limited in their nutritional value. While they may provide a measure of food security, commodity foods fail elsewhere (Whyte 2016). In response to these conditions, residents of White Earth have found it necessary to supplement their diets in other ways. Just as they did at the reservation’s founding, the White Earth Ojibwe “have got to dig” (US Congress 1887, 12).

Many families, although not a majority, maintain their own small gardens, as Ruth and her extended family did. Gardening is promoted by the Tribal Council, which has several raised garden beds outside of the Tribal Headquarters Building, and by nonprofits like WELRP, which has overseen the development of gardening projects around the reservation. Moreover, the White Earth Tribal and Community College maintains an extensive garden behind the Extension Office, where both traditional<sup>4</sup> foods and medicines, such as tobacco (*asemaa*), are grown alongside foods selected for their nutritional value, such as spinach and mustard greens. The endeavor is seen as a means of achieving both good health and a measure of economic security. While “in North America, most Indigenous communities maintain an uneasy relationship with agriculture as a means of addressing food security,” this is not the case on White Earth (Rudolph and McLachlan 2013, 1081). Historically, Ojibwe communities maintained family gardens, although they were subsistence-oriented rather than market-oriented (Meyer 1994, 25-26). Many Ojibwe

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<sup>4</sup> There is also some dispute over the term “traditional.” Some Ojibwe community members I spoke with objected to the use of the term when referencing certain foodways and lifeways, as it implied that a practice was “outdated” or “old fashioned.” For those who still practice the customs in question, this implication is both insulting and inaccurate. Some scholars (see Meyer 1994) work around this word by using expressions like “conservative.” However, it is my opinion that descriptors like traditional and conservative obfuscate the practices they are describing—the foodways at the center of this paper are practiced by all types of people under many circumstances. As such, I have chosen to avoid these terms whenever possible, except where they are necessary.

peoples are familiar and comfortable with the practice of cultivating land and tending plants, and do so in a manner that aligns with Ojibwe beliefs regarding relationships with natural beings.

Contemporary gardening practices on White Earth are a blend of both indigenous and Euroamerican approaches. For example, many who garden grow foods that can be canned and pickled, popular activities in northwestern Minnesota that originated with Euroamerican settlers. Over the summer, Ruth and I spent a weekend at her parents' home on the reservation, where we picked raspberries from several large bushes her parents had grown with the help of WELRP some twenty years before. In return we were given several boxes of raspberries, which Ruth used to make several jars of jams and jellies. The leftover raspberries we packed into bags and froze for later use. Produce, pickled and fresh, as well as jams, jellies, and homemade breads were also a common sight at the Mahnomen farmers market, held weekly on Thursdays. This farmers market was usually small, with only around half a dozen elderly gardeners participating. This was not unusual, as contemporary gardens are usually either family affairs or maintained by older reservation residents. Younger reservation children and teens, if their families do not have gardens, are often exposed to gardening through after-school programs like the local Boys & Girls Club, which collaborates with WETCC's Extension Office to bring children to the Extension Office's gardens.

Hunting, gathering, ricing, and sapping—the same subsistence activities practiced by Ojibwe communities for generations—are still popular activities. Much as they did prior to the reservation era, these practices govern a large portion of activity on the reservation. The change of seasons is marked by ecological indications that certain wild foods will soon be available. When sapping season nears, temperatures are closely watched to determine when the trees will start “running” (producing sap). Wild patches of chokecherries, blueberries, raspberries, and

other wild berries still persist in the area, and news travels fast when patches of ripe berries are spotted. As the ricing season nears, bodies of water are keenly monitored for signs that the wild rice is growing either well or poorly. Activity heightens on the reservation when it comes time to gather rice or collect sap—both are labor intensive processes that require a number of people to successfully complete. As a result, the gathering of wild foods presents an opportunity to create and strengthen intra-tribal social bonds.

While most residents of White Earth do not actively gather wild foods, the vast majority of tribal members engage with these practices in some capacity, whether it is by helping to prepare and preserve wild foods, buying wild foods from fellow tribal members, or consuming wild foods at special functions and events. Thus, the procurement and consumption of wild foods undergirds a fair amount of social engagement and activity on the reservation, and features significantly in local dialogues regarding the social, political, and cultural state of the White Earth Ojibwe.

