A Series of Returns: Indigenous Land, Water and Food Sovereignty in Contemporary Art

Katie Lawson

Abstract

This text draws connections between contemporary art projects realized in Mexico City, Mexico, and Toronto, Canada, over the last ten years as a means of studying patterns of colonial settlement (and its remnants) through hemispheric encounters. The resulting transnational dialogue reveals common strategies of watershed "management" implemented by colonizers, which has led to environmental degradation and threatened Indigenous food sovereignty across the Americas. Maria Thereza Alves, Cocina CoLaboratorio, and Ogimaa Mikana have created projects that harness public intervention and community-based practices to draw attention to the lesser-known stories of watersheds with the hope that this will lead to social mobilization in defense of overexploited natural resources. Ultimately, I argue that contemporary art plays a significant role in fostering a series of returns—the return of local histories threatened by disappearance, the return of a watershed itself, or the return of Indigenous knowledge with attendant sustainable agricultural practices. This text also considers the role of the artist as an amplifier

of existing community organizers, situating this research within the ongoing discourse on visual culture, community-based art, public space, and decolonial and environmental action.

Maria Thereza Alves realizes projects that are research-based, emerging from the specificities of local context. This work often involves connecting with community organizations to amplify the lesser-known histories of a given region. She frames her role as a witness to silenced histories—often in relation to critical issues of decolonization through land, water, plants, borders, and birds. She has realized temporary public artworks in an impressive array of international locations, but the scope of this paper includes two related projects in Mexico City, Mexico, and Toronto, Canada. Both *The Return of a Lake* (2012/2014) and *Phantom Pain* (2019) respond to the desecration of bodies of water as a consequence of settler colonialism—revealing interlocking hemispheric patterns of environmental degradation. That is to say, working across disparate localities has enabled the artist to point to global patterns concerning colonial practices of water "management" and I intend to follow suit with transnational research in this regard. Alongside consideration of Maria Thereza Alves' work, I propose a parallel examination of site-responsive projects by Cocina CoLaboratorio and Ogimaa Mikana (in Mexico and Canada respectively) that use complementary strategies to reassert the significance of Indigenous sovereignty with crucial links to traditional foodways.

This constellation of contemporary artists draw attention to the environmental realities and social circumstances of a place, with the hope that this will lead to social mobilization in defense of overexploited natural resources. Water runs through these works as a major current, taking up the stories of Lake Chalco, Lake Xochimilco, the Don River, and Pigeon Lake.

The artists considered here take their cue from the colonial transformation of a landscape that often obscures or makes invisible the past and present presence of Indigenous peoples. In the introduction of an issue of *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, Melanie K. Yazzie and Cutcha Risling Baldy argue that,

> «...radical relationality requires *interconnecting* these variously scaled decolonial practices to build the kind of mass movements that are necessary for staging a serious counterhegemonic challenge to the status quo of death that currently structures our existence. This requires commitment and trust in the work we have already done. The paradigm has already been created; we just need to enforce it» (Yazzie and Risling Baldy 2018).[1]

I do not seek to flatten the complex differences between the contexts of Mexico City and Toronto, or Latin and North America, but I am interested in what might be revealed through this line of inquiry into the ongoing expropriation and destruction of Indigenous land, water,

[1] Yazzie, Melanie K. and Cutcha Risling Baldy. 2018. "Introduction: Indigenous peoples and the politics of water," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 27.1, 1-18.

and livelihoods across the Americas. Through consideration of the projects brought together in this text, I explore the role of contemporary art in fostering and depicting a series of returns—whether that be the return of local histories threatened by disappearance, the return of a watershed itself, or the return of Indigenous knowledge with attendant sustainable agricultural practices.

Lake Chalco: Maria Thereza Alves

I was first introduced to Maria Thereza Alves through her work in dOCUMENTA (13), where she presented *The Return of a Lake* (2012), a project that focused on the desecration of a lake in the region of Chalco, near Mexico City, in the early twentieth century. At the time I was seeking examples of aesthetic strategies that revive local histories where bodies of water were radically altered to serve settler colonial desires for a mastery over nature and capital gains. Alves lived in Mexico for just shy of a decade, and in 2009 she began working collaboratively with regional Museo Comunitario del Valle Xico (Community Museum of Xico Valley), who wanted the history of Lake Chalco to be made visible.

