

Convergence: Building Towards Fluid Futurities

Sai Ahmed

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Carrie Freshour

Megan Ybarra

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Sai Ahmed

University of Washington

Abstract

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Sai Ahmed

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Carrie Freshour

Department of Geography

Since the 1974 Boldt Decision, Native Nations in Coast Salish territories have collaborated alongside state and federal governments for co-management over watersheds and coasts. Over this time, the fishing industry has rapidly expanded, from commodifying fishing rights and access to the territorialization and allocation of miles of the ocean to farmed fish production, putting wild Pacific Salmon—an ecological and cultural keystone species in Coast Salish territories—in danger. This paper explores the tensions navigated and solidarities formed between Black, Indigenous, and other people of color on Coast Salish territories in the struggle to protect Salmon and resist the ongoing violence of racial capitalism and settler colonialism that is exerted on their communities, and more- than-human kin. This research combines a historical overview of Seattle, as a crossing-over place for people and Salmon on Coast Salish territories, and ethnographic methods, to explore ways in which Black,

Indigenous, and other people of color build towards fluid futures, centering Indigenous ontologies, relationality, food-sovereignty and the long-term restoration of Salmon watersheds and the ocean.

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Glossary of Recurring Acronyms

BCS—BlockCorporateSalmon

BIPOC—Black, Indigenous, and other people of color

CAGJ—Community Alliance for Global Justice

GE—genetically engineered

NAMA—North American Marine Alliance

UNR—Uprooted and Rising

Introduction: Convergence

Fluid social worlds

All my life, food has existed as a central part of my identity. Cooking my home foods as an act of ancestral revival, food was, and has remained, a way that I maintain ownership over my heritage and identity. As a child born in the United States from immigrant parents, a Pakistani father and Thai mother, assimilation was treated as a compass to my family's survival. I was taught only how to speak English, and my brother, for whom Thai was his native language, slowly taught himself how to forget. While I loved making trips back to Kalasin, a rural village in Thailand where most of my extended family live, our language barrier made it a struggle to communicate. Still, every day we would sit outside on the rattan mat, trim bamboo shoots, wash banana leaves, and pass each other bites of food, smiling as our shoulders touched. Sharing food, cooking together, and cultivating land together, was one of the main ways my family and I conveyed our love, joy, and grief to one another. Food has not only served as the foundation of my communities, but it also serves as my connection to land and water. I come from a large family of farmers and fishers. Many summers, after my family moved back to Thailand, I would spend my days with my grandma, harvesting rice in the fields or looking for catfish in the river. I also think of the catfish fifty miles from my family's home in the Chiang Dao caves and temple. They are beautiful and huge, blessed by the temple so they cannot be eaten.

These lived experiences construct and inform my own relationship to food, land, and water, but also demonstrate the broader social and structural networks that food is tied to. In Kalasin, the members of my family who worked on the rice fields did not own that land. The rice that they harvested was not typically for themselves or their direct communities, but for an employer. When my

grandmother, who worked on the rice field her entire life, was young, she was compensated 30 baht per day (the equivalent of almost one U.S. dollar). The rice she and other workers harvested were sent to processing facilities, to be dried, cleaned, milled, and made into a variety of products to be sold across the country or exported to distant parts of the world. No one knew if the sacks of rice that made it back to the town had even been farmed there, or if it had come from another part of the country. Despite the engineered separation between the farmers and their harvests, food was still abundant in my grandmother's village. Everyone knew and supported each other—trading (my grandfather raised chickens and grew other vegetables around the house), gossiping, gambling, laughing, and building fluid social worlds around food.

In 2014, I made a significant move away from my home to Seattle, Washington, a highly industrialized coastal city in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. Here my relationship to food and community was very different. The divide between Kalasin and Chiang Mai, where I primarily lived, was already a wide gap to cross. In Kalasin, where much of the food that I and my family ate came either from the land itself, or was purchased directly from producers in *talaads* (open-air markets), Chiang Mai's system of food production and distribution was more industrialized, but still very fluid and dynamic. While many people still bought directly from *talaads* (which were typically much cheaper to purchase from), many also carried out the majority of their shopping in big chain grocery stores. These grocery stores were hardly ever simply places to purchase goods — there were usually many other shops, restaurants, and pop-up markets that would fill and surround these stores, oriented around spending time together, eating, and wandering. Seattle's urban food-landscape was far more focused and segregated than anything I had experienced at home. Aside from fast food

places, most restaurants were prohibitively expensive to visit for the vast majority of time that I have lived here (as a young college student without access to much disposable income). Grocery stores were seldom places of socialization, and primarily served as centers of distribution embedded within a highly corporatized food system, that were extremely far-removed from sites of production. Food and experiences surrounding food were highly commodified and stratified in terms of who could access it across various places and times. Understanding Seattle's geographies of food, however, requires unpacking the fluid borders and vibrant social worlds between diverse communities that had formed here across time as a "crossing-over place" for people who were seeking employment in agriculture, timber, and maritime industries—particularly centered around Salmon¹ (Asaka, 2022).