Indigenous residents are not the only ones who practice “alternative” methods of food procurement around White Earth. Notably, there is a burgeoning community of organic and sustainable farmers, predominately non-Native, in and around the reservation. These individuals practice homestead-styled farming, raising animals for small-scale slaughter operations and growing a variety of heritage, GMO-free foods without the use of pesticides or inorganic fertilizers. These foods are usually not sold on the reservation, as they can be prohibitively expensive. Nevertheless, White Earth is seen as an ideal location for such endeavors, largely because of its perceived separation from America’s modern food system—the same very *real* separation that has produced crises of hunger and nutrition on the reservation.

While many of these non-Native farmers have good working relationships with the local Ojibwe community, the fact remains that these settler-run farms are located on either reservation or ceded lands (Matties 2016). Scholar Lauren Kepkiewicz argues, “without attention to and intervention in how food and food production intersects with the appropriation of land and a history of settler agriculture, food movement actors, whether intentionally or not, engage in colonial process of erasure by further invisibilising the ways that dispossession occurs” (191). In other words, although these may not be large *industrial* agricultural operations, they are still *settler* agricultural operations that mirror the problems created by industrial farms. Primarily, they limit use of the land and prohibit access to the foods produced on reservation by exporting them off reservation.

## Food & Sovereignty

In early July, Mr. Larson and I attended a meeting of the 1855 Treaty Authority. It was a three-hour trip east to Sandy Lake Reservation (*Gaa-mitaawangaagamaag-ininiwag*), through dense pine forest and past the occasional reference to Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox. Every time we passed by water, Mr. Larson noted the young lanky shoots of wild rice. There had been a lot of rain lately, and too much water would drown the rice before it even had a chance to grow.

The meeting was held in the basement of a large conference center and resort at Sandy Lake. Mr. Larson and I took our seats off to the side, in front a large map propped against the wall of different treaty territories and reservations in Minnesota. The members of the Treaty Authority—tribal lawyers, elders, and representatives from White Earth, Mille Lacs, Leech Lake, East Lake, and Sandy Lake bands of Ojibwe—were seated in the center of the room. The day’s discussion centered around an August 2015 protest on ceded territory at Hole-in-the-Day Lake and Gull Lake, both near Nisswa, Minnesota. During the protest, four enrolled Ojibwe were cited for harvesting wild rice without a state license and setting a gillnet. The men were later charged, and had pled not guilty as of February 2016 (Kennedy 2015; Enger 2016; Kalmanson 2016; Thompson 2016). The charges allowed the 1855 Treaty Authority to pursue a case regarding treaty rights, and the conversation quickly evolved into a technical legal discussion regarding courts, lawsuits, and civil rights. An hour into the discussion, an elderly man, quiet until that point, spoke up. He was frustrated with the technicalities, and believed the Treaty Authority had lost sight of their most important function. —“We’re the stewards of the land,” he insisted, “and we’re forgetting our role. We should be our own EPA.”

For this man, to be the “stewards of the land” meant more than bringing cases before settler courts. It meant carrying through on responsibilities and obligations attached to engaging



with the land, responsibilities that both granted and depended on the *inherent* sovereignty of the Ojibwe people. This is a common assessment of indigenous sovereignty. Creek-Cherokee scholar Craig Womack (1999) puts forth a similar notion:

Tribal sovereignty was not invented by Chief Justice John Marshall nor extended throughout Indian country via federal Indian law, though these political definitions affect tribes in very important ways. Sovereignty is inherent as an intellectual idea in Native cultures, a political practice and a theme of oral traditions; and the concept, as well as the practice, predates European contact. (51)

Both the idea and practice of inherent indigenous sovereignty are fundamentally based on living relationships to physical place and environment, relationships that result in a particular set of ethics and “rules of engagement.” Leanne Simpson (2008) further remarks that “our ancestors knew that maintaining good relationships as individuals, in families, in clans, and in our nation and with other Indigenous nations and confederacies was the basis for lasting peace. This was the foundation of a set of ethics, values, and practices known as *Bimaadiziwin* or ‘living the good life’” (32).