Before the arrival of Mexicas (Aztecs) in the Mexico Valley Basin, the Chalca people established control over the region's five interconnected lakes: Chalco, Texcoco, Zumpango, Xaltocan, and Xochimilco, which functioned as one hydraulic system. The equilibrium was disturbed with the Spanish invasion of the sixteenth century, as settlers demolished existing infrastructure like the Nezahualcóyotl dike, before implementing a series of drainage projects in the seventeenth century known as *desagüe*—all in the interests of expanding Mexico City into the lakebed of Texcoco but with negative implications for the broader valley area. The Chalcas and Aztecs understood the interdependence of the valley's many bodies of water,

and embraced the abundance of water and seasonal flooding in their way of life. Alves' focus would settle on a historical moment closer to present day, with the man-made disaster initiated by Spanish settler Íñigo Noriega Laso (1853-1923), who set in motion a series of "modernizing" projects in 1885 that caused the collapse of the region's commerce, ecological equilibrium, and adversely affected twenty-four Indigenous villages and towns. A close friend of the then president Porfirio Díaz, Noriega carried out a large-scale geoengineering project to drain the lake around his opulent hacienda to pursue agro-industrial ventures that would quickly make him one of the country's richest men (Alves 2012).[2] But as the title of Alves' work suggests, more than a century has passed since Noriega's actions, and a lake is returning. Despite the draining of most of its waters, excessive pumping of the underground aquifer has continued, resulting in the depression of the lakebed where pluvial waters now collect—the emergent body of water has a new name to reflect the two communities that make up the area where the lake is returning, Lake Tláhuax-Xico. Although there are troubling aspects of this development, it also signals the possibility of return—not just of water, but for previous ways of life and more sustainable agricultural, social, and environmental engagement.

For the initial presentation in Kassel, Germany, for dOCUMENTA, the artist produced a multi-faceted installation and publication that investigated the history of the region of Xico and Tláhuac through pre-Hispanic, colonial, and present-day relations to a body of water that has been subject to radical transformation (Figure 1). In an aesthetic that embraces the DIY materiality of the community museum,

[2] Alves, Maria Thereza. 2012. *El regreso de un lago | The Return of a Lake*. Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König.

papier-mache dioramas of the region are scattered throughout the gallery space. In his review, Richard Hill (2013)[3] suggests an aesthetic resonance between the display strategy and the venue for the work, the Ottoneum Natural History Museum. The scale models depict a parched landscape with fledgling crops, sparsely populated areas and handwritten labels with details about the founding of the community museum and a timeline of changes in land ownership and use (Figure 2).

Two years after the work was exhibited in Kassel, Alves would revisit this project through the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC) at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) in Mexico City (Figure 3). Interconnected bodies of water, similarly to Canada's Great Lakes region, shaped the worldview of the Indigenous communities who

Figure 1. Maria Thereza Alves: *The Return of a Lake* (2012). Installation view, dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, Germany. Courtesy: Maria Thereza Alves.

settled in the Mexica (Aztec) capital of Tenochtitlan. This included *chinampas*, a pre-hispanic feat of engineering in hydro-agriculture—artificial islands in shallow lake beds that integrated organic materials and waste recycling while producing high yielding crops. *Chinampas* were a part of an economically diverse and prosperous aquatic society that worked with, rather than against, the lake environment. The manufacture and use of canoes were a central pillar of Nahua enterprises, used by farmers to cultivate their crops and deliver them to a

[3] Hill, Richard William. 2013. "Exhibition Review: *The Return of a Lake*, Maria Thereza Alves at dOCUMENTA 13." *PUBLIC Journal*, 244-247.

network of regional markets, but also by artisans and merchants to reach customers and deliver building materials; certain crafts were made possible by the resources of the lake itself, as in the case of woven mats made with reeds (Conway 2012).[4] Alves had set out to recreate a *chinampa* as a part of the 2012 iteration, reactivating a plot that had been destroyed by Noriega's drainage of the lake, but plans were brought to a halt by diminished water levels. The eponymous publication for *The Return of a Lake* includes writing by the artist that lays bare her intentions with the project as a whole, lest this desire for a pre-modern Indigenous technology be misconstrued:

«This work is not against change; ample documentation demonstrates that by the time of the Spanish conquest, Lake Chalco/Tláhuac-Xico had been completely transformed

Figure 2. Maria Thereza Alves: *The Return of a Lake* (2012). Detail view, dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, Germany.
Courtesy: Maria Thereza Alves.

