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Sovereignty of and through food: A decolonial feminist political ecology of Indigenous food sovereignty in Treaty 9

Keira A. Loukes*

Lakehead University; ORCID: 0000-0002-7841-3871

Abstract

"Food sovereignty," a term conceived by peasant agriculturalists in South America, has become ubiquitous worldwide in academic and activist circles advocating for greater local control over local food. Its use has been adopted by various actors in North America, most notably by agriculturalists that tend to be small-scale, family-run, or permaculture focussed. While Indigenous food sovereignty has emerged as an adaptation of this concept, ecological, economic, social, and political opportunities and constraints in different locations across Turtle Island make its widespread application challenging, especially in contexts where communities do not want, or cannot (for a variety of reasons) eat exclusively from the land. In addition, "food sovereignty" can become a chimera in contexts where the "Crown" has absolute and final "sovereignty" over the land, which they have demonstrated through multiple enforcements across Turtle Island. Using a decolonial feminist lens within a political ecology community of practice, this paper describes and critiques current and historic framings of northern Ontario boreal forests as variously and simultaneously scarce and abundant. It also analyzes the ways that these framings have been discursively and materially constructed through colonial social, ecological, economic, and political impositions. It asks whether the concept of food sovereignty adequately challenges these constructions. Ultimately, this paper suggests that thinking about Indigenous food sovereignty as sovereignty *of* and *through* food may better describe the process, importance, and potential inherent in traditional and alternative Indigenous food harvesting and distribution practices in First Nations communities in northern Ontario, and indeed, beyond.

*Corresponding author: kloukes@lakeheadu.ca

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Résumé

Le terme « souveraineté alimentaire », conçu par les agriculteurs paysans d'Amérique du Sud, est devenu omniprésent dans les cercles universitaires et militants qui prônent un plus grand contrôle local sur l'alimentation locale. Il a été adopté par divers acteurs en Amérique du Nord, plus particulièrement par les agriculteurs qui tendent à œuvrer à petite échelle, en gestion familiale ou d'après les principes de la permaculture. La souveraineté alimentaire autochtone est apparue comme une adaptation de ce concept, cependant les possibilités et les contraintes écologiques, économiques, sociales et politiques dans certains endroits de l'Île de la Tortue rendent la généralisation de son application difficile, en particulier dans les contextes où les communautés ne veulent pas ou ne peuvent pas (pour diverses raisons) se nourrir exclusivement de produits de leur territoire. En outre, la « souveraineté alimentaire » peut devenir une chimère dans le contexte où la « Couronne » détient la « souveraineté » absolue et définitive sur cette terre, ce qu'elle a démontré par de multiples mesures appliquées sur l'Île de la Tortue. En utilisant une perspective féministe décoloniale au sein d'une communauté de pratique d'écologie politique, cet article décrit et critique les conceptions actuelles et historiques des forêts boréales du nord de l'Ontario qui en ont fait diversement et simultanément des espaces de rareté et d'abondance. Il analyse également les façons dont ces conceptions ont été construites discursivement et matériellement à travers des abus coloniaux de nature sociale, écologique, économique et politique. Il pose la question de savoir si le concept de souveraineté alimentaire remet en cause ces constructions de manière adéquate. En fin de compte, cet article suggère que la réflexion sur la souveraineté alimentaire autochtone en tant que souveraineté de et par l'alimentation peut mieux décrire le processus, l'importance et le potentiel inhérents aux pratiques traditionnelles et alternatives de récolte et de distribution des aliments autochtones dans les communautés des Premières Nations du nord de l'Ontario et, en fait, au-delà.

Introduction

While food insecurity is felt by fifteen percent of Canadians (Tarasuk et al., 2022), it impacts nearly fifty percent of on-reserve Indigenous households in Canada (Batal et al., 2021). For years, popular media, community, activist, and academic circles, as well as a scathing report from the United Nations' Special Rapporteur a decade ago, have brought attention to these grossly inequitable statistics (De Schutter, 2012). The issue has been extensively studied from health and wellness perspectives (Adamson, 2011; Borras & Mohamed, 2020; Gyapay, 2022; Imbeault et al., 2011; Pal et al., 2013; Ray et al., 2019), critical social justice perspectives (Coté, 2016; Desmarais & Wittman, 2014; Kepkiewicz & Dale, 2019; Keske, 2021; LeBlanc &

Burnett, 2017; Lemke & Delormier, 2017; Levkoe et al., 2019; Morrison, 2011), and community resurgence perspectives (Cherofsky, 2013; Daigle, 2015; Daigle, 2019; Martens et al., 2016; Pawlowska-Mainville, 2020; Robidoux & Mason, 2017; Settee & Shukla, 2020). In response to this work and the accompanying public outcry, numerous programs have been implemented to attempt to address food shortages, either from a government funding approach (i.e., Nutrition North subsidy), non-governmental funding and research agencies (Turner, 2022), community led land-based initiatives (Ferreira et al., 2021; Gaudet, 2021; Kamal et al., 2015; Loukes et al., 2022; Lowitt et al., 2019), or a combination of all three. Despite significant efforts, food insecurity prevails in northern Ontario First Nations (Robidoux et al., 2021). It is not my goal to dismantle or critique these efforts, but to bring attention to the structural factors outside of local food initiatives that continue to contain and constrain them.

