

The Affective Geography of Wild Rice: A Literary Study

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Wild Rice Is Anishinaabe Law

IN 2016 A BILLBOARD WAS ERECTED beside a highway near Pigeon Lake, not far from Peterborough, Ontario. Its design is simple and striking: four words — “Anishinaabe manoomin inaakonigewin gosha” — are set against a white background, adorned on one side by three golden stalks of wild rice. Translated, the words read “wild rice is Anishinaabe law” (Carleton). Wild rice, or manoomin (actually a species of grass, pronounced ma-nō-min), can still be found in nearby lakes and streams, but it has been much diminished in the past century and a half. One lake in the area, known to the Anishinaabeg as Pimadashkodeyong, was aptly renamed Rice Lake by Anglo settlers. As Mississauga writer George Copway (Kah-Ge-Ga-Gah-Bowh) recounted in 1850, “Large quantities of wild rice abound in almost every part of the lake; it resembles fields of wheat” (49). British settler, writer, and botanist Catharine Parr Traill, who immigrated to the shores of Rice Lake from Suffolk in the 1830s, later wrote that the rice beds nearly “fill[ed] the shallow lakes” in the area, “impeding the progress of boats” (*Studies* 103). Read through the contemporary Anishinaabe sign, these historical representations are deeply resonant.

Within Traill’s and Copway’s lifetimes, newcomers’ desires for increasingly navigable waterways were already endangering rice plants in this area. Today, as Michi Saagiig (sometimes known as Mississauga) Nishnaabeg writer, artist, and scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson laments, “wild rice beds have been catastrophically destroyed,” their habitat drastically reduced by the construction of canals and their “fluctuating water levels, the decline of water quality in the lakes, boat traffic, and cottagers actively removing the beds from the waterfront” (“Land”). The Anishinaabeg for whom wild rice is an important part of a way of life protected by treaty have been harvesting and reseeded

the plants where it is still possible for them to grow. Non-Indigenous cottagers, staking their own claims to a landscape ideal that includes views of open water and access for boats, have been pulling them up. What some have called a “wild rice war” has erupted.

It is from and to this conflict that the Pigeon Lake sign speaks as a piece of protest art. Visibly connecting wild rice to Anishinaabe culture, it challenges settlers to think differently about the plant and its place in a complex human ecology defined by conflicting visions of the land and how it should be used. It is a text through which we might reinterpret the plant and its long textual history. Created by Anishinaabe artists, scholars, and educators Susan Blight and Hayden King, the billboard is one installation of the *Ogimaa Mikana* (in English, “reclaiming/renaming”) project, which has placed Ojibwe names and signs at various locales across their vast traditional territory. Like the toponyms and phrases that have appeared across Ontario from the streets of Toronto to Thunder Bay, the Pigeon Lake sign is a powerful inscription of Anishinaabe presence on the land. It is at once an intervention in present debates and a link to the past, an inscription of historical meaning and language that continues to shape, and to be shaped by, the landscape.

Calling attention to the deep significance that a single species can carry, the sign is a poignant marker of the affective geography — that is, a geography defined not just by topography and vegetation but also by emotions and bodily sensations¹ — of the shorelines and waterways bordering the Precambrian Shield in which wild rice grows. In what follows, I begin to trace this geography, exploring the representation and meaning of this plant as it has been refracted through literary descriptions and stories since early encounters between Indigenous peoples and colonial settlers. Focusing in particular on Copway, Traill, David Thompson, and Simpson, I consider the relationships between colonial Canadian natural history and Anishinaabe accounts of the plant and its harvest, positing that these texts are mutually illuminating. Nineteenth-century descriptions of wild rice not only provide vivid glimpses of the historical ecology that the Anishinaabeg have been currently working to protect and restore but also reveal the human and affective dimensions of that ecology, thus pointing to how settlers and their descendants might grasp the idea that wild rice is Anishinaabe law. Moving between

contemporary and historical Anishinaabe, explorer, and settler representations, I develop a geopoetics of wild rice that underscores the plant's complex and sometimes untranslatable signification in the affective spaces of colonial encounter — spaces in which the past continues to shape the present and plants to shape people.

