

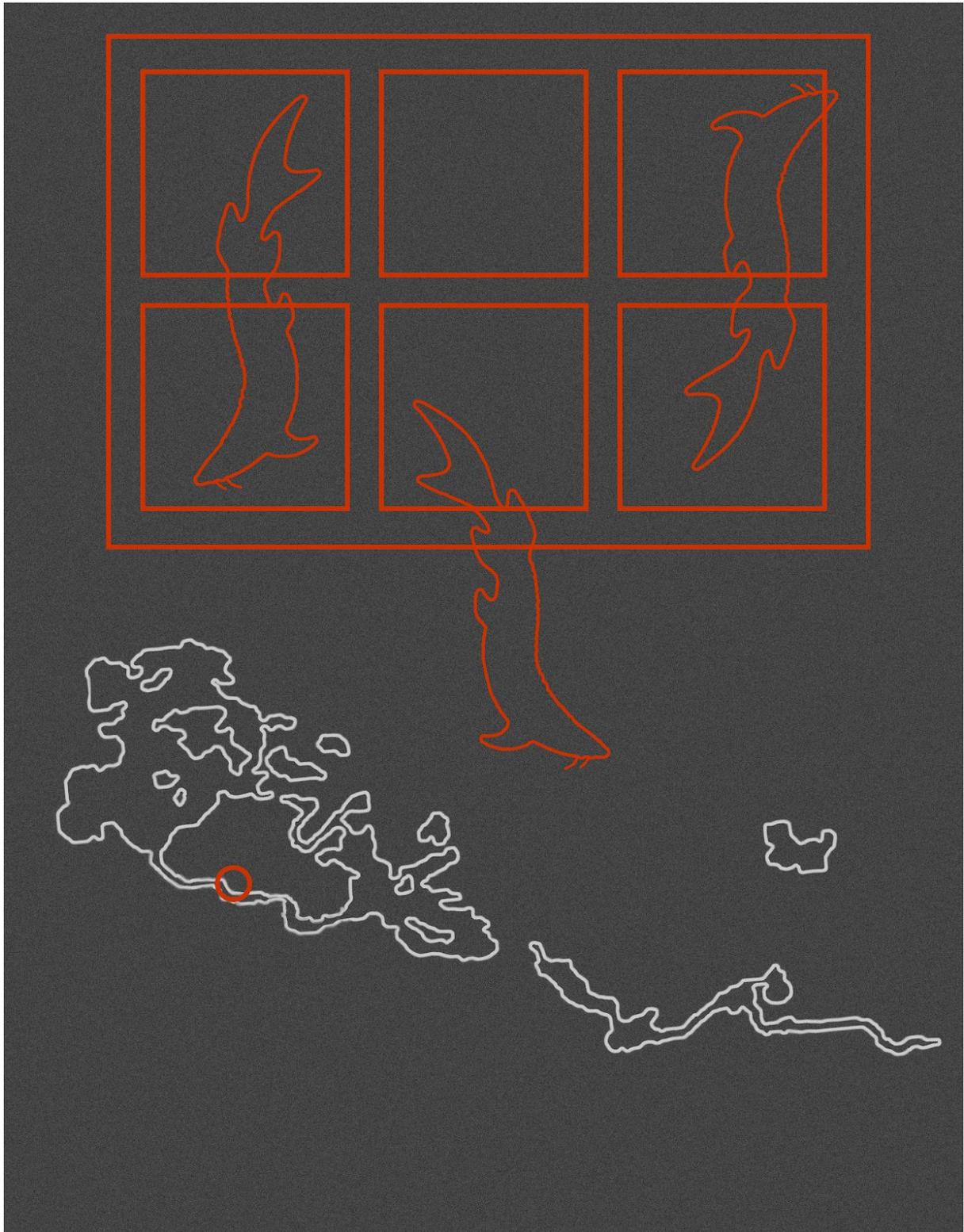
The Sturgeon Must Live as a Sturgeon

The Sturgeon Must Live as a Sturgeon: Memory, Traces and Keeping the World Going.

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“Things are going wrong when people think of the land as a pie that can be sliced up in pieces. One quarter will live well, and another quarter will be reasonable. But the other half won’t do too well at all. No matter how you cut a pie, in the end there’s nothing holding it together. It gets eaten like pop and chips, like raisins. It’s better for people to live as if they’re inside a ball. The sky, upstairs and downstairs, the four directions: these will hold everything together and not let anything escape because a ball has a top to cover us and a bottom to hold us, and everything works together.”

- Ron Geyschick, *Te Bwe Win: Stories of an Ojibway Healer*

### **Ziigwan was the Time to Catch Namewag and Will Be Again.**

In the spring spawning season, the sturgeon would gather close to the surface of the water and they would gather together in the thousands (Holzkamm, Lytwyn and Waisberg, 1991). If you missed that period of three to four weeks in May or early June it was more difficult, though not impossible, to catch them. By the summer the sturgeon in Gojiji-ziibi<sup>1</sup> would disperse; this was their time to go off on their own, keeping close to the bottom of the river and evading Anishinaabe nets and spears. It is said that for that five to six weeks in the warm summers of what came to be known as the Rainy River-Lake of the Woods basin, the sturgeon kept their heads down to follow the current (Holzkamm, et al., 1991) and it was unlikely you would catch them. A fall migration period meant that the sturgeon went downriver into Lake of the Woods and while it was not as bountiful as the spring spawning, they were back close to the surface of the water and could be caught before the winter arrived when it was simply impractical to fish for sturgeon.

To the Anishinabeg the sturgeon is the original fish, the genesis from which all fish who inhabit our waters came (Johnston, 2003). Maybe you have heard about Nanaboozhoo being swallowed by a giant sturgeon. Nanaboozhoo is half human and half spirit; they are the fourth son of Winonah, a human, and fathered by Ae’pungishimook, a spirit. Nanaboozhoo eventually slays the great fish and cuts the carcass into pieces which they throw back into the waters; those pieces become trout, suckers, whitefish, bass, perch, pickerel, and of course smaller sturgeon (Johnston, 2003). When I write “smaller sturgeon” I should be clear that, though perhaps not giant, the sturgeon in our waters can be over 300 pounds in weight and three metres in length. Their size is linked to their age as the sturgeon never stops growing and can live to be 100 years old or more. The lake sturgeon is an ancient fish having been on the earth for over one hundred and thirty million years and it is

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<sup>1</sup> Gojiji-ziibi is known as english as the Rainy River. The 137 kilometre long river connects Rainy Lake and Lake of the Woods and forms part of the colonial border between Northwestern Ontario and Minnesota.

with these understandings that the Anishinaabeg came to be in relation with the fish we call, name or namewag when there is more than one.

In this paper, I am writing about the Anishinaabeg of Treaty #3 and more specifically, the Anishinaabeg in the regions of Manidoo-baawitigong (Manitou Rapids), Gojijing (Couchiching), and Gaa-waawiyegamak (Hunter's Island). For the purposes of this paper when I refer to the Anishinaabeg, I am referring to the Anishinaabeg of this region unless otherwise stated. Indigenous peoples had large scale fisheries long before any European fur trader or missionary ever stepped foot near Gojiji-ziibi and continued to operate sustainable and successful fisheries after. The fisheries along the Rainy River were significant gathering places for Anishinaabeg who came from all directions: Lake Superior, Leech Lake, Lake Winnipeg and Lac Seul, for instance. There could be as many as 1500 Anishinaabeg convened at these sites during the fishing season which is important in thinking about how sturgeon supported the reaffirming of familial, social and political ties among our people. Canoes were pulled ashore as people arrived. Smaller bark-covered lodges for housing dotted the land in proximity to larger ceremonial and teaching lodges. Colonial Administrator Sir Henry Lefroy made a note in 1843 that the fishery at Manitou Rapids alone consisted of twenty-five lodges (Holzkamm, et al., 1991). Nets were initially made of wild hemp and then twine bought from trading posts (Child, 2016). The process for making the strong and durable nets required delicate artistry and was done communally. Lifting the nets from the water and gathering the catch was done by Anishinaabe folks of all genders (Child, 2016). Midewiwin ceremonies were held during the spring spawning season in close proximity to the fisheries; when the Anishinaabeg speak of a spiritual relationship to the sturgeon, there is a very direct connection between namewag and our spiritual renewal. In fact, when a missionary by the name of Peter Jacobs asked to build a mission in 1852 at the Manitou Rapids site, the Anishinaabeg refused, stating its presence would harm the sturgeon fishery (Holzkamm, et al., 1991).