As an alternative to food security approaches, which focus on a more apolitical conception of food shortages such as using caloric intake and absolute amounts of food as indicators of success, food sovereignty has emerged as a political framework that highlights the social and economic roots that impede local control over local food sources and lead to food shortages (Chappell, 2018; Jarosz, 2014). While it is crucial that food access inequities are addressed, the focus on a "food" crisis centres the scarcity of affordable, nutritious, preferred food and easily falls into environmental (e.g., climate change), individual (e.g., food choices), and geographical (e.g., remoteness) explanations and solutions. It has been repeatedly demonstrated that the root causes of food shortages in Indigenous communities across Turtle Island are colonial policies that continue to control the movement of Indigenous bodies, disconnecting people, families, spiritualities, and governance from the land in order to make space for settlers, land use management practices (e.g., parks and tourism development, etc.), and resource extraction. It has been well documented that in some locations food scarcity was engineered (Daschuk, 2013) and in others it was a direct result of increased settlement and exploitative industries which led to the destruction of land, forests, and river systems motivated by primitive accumulation and economic growth. In this context, the crisis is not one of food, but of colonialism, modernity, development, and capitalist resource exploitation. Lack of access to and control over adequate, affordable, nutritious, and desirable food sources is a symptom of a failing economic, political, cultural, and social system that has imposed itself on an ecosystem which cannot support it.

I come from a mix of German, Scottish, and Anishinaabe relatives, all of whom impact the way I move through the world, what I pay attention to, how I come to know, and how I understand. My grandfather was enfranchised as a child in 1921, regaining his status (6(1)) as well as my father's and uncles' (6(2)) under Bill C-31 in 1985. I do not have status. I have been learning more about my grandfather's community in southern Ontario through manoomin harvesting with my uncle and our friend, an avid manoomin harvester and caretaker. While this experience helps to ground, shape, and embody my perspective and work on Indigenous food sovereignty and traditional food harvesting, I am still learning. There is much I do not know. I live in a white body, was raised in various predominantly white suburban communities, and have attended various western educational institutions. Over the last four years, I have worked, visited, and spoken with individuals from some Treaty 9 communities on different local food initiatives, from increasing capacity for traditional food harvesting, processing, and distribution, to creating community and household kitchen gardens. While these experiences have undoubtedly helped to shape my nascent understanding, as a visitor to the region, I cannot

represent the myriad ways food sovereignty is conceptualized, desired, rejected, and worked towards in the vastly different communities in this region of northern Ontario. I do not attempt to do this.

Instead, my purpose is to analyze what we mean as scholars, activists, educators, traditional food harvesters, and gardeners by "food sovereignty". Is the concept important as a process and goal, or does using it distract from the broader political structures that by their very existence prevent this vision from being realized? This paper begins by theoretically analyzing food sovereignty from a decolonial feminist lens operationalized within political ecology's community of practice. Then, I will outline a brief history of the framings of food shortages throughout the fur trade to the signings of Treaty 9. Next, I will overview the more recent and current colonial constraints that Treaty 9 First Nations are working within, pushing against, and consciously ignoring while improving food access. Finally, I will discuss how food harvesters and other land-users are reclaiming sovereignty—not *over* food, but *of* and *through* food. This view joins scholars who see food sovereignty as a process towards decolonization (Daigle, 2019; Grey & Patel, 2015; Kamal et al., 2015), but centres Indigenous land restitution as an imperative goal or entry point. Without this, food sovereignty risks working towards a metaphorical conception of decolonization (Tuck & Yang, 2012). This is not to argue that traditional food harvesting activities which work to decolonize minds, languages, and knowledges are futile, but to argue that, although this is an integral element of decolonization, it is not complete without land restitution efforts, such as Land Back. While this refers to the redistribution of land, it also refers to the resurgence and autonomy of Indigenous governance, jurisdiction, law, language, culture, and lifeways on that land, and requires the colonial state to recall and honour the meaning and spirit of the Treaties from the perspectives of the communities that signed them. In conclusion, this paper will suggest that sovereignty *of* and *through* food may be a more powerful and conceptually accurate inversion of "food sovereignty" through which Indigenous presence, resurgence, and decolonial movements are asserted.

Theoretical perspectives

Decolonial feminist lenses "set anti-colonial, anti-capitalist and anti-racist form of feminism apart from others" (Paramaditha, 2022, p. 34) and have much uptake among Indigenous feminist thinkers in the settler-colonial context of North America (Barker, 2017; Ferreira et al., 2022; LaRocque, 2017; Nickel & Fehr, 2020). Using this lens to analyze food sovereignty theory and discourse joins and expands the community of practice of political ecologists. Political ecology practitioners question the division between social and ecological systems and are critical of concepts such as ecosystem limits by pointing to socio-economic, political, and power structures which influence and often dictate relationships to land (Robbins, 2012; Tilzey, 2018). While political ecology offers a framework which helps to recognize and break down colonial narratives, decolonial feminist theories rebuild by emphasizing the imperative of shifting the "loci of enunciation" in order to achieve the "epistemic

disobedience" necessary for social transformation (Mignolo, 2000, 2009; Paramaditha, 2022).

A decolonial feminist political ecology of food sovereignty

Food sovereignty stresses local control over local food systems and highlights the global political, economic, and government structures which work to contain and constrain the options communities have to exercise this control. The current and most popular use of the term, as coined by peasant agricultural group *La Via Campesina* (LVC) at the Nyéléni International Forum for Food Sovereignty in Mali, has become the dominant understanding of food sovereignty globally. They defined food sovereignty as:

> the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agricultural system. It puts those who produce, distribute, and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations. (Nyéléni Declaration, 2007, p. 9)

However, this term and associated definition does not satisfy everyone. For one, the term "sovereignty" has classical definitions related to a "state's legal control over a particular geographical area and its population" (Kamal, 2015, p. 564) and is connected to the notions of private property and resource accumulation (Menser, 2014). Referring to the term "sovereignty", Louis Bird (2023), an Elder and researcher from Peawanuck in northern Ontario, states:

> to call this land our own in terms of Whiteman language in the legal system and also in institution, we speak forked tongue…explain this or saying this in Whiteman's language, I feel very foolish. I should be speaking in my own language. (p. 3)