Simple as its design might appear, the Pigeon Lake billboard works through complex textual layers. Its Anishinaabemowin words disrupt the predominance of English place names and signs that mark this place with its British colonial history. Adding to the resurgence of Indigenous toponymy, mapping, and territorial inscription occurring across the country, the Ogimaa Mikana project calls attention to histories rendered all but invisible by centuries of settler activities on and inscriptions of the land. The sign at Pigeon Lake reorients people to the land's diverse meanings in ways that doubtless resonate differently with different readers. To some, the import of these words might be less understood than experienced: unfamiliar and untranslated, they pose a bodily challenge when a reader struggles to pronounce the words and wonders what they mean. This kind of felt knowledge is decentring; it prompts dislocation and disorientation but also opens up possibilities of reorientation to a different kind of shared space (Krotz, "Opinion"). To the anglophone cottager and passerby, the sign is a reminder that theirs is not the only language to have defined this place; to those aware of the translation, it adds that Canadian law is not the only law. For those who claim Anishinaabe language and law as their own, it is an affirmation of belonging inseparable from the topography and the vegetation that grows there. This multiplicity is part of the point: "While the work definitely asserts and privileges Anishinaabeg language and ways of knowing," Blight explains, "we are hoping for multiple interpretations of the work" that will "open up questions about the land we are on and . . . disrupt viewer's [sic] assumptions about the land known as Canada" (qtd. in Carleton).

The sign's message extends its textuality to the plant itself, which, like the written words, becomes a carrier of meaning, something that can be "read" and understood. For the Anishinaabeg, the manoomin plants signify not just traditional livelihood but also a way of being, of governance and sovereignty; they comprise a living inscription not just of a nation's presence but also of its continuing identity. Thus asserting

Anishinaabe right, belonging, and relationship to the land, the sign poses a challenge to settlers in the area — particularly cottagers who have been pulling up the plants — to think differently about wild rice and its role in a complex ecology that includes Anishinaabe culture and history.

For those outside this culture, the sign also unsettles with a persistent untranslatability. Even when rendered into English, to the inheritors of European legal traditions the import of its message remains elusive; the very foundation of the law to which it points is foreign, the closeness of the relationship among vegetation, land, and governance unfamiliar if not altogether opaque. How can rice be law? Across a wide gulf from those reassured by this message are others to whom it is baffling, unimaginable, or even adversarial. A number of news articles documenting recent conflicts between non-Indigenous cottagers and Anishinaabe harvesters point to an affective geography riven with colonial ironies. In their complaints about James Whetung's seeding and harvesting of rice beds across "an estimated 10 to 15 percent of the lake's 57 square kilometres," some cottagers see themselves as victims of an Indigenous entrepreneur turning the landscape into "his farm." One cottager laments the "total lack of respect for all the people around here. . . . It's like we don't count. . . . Our kids grew up playing here and swimming. All of us are affected by what he's doing" (Marilyn Wood, qtd. in Jackson). Canadian law might well agree that "No one should have the right to plant a crop in the waterways for his own personal gain" (Larry Wood, qtd. in Jackson), but the cottagers' appeal to notions of right and belonging based upon family traditions extending back for generations could just as easily have been made by the Mississauga when the Williams Treaties were drawn up in the first place, as agricultural settlers moved in to plant crops — for their own personal gain — on the ancestral Anishinaabe hunting grounds.

Whether registered as adversarial or as empowering, at the heart of wild rice as law are two significant legal ideas. The first is an assertion of the authority to make and enforce law — an assertion, that is, of legal sovereignty. Wild rice is but an example of a larger corpus of laws by which the Anishinaabeg have governed themselves since time immemorial.² The second is an endorsement of wild rice as a *particular* law with its own constellation of meanings and ordered relations. "There are teachings within manoominike (the harvesting of manoomin) that are

central philosophical and spiritual tenets of the Anishinaabeg,” Blight explains, “teachings about respect, reciprocity, working for others, humility, gentleness, responsibility, balance, about relationships, and giving more than you take” (qtd. in Carleton).