From these ethics, ideas, and practices arise the notion of *sovereignty* as “a process of asserting the power we possess as communities and individuals to make decisions that affect our lives” (Warrior 1994, 124). Jessica Cattelino (2008) builds on that definition to add that sovereignty includes “shared assertions, everyday processes, intellectual projects, and lived experiences of political distinctiveness” (129). Indigenous sovereignty is indeed a process—it is neither granted nor rescinded, but rather is strategically reshaped through encounters with settler structures (Dussias 2010; Whyte 2016). This stands in contrast to Western conceptions of sovereignty, which emphasize the legal-political facets of the term and delineate clear “beginnings” and “ends” to sovereignty and sovereign rights through political maneuvering.

Although “sovereignty” is bound up in the complexities of tribal law, federal and state law, history, and the constant rewriting of history, the concept of “cultural sovereignty” figures intensely in this discussion (Dussias 2010). As indigenous scholar Lawrence W. Gross (2003) asks, “in a scenario in which Native Americans achieved sovereignty over their land and politics, would that accomplishment have any functional meaning if, at the same time, Native Americans were fully assimilated into the culture of the dominant society” (127)? This is where food comes in; if indigenous sovereignty relies on relationships to physical environment and distinctive ecologies, while also being experienced through everyday processes and practices, then food is an inseparable component.

### *Indigenous Contributions to the Concept of Food Sovereignty*

“Food sovereignty” first emerged as a response to “food security,” a technical measure that refers to the state of having access to food that meets dietary and nutritional needs (Rudolph and McLachlan 2013; Gulrukh Kamal et al. 2015; MacRae 2016). Food security does not speak to the means by which food is procured or distributed, however, nor does it include a critical discussion of power dynamics that shape global food systems. Thus, the concept fails to challenge the dominant neoliberal perspective that situates food as “a commodity most effectively delivered through the global market” (Gulrukh Kamal et al. 2015, 563-564).

There are several different definitions of food sovereignty, and scholars generally situate themselves in certain “camps.” The 1996 Via Campesina Declaration of Food Sovereignty defined the term as “the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods respecting cultural and productive diversity. We have the right to produce our own food in our own territory. Food sovereignty is a precondition to genuine food security” (Gulrukh Kamal et al. 2015). The first International Food Sovereignty Forum, held in Mali in

2007, defined the term as “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems” (MacRae 2016, 299). Both definitions, however, reject top-down approaches by emphasizing local control over local consumption practices.

An *indigenous* approach to food sovereignty is merely the application of new terms to old ideas—“a ‘right to define agricultural policy’ is indistinguishable from a right to *be* Indigenous, in any substantive sense of the term” (Grey and Patel 2015, 9). Kyle Whyte (2016) goes further when he writes:

...we should consider that North American Indigenous peoples, going back several hundred years, were using English-language concepts and frames associated with concepts of inherent sovereignty, self-determination, cultural integrity, subsistence harvesting, and treaty rights as ways of justifying their own control over foods that matter culturally, economically, and nutritionally. For example, in the process of treaty-making in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many Indigenous peoples ensured their retention of rights to continue harvesting foods in the territories they ceded to the US. Well over a century after signing these treaties, the same Indigenous groups continue to protect and exercise these rights, often working with the US court system and co-management arrangements with the US federal and state governments.

Indigenous peoples in the Americas have recognized that food is more than a commodity for generations—food is a means of engaging with local landscapes and ecology, and is essential to community cohesion and wellbeing (Rudolph and McLachlan 2013, 1081). The slaughter of the buffalo by Euroamerican settlers in the nineteenth century, for example, violently disrupted not only the food systems of Plains Indians, but entire systems of community and cultural practices (Geishirt 2001; Rudolph and McLachlan 2013). Indigenous communities across North America have fought aggressively to preserve the usufruct rights outlined in the treaties that ensure access to both land and good food (Wilkinson 1991; Dussius 2010; Rudolph and McLachlan 2013; Gulrukh Kamal et al. 2015; Whyte 2016).