Figure 3. Maria Thereza Alves: *El retorno de un lago—The Return of a Lake* (2014). Installation view, Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC-UNAM).
Courtesy: Maria Thereza Alves.

[4] Conway, Richard. 2012. "Lakes, Canoes, and the Aquatic Communities of Xochimilco and Chalco, New Spain." *Ethnohistory* 59.3, 541-568.

by human action. It is rather a discussion of how colonial practices implemented by Spain continue in place as a quotidian reality for Indigenous communities and obstruct the possibility of a viable and ecologically sustainable future for all members of Mexican society» (Alves 2012, 8).

The intervening two years between presentations also allowed for previously unrealized aspects of the project to come to fruition, and by the time *The Return of a Lake* was shown at MUAC-UNAM in 2014, Alves was able to reactivate a former *chinampa*. This was achieved working with the *ejido* of Tláhuac, and resulted in the cultivation of vegetables sold at the local market.[5] Alongside a series of workshops with local community members, the revival of chinampas contributed to conversations about the sustainable and flourishing futures that were buried by dominant settler culture (Amaro Altamirano 2018).[6] In a reflection written by curator Paloma Checa-Gismero, who worked closely on the MUAC-UNAM presentation, she describes these off-site programs as extensions of the project's presence in the gallery, to expand the scope of the collaborative endeavour by rethinking how neighboring institutions in disproportionate power positions can relate to one another; recognizing the relatively precarity of the community museum to a major contemporary art institution (Checa-Gismero 2014).[7] Since the

[5] Alves, Maria Thereza. 2014. "From the Core of the Earth" in *Maria Thereza Alves: El Retorno de un Lago | The Return of a Lake*, 12. Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

[6] Amaro Altamirano, Genaro. 2018. "Dissipating Darkness" in *Natura: Environmental Aesthetics After Landscape*. Eds. Jens Andermann, Lisa Blackmore, and Dayron Carrillo Morell, 61-67. Zürich: Diaphanes. Genaro Amaro Altamirano provides an account of the working sessions held at MUAC.

[7] Checa-Gismero, Paloma. 2014. "On *The Return of a Lake*. MUAC,

rise of community-based practices in the art world in the 1990s, there have been enduring debates around how to measure the impact of such projects. While Checa-Gismero's intentions are clear, as are Maria Thereza Alves', one question that a project such as this raises is what happens after the temporary exhibition or public intervention is over? As Claire Bishop notes,

> «The tasks facing us today are to analyze how contemporary art addresses the viewer and to assess the *quality* of the audience relations it produces: the subject position that any work presupposes and the democratic notions it upholds, and how these are manifested in our experience of the work» (Bishop 2014).[8]

For these institutionally initiated processes to have long-term impact, it is ultimately up to the community to continue working towards their goals—whether that be continued awareness and recognition of a common concern, or seeking the funds and infrastructure to keep Museo Comunitario del Valle Xico open.

One way that temporary projects can live on and gain a wider audience is through the creation and dissemination of publications. The gatherings that took place through the development of both iterations of this work, the 2012 and 2014, proved to be fruitful—the Community Museum published a booklet which called

Mexico City, August – November 2014," *FIELD*: a journal of socially engaged art criticism: http://field-journal.com/issue-1/checa-gismero.