In her defence of the right to gather rice in this area, Simpson underscores the extent to which the harvest, which “involves drying, roasting, dancing, and winnowing,” is a cultural practice: “Songs, stories, and ceremonies [a]re interwoven with each step,” she writes (“Land”). This ritualized interweaving of community, manoomin, and cultural expression is key to understanding not only what the harvest means but also what “wild rice is Anishinaabe law” means — how a plant can be intimately tied not just to land and territory but also to governance. Following Curve Lake elder Doug Williams, Simpson explains that the process of gathering manoomin is embedded in their nation’s teachings about how to exist as a “hub of Nishnaabe networks” that strengthens “a web of connections to each other, to the plant nations, the animal nations, the rivers and lakes, the cosmos, and our neighbouring Indigenous nations.” Manoomin does more than just represent this “ecology of intimacy” — it creates and sustains it (“Land”).

My exploration of manoomin and its textual history asks at which junctures Eurocentric systems of education and knowledge — especially natural history, which played such an important role in Eurocolonial place making (Krotz, “Poetics”) — can begin to fathom the depths of this Anishinaabe cultural, spiritual, and legal relationship and to respect the plant as an integral expression of Anishinaabe identity and sovereignty. Early accounts of this plant suggest that thinking in these ways might not require such a radical imaginative shift. The centrality of wild rice to Anishinaabe culture surfaces in varied yet sustained ways across a wide range of early descriptions. The Pigeon Lake billboard is a recent, succinct, and polemical articulation of a cluster of associations and practices of which there is a long record in settler and Indigenous literatures alike. Read through the billboard and defences such as Simpson’s, these literary representations can be understood as part of a textual ecology that, not unlike Laurie Ricou’s model of “habitat studies,”³ converges on the plant, exposing its fascinating history of signification and affective resonance in the colonial landscape.

Textual Ecologies

Wild rice is at the centre of a rich textual web that begins with naming. The Anishinaabe word *manoomin*, from *mino* — meaning “good” or “beneficent” — and *min* — meaning “grain” or “seed” (*Dictionary of Canadianisms*) — which has several variants in spelling, including *minomiin* and *manomin*, is used widely by Anishinaabeg and other Indigenous nations on both sides of the Canada-US border. Its Latin name, *Zizania aquatica*, bestowed upon it by the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus in 1753 (Vennum 13), places the plant in the taxonomic order preferred by European naturalists and botanists. Europeans had also been the first to refer to it as “wild rice” because of its resemblance to the Eastern grain. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first reference to wild rice appeared in English literature in 1748 when, in his *Voyage to Hudson’s-Bay*, Henry Ellis described an “abundance of wild Rice” growing “[b]y the sides of Lakes and Rivers” (Ellis 79). He went on to observe that “if cultivated” the rice “would make good Food” — a significant remark that not only draws the plant into an ecological network involving humans but also shows how easily the line between “wild” and “cultivated” becomes blurred (79). Moreover, like *buffalo*, *rice* is a misnomer that betrays the foreign lens through which newcomers first saw the plant; the English name hovers at the edges of the plant, obscuring as much as it reveals. Mayne Reid’s *The Young Voyageurs* gives an alternative name — “water oats” (likely from the French *folle avoine*) — and specifies that it is “the food of millions of winged creatures, and thousands of human beings as well” (qtd. in *Dictionary of Canadianisms*, “Wild Rice”). “A self-seeding annual,” writes Mi’kmaw scholar Bonita Lawrence, “wild rice is actually an aquatic grain rather than a true rice and is unique to North America” (139). Native to the shallow parts of lakes and streams across the Precambrian Shield as far west as Manitoba — and transplanted to lakes far beyond — the grain feeds many varieties of waterfowl as well as humans. Ducks and geese are drawn to areas where wild rice is abundant.