Food sovereignty advocates have worked to distinguish the term from its colonial roots by arguing that food sovereignty is opposed to capitalist accumulation and privatization. Second, while framing access to food as a right has been argued to be integral to achieving food security and sovereignty (Keske, 2021), using a rights-based framework inherently assumes that rights must be bestowed upon local food producers by the state. This implies an acceptance of the sovereignty of the state. However, extending more rights to more people does not change the "fundamental nature of the problem—the sustained imposition of alien economic and socio-cultural structures" (Leblanc & Burnett, 2017, p. 20). In a settler-colonial state such as Canada, "rights-based approaches do not offer meaningful restoration of Indigenous homelands and food sovereignty" (Corntassel, 2012, p. 93), "can only take struggles for land reclamation and justice so far" (Corntassel & Bryce, 2012, p. 151), and fail to recognize Indigenous peoples' political sovereignty (Morrison, 2011). To address Indigenous concerns and account for the inextricable link between Indigenous food sovereignty and Indigenous political resurgence, advocates have urged for food sovereignty to move beyond rights (Coté, 2016; Grey & Patel, 2015). Third, the term food sovereignty has been used in contexts that obscure settler-colonialism. For example, the term has been adopted in Canada by many small-holder family-run farms as well as by the permaculture movement (Food Secure Canada, 2022). These versions of food sovereignty are depoliticized and agri-centric (Kepkiewicz & Dale, 2019), leaving little room for harvesting activities such as gathering, hunting, and

fishing (Pawlowska-Mainville, 2020). Tilzey (2018) argues that the concept of food sovereignty has "become increasingly diffuse as it has been embraced by an expanding array of class and class fractional interests" (p. 4). Finally, Dawn Morrison (2011) asserts that "food sovereignty" was not used historically in Indigenous communities—instead, this concept was a "living reality" (p. 97). Morrison (2011, 2020) nuances the concept of "food sovereignty" through her development of *Indigenous* food sovereignty, which accounts for the contours of Indigenous food systems that, although in many cases do include agriculture and cultivation (e.g., manoomin), also rely on harvesting medicines, mammals, birds, and fish. Indigenous food sovereignty focusses on the sacredness of food, participation in traditional practices of harvesting food, and involvement in policies that support and protect Indigenous food systems (Morrison, 2011, 2020). This conceptual framework has been used in a variety of contexts, including remote, rural, and urban environments (Blue Bird Jernigan et al., 2021) and Indigenous health (Ray et al., 2019). Morrison's (2011, 2020) definition of Indigenous food sovereignty is broad enough to encapsulate Indigenous food systems across Turtle Island which are shaped by "diverse dietary practices, ecological features, geographical variations, and social-political as well as historical experiences (e.g., residential school systems)" (Settee and Shukla, 2020, p. 4). These experiences vary widely, from abundant salmon fisheries and modern Treaties on the west coast to more minimally productive black spruce forest stands and political legacies of Treaty 9 in northern Ontario.

Importantly, political ecologists remind us not to look at the ways that ecosystems *are* limited or scarce but, instead, the ways they have been *made* scarce (Robbins, 2012). For example, although northern Ontario is considered a region of low bio-productivity and is therefore considered scarce in some regards (e.g., boreal caribou and moose populations), it is and has been considered abundant in others, such as beaver furs, hydro-electric potential, and minerals such as diamond, chromium, palladium, and nickel. Indeed, the continued exploitation of these latter resources is part of the creation of the scarcity of the former. In this context, where federal and provincial colonial Acts, policies, and northern resource extraction continue to *create* ecological scarcity of food sources, what is the pathway towards food sovereignty? From a political ecology perspective, how do social relations shape the ecological "capacity" of the land? From a decolonial feminist lens, who is being asked to develop solutions (Ferreira et al., 2022)?

Holt-Gimenez and Shattuck's (2011) distinction between "progressives" and "radicals" in food sovereignty work is an important guide to answering these questions. Tilzey (2018) argues that "if food sovereignty is to realize its full potential, by necessarily contesting the ecological *and* social contradictions of capitalism, it should embrace the counter-hegemony of the 'radicals'" (p. 4), who move beyond "localizing" and "greening" food systems by advocating for social relational change through land redistribution. This aligns with the ways that decolonial feminists draw caution to decolonizing rhetoric, wherein these terms risk "losing their radical origins as they become more mainstream and give the impression that something has been accomplished" (Paramaditha, 2022, p. 36). In this same way, I hope to hold food sovereignty accountable to itself, and myself accountable to its use.

Historical social, economic, and political impositions

It is important to note that available academic literature creates an incomplete perspective of the history of the Treaty 9 region of northern Ontario before, during, and

after the fur trade. The Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) provides the most consistent recordings of people, furs, and food between 1670 and 1940, along with some anthropological and missionary accounts. These accounts will always be problematic as they carry with them an outsider, visitor, and/or intruder perspective, which can easily fall into the romanticization, misinterpretation or "Othering" that travel writing and anthropological accounts of non-European communities have long been accused of by post-colonial and decolonial writers (Loomba, 2005; Said, 1978; Smith, 1999). There is a growing accumulation of and access to oral records, such as Elder Louis Bird's Ourvoices.ca.