In her text on gaming and sovereignty amongst the Florida Seminoles, Jessica Cattelino (2008) discusses the transformation of “chickees” (traditional Seminole housing structures) into “material markers of Seminole sovereignty” (128). The construction of tribally-owned casinos allowed the Seminole Tribe of Florida to fund their own housing programs, and as a result promote the construction of traditional “chickees.” These material constructions serve as evidence of Seminole independence and sovereignty, and have thus become political statements as well as cultural features. For the White Earth Ojibwe, wild foods—berries, wild rice, maple sap—serve a similar function. Wild foods are nutritious, culturally appropriate, and sustainable. More importantly, they are powerful symbolic elements strategically used to reference historical foundations of sociopolitical conditions and to make claims about those conditions. As physical materials imbued with intense symbolism, wild foods challenge the material and ideological divide in anthropology and elsewhere. As one resident noted, promoting the use of wild foods is not just about health, but rather about bringing back a body of knowledge that is thousands of years old.

### ***Responsibility & Competency: The Burden of Proof***

In his article on indigenous food systems and settler-industrial states, Kyle Powys Whyte (2015) describes the process by which settlers “inscribe” new homelands in territories already home to indigenous peoples. “For a territory to emerge as a meaningful homeland for settlers,” Whyte writes, “the origin, religious and cultural narratives, social ways of life, and political and economic systems (e.g., property) have to be physically engraved and embedded into the...environmental dimensions of the territory or landscape” (15-16). These settler “ecologies” stand in direct competition to indigenous ecologies, and thus require constant maintenance and defense on the part of settler peoples. Otherwise, the legitimacy of their presence and activities is

at stake. As noted in the subsection *Race, Rights, & Recognition*, early methods of delegitimizing indigenous land claims relied heavily on race; settlers equated Euroamerican ancestry with competency, while Native ancestry was understood to imply the opposite (Beaulieu 1984; Peterson 2012). The following quote from the Graham Commission (1913) effectively outlines this common assumption from the period:

These people are the descendants of a race which for centuries had held trade and commerce in contempt. They have little sense of comparative values. They seem to have no desire for hoarding or accumulating property. The reasons, or rather the impulses, which guide them in such matters are not what might be called business reasons or impulses. Indeed, the real Indians seem to be without what might be called the business instinct.

On the other hand, the white men and the “near-white” Indians are the descendants of a race which for thousands of years has followed trade and commerce, has been engaged in buying and selling, had had its wit sharpened in the never-ceasing struggle for advantage in exchanging commodities, as well as in the struggle for political advantage or supremacy.

Many of the mixed-blood Indians who are “near whites” prove their descent by having accumulated considerable property; scarcely any of the real Indians have succeeded in this way. (U.S. Congress 1913, 18)

Although the vocabulary has since been altered, the “sustained campaign of settlement” through claims of competency is ongoing (Whyte 2015, 16). While on an excursion in North Dakota (about an hour away from the White Earth Reservation), I spoke with a young white man who identified himself as an outdoorsman and an environmentalist. He believed it was “unfair” that Natives had “different rules” when it came to hunting and fishing. He claimed that on a recent visit to a North Dakota reservation (he could not recall which reservation or which tribal community resided on it), he had seen Natives overfish the lakes and had heard of them overhunting deer. According to this man, the Indians did not have any “respect” for the resources, and did not act “responsibly.”

Such sentiments, often baseless, are common, and represent attempts to assert the superiority of settler ecological practices. The claim that Native peoples are inherently incapable of managing environmental resources is both resented and rejected by indigenous communities. As one attendee of the meeting of the 1855 Treaty Authority noted, indigenous foods evolved through long-term adaptations to their surroundings, and are thus related to each other and their traditional homelands, including the original residents of those homelands. The Ojibwe understand themselves to be the younger siblings of these indigenous foods and participants in a reciprocal relationship which carries specific responsibilities (Simpson 2008). In contrast, settler relationships to the land and understanding of the resources therein are often underdeveloped, if they exist at all. As a result, state and federal regulations do not map well over indigenous land practices and methods of food procurement. Nevertheless, the indigenous peoples of North America have become adept at integrating settler politics, and “appeal strategically to U.S. legal principles and interpretations of treaties to protect Indigenous lifeways and homelands from settlement” (Whyte 2015, 18).