The lakes around Peterborough historically comprised one such area. The Pigeon Lake sign is one inscription among many that call attention to manoomin and its significance to the Anishinaabeg on these lakes. As Copway clearly outlines in his autobiography, before the Williams Treaties began to open this region up to colonial settlers in 1818, much

of this land was Anishinaabe territory. Copway explains that “The Ojebwas each claimed, and claim to this day, hunting grounds, rivers, lakes, and whole districts of country. No one hunted on each other’s ground” (14). The seasons tied them to different geographical locations: “In the fall we gathered the wild rice” on the lakes, he writes, “and in the winter we were in the interior” (21). While clearly marking his people’s historical use and occupancy of the land, his description also shows how extensively the area had already been mapped for British settlement in 1850: “My father had the northern fork of the river Trent,” Copway writes, “above Belmont lake” and “north of the Prince Edward District, Canada West,” the English names jarring noticeably with the Indigenous meaning that the land holds for him (14, 20).

The treaty, for Copway, was a particularly egregious form of colonial overwriting that worked through its opacity to rob his people of their land:

In 1818, our people surrendered to the British government a large part of their territory, . . . reserving, as they had good reason to believe, all the islands. As they could neither read nor write, they were ignorant of the fact that these islands were *included* in the sale. They were repeatedly told by those who purchased for the government, that the islands were *not* included in the articles of agreement. But since that time, some of us have learned to read, and to our utter astonishment, and to the everlasting disgrace of that *pseudo* Christian nation, we find that we have been most grossly abused, deceived, and cheated. Appeals have been frequently made, but all in vain. (50)

Hoping “that the scales will be removed from the eyes of my poor countrymen, that they may see the robberies perpetrated upon them, before they surrender another foot of territory” (21), Copway regrets the rapid increase in the population of “whites . . . continually settling among us” (52). These settlers not only displaced the Anishinaabeg from their vast territories but also diminished the resources on which they depended: “The deer was plenty a few years ago, but now only a few can be found” (52).

Although Copway does not mention the impact of settlers on the rice beds, he does weave descriptions of wild rice throughout his elaboration of his community’s strong ties but diminishing access to the land.

He connects the rice to memories of his mother, whom he describes as a “kind and affectionate,” generous, self-sacrificing, and “industrious woman: in the spring she made more sugar than anyone else; she was never idle while the season for gathering rice lasted” (23-24). Invoking what Lawrence refers to as the “hereditary guardianship” of the rice (139), Copway makes it part of a web of connections linking the land and the water with the strong bonds of family as well as the food that sustained them.

Providing a settler’s initial perspective of the same area around the same time, Traill’s earliest descriptions of wild rice in *The Backwoods of Canada* (first published in 1832) remain disconnected from Indigenous use and cultivation of the plant. Traill explains its purported relationship to the malarial “fevers and agues” from which so many settlers suffered, “supposed by some people to originate in the extensive rice-beds which cause a stagnation in the water”: rather than mosquitoes, which actually carried the disease, “the constant evaporation from the surface acting on a mass of decaying vegetation” was thought to “have a bad effect on the constitution of those that are immediately exposed to its pernicious influence” (60-61). Although this association alone might have given her good reason to desire removal of the plants, she appreciated wild rice both because it attracted ducks (134) and for its aesthetic value. “Our rice-beds are far from being unworthy of admiration,” she wrote, and

seen from a distance they look like low green islands on the lakes: on passing through one of these rice-beds when the rice is in flower, it has a beautiful appearance with its broad grassy leaves and light waving spikes, garnished with pale yellow green blossoms, delicately shaded with reddish purple, from beneath which fall three elegant straw-coloured anthers, which move with every breath of air or slightest motion of the waters. (193)

Traill’s natural history was animated by a love of beauty as well as a scientific interest in plants and flowers. In *Canadian Wild Flowers* (1868), she described wild rice “with its floating leaves of emerald green, and waving grassy flowers of straw colour and purple,” in the middle ground of a picturesque “aquatic garden,” flanked by pond lilies and water periscaria (72). “When the rice is ripened and the leaves faded,” Traill later added in *Studies of Plant Life in Canada* (1885), “a golden tint comes

over the aquatic field, and the low Rice islands, as they catch the rays of the sun, take the form of sands glowing with yellow light” (103). Traill the word painter comes to life in such passages, making her case for the preservation of native plants that her fellow settlers all too frequently dismissed as “nothing but weeds” (48).