While some of the sturgeon that was taken from the waters was eaten fresh including the flesh and eggs, much more was cured or otherwise preserved for later use. There was a way of preserving that was specific to the Gojiji-ziibi Anishinaabeg that involved drying the flesh over a slow fire until it became flaky which was then ground between stones. The dried flakes were mixed with a rich oil rendered from the sturgeon producing a pemmican that was flavourful and nutritious; when stored in the sturgeon skin bag, this food would keep for years (Holzkamm, et al, 1991). We produced the sturgeon oil in huge quantities and kept it in namewayan, sizeable jars made from the skin of sturgeon. The ingenious method of making namewayan used the whole skin of the sturgeon and when completed the containers were both light and nearly indestructible (Holzkamm, et al, 1991). Sturgeon oil could be preserved for two years or more in these jars (Steinbring, 1964-65). Important for the making of namewayan was the glue produced from the inner membrane of the swim bladder. This glue was impressive to say the least as even an HBC trader remarked in 1743 that it was, "very strong and good" (Holzkamm, et al, 1991, p. 126).

I feel compelled to type out the tangible things the sturgeon offered us. This relationship gave us life that was abundant which is not to say that there weren't hard times or periods of scarcity. Abundance is different from amassing or acquisition or even quantity. It is a way of living in the world that sets actions in the service of balance and a deep knowing that we live on land that continually grows and replenishes. The abundance was not due to a reckless and unrestrained drive to collect as much as possible but to an acknowledgment that sturgeon sustained Anishinaabe life, itself a practice of promoting more life. As Joe Hunter, who has been the operator of the Sustainable Sturgeon Culture fish hatchery on Rainy River First Nations since 1993, says:

"When you take a fish from the river, you must offer something back. This fishery was a source of life and livelihood for the Anishinaabe, who paid homage to the sturgeon through the practice of taking only what they needed to survive and carry them through harsh winters" (Spratt, 2017)

In this passage, Joe Hunter is offering us something about reciprocity in the specific relationship of Anishinaabeg to sturgeon. We understand that *namewag* help us to remember, to restore, to renew and reaffirm. In exchange, we offer our actions as ones that are not harmful to their ability to make new ancestors. As they move through the world, the shape they make is drawn by passage and return and the desire for connection. We must be sure to align our ways of living so as to not impede their desires.

That abundance, in very practical ways, also made the Anishinaabeg of our region highly skilled traders with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous trading partners. In addition to sturgeon products, we had wild rice, deer and moose meat, other fresh and dried freshwater fish, maple syrup, berries, and birchbark canoes to trade. Euro-Canadian fur traders noted extensively the position of power the Anishinaabeg held in trading and they often seemed frustrated by the Anishinaabeg tendency to live on what we already had rather than barter. The surveyor Simon J. Dawson described us as, "formidable, if inclined to be troublesome" while Sir John Richardson noted that the Rainy River Anishinaabeg were, "independent of the HBC, from the fact that they have abundance of sturgeon and great quantities of wild rice" (Holzkamm, et al., 1991, 127). The relationship between *namewag* and Anishinaabeg was so strong, abundant and visible that at that time, settlers called the region "sturgeon country" and the Anishinaabeg of the region, "Sturgeon Indians" (Kelly, 1998).

There was a period of time when settlers viewed the sturgeon as a nuisance from which no money could be made. Due to their enormous size and strength, the sturgeon often and easily destroyed the inadequate nets set by settlers. (Hannibal-Paci, 1998) and weren't the fish settlers wanted; when caught, our relatives were ripped from the worlds they inhabited and tossed on the ground where they would be "stacked on the shorelines like logs" ("Species Profile - Lake Sturgeon", 2018). They would remain there on the shore mostly

unused. I imagine the depravity of this act must have shocked any Anishinaabe who witnessed it.

Categorizing the sturgeon as not valuable changed when settlers wanted isinglass, a product well known to the Anishinaabeg for millenia. Isinglass is sourced from the inner membrane of the swim bladder and became, during the period of the fur trade, a commodity very much in demand in Europe and an important ingredient in the production of beer and wine. Initially, both the NWC and the HBC acquired isinglass from the Anishinaabeg in trades. However, our people also valued this material as the aforementioned highly effective glue and considering it takes an estimated ten sturgeon to produce one pound of isinglass (Holzkamm, et al., 1991) and the labor involved is quite extensive (Holzkamm, 1987), there was a point at which the colonial demand surpassed the Anishinaabeg's willingness and ability to give it to them.

When the negotiations for the agreement known as Treaty #3 were completed in 1873, representatives for the Anishinaabeg of Goojiji-zibi chose as part of their reserve lands areas around Manitou Rapids and Long Sault, securing these locations of long term, sustainable sturgeon fisheries for the "children yet to be born" (LaDuke, 2005, p. 43). It's been noted that for some years previous to beginning negotiations in 1869, the Anishinaabeg had "persistently refused to enter into any Treaty" (Holzkamm, et al, 1991, p. 132) and when we did negotiate, we demanded control of all existing fisheries in the region. Our people held great care for the fisheries, envisioning futures for generations to come; what was agreed upon was Anishinaabeg control of all fisheries and that we would, "forever have the use" ("We Have Kept Our Part of the Treaty", 2011) of these sites.

Indiscriminate and unrestrained fishing by non-Indigenous people included the use of pound nets which swept the lakes of massive quantities of sturgeon, along with other fish like whitefish, jack fish and walleye. Anishinaabe people recognized the destruction and acted to protect the sturgeon by herding them away from settlers' nets (Kelly, 1998). Furthering the devastation, Canada violated the treaty by granting large-scale, commercial fisheries to non-Indigenous people ("We Have Kept...", 2011) and even allowed them to take over land that was the site of Anishinaabe fisheries. As Fred Kelly articulates it, the "wrongful expropriation of the traditional fisheries" (Kelly, 1998, p. 8) occurred amidst Canada turning fishing regulations over to the province of Ontario which allowed them to bypass obligations within the treaty, as provinces cannot pass laws over Indigenous peoples (Kelly, 1998). This action combined with American fishermen operating near the colonial border in Lake of the Woods, which Canada also did nothing about despite pleas from their own local administrators and the Anishinaabeg (Holzkamm, et al, 1991), was a disaster for the sturgeon. Again, the Anishinaabeg resisted. In August of 1890, Chief Powassin, a principal negotiator of Treaty #3, was part of a group of thirty warriors who seized a U.S. commercial fishery. This direct action included cutting up the nets and taking the fishing equipment (Kelly, 1998) but the volume of fish destroyed was enormous. By the 1891 spring spawning

season, few sturgeon were being caught at the previously bountiful Gojiji-ziibi sites. Conditions were so bad during that same year that Indian Agent Robert Pither reported, "On my trip up Rainy River in July, making the payments, the Indians were almost starving, as very few sturgeons went up the river to spawn and they hardly caught enough for personal use" (Holzkamm, et al, 1991, p. 134). This drastic decline in sturgeon was a direct consequence of Canada granting control of fisheries to non-Indigenous people and introducing an extractive economy on our lands which not only systematically impoverished our people but attempted to sever our spiritual relationship to the sturgeon. In 1892, the Anishinaabeg petitioned the Canadian government on behalf of themselves and the sturgeon to stop granting fishing licences before there were no fish left in Lake of the Woods.