The thousands of lakes, rivers, streams, peat bogs, and wetlands of the boreal forest ecosystem were formed by glacial retreat and advancement and make up fifty-eight percent of Canada's land mass, which varies greatly depending on latitude and proximity to the coast (Golden et al., 2015; Steegman Jr., 1983a). Its climate experiences wide variation (from -40°C in the winter to 30°C in the summer), with summers lasting three months and long winters making up most of the rest of the year, often with severe weather due to continental polar and Arctic air masses (Golden et al., 2015). The landforms, climatic factors (snow, ice, wind), disturbances, vegetation dynamics, and animal dispersion combine to "create a complex and sharply defined mosaic" which Steegman Jr. (1983a) refers to as "patchiness" (p. 48). In response, a "diffuse" subsistence economy developed, which has several advantages and requires much flexibility and adaptability (Steegman Jr., 1983a). It is commonly cited that small, kin-based groups of ten to fifteen people would travel together, following land mammals in the winter and gathering together in the summers around sources of fish (Bird, 2020; Steegman Jr., 1983a). Steegman Jr. (1983b) argues that "in the face of constantly changing resources and movements of people, a flexible kinship and social structure would be most adaptive" (p. 345). Before the traders designated "chiefs" at trading posts, the Anishinaabe (*Ojibwe)*, Cree, and Anishininew (*Oji-Cree)* of northern Ontario did not have official leaders and were not part of bands—their ties were through family (Long, 2010). Rogers' (1983) research shows that summer gatherings were generally made up of several hunting groups with one male leader, followed because of his hunting abilities, spiritual powers, generosity, and wisdom, although people did not need to follow his advice. The infrequency of large animals in the boreal forest made gifting an important economic and social exchange to ensure general survival by "scattering economic risk" (Steegman Jr., 1983b, p. 253), whereby groups abundant in resources would offer a feast to another until they were out of food, trusting that they would be similarly supported in the likely chance they would require it in the future (Rogers, 1983). Indeed, pre-contact, it has also been argued that "the Cree population would've had abundant resources most of the time" (Winterhalder, 1983a, p. 236).

Fur trading posts were typically established around areas where First Nations families already congregated (Long, 2010). By the nineteenth century, there was a greater congregation around these posts, however, families would still spend most of the year moving freely through the bush and gathering in the summers, much in the way they had done before the arrival of the traders (Rogers, 1983). Although it is often cited that congregation around posts was motivated by access to the fur trade market as well as to European goods and foods, intermarriage and family ties were likely another strong draw. Child's (2012) work highlights the important role that women played in the fur trade in the Great Lakes region. It was advantageous for a fur trader to marry an Anishinaabe woman from a

prominent family in the community, as her knowledge of food harvesting, language, and her wide kin networks sustained the traders socially, economically, and politically.

Winterhalder (1983a) argues that "irregular, partially phased, and dramatic population fluctuations make it impossible to assign a value to the carrying capacity of this environment" (p. 235), yet it is often stated that this congregation around fur trading posts led to an overharvesting of animals and to scarce hunting in the region. During this time period (between 1706 to 1840), HBC records indicate there were eleven examples of hunger, ten reports of famine, and four reports of death by starvation (Steegman Jr., 1983b). Long (2010) attributes famines during the fur trade years to corporate competition along with a corresponding period of geothermal cooling. Fritz et al. (1993) similarly contrast the overpopulation theory, arguing that, at this point, the human population was still too small in northern Ontario for overexploitation to have been a major factor and that pressures such as climate and habitat disturbance (e.g., fire) would have had more of an impact on animal populations.

Focussing on population-driven depletion of animal sources could distract from other pressures on food systems, such as changes in tenure and family trap lines (Rogers, 1983), series of disease epidemics working in concert followed by grief and recovery from the losses (Hurlich & Steegman, Jr., 1983; Lytwyn, 1999), corporate competition between the HBC and the North West Company (NWC) (Steegman Jr.,1983a; Long, 2010), shifts in hunting schedules (Hurlich & Steegman Jr., 1983), industrial developments (Festa-Bianchet et al., 2011), and conservation policies. Eventually, the declining fur trade forced HBC to reluctantly sell Rupert's Land to Canada for $1.5 million in 1869. While Duncan Campbell Scott (1906), a federal commissioner for Treaty 9, explains the relationship between HBC and the First Nations hunters and trappers of the fur trade as a "sort of slavery" (p. 582), Long (2010) argues that trappers "had coexisted with fur traders for two centuries in a symbiotic relationship that usually benefitted both parties" (p. 352). Child's (2012) work demonstrates that, in the Great Lakes regions, it was beneficial for the fur traders to adopt Anishinaabe languages and customs in order to form respectful and trusting relationships. This relationship experience with fur trading companies such as the HBC and Northwest Company was vastly different than the relationship with the government of Canada, which was solidified through Treaty 9.

The Treaty 9 signings, which took place between 1905 and 1906, were unique among the treaties as the negotiations took place between Canada and Ontario without any input from the First Nations (Long, 2010). When communities signed the treaty, each person received four dollars, and each family of five received one square mile of land on parcels called "reserves", while the swath of land they once considered home or "pantry" (Pawlowska-Mainville, 2020) was "ceded" to the Crown. This land distribution system is severely out of alignment with sustaining food systems in the boreal forest, in which each family needs to range over a territory of fifty to 100 square miles for two-thirds of the year (Long, 2010). The reserve system demonstrates either a conscious effort to disconnect Indigenous families from their food systems in order to create dependency on the state, or a deep misunderstanding of the vast amounts of land that animals such as moose and caribou, which remain important food sources to communities, require to subsist in the boreal forest ecosystem (Magoun et al., 2005; Timmermann & McNicol, 1988). While each community was told that they could "hunt and fish as they always have," Treaty 9 further stipulates that "saving and excepting the land is

needed for mining, lumber, or settlement" (James Bay Treaty (Treaty 9), 1905). Chief Missabay of Osnaburgh First Nation rightly questioned: "well for all of this, we will have to give up our hunting and live on the land you give us, and how can we live without hunting?" (Long, 2010, p. 293). Eventually, communities north of the Albany River, whose hunters were being harassed by the Department of Lands and Forest and who were also experiencing the encroachment of miners and loggers, sought inclusion in Treaty 9 as they believed it would be an avenue to protect their ability to sustain themselves (Ariss & Cutfeet, 2011). They signed the Treaty 9 adhesions in 1929 to 1930.