It was not until *Studies of Plant Life in Canada* that Traill commented on the importance of wild rice to the local Mississauga. In this volume, as in her earlier descriptions, she emphasizes the beauty of the plant, from its “stiff upright stalk” to the “delicate, fragile flowers . . . sheathed within its folds,” but she moves quickly from taxonomic and aesthetic descriptions to an account of its value to the Mississauga woman, who harvested wild rice in the fall to “give pleasant, nourishing and satisfying food to her hungry family” (103, 104). Traill also observes that wild rice was part of an Indigenous economy in which settlers participated, buying it for their own families; however, she notes that “it is much more costly now, as the Indians find it more difficult to obtain,” and by that time it had become “only a luxury in their houses” (104).

This observation of the changing ecology of the very waterways that King, Blight, and Simpson are currently fighting for elicits a rare lament in Traill’s writings about the injustices that her Mississauga neighbours faced as a result of encroaching colonial settlement: now “confined to their villages,” they were cut off from the “resources that formerly helped to maintain them” (104). “Were it not going beyond the bounds of my subject,” Traill adds, “I might plead earnestly in behalf of my destitute, and too much neglected, Indian sisters and dwell upon their wants and trials; but this theme would lead me too far away from my subject” (105). Her “subject” is the native botany of early Canada in the environs of her homesteads, and here the generic constraints of the botanical guide foreclose the kind of action that her contemplation of wild rice otherwise prompts. In this moment, Traill exposes the narrowness of European natural history’s categorical treatment of plants as separate from the human ecology that would provide her with another “theme.” Wild rice as law suggests precisely the opposite: wild rice and Anishinaabeg are in a relationship that constitutes a single indivisible subject — there is no separating the plant from the people and vice versa.

The Perspective of Natural History

With its penchant for detached, objective descriptions and taxonomic inventories that describe species as isolated specimens, natural history seems to be structurally antithetical to the intimate connection between plant and human that wild rice as law registers and far from the affective registers that might make an outsider appreciate that connection. Although this antithesis dictates how much — or how little — Traill writes in *Studies of Plant Life in Canada* about her Mississauga neighbours' diminishing access to wild rice, it is the naturalist's close attention to the plant and its place in a complex world that makes her more attuned to the "wants and trials" of her neighbours in the first place, causing her to lament their supposed eventual disappearance along with the native flora that she feared was being wiped out by agricultural development (104). A geographical practice that depended on concrete, embodied knowledge, the naturalist's work frequently exceeded the divisions and categories that botany as a scientific "subject" imposed. As Christoph Irmscher underscores, "Like her native herbalists, Traill the naturalist has smelled, touched, and tasted the plants she writes about. She has felt their leaves, has rolled them in her palms, has run her fingers along their hairy stalks, and eaten their roots" (103). In other words, to practise natural history was to cultivate a perspective of species and habitats that was phenomenological as well as scientific and that had a clear affective potential to open up ways of imagining the ontology of wild rice as "law," even when not explicitly understood as such.

As cultural geographer John Wylie reminds us, at the heart of a phenomenological perspective is an "*enlacing together* of body and world" that foregrounds the sensuous — and affective — experience of being *in* the environment (150). This "enlacing" emerges with even greater clarity in David Thompson's sensuously evocative description of a wild rice harvest, which Thompson observed during his travels in the northwest as a fur trader and mapmaker. His account of his travels was written between 1845 and 1850, though not published until 1916 (several decades after his death), and documents nearly thirty years spent in the northwest straddling the turn of the nineteenth century. The book includes detailed descriptions of the land and its inhabitants, from the habits of beavers to the stories and practices of many Indigenous nations. As was frequently the case in travel writing during this period,

natural history and ethnography are frequently intertwined in his book; however, while some writers used this approach to treat “the Natives” as specimens to be taxonomically ordered alongside plants and animals, Thompson emphasizes the interconnectedness of the people and the land that they inhabited.