[8] Bishop, Claire. 2004. "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," 78. *October* 110.

on the thirteen municipalities of the region to create communal land committees, to reforest the hills as a form of resistance against continued urban sprawl, to educate local farmers on sustainable agricultural practices, cultivate water management organizations, counter real-estate industry privatization and more. The artist's publication for documenta, a "Manifesto for Water" was signed by representatives of different boroughs, including Chalco, Xochimilco and Milpa Alta. It "demands a reorientation of water policies" for the valley as a whole, asserting the importance of protecting aquifers and restoring former river and canal systems that supported flood prevention before colonial settlement (Demons 2014)[9]. In other words, the collaboration between the Community Museum and Maria Thereza Alves unified community action, demanding the return of the lake, the return of access to drinking water (which remains inconsistent), and the return of the *chinampas*. Together, the "Manifesto for Water" and the artist's publication serve as reminders that a hyperlocal issue is intertwined with a broader region, proposing that the insights gained from the case of Lake Chalco are applicable to other bodies of water—this brings me to form a relationship with the second project considered in the scope of this text, which focuses on Xochimilco.

Lake Xochimilco: Cocina CoLaboratorio

In February of 2022, I had the opportunity to spend time in Mexico City as a participant in the Visualizing Foodways Field School, organized by Zoë Heyn Jones through the Hemispheric Encounters Network in partnership with the

[9] Demos, T.J. 2014. "Return of a Lake: Contemporary Art and Political Ecology in Mexico." *Maria Thereza Alves: El Retorno de un Lago | The Return of a Lake*, 41. Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

Centre for Sustainable Curating (University of Western Ontario) and the Centro de Investigaciones sobre América del Norte (UNAM). As a part of this intensive gathering of scholars, artists, and activists, Cocina CoLaboratorio hosted our group in Xochimilco for a day on the *chinampa* of Humedalia A.C., an organization that works in environmental education and conservation tourism. Cocina CoLaboratorio is an initiative that brings together farming communities, scientists, cooks, and creatives to exchange knowledge, design and take action across disciplinary boundaries in order to create sustainable food futures. Emerging out of a partnership in 2016 between post-secondary institutions and professional networks in Mexico and the Netherlands (Cascoland, the Forefront Project, the aforementioned UNAM, and Wageningen University), the initiative had grown exponentially to include collaborators from a range of disciplines, organizations and geographies. If Maria Thereza Alves taps into the work of existing communities, Cocina CoLaboratorio is a mechanism for the creation of new networks and relationships. They identify their core questions as follows:

> «How do we bridge scientific and local knowledge? What kind of interdisciplinary projects can we create towards a better livelihood and ecological resilience of farmer communities? How can we conserve the environment and its biodiversity in balance with sustainable food production and pair local consumption to global demand?» (Cocina CoLaboratorio).[10]

[10] Cocina CoLaboratorio, "Info" https://colaboratorykitchen.com/es/.

In 2020, Xochimilco became a site of interest for consideration of a local food system in relation to the social, political and environmental context, and Cocina CoLaboratorio embedded themselves within the *chinampas*. Their aim was to celebrate and encourage a return to the biocultural heritage of the Xochimilcas, developing a series of pilot projects that would unfold on site. The major public output of this time is an audio work, *Vox Populi* (Radio Cocina CoLaboratorio 2020),[11] a mobile radio that creates a collective portrait of the community through the inclusion of quotes from participants of different ages, genders and socioeconomic backgrounds that have been or are involved in local food systems and traditions. These fragments are enveloped by a soundscape based on field recordings—the rippling of water and rustling of plant matter; songs sung by birds and boat engines alike. Zabadiel is one of several participants, a *chinampero* from the younger generation concerned about loss of biodiversity and native seeds, who is committed to cultivating crops without agrochemicals and working collectively with dignity and respect.[12]

At the Visualizing Foodways Field School, we travelled through the extensive canal system as we listened to a related series of audio recordings featuring accounts from the region (Figure 4). Upon arrival to the *chinampa*, our group gathered to contribute to Cocina CoLaboratorio's *Living Biocultural Archive* (2022). The archive is positioned as a temporary, rhizomatic and changing platform that promotes exchange and dialogue—we had each been asked to bring a

[11] https://soundcloud.com/colabkitchenradio

[12] A *chinampero* or *chinampera* is the name for individuals who cultivate and care for *chinampas*. Cocina CoLaboratorio. 2020. "Exchanges in the Chinampas of Xochimilco." https://colaboratorykitchen.com/stories/?story-532.

Figure 4. Documentation of program organized by Cocina CoLaboratorio forVisualizing Foodways Field School in Xochimilco (2023). Courtesy: Katie Lawson.