Colonial and Indigenous understandings and intentions of treaties differ vastly. Mills (2017) argues that from an Anishinaabeg perspective, rather than a legal document akin to a contract, Treaties are a binding law of how to be in right relationship with one another. For example, foundational treaties between Indigenous Peoples and the British Crown, such as the Royal Proclamation (1763) and the Treaty of Niagara (1764) represented by the Covenant Chain and Twenty-Four Nations wampum, symbolize an ongoing and living relationship between nations that are unique but choose to "stand together in a relationship" (Mills, 2017, p. 239). Mills (2017) points to an important distinction between Indigenous languages of "treaty partners" and Canada's language of "treaty rights". He states that Anishinaabe constitutional order strives for harmony instead of justice, made up of individuals "*living in right relation*" (Mills, 2017, p. 236).

Yet, this was not the reality of Treaty 9. Although First Nations were guaranteed that their livelihoods would "in no way be interfered with" (Long, 2010, p. 170) by signing Treaty 9, hunters became subject to provincial game laws when outside the boundaries of their reserves (Rogers, 1983). This, assisted by increased air transportation access in the area, allowed an increase in patrol, and the game wardens were able to confiscate furs and arrest trappers (Rogers, 1983). Ontario's wildlife and fish legislation, enforced through "amisk okimaaw" (*beaver boss*) (Long, 2010, p. 332), implemented game laws that controlled hunting and trapping seasons and harvest limits, resulting in uncertainty in people's abilities to survive winters (Ariss & Cutfeet, 2011).

Treaty signings were only the beginning of the ways that the Dominion of Canada created a physical, discursive, and political container in which First Nations of northern Ontario could exercise traditional harvesting rights. Along with limiting the physical space within which communities could practice traditional food systems, the Canadian government also enforced policies, governance, and economies which disrupted families, knowledges, and intergenerational learning, such as the *Indian Act* (1876), Indian Residential Schools (IRS), and the wage labour economy. Morrison (2020) explains:

> Forced assimilation into Indian residential schools and participation in the capitalist wage economy has led to the breakdown of traditional social structures and intergenerational transfer of knowledge and has disconnected families and communities from one another and the land, plants, and animals that provide us with our food. (p. 24)

Streit & Mason (2017) outline the ways that Indigenous food systems in northern Ontario were intentionally destroyed as they interfered with assimilation strategies (i.e., residential schooling and missionary activities) that were only effective when people stayed in their communities. As impactful as these impositions were, Indigenous families did and continue to resist these attempts—some by refusing to attend schools and

others by attending them to learn the language and tools necessary to challenge the colonial government.

Despite resistances, these pressures have worked in myriad ways to limit the potential realizabilities of Indigenous food sovereignty, allowing the Government of Canada to support community-led initiatives for "food sovereignty" that will not actually challenge settler claims to land. However, First Nations communities in northern Ontario have always and continue to resist, negotiate, ignore, and defy these imposed constraints, although not without significant costs.

Ongoing colonial impositions

As has been outlined above, Treaty 9's imposition of the reserve systems was a "radical change" for Indigenous food systems, which depended on traveling long distances following food (Long, 2010, p. 92) and years of experience and intergenerational knowledge transmission on the land. This was significantly disrupted by mandated attendance of all children at IRS as per the Indian Act. The intergenerational impacts of the physical, mental, emotional, and sexual abuses experienced at IRS have been extensively documented (Bombay et al., 2009, 2011, 2014; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), 2015). Hunger was an extremely common experience in residential schools across Canada (TRC, 2015). In some cases, the children in IRS were used in nutrition experiments determining the importance of specific minerals, nutrients, and supplements (Mosby, 2013; Mosby & Galloway, 2017). During these studies, children were continually fed nutritionally inadequate diets, sometimes for up to five years (Coté, 2016). While IRS are no longer operational, many youths from northern Ontario First Nations are required to leave their communities and stay with billeted families hundreds of kilometres away in Thunder Bay and Sioux Lookout to attend high school. This creates enormous disruptions to the youths' ability to be mentored by experienced harvesters in their communities.

Engagement in the wage labour economy limits the time available to hunt, harvest, process, distribute, and teach youth about traditional foods (Morrison, 2011; Streit & Mason, 2017). At the same time, one needs to be involved in the wage labour economy in order to afford the high costs of hunting, including equipment and fuel to travel further distances in search of food sources, whose migratory patterns have changed drastically due to climate change (Golden et al., 2015). Income is also necessary in order to afford the exorbitant costs of market food, often only available through the Northern Store (owned by the Northwest Company). Burnett and Hay (2023) outline the Northwest Company and Northern Store's corporate strategies that work to sustain food insecurity in the north.

Yet, traditional food access is often as much or more expensive than market food (Golden et al., 2015; Leibovitch Randazzo & Robidoux, 2019; Robidoux et al., 2021). While many programs and research grants do provide funding for local food harvesting, Robidoux et al. (2021) demonstrate that, in one northern Ontario community, the actual impact local food harvesting has on food security (in terms of amount of calories from protein) is minimal. This, of course, is in a political and ecological landscape where food resources are continuously *made* scarce due to ongoing resource exploitation and climate change. It is a positive feedback loop of decreasing food availability—when food becomes scarce and hunting becomes more expensive, there are fewer hunters able to be on the land. When there are fewer hunters on the land, it is easier for the province to extract resources unencumbered and unchallenged, further diminishing

the abundance of plants and animals integral to sustaining the food system.