### ***Manoomin*: A Case Study**

A millennium ago, the people who would come to be known as the Ojibwe resided on the northeastern coast of what would later become the United States of America. At the urging of a prophecy, the Ojibwe were instructed to travel west. They would know they had reached their new homeland when they arrived at the place where food grew on the water—that food was *manoomin*, “the good berry,” also known as wild rice. Today, “with the exception of the far-western reservations, where there is rice there are Ojibwe” (LaDuke 2011). *Manoomin* is probably the most significant wild food procured and utilized by the Ojibwe. It has been a staple food for Ojibwe communities for generations, eaten plain or in soups, hot dishes, and countless other recipes. Its central role in the Ojibwe migration story indicates its importance in Ojibwe ecology—the Ojibwe found “home” when they encountered wild rice, and the food has retained its cultural significance in the generations since then.

In the months leading up to the ricing season, the wild rice beds are anxiously watched, and frequently discussed—how much rain there has been and whether it has been too much or too little, how the rice in one lake compares to the rice in another, what changes there have been from years past. *Manoomin* generally ripens in August or early September, at which time it is collected by pairs of individuals in canoes who beat the rice stalks with sticks (referred to as “knockers”) and collect the kernels in the bottom of the boat (Vennum 1988). Experienced ricers often note that rice from different lakes have both disparate appearances and tastes—their own terroir. Rice from certain bodies of water is considered superior to others—this “superior” rice is generally stored separately and used more sparingly.

However, access to traditional ricing beds has been severely limited by state and federal laws that dictate the appropriate location and time of rice gathering, and also necessitate extra

licensure. Encounters like those which took place near Nisswa, Minnesota in August 2015 are not uncommon—there are numerous anecdotes of Ojibwe practicing their harvesting rights without state licenses and subsequently risking citations and fines. This is a direct commentary on the intersection between settler and indigenous conceptions of sovereignty in general, and food sovereignty in particular. The former Minnesota Chippewa Tribal President, Norman Deschampe, noted the following:

We are of the opinion that the wild rice rights assured by treaty accrue not only to individual grains of rice, but to the very essence of the resource. We were not promised just any wild rice; that promise could be kept by delivering sacks of grain to our members each year. We were promised the rice that grew in the waters of our people, and all of the value that rice holds. (quoted in Whyte 2016)

Wild rice cannot be separated from its particular historical and ecological contexts. This establishes the foundation for why wild rice harvesting on ceded territory is important enough to risk court appearances. The rice on ceded territory is the “promised rice,” imbued with an irreplaceable value imparted on it by its unique physical location.

Conflict between settlers and indigenous Ojibwe exists not only in regards to place, but also in regards to the very nature of wild rice itself. Settlers in areas where wild rice was abundant also valued the grain, but they were frustrated by what they perceived to be the “underproduction” of the plant. While ricing, it was customary for Ojibwe individuals to leave rice kernels on the stalks during the harvest. This practice increased the possibilities of a second harvest later in the season, promoted the growth of new rice for the next year’s season, and also left ripe rice for consumption by birds and other beings that also utilized the resource. The belief that settlers could “improve” upon wild rice led to attempts in the mid-twentieth century by the University of Minnesota to develop a “paddy” wild rice that ripened at one time and was resilient enough to survive industrial handling. In 1973, only five years after the initial development of



paddy rice, the new grain made up the majority of “wild rice” production in the state of Minnesota (Vennum 1988, LaDuke 2011). This drove the price of wild rice down significantly, hampering Ojibwe peoples’ ability to sustain themselves in the cash economy.