Figure 5. Documentation of program organized by Cocina CoLaboratorio forVisualizing Foodways Field School in Xochimilco (2023). Courtesy: Katie Lawson.

recipe, seed, history, practice, or tool that refers to strategies we carry with us from our home contexts that have been mobilized in the defense of territory and community (Figure 5). The experiences shared by members of our group were far reaching, as we had all traveled from across North, Central and South America to be together. We harvested fresh produce from the chinampa to create collaborative salads, sharing stories and tactics over plates of abundance, creating a collective vision from different territories.

My offering to the group came from the Canadian lands where I live and work as an uninvited guest, as I described the ongoing work of Indigenous water and land defenders in the context of my home. More specifically, I relayed my experience of joining grandmother Josephine Mandamin on one of her

Water Walks—an elder from Wikwemikong First Nation. Grandmother Josephine brought renewed attention to campaigns for water protection through organized walks around the entire 17,000 kilometres of the Great Lakes Watershed. This example sparked further discussion about the varied strategies of Indigenous environmental activists across hemispheres. It is in this spirit of exchange that this text has been authored, to refer back to Yazzie and Baldy's argument that we must develop interconnected and variously scaled decolonial practices. It also prompted me to draw connections with artist-led projects that were realized in southern Ontario by Maria Thereza Alves and Ogimaa Mikana that reveal patterns that echo through disparate projects of colonial settlement—the mastery of nature, radical reshaping of land and water, and destruction of Indigenous foodways.

Figure 6. Documentation of research walks with Maria Thereza Alves, Kari Cwynar and Katie Lawson: *Phantom Pain* (2019). Courtesy: Katie Lawson.

Don River: Maria Thereza Alves

In 2019, I had the privilege of working with Maria Thereza Alves in my capacity as a curator for the Toronto Biennial of Art (TBA). Our curatorial team worked with Kari Cwynar at Evergreen's Don River Valley Public Art Program to co-produce a new site-responsive artwork by Alves in the city. Given the artist's previous work on silenced

histories that illuminate the relationship between environmental degradation and colonial settlement, the Biennial facilitated a dialogue with Helen Mills, a founder of Lost Rivers, a community organization initiated by the Toronto Green Community.[13] Since 1995, this group has led a series of public walks and programs that encourage residents to rediscover the lost and buried rivers that once flowed through the country's largest city, nestled within the Great Lakes watershed. The research for the commission began with a series of walks with Mills, who served as our guide along the former pathways of the Don River, Garrison Creek, Taddle Creek, Lavender Creek, Mud Creek, and the Market Streams—regularly pointing to subtle clues in the natural and built environment that mark the former course of forgotten tributaries and streams (Figure 6). From the slump of a sinking home built on what was once a creek to the old willows along the basin of a grassy park that indicate the former bank of a buried river. Over the last two hundred years, increasingly rapid urban development has brought varying degrees of intervention for different segments of the watershed—most common being the draining or infill of wetlands and tributaries to provide space for residential, industrial and commercial growth.

Maria Thereza Alves became particularly invested in the Lower Don River, which has been subject to a dizzying array of large-scale transformations, regularly subject to detrimental resource extraction, the radical transformation of the valley through industrial development (including using the river as a sink for waste), and major infrastructure "improvement"

[13] The scope of the organization has expanded as a joint project of the Toronto Green Community, the Toronto Field Naturalists, and community partners Hike Ontario. Their trail system has been designated as official Ontario Legacy Trail. https://www.lostrivers.ca/

schemes since the founding of York in 1793. Jennifer Bonnell's landmark book *Reclaiming the Don: an Environmental History of Toronto's Don River Valley* traces the European visions (and re-visions) for the Don River Valley as a means of illustrating changing economic, political and technological realities—namely, the relationship between humans and nature—through nineteenth and twentieth-century capitalist economies. She writes:

> «Colonial approaches to the river and its valley differed in important ways from those that would follow. From reconnaissance expeditions to surveys, land surrender treaties, and resettlement efforts, imagined futures in this period consciously strove to establish a permanent European presence in the region through the institutions of agriculture, commerce, and private property. Specific in conception and practice to colonial imperatives of claiming and remodelling the geography of the New World, these imagined futures positioned the Don River and its valley as central to the development of the future capital. The practices that flowed from these ideas had visible and lasting effects upon valley ecosystems. They also displaced, and then replaced entirely, existing Aboriginal land uses» (Bonnell 2014).[14]