These extractions have had profound ecological and social impacts. The pulp and paper Mill in Dryden, Ontario has dumped mercury into the waters, which has bioaccumulated in fish (Long, 2010, p. 160). Hydro-electric dams in northern Ontario and river diversions constructed in order to increase electricity output in the south have flooded out lakes and communities, forcing relocations (Kamal et al., 2015; Long, 2010), destroying manoomin beds (Mehltretter et al., 2020), releasing mercury into the food system (Calder et al., 2016), and disrupting commercial fisheries along with spawning and migratory patterns (Kamal et al., 2015). Forestry and mining developments, accompanied by the construction of access roads, disrupt caribou populations in the region by increasing habitat for alternate prey and increasing predator access (Abraham & Thompson, 1998; Boan et al., 2018). While these changes have led to "increased prosperity for Canadians generally, Anishinaabe lifestyles [have] suffered" (Mehltretter et al., 2020). Essentially, First Nations in Treaty 9 are able to "hunt and fish as they always have" (James Bay Treaty (Treaty 9), 1905) on whatever land is left over after the province takes what it needs for economic development. For example, Ontario's Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR, 2005) states:

> In general, Aboriginal people exercising their Aboriginal and treaty rights on Crown land are free to do so and enforcement will not occur...enforcement activity is only undertaken where the activity appears to present a significant risk to ecological or resources sustainability, or where there are other compelling and competing land management program goals. (p. 21)

While the MNR rhetoric seemingly supports Treaty rights, they simultaneously explicitly re-establish the province's jurisdictional control—First Nations can use the land as long as it does not interfere with the interests of the province. Alfred (2005) appropriately asks "...to what extent does that state-regulated 'right' to fish represent justice when you consider that Indigenous people have been fishing on their rivers and seas since time began?" (p. 43). Corntassel & Bryce (2012) remind us that "rights are state constructions that do not necessarily reflect inherent Indigenous responsibilities to their homelands. Rather, rights are conditional in that the state can withdraw them at any time or selectively enforce them" (p.152). In line with this critique, Ontario justifies their enforcement and withdrawal of harvesting rights when necessary to maintain "ecological sustainability", yet they are extremely vague about what other "competing land management program goals" might be (Ministry of Natural Resources, 2005, p. 21).

King (2011) exposes the ways that conservation is used to justify colonial legislation and control over Indigenous peoples' livelihoods, particularly related to food harvesting. The Supreme Court "has demonstrated that it will continually assert the right and responsibility of the Crown to manage and regulate the harvest" (Ministry of Natural Resources, 2005, p. 35). For example, *R. v. Jones and Nadjiwon* (1993) (Ministry of Natural Resources, 2005), *Platinex vs. Kitenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug* (2007) (Ariss & Cutfeet, 2011), and *Grassy Narrows v. Ontario* (2005) (Townshend LLP, 2014) all resulted in rulings that affirm Ontario's authority over natural resources in the region, bestowed upon the province by the Crown during Treaty proceedings. More recently, Chapleau First Nation, Missanaibi First Nation, and Brunswick House First Nation are pursuing legal action against the ways that the province of Ontario's forestry operations

continue to disrupt Indigenous food systems and livelihoods (CBC News, 2022).

Following *Platinex vs. Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninìwug*, Ontario implemented the *Far North Act* (2010). Although publicly presented as heralding a new relationship with First Nations (Government of Ontario, 2021), analysis of the Act reveals that it is merely a repackaging of the same relations which further entrench Ontario's right to take up land as it needs for resource extraction (Gardner et al., 2012; Scott & Cutfeet, 2019). In 2021, Ontario's Progressive Conservative Party passed an amendment to this Act with the intention to remove the "red tape" in the Ring of Fire mining operations in northern Ontario (Scott et al., 2020; Scott & Cutfeet, 2019). Although the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) states that Indigenous people have the right to control and develop their own lands, (UNDRIP, 2007), clearly the kind of partnership or sovereignty necessary to work towards Indigenous food sovereignty in a settler-colonial nation is forcefully limited, as "traditional harvesters who assert their inherent jurisdiction through direct action often face civil and criminal charges in a court system that is adversarial in nature and has demonstrated culturally biased tendency to make judgements in favour of corporate interests" (Morrison, 2011, p. 107).

Amidst these colonial impositions on Indigenous lands, an ecological climate emergency is further stressing traditional food systems. Much research demonstrates the connections between climate change, food security, and food sovereignty in northern Canada (Beaumier & Ford, 2010; Golden et al., 2015; Lemelin et al., 2010; Ross & Mason, 2020; Tsuji et al., 2019). In the boreal forest, shifts in water levels (Winterhalder, 1983b), snow depth (Winterhalder, 1983a), and the timing between ice formation and initial snowfall accumulation (Steegman Jr., 1983a) can shift migration patterns and increase the safety risks associated with hunting. While climate change is posing real challenges for traditional food systems in northern Ontario and must be addressed, it has the potential to be used as a political scapegoat in order to obscure the colonial social, economic, and political impositions which created and continue to perpetuate food shortages in First Nations communities. While it may be inherent that political sovereignty is a mandatory precursor of food sovereignty, it must also be consciously and explicitly put at the forefront of the movements, lest Indigenous food sovereignty becomes relegated to exercising Treaty and constitutional rights within a container which is continually being suffocated. Sustaining what we can with what we have can easily slip into a performance of food sovereignty.

Futurity of Indigenous food sovereignty in Treaty 9

As has been outlined in the first two sections, food sovereignty in Treaty 9 is highly contingent on the food resources available, the relative robustness of the ecosystem, a community's capacity and autonomy to adapt, and the ability of the community to negotiate the use of these resources with other communities. The settler colonial state of Canada has disrupted all of these autonomies. This section asks: given these historical and ongoing impositions on Indigenous lifeways, what is the pathway forward for research, partnership, and innovation towards Indigenous food sovereignty in Treaty 9 region of northern Ontario?

There is always a risk in transplanting concepts developed in one context and language to another, especially when Indigenous communities and groups use non-Indigenous terms to define our movements. Indigenous eco-philosophies sharply contrast Eurocentric hierarchical binaries of modernity (Morrison, 2011). The implications of coercion and

domination inherent in the term "sovereignty" defies "kin-centric ecology", which entails "an awareness that life in any environment is viable only when humans view the life surrounding them as kin" (Salmón, 2000, p. 1332) and "foster[s] relationships with plants, animals, and land based on respect and reciprocity" (Coté, 2016, p. 8). In this view, even though life in the bush is hard, it is also "*pimachiowin aki*—'the land that gives life'" (Pawlowska-Mainville, 2020, p. 58), based on a "dynamic view of the land and food system, which assumes that nature cannot be controlled nor yields predicted" (Morrison, 2011, p. 104). In an Indigenous, decolonial worldview, the animal and/or plant that is consumed for food has agency, or sovereignty, over themselves. There is an element of needing to "dethink the concept of sovereignty and replace it with a notion of power that has at its root a more appropriate premise" (Alfred, 2005, p. 47). It is not sovereignty *over* food, but sovereignty *of* and *through* food. As activists, academics, and traditional food harvesters protect the sovereignty of the land itself, we protect our own political sovereignty.