Overharvesting by Canadian commercial fisherman continued after 1892 and harvest rates for dressed sturgeon in the years following averaged one million pounds per year (Holzkamm, et al, 1991) in comparison to the Anishinaabe-managed harvest of 275,000 annually between 1823 and 1884 (LaDuke, 2005). The introduction of pound nets used at the mouth of the Rainy River specifically produced a terminal decline as noted by Ojibwe storyteller Maggie Wilson<sup>2</sup>; the use of the pound net traps in that location not only blocked the sturgeon from ever reaching Manitou Rapids and Long Sault but prevented them from reproducing (Wilson, 2009). The sturgeon takes it slow. It reaches sexual maturity between 12 and 26 years of age and then, males may spawn once every 2-3 years and females every 4-7 years. You can imagine how destructive stopping them before they even begin the spawning journey would be to the population. During the 1890's, the treatment of our relative, name, was repulsive. Settlers often took only the swim bladder while the rest of the fish was, as Winona LaDuke notes, "stacked up like cordwood on steamboats, used as fuel for the boilers" (LaDuke, 2005, p. 229). This, combined with the pollution from sawmills upstream on the Rainy River and the building of hydroelectric dams at Fort Frances and Kenora caused a nearly complete collapse of sturgeon in the region. By 1925, the sturgeon population had declined to about 1% of what it was when Anishinabeg had management of the waters (LaDuke, 2005).

The construction of dams in our territory blocked the sturgeon from their rightful waterways and their ancestral paths. Namewag are wide-ranging fish; they need the freedom to travel--hundreds of kilometres in some cases--in their world of lakes and rivers. The dam at Fort Frances had effectively confined the Rainy River population of sturgeon, restricting them from engaging with the Rainy Lake sturgeon. As Zoe Todd offers us in her work, "water is a site of, and is used as a manifestation of, settler colonial violence in Canada" (Todd, 2018, p. 61). Flooding land, diverting water, stealing land, stealing water,

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<sup>2</sup> Maggie Wilson (1879–1940) lived on the Manitou Rapids Reserve. In 2009, her stories were published as a book--Rainy River Lives: Stories Told By Maggie Wilson. I have relied on this book not only for its references to the sturgeon fisheries but for an overall sense of the times in Manidoo-baawitigong.

denying water, contaminating water, these tactics of controlling water work against abundance and for accumulation. As much as the dam acts as a symbol of colonial “progress”, it represents for the Anishinaabeg a profound disregard for life as it must be lived by other-than-human beings.

We as Anishinaabeg, believe the sturgeon like all beings is born to be free and travel its path; the dam is a corporeal border, cutting across and through sturgeon freedom, allowing for the extraction of some things and the holding back of other things. As one of our closest relationships with other-than-human societies<sup>3</sup>, we know sturgeon is not us and we are not sturgeon but we also know that our lives, our freedom, are inextricably linked. Like Winona LaDuke articulates, “our people became like the sturgeon, like the wolves, placed in smaller and smaller boxes, territories or ecosystems, and then asked to give up who we were” (LaDuke, 2011). But we didn’t give up who we are and we have often depended on sturgeon to remind us how free beings move because we are not those who build smaller and smaller boxes. Rather than on top of or through sturgeon society, we have worked to make life alongside them. Life alongside them as they move through and return, deftly changing direction and slipping through constructed boundaries.

### Memory as Offering

At present time, there are only a few viable populations of sturgeons left on Turtle Island (LaDuke, 2005) and one of these populations exists because of the Rainy River First Nations, the descendants of the Goojiji-ziibi Anishinaabeg. The Sustainable Sturgeon Culture Fish Hatchery there is the only Indigenous-run sturgeon hatchery in Canada and was started back in 1993. The team at Sustainable Sturgeon Culture Fish Hatchery, under the guidance of Elders and the leadership of Joe Hunter, propagate lake sturgeon from the Rainy River and introduce fry and fingerlings back into the river from which their ancestors came. They also supply fertilized lake sturgeon eggs to conservation bodies and other Indigenous communities looking to bring sturgeon back to their waters (Spratt, 2017). It is a reaffirming of our responsibilities and a recognition of a worldview that knows that if the sturgeon population is healthy, our people will be healthy. At this point in time, “the strongest and most viable population of sturgeon in the world is in the Rainy River system.” (LaDuke, 2005, p. 230)

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<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Vanessa Watts for articulating this understanding of how non-human beings, the worlds they inhabit, and the relationships within those worlds are understood as societies by Indigenous peoples. In her article *Indigenous place-thought & agency amongst humans and non-humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European world tour!)* Vanessa writes, “...habitats and ecosystems are better understood as societies from an Indigenous point of view; meaning that they have ethical structures, inter-species treaties and agreements, and further their ability to interpret, understand and implement. Non-human beings are active members of society” (Watts, 23).

I think we need to take a moment to appreciate what it takes for a people not to forget, when everything in the dominant culture wants us to forget, sometimes violently forced us to forget, created conditions in which it was easier for us to forget. The Canadian state doesn't know how our memory works and underestimates its strength.

Our world as Anishinaabeg was built in relationship to the sturgeon just as it was built in relationship to the other beings who populate our cosmologies with the sky above us and the lands and waters around us. Not forgetting is the medicine that keeps our world going. It is the healing and the protection. It is the breaking down of constructed borders and the passage through and return. It is the homecoming when you have veered off. One sturgeon brought back to the river will draw its trace across our waters contributing to the memory of a land still strong but impacted by the violence of settler colonialism. As Anishinaabe people, the human beings of this land, we learn their traces because our collective memory needs to have a sense of the shape of our world or else how can we hold it all together? When I think about Joe Hunter gently, ceremonially, bringing those baby sturgeon back to the Rainy River, I recall what Fred Ackley Jr. from the Sokaogon Chippewa Community of Mole Lake has said:

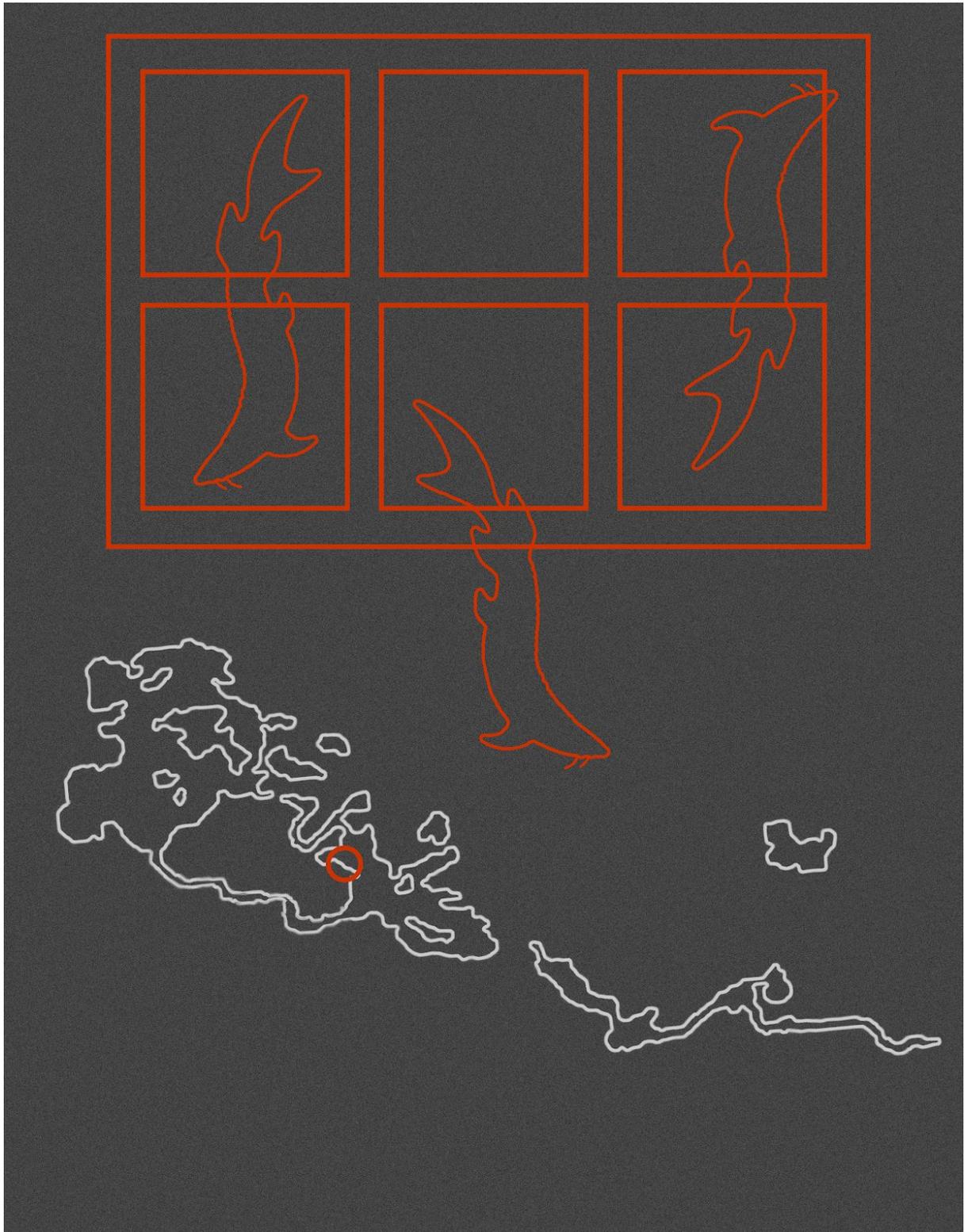
“I'm trying to keep that for all our Anishinaabe people, them prayers going and eating that food every year because we believe if we stop that tradition, that the world's going to stop. That's why it's important for the Indian people to keep on with our traditions and our spiritual thinking because if we stop, what if the world does stop?” (Finn Ryan, 2014)

Keeping the world going is a practice that places Anishinaabe ways as antithetical to destruction, to accumulation, to confinement. I am still trying to decide if this custom is solely about celebration or even observance or does keeping the world going include a level of mourning within its celebration. Is mourning connected to missing some time that has passed or never came to be? As Anishinaabeg, we know this world is not the only one but it is the one that has been invaded and in so many ways, ripped from us. That tear is incredibly delicate. Holding it together is the practice.

I want to take you through an understanding of sturgeon that may feel like a divergence. This path that we are on is one of currents of downwelling air and upwelling water with the land surrounding. Part of the reason for this approach is to write into being a concept of namewag as more than catch, more than even a fish. Maybe the settlers weren't totally wrong when they called us, “Sturgeon Indians” although, of course, we can't accept their articulation of who we are as anything other than a descriptor that happened to have a resonance beyond intention. Throughout this paper, I am attempting to write a philosophy of sturgeon that embraces the complexity of their reach in the Anishinaabe world. This philosophy is one that reinforces and attends to the times they appear to us beyond our nets. There will be gaps. I don't wish to retell history or to react or to prove. I do wish to understand what it means spatially when we say we honour the sturgeon. The images I have

created to accompany the text are visual signposts that situate a section of the paper to a place as all of these stories belong to a place and to those of that place.

Stay with me on this current which is inviting us to fall into thinking about remembrance (S. Hopinka, personal communication, May 13, 2020). This is an offering that holds the sturgeon as a being of possibility, one who reminds us that space is distance but that we must not abandon the need for connection. Most importantly, I want you to understand that I am always, already missing some time, somewhere, someone.



“Only if the land decides to stop speaking to us will we enter the world of dislocation where agency is lost and our histories become provocative Indian lore in an ongoing settler mistake.”

- Vanessa Watts, Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency Amongst Humans and Non Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman Go On a European World Tour!)

### **Traces (and the longing to have you here)**

1.

To know you  
as you might have been  
without the great interruption  
without the borders that kept us apart  
without the choices we had to make to stay alive.

I know you  
as you are  
we have been running along the edges  
thirsty for new water  
and a reunion of old ones you should have known.

How do I survive the longing?

Canada,  
this is not a project for you.  
It is a call to the ghosts who still grieve  
flooded lands  
or dehydrated lands  
sliced up like a pie  
just like Ron said,  
if everybody takes a piece for themselves  
one is always left  
with nothing holding it together.

I miss green mosses  
and rocky shores  
and cold lakes  
laying my face to your body  
listening for the water  
and sitting in the lushness  
of your memory.

We haven't forgotten  
 that the sturgeon must live as a sturgeon  
 or as niigaani<sup>4</sup>  
 sweeping past stars  
 until it all opens up and the only thing heard  
 is a rumble of seed thoughts  
 in the darkness.

2.

Nanigegonebiik nindigoo anishinaabemong. Mikinaak nindodem<sup>5</sup>. Ron Geyschickiban nigii-anishinaabewinikaazhig; mii a'aw niyawen'enh Ron Geyschickiban<sup>6</sup>. Nimaamaa miinawa odanawemaaganan oonjiwag iwidi gojjing<sup>7</sup>. Nimaamaa mii iniw name gaa-odoodemid. Nindaanike-mishomisibaniig mii iniw name gaa-odoodemiyaang apane<sup>8</sup>. Ningii-wiijinitaawigi'igoog nimishomisiban miinawa nokomisiban<sup>9</sup>. Nindinodewiziinag apane gii-danakiwag omaa besho gojjing. Niinawind nindabiitaamin o'aki omaa<sup>10</sup>. Mii wa'aw niin eyaawiyaan<sup>11</sup>.

3.

My mother's mother is from Naicatchewenin. My mother's father is from Couchiching. My mother's father's father is from Couchiching as were both of his parents. My mother's father's mother is from Mitaanjigaming as were both of her parents; her parents were Natawence and Naanaquotooke. And so, I don't have to go too far back in my family line to a time when we held only Anishinaabe names and not English ones. I write this because I want you to understand that the space between great-great-grandparents and a grandchild is not distance (it is something else) and 120 winters is a blip in the infinity of Anishinaabe life.

4.

Ron Geyschick said sturgeon are people<sup>12</sup>. I understand sturgeon as non-human persons. I also know sturgeon who are human beings.

5.

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<sup>4</sup> In anishinaabemowin, a lexical pre-verb meaning "ahead, leading, in front"

<sup>5</sup> My name in Anishinaabe is Nanigenonebiik. My clan is snapping turtle

<sup>6</sup> The late Ron Geyschick gave me my name. It is thus that the late Ron Geyschick is my namesake

<sup>7</sup> My mother and her family are from the place at the inlet.

<sup>8</sup> My mother is from the sturgeon clan. Through my late grandfather, we come from the sturgeon.

<sup>9</sup> My grandfather and grandmother, they helped to raise me.

<sup>10</sup> Our family has always lived near the place at the inlet. We are the ones that live on this land.

<sup>11</sup> That is who I am.

<sup>12</sup> The late, respected Elder Ron Geyschick of Zhingwaako Zaaga'igan (Lac La Croix First Nation), wrote a story about a sturgeon in his book *Te Bwe Win: Stories by an Ojibway Healer*: "Sturgeon are people, very much like us."