His description of the wild rice harvest builds a subtle and complex sensory experience that reveals the closely enmeshed world of manoomin and Anishinaabe harvesters:

The wild rice is fully ripe in the early part of September. The natives lay thin birch rind all over the bottom of the Canoe, a man lightly clothed, or naked places himself in the middle of the Canoe, and with a hand on each side, seizes the stalks and knocks the ears of rice against the inside of the Canoe, into which the rice falls, and thus he continues until the Canoe is full of rice; on coming ashore the Women assist in unloading. A canoe may hold from ten to twelve bushels. He smokes his pipe, sings a Song; and returns to collect another canoe load. (246)

Thompson revels in the concreteness of this world, emphasizing the confluence of seasonal conditions, vegetation, and human activity that the harvest requires, along with the wider ecology of birch trees, grass, oak, and rushes. He also underscores the richness of the harvest: “[S]o plentiful is the rice,” he continues,

an industrious Man may fill his canoe three times in a day. Scaffolds are prepared about six feet from the ground made of small sticks covered with long grass; on this the rice is laid, and gentle clear fires kept underneath by the women, and turned until the rice is fully dried. . . . The rice when dried is pounded in a mortar made of a piece of hollow oak with a pestle of the same until the husk comes off. It is then put up in bags made of rushes and secured against animals. (246)

Although this passage exemplifies Thompson’s “power for exact scientific observation” (Hopwood 20), it is also vividly phenomenological: the relationships that Thompson describes, and indeed the mode in which we apprehend them, are rooted in an embodied experience of the rice and the harvest. His “enlacing together of body and world” begins most obviously with the harvesters’ intensely rendered physical-

ity. Yet, just as significantly, his own bodily proximity to the scene is also palpable and lends an intimacy to his description that collapses the distance of an observer taking stock and detailing the scene for readers unfamiliar with the place. We as readers also become implicated in the physical experience as Thompson's sensuous language invites us not only to picture but also to hear what is happening: from the knocking of the stalks against the canoe to the sibilant fall of rice kernels into it.

Repetition of the word *rice*, accentuated by the internal rhyming of "stalks and knocks" and the repeated "s" sounds, conveys through feeling rather than abstraction a sense of abundance, of ritualized physical labour, and of interconnected human and earthly practices. These sounds accentuate the other senses that this passage also awakens: we can imagine the texture of the rice that slowly covers the harvester's lower body; the increasing weight of the canoe as it glides between the stalks; the cadences of the harvester's song; the smells of pipe and wood smoke and roasting rice; and the motions of the canoe, bending stalks, knocking sticks, and winnowers. The harvest thus assumes a fully embodied character, a three-dimensional wholeness into which the reader is drawn and invited to feel, not just see, what it means to inhabit this place, where birch trees and rushes grow beside manoomin.

Thompson's is not the kind of natural history that dissects the world and collects its pieces in a taxonomic inventory with which Western natural science orders the world. Nor is it defined by the "spectatorial epistemology" of landscape viewed by a detached observer (Wylie 144-45). Rather, Thompson registers a keenly felt sense of what we now call ecology, conceived as "a vision of nature and environment as active forces and participants in the unfolding of life, as both agents of change, and that which is changed" (159). From the processing of wild rice to the trees and reeds made into tools and receptacles, transformation is evident everywhere in this passage. But it is not just humans who change the environment — the environment creates them as well. Moreover, though this web of connections begins with material things — the birch rind in the bottom of the canoe; the man's nakedness; the small sticks, long grass, gentle fires, mortar and pestle made of hollow oak, and bags made of rushes; and of course the wild rice that comes into contact with all of them — the relationship is also cultural. Embedded in ritual, woven through with the ceremonies of song and pipe smoking, the rice is much more than just food. The land and the people are inseparable in

this description, shaping one another in ways that bring us closer, again, to grasping what it might mean to regard wild rice as law.