It is a site that is ripe for environmental historians, and there are many stories to be told about this watershed. Alves, however, was most interested in

[14] Bonnell, Jennifer. 2014. *Reclaiming the Don: an Environmental History of Toronto's Don River Valley*, 22. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

the tri-government initiative that emerged in the 1880s. By this time, years of waste and sewage disposal by the municipality and a growing industrial hub had resulted in abhorrent conditions including foul odors and polluted waters that were a threat to public health with common outbreaks of cholera and diphtheria. The heavily contaminated waters of the Don were exacerbated by deforestation and soil erosion that impacted seasonal flood patterns. The so-called Don Improvement Plan of 1886 sought to improve the sanitary conditions of the watershed, make it navigable for large vessels, accommodate rail traffic, create new lands for industry, and offer flood control. City engineer E.H. Keating proposed that these lofty goals could be achieved through the dredging of a wide channel from the harbour to nearby Ashbridge's Bay Marsh and the radical straightening of the Lower Don River, diverting the mouth of this Lake Ontario tributary. The project ultimately failed and pollution of the watershed would continue unabated through the twentieth-century, with worsened flooding and further development, namely the construction of the Don Valley Parkway.

Riverdale Park West sits in the heart of the Lower Don River, a site where the straightening of the tributary was most severe. This is where Maria Thereza Alves felt compelled to install a temporary public artwork, a subtle intervention in the park that would act as a memorial for the loss of a past landscape (Lawson 2022).[15] The evocative title *Phantom Pain* calls to mind the troubling, treatment-resistance sensations in human patients who have experienced the loss of a limb. The Don River was effectively

[15] Lawson, Katie. 2022. *Water, Kinship, Belief*. Eds. Candice Hopkins, Katie Lawson and Tairone Bastien. Toronto: Toronto Biennial of Art and Art Metropole, 328.

amputated, and Riverdale Park West becomes reinscribed as a site of bodily trauma, one that continues to send signals through the nervous system of the city. The artist installed a series of five steel forms that sat flush with the park's grass, a compressed and fragmented rendering of the river's former winding path (Figure 7). From certain angles, the work almost completely disappears, but when a passerby is within close range, the reflective surface of the work catches the hue of the sky above and for a moment the once shimmering surface of water returns to this radically altered site (Figure 8). While chosen for its perceptual effects, steel appealed to Alves as a material that would be easily recycled once the 2019 Biennial came to a close, moreover working as a modest scale that would not require extensive site remediation once the work was removed.

Phantom Pain makes visible the complicated and often buried histories of one of Toronto's watersheds—in spite of the radical changes to the river, it returns to its original path through the ebb and flow of the hydrological cycle. In the scope of this paper, I have barely skimmed the surface of the long history of environmental degradation localized to this urban watershed. However, Maria Thereza Alves' engagement with the Don River extended beyond the conditions of land and water, as these elements of an ecosystem inherently impact native flora and fauna that once thrived in the region. This entanglement was recognized but only implicitly addressed by the artist. And as a means of deepening my research I situate this artwork in dialogue with projects by contemporary artists that take up the ripple effect that environmental degradation has on the ability of all beings, human and non-human, to thrive. A key example of these interdependencies can be found in the fact that by the 1860s, once abundant

Figure 7. Maria Thereza Alves: *Phantom Pain* (2019). Stainless steel temporary public sculpture at Riverdale Park West, Toronto. Courtesy: The Toronto Biennial of Art.