Part of this story is about a family of sturgeon: my grandfather Albert Niingaabnogezi Morrisseau, myself as his grandchild, and all of our relatives. I don't have permission to share my grandfather's story and I don't know that this is a space where I would share it even if I did. I can offer you some things that locate me to a place. We are<sup>13</sup> a place at Manaashkisiwaanig. My uncle Les said it is called that because people used to keep horses there and it had wild hay which grew to feed them. Until 1997 the only way to get to this place was on foot, by horse, and later by snow machine. To the west the bay meets up with Rainy Lake which on one side opens up to the Rainy River. This is where my great-grandparents raised my grandfather; a place where you can net walleye, snare rabbits, make offerings and raise a family. My mom and two of her brothers have homes there now among the cedars and the spruce. There is a continuity of Anishinaabe life on this land.

6.

As Anishinaabeg, for many years we have had to run from violent places. Sometimes running is a dream of another world.

7.

There is a continuity of Anishinaabe life on this land. Which is not to say that the land isn't changed. Maybe thinking of land in relation to time is to temporalize it in a way that flattens it out; those of us who desire a spatial understanding of who we are, may not find it useful. Time is political for the Anishinaabeg of Treaty #3 and it is sometimes advantageous and often strategic to name our presence in colonial years. The late Alex McKay<sup>14</sup> told me once to never put a time on how long we have been here; he was warning me about how it can be weaponized against us by settlers. I understand that and am grateful for the teaching. But the continuity of Anishinaabe life on this land is important and it is political. Sometimes staying is a making of another world.

8.

Land is real. But our real presence on real land gestures towards something beyond the temporal. Perhaps our real presence on real land lingers beyond the time we are here. I think that because in moments of solitude I have felt your presence like gravity, but pulling me outwards. Maybe you saw my loneliness. I haven't always been a good relative but I have always belonged to some body/some place. Somewhere, someone is trying to define "Indigenous Knowledge". I consent to holding a part so that when we come together, we

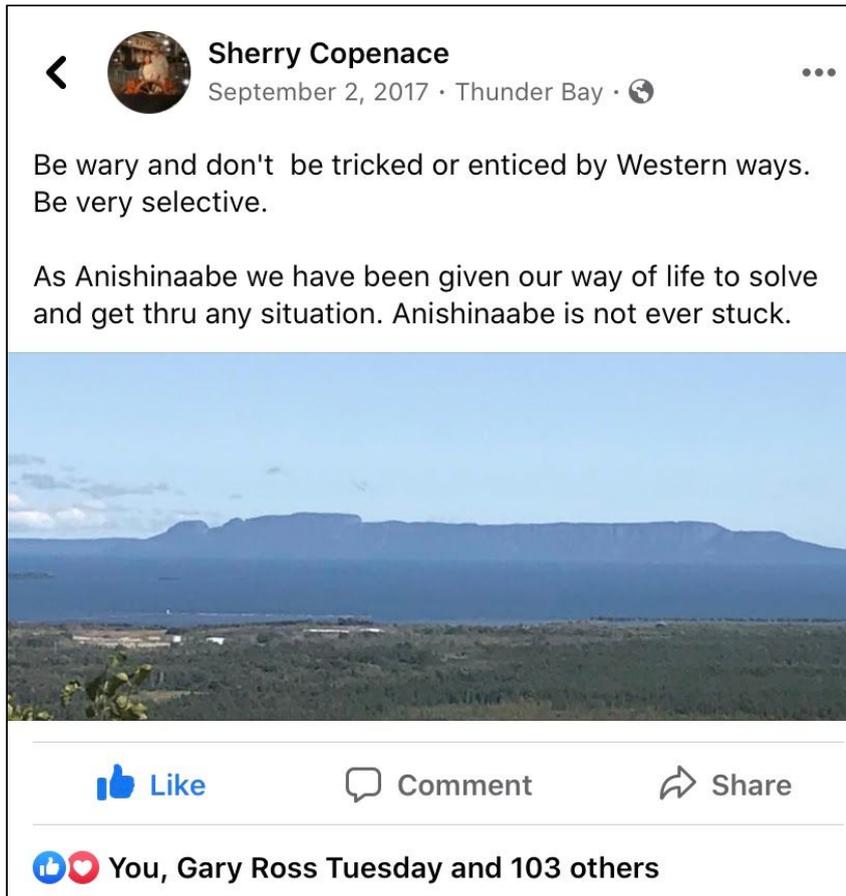
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<sup>13</sup> This idea of being a place is one I learned from K. Wayne Yang and Eve Tuck in Decolonization is not a Metaphor: "In order for the settlers to make a place their home, they must destroy and disappear the Indigenous peoples that live there. Indigenous peoples are those who have creation stories, not colonization stories, about how we/they came to be in a particular place--indeed how we/they came to be a place." (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 6)

<sup>14</sup> Alex McKay is Anishinaabe from Kitchenumaykoosib Inninuwig and was an Associate Professor in Indigenous Studies at the University of Toronto. I learned Anishinaabemowin from Alex for four years and he is cited throughout my work. I have tried to do this with as much care and thought as possible as I can no longer go to see him in his office to ask him if it is ok.

place our memories into a gathering and no one has the responsibility of carrying it all. Was it the conditions of precarity that necessitated this practice or just life on earth as a finite thing?

9.



15

10.

The headline reads: "Native People Reclaim Their Culture". Our ways and our language aren't things I'm (re)claiming just as Manaashkisiwaaning isn't a place I am returning to but one that I have travelled through with the traces of all of you. Still, I desire to know things the way you did and I think it's a longing that I should embrace. It is in the spirit of Natawence and Naanaquotooke that I say, we must fight against the risk of "standing in

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<sup>15</sup> Niizhoosake Sherry Copenace is an Anishinaabe Knowledge Holder from Onigaming (Ojibways of Onigaming First Nation).

disbelief of ourselves.”<sup>16</sup> Because we have saved us when we stood at the edge of losing ourselves.

11.

One time I was at a powwow in Naicatchewenin and for some reason the drum stopped after three pushups. Some people were confused, some folks didn't notice. Dancers stopped dancing and just stood there and some walked away. The arena director stepped in, “you have to do four, you have to do four”. The drum started up again and finished the song and so did the dancers. I've never seen anything like that before.

We have to see that song through; four times. No matter what, you have to keep it going.

12.

Every Anishinaabe is a researcher of loss.

I don't mind sinking into the productive tension of intimately understanding loss and refusing to be lost to you. The overflow reminds me of so many possible futures. So, I will pause with a passage from Al Hunter's<sup>17</sup> poem, *Mishomis*<sup>18</sup>:

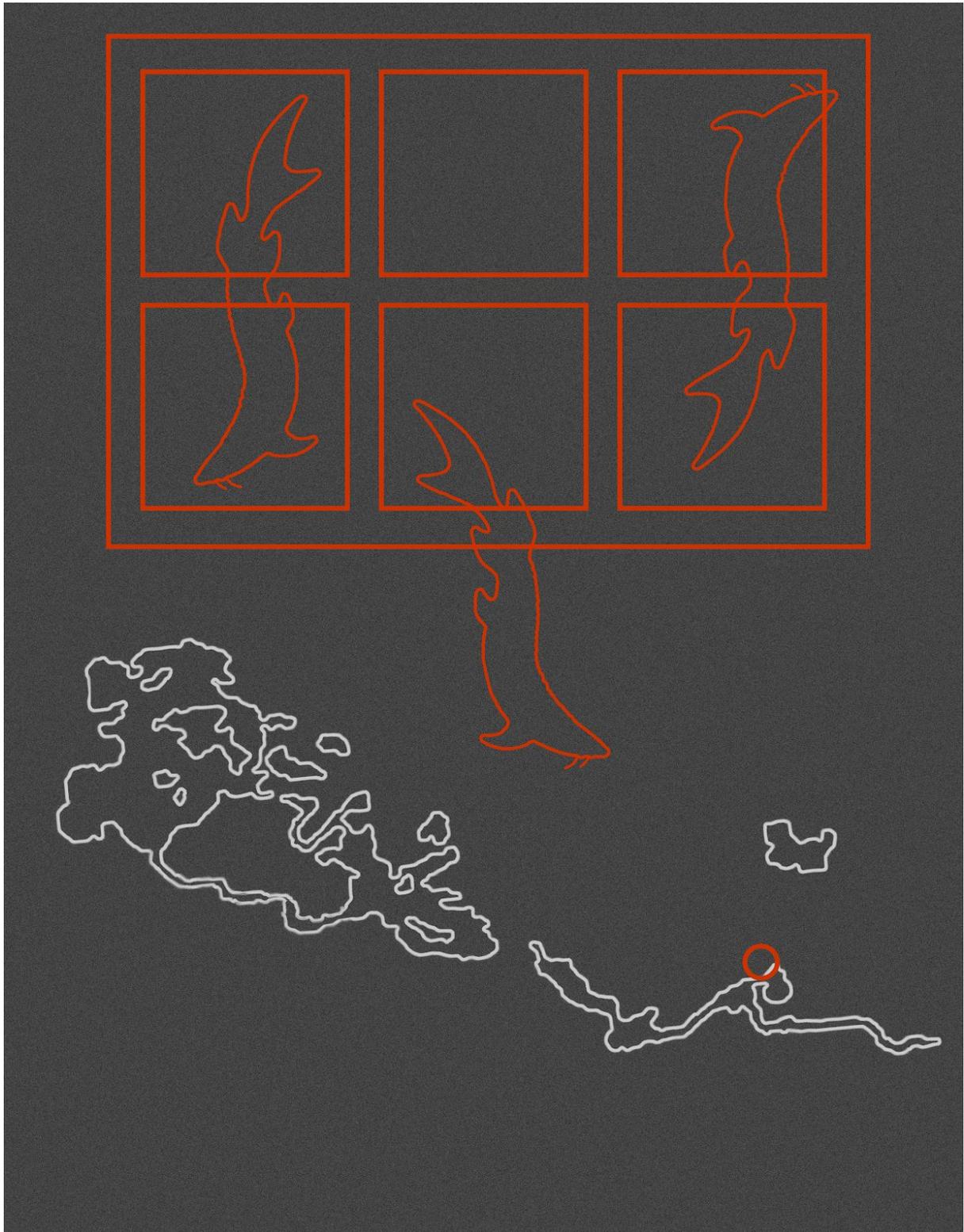
I haven't forgotten  
what you said  
I have only taken the medicine  
Of your memory  
Of your memory  
Of your memory  
Of your memory (Hunter, 1994)

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<sup>16</sup> This phrase comes from Vanessa Watt's important ideas on Anishinaabe cosmologies and specifically the following: “Our cosmologies (and the theories within them) are righteously different and cannot be separated from the stuff of nature. When an Indigenous cosmology is translated through a Euro-Western process, it necessitates a distinction between place and thought. The result of this distinction is a colonized interpretation of both place and thought, where land is simply dirt and thought is only possessed by humans. If we operationalize this distinction, we as Indigenous peoples risk standing in disbelief of ourselves.” (Watts, 2013, p. 32)

<sup>17</sup> Al Hunter is atik dodem and Anishinaabe from Manitou Rapids, Rainy River First Nations.

<sup>18</sup> *Mishomis* is the Anishinaabe word for Grandfather.



“The ‘vanishing’ Indian has steadfastly refused to vanish, resisting all manner of genocide...”

- Haunani-Kay Trask, From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawaii

“When I was told about the land at Gawa Bay, I talked with a lot of spirits. Some were even relatives of mine. I didn’t offer anything to them when they came this time, not even tobacco. They told me, there are still a lot of spirits living at Gawa Bay.”

- Ron Geyschick, Te Bwe Win: Stories of an Ojibway Healer

### **Round Lakes and Moving Around.**

Western science says that the area known in English as Kawa Bay<sup>19</sup> has a glacial memory (Nelson, 2009). They say a glacier once flowed over the land like a frozen river eventually leaving unique deposits of silt and sediment that nourished atypical plants from the north and the south not found anywhere else in the region. That sediment was once unyielding bedrock that the glacial ice pulverized into the sand that is there today, on that land our people knew wasn’t suitable for farming but provided other gifts. What they call the Wawiag River<sup>20</sup> is a relative to that glacier that stirred up our lands.

We have stories about that time, about glaciers swung across the land by manidoog, about giant lakes filling and draining and refilling, about a great stirring. We have a name for this place we came to know very well, Gaa-waawiyegamak (Nelson, 2009), which translates in English to Round Lake. This is a different kind of place where woodland caribou, hawk owls, kingbirds, all kinds of berries, and red and silver maples make their home. Sturgeon, walleye, whitefish, and suckers swim the waters with fish like the mooneye not found anywhere else in the region except for the Wawiag River (Nelson, 2009). That food that grows on the water gave itself roots in the river; the waters were marshy, more difficult to navigate perhaps. The settlers always said *swampland* in a disparaging way; they don’t know some of the strongest medicine comes from the swamp.

The Anishinaabeg from Lac La Croix and Sturgeon Lake are connected, by family and by community (McNab, 1991). Those who came to be counted by Indian Affairs at Lac La Croix Indian Reserve 25D and Sturgeon Lake Indian Reserve 24C were extended families who had been living around Hunters Island long before a fur trader ever stepped foot in the region. I am using the names for these communities given them as Indian Reserves by the Department of Indian Affairs. It’s unfortunate but the way that communities were organized

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<sup>19</sup> The letters K and G are interchangeable in Anishinaabemowin in that these letters form the same sound. Kawa Bay is the same Gawa Bay that Ron Geyschick is referring to in the opening quote.

<sup>20</sup> One of the Anishinaabe names for the area of the Wawiag River is Kawaswiagamok, also written as Gaa-waawiyegamak. Wawiag comes from Kawaswiagamok/Gaa-waawiyegamak.

by Indian Affairs matters to this paper. The Anishinaabeg, of course, have our own names for these places and I want to acknowledge that our people and communities exist before and beyond the Canadian state. Hunters Island sounds like a small piece of land but it's a 320 kilometre trip by canoe to circumvent it and to cross it at its widest point, you would be walking 72 kilometres. And our people did know that land on foot and by canoe. The livelihood of the Anishinaabeg of Hunters Island was based on movement. The families moved year round, to best utilize and care for the resources in the area; hunting, fishing, trapping and harvesting of wild rice, berries, mushrooms, other plant foods and medicines (McNab, 1991) was done according to the Anishinaabeg seasonal calendar and with much attention paid to how the land was responding. Nobody stayed in one place too long because it wasn't the kind of land where you should do that.

Settlers often characterize us as *hunter-gatherers* and they mean it in a derogatory way. They believe a hunter-gatherer is less valid, less valuable, not using land to an acceptable degree, not really *of* a place. The term *hunter-gatherer* is one that is still weaponized against the Anishinaabeg of Treaty #3. As recently as 2018, you could see this on a letter posted to the website of Canadian Senator Lynn Beyak, herself notorious for defending the residential school system. I don't wish to retype those words here but a quick google search of those letters will show it is used by racists in the area against us. Hunting and gathering is in part what made the Anishinaabeg of Hunters Island. Moving around was a way of caring for the health of the land and larger groups came together at specific times like spring and fall ceremonies at Gawa Bay (Geyschick, 1989) so that we would never forget that this place is sacred.

That way of life that kept the Anishinaabeg and the land healthy was one that we maintained after the treaty negotiations were completed and into the first decade of the 1900's. As Métis historian David McNab writes, "the Quetico area remained commercially undeveloped and unsettled by non-Indian communities until the twentieth century" (McNab, 1991, p. 160). Although settlers would later come to recognize the monetary value of the timber and mineral resources of the area, in the early twentieth century the Anishinaabeg were living as Anishinaabeg and the lands and waters were productive and thriving.