While Indigenous food sovereignty and local food harvesting are opportunities for decolonization (Kamal et al., 2015), we must be conscious not to accept them only as metaphors (Tuck & Yang, 2011). While it may look like sovereignty when people hunt and fish traditionally, and it feels like sovereignty when I harvest and reseed manoomin, if the land is still in the control of the state, can we call it such? Barker (2005) explains:

> [Some Indigenous scholars] find the links between sovereignty and particular cultural practices, such as certain aspects of basket weaving or food preparation, to flatten out, distort, or even make light of the legal importance and political substance of sovereignty. (p. 21)

Reclaiming Indigenous homelands, and by extension food sovereignty, requires that all activities that "encroach on the sovereignty of these territories", including mining, damming, and dumping toxins, must cease (Menser, 2014, p. 70), that is, if this is in line with communities' interests.

There is nuance in this perspective, as many communities do see economic potential in mining and other extractive industries. However, Horowitz et al. (2018) found that economic benefits from mining often leak out of Indigenous communities who live in the ecological "sacrifice zones" (p. 407), along with the acute and long-term ecological impacts. These impacts shift, however, when there is greater local ownership. Yet community consultation processes do not include veto power—instead, it is the power to negotiate within a predetermined outcome. Horowitz et al. (2018) succinctly summarize:

> Indeed, Indigenous communities may ultimately see no alternative but to negotiate with companies. As their land rights are restricted to a certain area, often imbued with great cultural, spiritual, and emotional significance to them, they do not have the option to go elsewhere. When it becomes apparent that the project will not go away, they may face a choice between continuing to resist in vain, at great cost and risk to themselves, or negotiating at least some benefits for their communities. (p. 411)

At the same time, employment from industry has been shown to both increase land-harvesting due to increased income to afford to be on the land, and to decrease land-harvesting activities due to limited time available to be on the land (Horowitz et al., 2018).

There are examples of hunter support programs which have found some success in offering an economic

return for traditional food harvesting activities (Gombay, 2005, 2009; Government of Canada, 2022). For example, initiatives such as Nutrition North Canada's (NNC) Harvesters Support Grant provide financial support for traditional food harvesting. While this initiative claims to "improve conditions for food sovereignty within northern communities" (Government of Canada, 2022) and does align with the majority of the pillars of food sovereignty, it neglects to mention Indigenous land restitution. It is unsurprising that this piece is avoided, as land is the basis of settler-colonialism (Tuck & Yang, 2012)— acknowledging that it has been home to political communities long before colonial settlement elicits fear that "the home [settlers] live in and even [their] claim to call this country home are baseless" (Mills, 2017, p. 219). Keske (2021) argues that "Nyéléni Declaration and La Vía Campesina imply, but fall short of, explicitly advocating for local control and resource ownership" (p.4). Yet I would argue instead that this is the central argument of LVC—indeed, at the Nyéléni conference in 2007, a member states, "food sovereignty is only possible if it takes place at the same time as political sovereignty of peoples" (Nyéléni Declaration, 2007, p. 16). However, this element has been lost as the concept has been enthusiastically co-opted by settler-colonial states—as to recognize the central tenet of food sovereignty is to deny the colonial state's legitimacy.

In a socio-ecological context where local food production is unlikely to meet the caloric requirements needed to sustain a community alone (Robidoux et al., 2021), and where there are competitive advantages in climate, technological advancements, and transportation to growing food in more temperate climates and transporting it north (Keske, 2021, p. 4), what does moving towards food sovereignty in Treaty 9 look like? It has been argued that current efforts to train young hunters and foragers to be on the land and supporting families to continue harvesting activities (Turner, 2022) do work towards food sovereignty in a way that has little to do with the amount of food that is brought back (Bagelman, 2018; Bagelman et al., 2016) or whether or not there is state-recognized Indigenous sovereignty to the land that is hunted. For example, Batchewana First Nation is reclaiming their traditional fishery and rejecting provincial jurisdiction by setting up their own fishing authority that does not depend on validation from the colonial state (Lowitt et al., 2019). Communities across northern Ontario have long resisted colonial impositions on food systems, such as Moose Cree First Nation challenging the Migratory Birds Act (Long, 2010) and the aforementioned court challenges to poor mining and forestry consultation and industrial toxin introduction accountability.

More recently, Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs) have been celebrated as examples of Indigenous co-management of traditional lands. These designations are defined as "lands and waters where Indigenous governments have the primary role in protecting and conserving ecosystems through Indigenous laws, governance and knowledge systems" (The Indigenous Circle of Experts, 2018, p. 5). The government plans to spend $800 million to support almost one million square kilometres under Indigenous protection and conservation by 2030 (Zimonjic, 2022). Although IPCAs differ across regions, they are argued to be Indigenous-led, represent a long-term commitment to conservation, and elevate Indigenous rights and responsibilities (The Indigenous Circle of Experts, 2018). Currently, funding is slated to protect the Hudson Bay and James Bay Lowlands, led by the Omushkego Cree (Zimonjic, 2022). Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug (KI) First Nation has also submitted a proposal to protect the Fawn River Watershed under their knowledge and authority (McIntosh, 2022). Although provinces tend to be

resistant to IPCAs because of the constraints on resource extraction, the federal government has approved many across the country (Mason et al., 2022). Ontario, for example, has expressed resistance to IPCAs (McIntosh, 2022). This makes sense considering their focus on mining activities in Hudson Bay and James Bay watershed—this watershed is fed by multiple rivers, some of which are at risk of being impacted by the Ring of Fire (Stevenson, 2022). However, there are several questions that challenge whether IPCAs truly represent a shift in colonial land management. First, if the IPCA does not protect the entire watershed and cannot control upstream impacts, how will it work to protect the region? Second, IPCA approvals still require government sign-offs (as the land is still considered to be in the hands of the "Crown") that are not guaranteed. While it is an important step towards Indigenous land management and co-management, it is neither land restitution nor exclusive sovereignty (Wood, 2022). While regaining Indigenous title is possible through lengthy and expensive court negotiations and communities have demonstrated that they are willing to go through with this process, again, it requires immense amounts of time and energy.