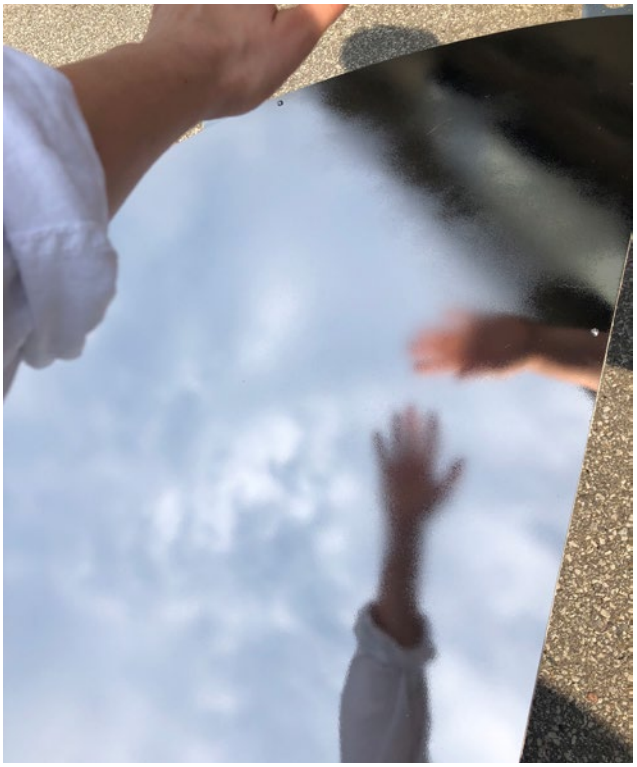

Figure 8. Maria Thereza Alves: *Phantom Pain* (2019). Detail view of sculpture surface. Courtesy: Katie Lawson.

native salmon had ceased to spawn in the river—a formerly reliable food source for human and non-human inhabitants of the region for thousands of years. Salmon are one of many species of fish and animals that have been impacted by the radical transformation of environments, which leads me to consider a project that focuses on a particular food plant that is native to the Great Lakes region.

Pigeon Lake: Ogimaa Mikana

In the nearby Kawarthas, Indigenous communities have had the cultural, spiritual and economic practice of harvesting *manoomin* since time immemorial. Oral tradition attributes the migration and settlement of Anishinaabeg peoples around the Great Lakes watershed to following a shell in the sky thousands of years ago, leading to a "place where food grows on water"—the abundance of wild rice within the region's freshwater basins thus became central to their cosmology. As the only grain of its kind native to North America, it has served for thousands of years as a traditional food, a medicinal substrate for poultices, a spiritual offering for ceremonies like funerals; a food source for a range of water fowl and shelter for young fish, frogs, and aquatic prey (Stack Whitney 2015).[16] Ogimaa Mikana is an artist collective founded by Susan Blight and Hayden King, working in public art and social practice to assert Anishinaabe self-determination on the land. In 2016, Ogimaa Mikana expanded their *Reclaiming/*

[16] Stack Whitney, Kaitlin. 2015. "Manoomin: The Taming of Wild Rice in the Great Lakes Region," *Arcadia* no. 2, Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society: https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc/6830.

Renaming (2013-) project from interventions in signage and historical plaques to include a billboard near Peterborough, Ontario, that served as a creative intervention in the Mississauga Anishinaabe's fight to harvest wild rice (*minomiin*, *manomin*, or *manoomin*).

A popular "cottage country" destination, Pigeon Lake received international attention when a citizen-organized group of settlers lobbied for the removal of wild rice in the body of water to "make boating easier and to protect their lakefront property values" (Carleton 2016).[17] Despite the fact that Anishinaabeg rights to hunt, fish and gather food on their traditional territories are protected by the nineteenth century Williams Treaties, non-Indigenous cottagers stake their own claims, which prioritize a particular landscape aesthetic and use of the lake for recreational activities. As Sarah Wylie Krotz notes, these contemporary complaints have historical resonance, as British settler, writer and botanist Catharine Parr Traill wrote of the impediment of rice beds to the "progress" of boats in 1830 (Krotz 2017).[18] Traill's written account coincided with an influx of settlers to the region, and three years later, the British government authorized the construction of locks, dams, and a canal system that would form the Trent-Severn Waterway. This geo-engineering project resulted in the flooding of the territories of Curve Lake First Nation, Hiawatha First Nation, and Scugog First

[17] Carleton, Sean. 2016. "Decolonizing cottage country: Anishinaabe art intervenes in Canada's 'wild rice war.'" *Canadian Dimension*, September 15, 2016: https://canadiandimension.com/articles/view/decolonizing-cottage-country-anishinaabe-art-intervenes-in-canadas-wild-ric.