The Anishinaabeg of Hunters Island would come to be represented by Chief Blackstone of Zhingwaako Zaaga'igan and Kebaguin of Sturgeon Lake at the treaty negotiations in 1873 (McNab, 1991); both were formidable and intelligent Anishinaabeg who were very aware of the true value of anishinaabewaki. Upon signing Treaty #3 the Sturgeon Lake people chose as their designated reserve, land situated at the mouth of the Wawiag River. This place was chosen for its access to waterways and wild rice (McNab, 1991) and was surveyed and confirmed by Indian Affairs as a reserve for, "Chief Ke-ba-guin and his Band of 41 or 45" (McNab, 1991, p. 161). I don't believe for one second that the Sturgeon Lake Anishinaabeg intended to live there year round nor do I believe that land other than this rectangle at the

mouth of the Wawiag River was ceded by them. In an 1878 report to the Surveyor General of Canada, R.I. Ross writes that, “there are no improvements on this reserve and by the appearance of the place I don’t think the Band frequent it often.” (McNab, 1991). I interpret the first part to mean that the land was left mostly uninterrupted as would be in keeping with Anishinaabeg ways of being. I interpret the second part to mean that in 1878, five years after the treaty negotiations were completed, the Anishinaabeg of Hunters Island were living as Anishinaabeg of Hunters Island.

This is not to say that in the following years that the challenges of being Anishinaabeg in an expanding and rapacious settler colonial state were not felt and experienced by the people of Hunters Island. Fifty-two band members were counted at Sturgeon Lake 24C in 1877 and by 1909, that number of registered band members had shrunk to nineteen. Now some had simply been counted at Lac La Croix and a few had taken jobs on the railroad but diseases brought by settlers to Anishinaabe territory certainly played a role in the population decline. Influenza, measles and smallpox, in particular, took so many of our people from the land at Gawa Bay. And then the province of Ontario, who never had an agreement with the Anishinaabeg of Treaty #3, established Quetico Forest Reserve.

### **On Confinement and Slipping Through.**

In the interest of protecting the province’s stake in timber as capital, Ontario unilaterally established the Quetico Forest Reserve in 1909 citing a desire to withdraw lands from “settlement or sale”, to be “kept in a state of nature as far as that is possible” (McNab, 1991, p. 164). The boundaries of the new forest reserve were described in a memorandum of the Ontario Deputy Minister of Lands, Forests and Mines attached to the Order-in-Council of 1 April 1909; within those boundaries was Lac La Croix Indian Reserve 25D and Sturgeon Lake Indian Reserve 24C. Lac La Croix was located at the southwest corner of Quetico and so was impeded by the park on the north side of the reserve while Sturgeon Lake was completely surrounded in all directions (Nelson, 2009). It is clear that the province was aware of the presence of these communities as the Deputy Minister of Lands, Forests, and Mines stated in regards to the newly created forest reserve that, “the Indians will not be interfered with.” (Nelson, 2009, p. 32). That was a lie among many lies told by those who worked for and within the province of Ontario.

This is not a paper about the violence committed by the province of Ontario upon the Anishinaabeg of Treaty #3 or even a paper about how connected our dispossession from our land is to the constitutional division of powers between the two levels of Canadian government. To discuss that would go beyond what I am trying to do with this paper. Think of it as an overarching threat and a spectre in this story. The Anishinaabeg hold inherent rights as the Indigenous peoples of this territory as well as treaty rights under the agreement known as Treaty #3 and any enforcing of provincial law around hunting, fishing,

or trapping would have been, and still is, illegal under Anishinaabe law and contravene to the agreement.

The pressure exerted by provincial authorities was felt almost immediately by Sturgeon Lake Anishinaabeg. By 1910, provincial rangers were patrolling the one million acre tract of land that would be declared a provincial park in 1913. Provincial hunting laws were influenced by game commissions made up of settlers who were, “the sportsmen of the province” (Waisberg, Lovisek, Holzkamm, 1996, p. 347); so while provincial laws were being aggressively enforced against Anishinaabeg, the laws were also being determined by racist settlers who had no understanding of Anishinaabe life. Hunting off-reserve was illegal under settler law by 1914 (Waisberg, et al, 1996), effectively criminalizing living life as an Anishinaabe of Hunters Island. The people of Sturgeon Lake had 14.5 square kilometres (McNab, 1991) in which to sustain their livelihood.

There was simply no way to survive as an Anishinaabe by staying within the boundaries of that small reserve and to leave the reserve was to risk imprisonment, punitive measures, and your very life. During this time, park rangers demolished cabins and traplines of Indigenous people found to be off-reserve and random shootings occurred under the guise of protecting the area from “poachers” (Waisberg, et al, 1996). The positioning of Anishinaabeg trying to feed their families as poachers was a construct informed by paternalism and white supremacy; it provided a justification for colonial aggression with the ultimate goal of removing Anishinaabe people from the territory. While settlers in Ontario were cultivating an image of protecting the land at Quetico in, “a state of nature”, they were using racist characterizations of the Anishinaabeg as uncivilized, inferior and primitive to rationalize stealing our land. McNab notes that at that time, Indigenous people were viewed as “inimical to the concepts of preservation and wilderness” (McNab, 1991, p. 164). These racist assumptions had real, critical consequences for the Anishinaabeg. In 1916, Pierre Hunter of Lac Seul was arrested near Sioux Lookout for having moose meat and was incarcerated in Port Arthur. After thirty days, with no money and no transportation, he was released to walk the 300 kilometres home. Pierre died four weeks later on that journey back to Lac Seul reserve, afraid to kill any game for food and be put back in jail. Ontario officials denied any responsibility for his death but Game Warden George Fanning did report, “sending him to jail done him no harm but it did the Indians around here considerable good” (Waisberg, et al, 1996), pp. 347-348). This statement was meant to intimidate and instill fear in Anishinaabe people that if we resist, not only is incarceration a possibility but great harm and death as well. It is a message that endorses the foundational violence of settler-colonialism.

The unofficial removal of Sturgeon Lake Anishinaabeg from the land occupied by Quetico Provincial Park began as early as 1910 despite the Department of Indian Affairs’ continued assertion of the integrity of the Sturgeon Lake Indian Reserve 24C. Leo Chosa, an American fishing camp owner, described in writing an encounter with two Ontario rangers who told

him they were ordered to remove trespassers, including Anishinaabe people, from the Quetico Forest Reserve (McNab, 1991). What Chosa described in his letter demonstrates the brutality of the province's approach: "I... asked... what the government intended to do with the Indians after removing them... He said he did not know... Imagine your own mother, wife, sister, or little children... without any warning whatever, turned out of your home in the middle of winter" (Waisberg, et al, 1996, p. 346). The official order to remove the Anishinaabeg at Sturgeon Lake came via memo three years later following a conference between the Superintendent General of Indian Affairs and the Ontario Minister of Lands, Forests, and Mines. The language was perfunctory and revoltingly bureaucratic stating, the "small reserve in Quetico shall be done away with" (McNab, 1991, p. 166).

By 1914, Sturgeon Lake Indian Reserve 24C was no longer included on the Government of Canada's schedule of Indian reserves (McNab, 1991) which is not to say that all of the Anishinaabeg left willingly or that all of the Anishinaabeg left. The bureaucratic language used by provincial authorities in regards to Sturgeon Lake 24C belies the violence of forced removal. Ron Geyschick writes about Sturgeon Lake 24C in his book *Te Bwe Win*, "I've been thinking about that old Indian Reserve at Gawa Bay, inside Quetico Park... when the government set up the park, they kicked them out with rifles" (Geyschick, 1989, p. 97). Once Quetico was declared a provincial park, forest rangers acting on behalf of the province of Ontario, "expelled Indian families at gunpoint" (Waisberg, et al, 1996, p. 347). Removing Anishinaabe families from their land with rifles is not official Indian policy in Canada but Indigenous peoples have long been classified as trespassers and subject to violence, death by violence, surveillance and incarceration for not complying. The land at Hunter's Island was set aside, to be kept pristine as a fish and game preserve and health resort for the benefit of the people of Ontario (McNab, 1991). Canadians' leisure is never innocent and has always been administered through violent displacement and dispossession.