The intermingling of living things and their environment brings into focus a vital ecological relationship between Ojibwe men and women, plants, water, and the land on which wild rice is dried, cooked, and eaten. Yet, at the same time, the layers of affective value that emerge from the intimacy between Thompson's words and the place and practice that Thompson observes hover at the edges of what he does not know, remaining sensitive to what Timothy Clark (following Ted Toadvine) describes as the "opacity and otherness of things" (Clark 284). Like the Pigeon Lake sign, much of what Thompson describes remains untranslated — perhaps even untranslatable. Despite his nearness *to* the scene, he is not completely *of* it; he alludes to, but does not record or even describe, the ricing song; he observes but does not share the smoking of the pipe; the significance of human relationships and rituals that Anishinaabe writers are now sharing more widely are rendered here as experienced by a guest in their midst. Like so many of the experiences that he describes in his *Travels*, this one is defined by intersecting subjectivities that remain distinct: the Anishinaabe harvester is at home here; this is their practice, not his own. At the same time, his language caresses this world and its intimately embodied interconnectivity in ways that make it impossible not to appreciate this practice as tied not only to land and the Anishinaabeg's rights and title to it but also to a way of being that the wild rice harvest enacts. As Blight underscores, "Anishinaabeg rarely tell each other how they should be. . . . [I]nstead we are shown how we should be through our land-based practices including manoominike. So in this way, wild rice is our teacher" (qtd. in Carleton).

Although Thompson does not explicitly say as much here, this passage contributes to a defence of Indigenous rights to the land, and arguably of Anishinaabe law. His account provides a glimpse of the "ecology of intimacy" that Simpson describes and anticipates arguments now made by many that "when the manoomin or our freedom to harvest manoomin is threatened, part of our existence as Anishinaabeg is threatened" (Blight, qtd. in Carleton). We can draw a link, then, between Thompson's historical description and writers such as Simpson, who weaves manoomin into her fiction and poetry in ways that expand its cultural value and vital connection to nationhood and identity. In the

story “Circles upon Circles,” Minomiinikeshii, “the spirit of the rice” (*This Accident* 75), watches from Ball Lake as the narrator and her partner have a civil but tense, awkward, and humiliating exchange with two of the white cottagers who question their right to harvest manoomin (76). This story underscores how the succession of “docks, manufactured beaches and waterfront” that has reshaped the shoreline is connected to “the ruins of [her] people,” clarifying what is at stake in the impasse between white settlers and Anishinaabe harvesters: “They want a beach. We want rice beds. You can’t have both. They want to win. We *need* to win. They’ll still be white people if they don’t have the kind of beach they want. Our kids won’t be Mississauga if they can’t ever do a single Mississauga thing” (77, 78).

Not unlike Thompson, Simpson emphasizes the sensory experience of the wild rice harvest as the narrator imagines paddling through the rice beds:

I imagine my arms circling, circles upon circles. I hear the grains hitting the bottom of the boat. I hear the wind. I see ducks and geese sitting and eating and smiling because they showed us this first and they remember. There is nothing more gentle than this — nothing is killed, nothing is pierced, nothing stolen, nothing is picked even. I sing the song the old one taught me, even though he can only remember the first two lines. It’s the kind of song you could sing while running a marathon. It’s repetitive and you’ll get lost in the canter. I suppose that’s why it is a ricing song. Actually, it’s the only ricing song we have left. (76)

Simpson’s sensuous language immerses us in another phenomenological encounter with wild rice: we are implored to listen to its rhythms, to see what she sees in order to grasp that access to manoomin is vital to the preservation of culture.