[18] Krotz, S. W. 2017. "The Affective Geography of Wild Rice: A Literary Study," *Studies in Canadian Literature* 42.1: https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/SCL/article/view/25931.

Nation; negative impacts on fish and animal habitats; and the dwindling of rice beds. At the centre of contemporary reportage on the conflict is James Whetung, a member of Curve Lake First Nation who is a provincially licensed harvester and founder of the company Black Duck Wild Rice, named for his father's clan (Jackson 2016).[19] The activities of the company are wide-reaching: for forty years, Whetung has worked to rehabilitate local rice beds in consultation with community elders, cultivate and sell wild rice, and to re-educate the public on how to gather and process the plant through experiential workshops as an advocate for Indigenous food sovereignty and security.

The billboard mounted by Ogimaa Mikana reads "*Anishinaabe manoomin inaakonigewin gosha*"—it offers no English translation upfront, but it is flanked by a hashtag #ogimaamikana (which takes curious passerbys to the collective's website) and a simple line drawing of the water bound crop (Figure 9). The presence of the Anishinaabemowin language is itself a disruption within a landscape dominated by the language of British colonizers.[20] The onus is placed on the viewer to seek out further information, and would easily discover that the text translates to "wild rice is Anishinaabe law." Susan Blight describes the philosophical teachings that are central to the harvesting of this nutritious,

[19] Jackson, Lisa. 2016. "Canada's Wild Rice Wars." *Al Jazeera:* https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2016/2/20/canadas-wild-rice-wars.

[20] While outside of the scope of this text, it is worth noting that much in the same way that the manipulation of water and land is a strategy of colonial settlement, so too is the imposition of the language of the colonizer and loss of Indigenous languages (which are a part of a given community's intangible cultural heritage). There has been a resurgence of interventions with Indigenous language in public spaces around the world, its own generative line of inquiry that is furthered through the exchange of global strategies for decolonization.

Figure 9. Ogimaa Mikana: *Reclaiming/ Renaming* (Susan Blight & Hayden King), "Anishinaabe manoomin inaakonigewin gosha" (2016). Billboard in Peterborough, Ontario.

sustainable food source—teachings that are threatened by the lack of freedom to continue with land-based practices that are central to Anishinaabeg identity and sovereignty (Carleton 2016). There are resonances here with the assertion by Cocina CoLaboratorio and Maria Thereza Alves that the *chinampa* represents not just a sustainable food system, but is part of an intricate web of human and non-human relations that inform our connection to place and culture. Intertwined with the harvesting and seeding of wild rice are the expression of that identity through songs, stories, dances and ceremonies that accompany the drying, roasting and winnowing of the grain—all a part of the web of relations that Leanne Betasamosake Simpson describes as her nation's "ecology of intimacy" (Simpson 2017).[21]

Conclusions

Each of the projects detailed in this paper look quite different on the surface: a gallery exhibition, an ephemeral series of gatherings with their resulting audio recordings, a steel sculpture, and a billboard. They emerged from distinct geographies and socio-political contexts, yet each of the artists or artist collectives recover an aspect of local cultural and environmental heritage and Indigenous knowledge, working with aesthetic strategies with ties to social practice to translate, develop, and amplify existing

[21] Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. "Land and Reconciliation: Having the Right Conversations." *Watershed Sentinel*, November 23, 2017: https://watershedsentinel.ca/articles/land-reconciliation/.

research or stories. There is also something fundamentally relational about the process of realizing each work—the artist takes on the role of amplifier, and shares strategies with community-based practices. While Maria Thereza Alves champions the work of the Museo Comunitario del Valle Xico and Lost Rivers, I would argue that Ogimaa Mikana provided a signal boost to Black Duck Wild Rice and James Whetung, and Cocina CoLaboratorio demonstrates the most literal meaning of amplification in their broadcast of a sprawling network of interdisciplinary researchers and practitioners. At first glance, the resulting contemporary artworks tap into local contexts by way of the forced manipulation and transformation of water and land, but they also expand out to include consideration of equally critical issues of our times: Indigenous sovereignty, food systems, and sustainable agricultural practices. I am encouraged by these artists to look to the past in order to imagine an alternative future—there is always the promise of return.

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