In a 1931 report, the Department of Indian Affairs claimed that there were only two members of Sturgeon Lake 24C alive and declared the band, "extinct" (Nelson, 2009). It's a strange and jarring word to read in relation to our people. The assertion by Indian Affairs that the community was no longer in existence foregrounds the state's inability to understand how Anishinaabe connection to land works. Generations of Anishinaabeg grew up with a collective relationship to the land at the mouth of the Wawiag River and from that place they learned care, deep reciprocity and how to nurture abundance. As Wacey Little Light, writing about Indigenous dispossession and Canada's national parks, articulates, "we may have been displaced, but we have not been disconnected from our territories" (Little Light, 2019). Many Anishinaabeg would not leave merely because a bureaucratic decree from the settler government ordered them to. Some would not leave even when threatened with state violence. I imagine some felt the only choice was to stay on that land; our ancestors are there. In 1918, Chief Blackstone--the son of the first Chief Blackstone of Lac La Croix--collapsed and passed on during a 50 mile journey from Gawa Bay to Winton, Minnesota to get help for his community suffering from the global "Spanish" flu pandemic

(Andra-Warner, 2020). His wife who was accompanying him on the trek, wrapped his body in a rabbit skin blanket and covered him with snow. (Andra-Warner, 2020). Chief Blackstone's people made the long journey to bring his body back to Sturgeon Lake 24C where he was buried. Our ancestors are there.

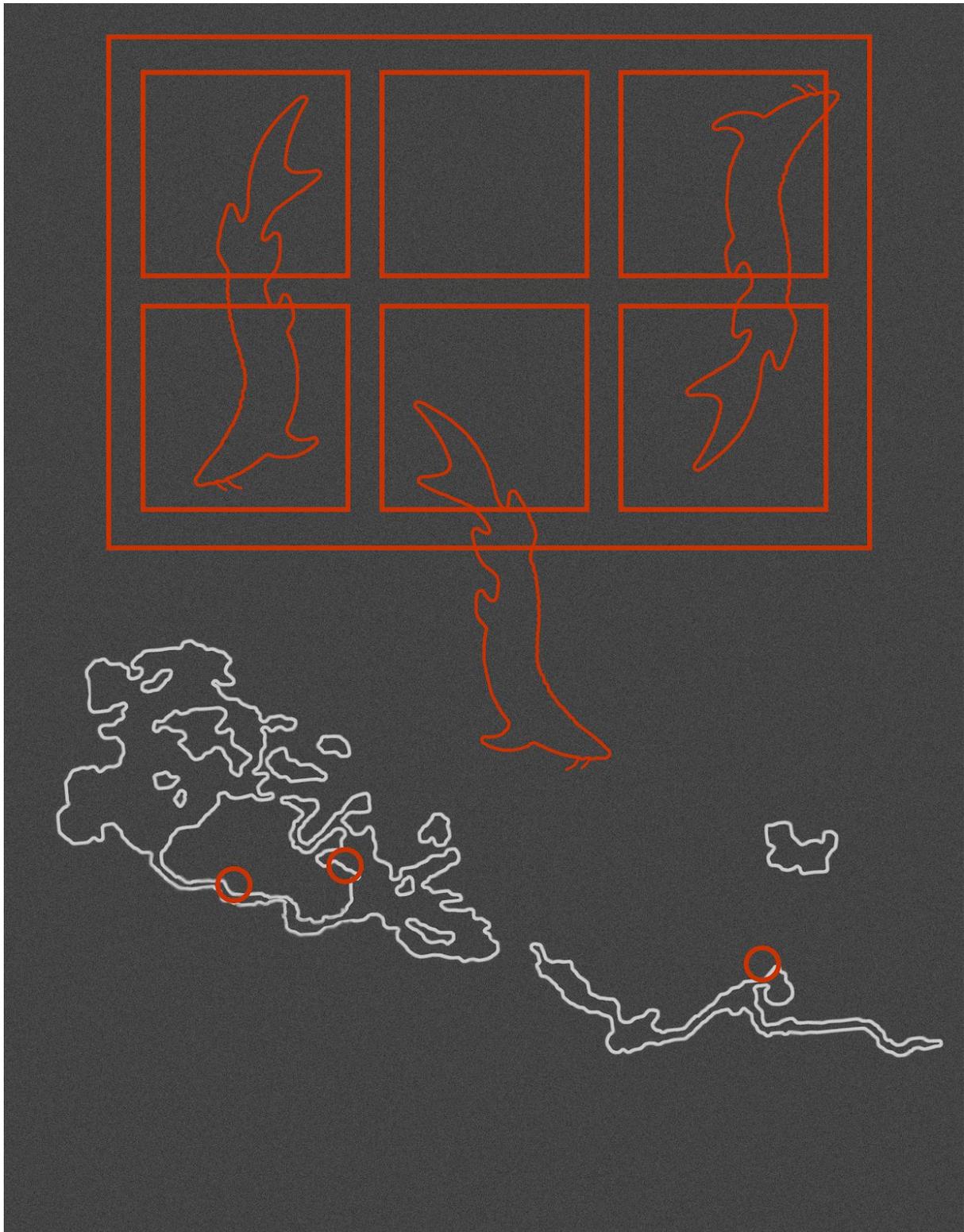
Wilda Walmark not only recalls living with her family in Quetico Park in 1946 but that there were three other Anishinaabe families with children with homes around the park. Wilma's mother was Esther Powell, daughter of Mary (Marie) Ottertail from Lac La Croix; both Esther and her mother had grown up in Quetico Park (Garrick, 2015). Reaffirming that not only were Anishinaabe people living in Quetico Park but that they were living Anishinaabe lives of cooperative co-existence, Wilma states: "We used to have great fun there. Everybody seemed to get along well up there — if somebody was short of something, somebody would take it from their own bowl, load up and everything would be alright" (Garrick, 2015). Her words restore Anishinaabe social relations back to the land from which those relations were created. These are words that simultaneously refuse settlers' drive to "destroy and disappear" Indigenous peoples (Tuck and Yang, 2012, p. 6) and expose colonial domination of land as immensely harmful. I need to write about the presence of Sturgeon Lake Anishinaabeg at Gaa-waawiyegamak beyond the time of that 1931 report. I need to do this because it complicates the ease with which the state declares us gone. It fills me with something that feels deeply important to the possibility of return.

Haunani-Kay Trask writes that for Indigenous people, "our daily existence in the modern world is...best described not as a struggle for civil rights but as a struggle against our planned disappearance" (Trask, 1999, p. 26). Those who plan our disappearance have failed even as they continue to operate with both swift brutality and coercive assimilation in pursuit of their plan to rid the land of the Anishinaabeg. As Sturgeon Anishinaabeg, there are certain things we just can't, just won't, do and one is to deny life. Another is to give up on the possibility of the present or of the future. Sturgeon of the Anishinaabe world are in motion, always and right now. They are generating waves of passage and return and we feel the force of their movement as a form made of lived lives and future beginnings.

## **Traces (and the longing to have you here) Pt. 2**

I dreamed that you were swishing past the stars; not held back by any situation, you were sailing past all of that. Let's envision for a moment the stars around us and the four directions swirling on the longest night or the shortest day. The land has risen up to meet the low hanging clouds and we are drawing traces across abundant fields. The world has not stopped. Over the expanse of many lifetimes you and I have moved and slipped through and found a way to return. We are people of land, waters, air and sky and we have to live in a space made expansive.

For as long as I have been loving you, I have been missing you and I have been loving you since the frozen river retreated.



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