At once a connection to the past and a renewal of it, Simpson’s literary representation of wild rice reverberates with the literary history that this essay records as well as with an even deeper oral literature. In addition to the sounds of the grains and the wind, her description echoes the quiet rhythms of the “gentle” practice that Thompson observed two centuries earlier, her elaboration of the “canter” of the one surviving ricing song that she knows calling to mind the other song, sung two hundred years earlier, to which Thompson only alludes. Although in

this story Simpson laments the disappearance of the ricing songs, in her accompanying poem “Minomiinikeshii Sings” she recreates her own. Here her metaphor “lake wearing prairie” recalls the simile with which Copway equated what might have been the same rice beds with fields of wheat (73, 74). The “ducks and geese” to which she refers in both the poem and the story also anchor these texts in ancestral narratives about how the Anishinaabeg discovered the rice beds long ago.⁴

This web of literary connections underscores the centrality of wild rice to Anishinaabe identity. In her account of an earlier “rice war” at Ardoch on Mud Lake (in the same region about which Simpson writes), Lawrence casts this centrality in explicitly legal terms. “[R]eclaiming jurisdiction over the rice beds was an essential process for regaining cultural knowledge,” she writes; “After decades of silence about their Algonquin identity, in a world where being Indian meant living under the Indian Act, the Ardoch people knew themselves to be of Native heritage but had no real name for themselves. By the end of the struggle, they had begun to explore their identities as Algonquins” (139). Like so many others, she describes the gathering of wild rice as at once leisure and livelihood, mundane and sacred. “For Aboriginal people,” Lawrence explains, “manoomin is a spiritual gift of the Creator that nourishes their spirits,” and they

have been planting, maintaining, and harvesting manoomin beds since time immemorial. . . . Its planting, harvesting, processing, preparation, and consumption are all heavily imbued with cultural and spiritual significance — indeed, the Anishinabeg calendar refers to the time of the rice harvest as manoomin keezis (wild rice moon). Wild rice figures centrally in [the] diet, and its harvest brings together individuals, families, and communities in a collective relationship rich with story, song, and local history. (139, 140)

For settlers seeking to grasp the import of this relationship, the literary history of this plant offers rich avenues for reorienting ourselves to, and respecting ties between, the Anishnaabeg and the places where wild rice grows. Like the two-row wampum that maintains the distinctness of settler and Indigenous cultures, while the meaning of wild rice as Anishinaabe law might remain opaque in many ways, separated from Eurocentric traditions by great gulfs of history, experience, and ecological knowledge, the reorientation to Canadian geography that it calls for is palpable.

I have emphasized here the perspective that phenomenological descriptions lend to such a reorientation. With their emphases on “direct, bodily contact with, and experience of, landscape” and their revelations of “how senses of self and landscape are together made and communicated, in and through lived experience” (Wylie 141), writers have repeatedly — though to varying degrees and effects — conveyed the place of wild rice in an affective geography of colonial encounter. Juxtaposing historical and contemporary representations illuminates the extent to which past writers anticipated present conflicts over wild rice and its habitat, registering the inextricable interconnectedness of wild rice and Anishinaabe culture that contemporary writers such as Simpson continue to elaborate and fight to preserve. Reading these texts through one another also illuminates the extent to which wild rice plants themselves (perhaps like all geographical landmarks) are a link between the past and the present from which different kinds of knowledge about people and land can emerge.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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NOTES

¹ Geographers such as Nigel Thrift have tended to attach “intensities of feeling” to cities, those densely humanized spaces that become “roiling maelstroms of affect” (57). As many writers reveal, Canada's cities are no exception. This essay, however, begins to build an affective geography of Canada's rural spaces.

² See, for example, Borrows.

³ See Ricou, whose critical approach weds literary and bioregional studies.

⁴ As recounted by the Native Wild Rice Coalition on its website promoting public education about wild rice and its meaning:

Over one thousand years ago, the Anishinaabe people lived along the Atlantic coastline of Turtle Island (North America). They were visited by eight Prophets

and given seven Prophecies to follow, the third of which directed them to travel westward until they found the place where ‘food grows on water.’ When they arrived in the Great Lakes region they discovered vast beds of wild rice, or Manoomin. . . . As the story is told, Nanaboozhoo, the cultural hero of the Anishinaabek was introduced to rice by fortune, and by a duck . . . [that led him to] a lake full of Manoomin.

For transcriptions of many other stories about manoomin and its significance to the Anishinaabeg, see Vennum (Chapter 3).

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