Alternatively, Batchewana First Nation (and others) provide an example of reclaiming land sovereignty without waiting for Canada's approval of their jurisdiction. While Batchewana's rejection of colonial authority is an important step towards Indigenous sovereignty, resurgence, and "de-linking" (Mignolo, 2007), at the same time, broader decisions about Lake Superior (e.g., shipping rates and regulations, invasive species legislation) are still held by the Federal Government of Canada, and those pressures have great impacts on the stability and sustainability of the fishery. While choosing to ignore government-set fishing limits in the lake is one measure of political sovereignty, without Indigenous land restitution, decisions about what happens to and on that lake still rest in the hands of the settler-colonial state. In the beginning of this section, I asked what the pathway forward is for Indigenous food sovereignty in northern Ontario. Based on the research in this paper, it is clear that communities will always do what is in their power to protect land and water sovereignty and integrity. Yet if we do not place Indigenous land restitution, resurgence, and sovereignty, however defined by the community, at the heart of our work, we risk sidestepping the foundation of Indigenous food sovereignty—the Land.

Conclusions

Colonial social, economic, cultural, ecological, and political impositions in the boreal forests of northern Ontario have created scarcities in traditional food systems that have led to food insecurity. If food sovereignty does not work in concert with land restitution efforts such as Land Back, it will be exercised in exponentially shrinking and segregated parcels of state-controlled land, which is becoming increasingly unpredictable due to climatic abnormalities. This is not to say that because of these imposed limits the pursuit of Indigenous food sovereignty is in vain; rather, it is *through* food that Indigenous land, political, and knowledge sovereignty has been and continues to be realized. Yerxa (2014) writes about the way her

community asserts their presence and governance on the land without requiring state approval. In other contexts, presence on one's land involves conflict, such as the KI Six resisting mining in Treaty 9 (Ariss & Cutfeet, 2011) and Black Duck Wild Rice seeding manoomin in the Kawarthas (Hayden Taylor, 2020). Sustaining the defense of the land in this way requires massive physical, emotional, intellectual, and financial sacrifice from Indigenous communities, minds, hearts, and bodies, which have already had many of these resources strained.

If we do not challenge this misplaced use of food sovereignty in a settler-colonial society, we create a narrative that has a built-in justification for increased government intervention to create economic opportunities and to provide market-based solutions to food shortages. It also justifies state surveillance to monitor wildlife and harvesting rates. Scarce food resources justify conservation and management policies, a complete opposite to, for example, Anishinaabeg teachings where:

> the plant is not simply a resource to be managed but rather an active and agential partner for whose future generations one cares and is responsible. Whereas conservation is a form of management applied to other life forms by humans without their consent, in this interaction, the plant must give consent and can always refuse it.... (Mitchell, 2020, p. 916)

It is within this context that I am reminded of harvesting and reseeding manoomin. Using our hands and participating in these harvesting activities has been argued to help re-establish kin-centric relationships to the entire ecosystem (Kamal et al., 2015; Morrison, 2020), reconnect with food and political systems (Martens et al., 2016), and "inherently asserts Indigenous peoples' self-determination of their own culturally suitable food systems" (Settee & Shukla, 2020, p. 4). This aligns with Corntassel and Bryce's (2012) emphasis on "moving away from the performativity of a rights discourse geared toward state affirmation and approval toward a daily existence conditioned by place-based cultural practices" (p. 153). While I believe and feel all of these elements when I am harvesting and seeding manoomin in my grandfather's community in southern Ontario, I understand that ultimate control over the lake remains in the hands of the settler-colonial state, which still has the ability, through legislative and indeed military power, to shape the space within which Indigenous food sovereignty is practiced. How can Indigenous food sovereignty exist in this context? As long as we keep our rice bed contained, there is no problem. When we start to expand, we meet resistance. While the costs of pushing against that container are great, so too are the costs of choosing not to.

From an Anishinaabe perspective, there is nothing new or radical about the concept of sovereignty *of* and *through* food. In the seven fire prophecies, the Anishinaabe are instructed to move west "to a land where food grows on water" (Benton-Banai, 1988, p. 89). I think about the profundity and depth of this relationship as I harvest and seed manoomin. I am reminded that, during the harvest, much more seed is knocked off into the lake than lands in our canoe. This means the more we harvest, the more the rice beds grow. The more these rice beds grow, the more they push on settler-colonial impositions which attempt to limit their growth. This perimeter serves as a revelation of both the impositions on it and the opportunities for growth and restoration. Without enacting this agency of and through food, the settler colonial state can continue to encroach on the land unencumbered. Instead of accepting this, by practicing traditional

harvesting, manoomin and the Anishinaabe (and many other Indigenous communities and food systems) are seeding and leading each other.

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Keira A. Loukes is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities in the Outdoor Recreation, Parks, and Tourism department at Lakehead University. She is interested in community-based, collaborative research around local community food systems, including work in Indigenous food sovereignty, food security and traditional, market-based, and alternative food access. Recent projects are related to manoomin revitalization, community-led food growing initiatives, and market-based food initiative and policy assessment and evaluation.

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