In the 1990s, a similar conflict arose, this time over genetic engineering. The University of Minnesota again set out to “improve” wild rice. Local tribes, outraged at the proposition and fearing that true wild rice might be contaminated, fought against the motion, and ultimately secured the passage of a state law that requires a full environmental impact statement before the growth of genetically engineered rice can be permitted (LaDuke 2011). Additional challenges include environmental degradation brought on by mining, pipelines, construction, and recreational activities in or near waters where wild rice grows (Whyte 2016).

Nevertheless, the Ojibwe, including those who reside on White Earth, remain committed to protecting and preserving *manoomin*. It is a living being with which the Ojibwe have entered into a relationship, and that relationship carries with it certain rights and responsibilities. Ojibwe peoples take these responsibilities seriously, just as they do in the treaty relationships they have developed with the American settler state. By upholding treaty rights and pushing back against efforts to modify the region’s wild rice, the Ojibwe are simultaneously acting under the obligations of their relationship with both wild rice and the United States.

## Conclusion

In July I attended a conference on food and health in Fargo, North Dakota with Mr. Larson. The small group of presenters and attendees were overwhelmingly food scientists who spoke passionately on the chemical makeup of a variety of traditional foods from around the world and marveled at their nutritional content—*the vitamins! the minerals! the cancer fighting agents never before seen in such concentrations!* More than anything, however, the scientists wondered at why it seemed so few were growing these foods. As far as they were concerned, the molecular merits of the foods (and the unquestionable validity of their advanced tests) were all the reason anyone should need to drastically change the way they secure and prepare their meals.

At the end of the day, Mr. Larson was invited to give an impromptu presentation. He offered up his credentials (“RRI”—“Real Reservation Indian”) and began his response to the day’s presentations with a creation story—how the Ojibwe came to be where they are, how they came to learn to live in the places that had sustained them for generations. The scientists, well dressed and well credentialed, sat quietly in the half-empty conference room. Finally, Mr. Larson ended the narrative with the following comment: “The sovereignty we have comes from a reciprocal relationship with the gifts of creation. Instructions were given to us on how to care for those gifts that take care of us.”

The conference was not about sovereignty, but for Mr. Larson, sovereignty was inseparable from food, health, and tribal history. This echoes other indigenous understandings of food sovereignty as relational and historically situated. History has consequences. It exists in an Indian Taco. It resides in an empty fridge and the pantry right next to it filled with pickled foods. It grows right up next to the corn slated for transport off the reservation. The Ojibwe residents of White Earth know this, because they are living the consequences. They have adapted to life on

the periphery of the modern-day food system, in an internal colony of the United States. They have transformed their cultural identity, traditions, and foods into political tools of resistance.

When a member of the White Earth Band of Ojibwe goes ricing off reservation or picks wild blueberries at the edge of a state park, they are making claims about their political identity and rights. They are asserting a certain way of being and knowing, rooted in culture, history, ecology, and biology that directly ties into political assertions of sovereignty. It is a living, physical commentary on the sociopolitical restrictions, economic limitations, and historical transgressions that have rendered the procurement of food a highly charged, and in some cases subversive, activity.

However, ricing, gathering, sapping, and other practices pertaining to wild foods are not engaged with on a constant basis by the residents of White Earth. For example, when he attended ceremonial or social functions, Mr. Larson—the same man who so eloquently spoke on sovereignty at the conference in Fargo—was in the habit of bringing a box of fried chicken from the nearest gas station. Usually without a word, he would set it on the table with the rest of the food where it would look out of place—a garish, greasy box beside wild rice dishes and sweets prepared with wild berries.

The contrast could be startling, yet even in this there is a lesson. Engaging with settler ecologies and practices does not negate the indigenous modes of sovereignty expressed by Native peoples. Colonialism has irrevocably transformed Native lands and lives, yet indigenous peoples persist through both resistance and adaptation. Bringing fried chicken to a ceremony bears just as powerful a statement as bringing wild rice, although the ultimate commentary being made is different. White Earth is an amalgamation of peoples, ecologies, and ideologies, and this reality is reflected in the foods people procure, and how they are able to procure them. As one

resident of White Earth noted, “we’re never going back to the woods. We have to take the wisdom of our ancestors and combine it with the tools of today.”

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