The city of Seattle was built through the convergence of peoples and communities from many near and distant places. Prior to the arrival of colonizers through the 18th and 19th century, Coast Salish peoples had lived in and held relationships to the lands and waters in and around Seattle since time immemorial. By Coast Salish territory, I refer to the lands that touch the waters of the Salish Sea, including parts of what settler states refer to as Vancouver Island, British Columbia, and Washington State. Tribes held deep embedded knowledge of their respective territories and surrounding geographies, and this knowledge was something that colonizers could not have survived without. After their arrival they relied heavily on relationships with Tribes to survive—trading goods they had brought for Salmon, furs, and other materials from the Tribes (Reid, 2015; Wadewitz, 2012). The city

¹ In this thesis, I capitalize "Salmon" whenever I am referring to wild Salmon. This practice was maintained by organizers in BlockCorporateSalmon, who did so to emphasize the agency, relational networks, and beinghood of wild Salmon—in contrast to the limited agency of farmed or genetically engineered salmon, which were raised solely for the purpose of production. While this distinction has been strategic for the campaign, I am not interested in negating the agency of farmed fish or genetically engineered salmon, and later in this thesis we see genetically engineered salmon exert that agency in interesting ways. All salmon (including Salmon) are subjected to colonial and capitalist commodification.

of Seattle itself was constructed on the lands of the Duwamish, the First Peoples of Seattle, who lived in permanent villages around the lower Puget Sound for thousands of years before white settlers displaced them to the southern fringes of the city. While some Coast Salish peoples were able to negotiate for reservation lands near or on their traditional homelands through treaty-making with the settlers, white settlers in Seattle petitioned against the creation of a reservation for the Duwamish tribal members, in an effort to secure their lands and labor. In 1865, Seattle's Ordinance Number 5, "An Ordinance for Removal of Indians," sought to expel Indigenous peoples from their homelands. They were pushed towards the southern borders of the city, and Seattle was spatialized into distinct regions. The north of Seattle became a place for white-settlers to set up permanent domiciles, while the south-end served as the place where many of the Duwamish and other racialized people were relegated to.

Over various periods of economic growth and stagnation, Seattle's geographic and economic positioning set the stage for it to become an increasingly diverse city. Communities of white, Indigenous, Asian, and Black workers traveled through and stayed in Seattle in migratory waves. As a crossing-over place, many people lived in Seattle in-between seasons of work that would take them to eastern Washington, Oregon, and Alaska to earn wages at the Salmon canneries or hops farms. The white population of Seattle grew rapidly in the 1870s through the 1890s with the promise of a transcontinental railroad enabling easier travel and additional promise for economic expansion and wealth (Wadewitz, 2012). Other Coast Salish peoples who worked in these industries often stayed in Seattle as well, journeying by canoe and camping along the shore for days—though this wasn't new. As Asaka writes, "Indigenous movement through this area had long predated the city itself and would continue even after the decline of the hop industry" (2022, 58).

As a city attached to the Pacific Ocean through the Salish Sea, its “maritime geography integrated the city into a Pacific-oriented economy, bringing it closer to Asia and the Pacific world than to the rest of the continental United States” (Asaka, 2022, 14). Seattle’s coastal geography, alongside expanding Western military and economic imperialism in Asia, brought many Asian immigrants to the West Coast where they worked as seasonal laborers, primarily in the Salmon canneries, alongside Indigenous peoples. Across various periods through the 1860s to the 1930s, Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino workers traveled to the Pacific Northwest² to find jobs in maritime and agricultural industries. Seattle was considered a “gateway to the Orient,” especially after the establishment of formal trade partnerships with Japanese companies such as Nippon Yusen Kaisha. Asian immigrants were never fully welcomed into the city however, and experienced waves of violence as they competed with white workers for labor on the railroads, or in the city.

Black workers also held a significant role in building the waterfront industry in Seattle. In 1897, the beginning of the gold rush boosted shipbuilding and trading and drew more workers to the Puget Sound and helped to bring broader development to the city. Quintard Taylor (1994) describes the emergence of Black workers as an integral part of Seattle’s dynamic shapeshifting economy. The influx of laborers from the gold rush did not immediately attract Black workers to the shipbuilding industry, due to the anti-Black racial discrimination that limited the work opportunities that Black workers were allowed to engage in. However, the concurrent increasing demand for unskilled labor and service industry workers drew a growing Black community to Seattle. Black workers did forever shape the maritime industry and the Seattle labor movement, however, when the International

² I use “Pacific Northwest” when referring to regions based on US settler state territoriality.

Longshoremen's Association (ILA) went on strike in response to a pay reduction. The Waterfront Employers Association (WEA), who announced the pay reduction, then sought to break the strike by hiring Black workers to take the place of the strikers. This tactic of strike-breaking, utilized by the WEA, and other employers within major industries across the Puget Sound, spurred racial tensions between Black and white Longshoremen, but eventually led to more racial inclusivity in the ILA, and more protections for Black workers as union members once the strike ended in 1917, though it was and continues to be an ongoing struggle.

In the city of Seattle there emerged two distinct neighborhoods in which the formation of racialized relationships have been particularly visible across space and time: the Central District (CD) and Chinatown-International District (CID). The CD is a neighborhood that coalesced after the development of public transportation systems in Seattle and the establishment of restrictive racial covenants and redlining³ that prevented Black and Asian people from living in other parts of the city. The neighborhood has been occupied by many different communities over time, but was a central space for Black community building in the city for decades (though the number of Black families living in the neighborhood has declined significantly over time due to increasing gentrification). The CID, a collection of smaller community clusters including Chinatown, Nihonmachi ("Japantown"), Manila town, and Little Saigon, is another neighborhood, adjacent to the Central District, where migrant,

³ A practice employed by banks, investors, and real estate developers to deny loans and development projects to people or within areas that were deemed "high risk," following the National Housing Act of 1934 which sought to protect affordable housing during the Great Depression. This practice confined Black and other racialized people to certain neighborhoods and prevented them from living in other parts of the city or owning property in the neighborhoods they resided in. This made them more susceptible to the effects of gentrification in the late 1900s to the early 2000s (Silva, 2009; Jagana, 2021).

Asian, and Black workers, lived in between their seasonal jobs in the cannery, logging, and farming industries.

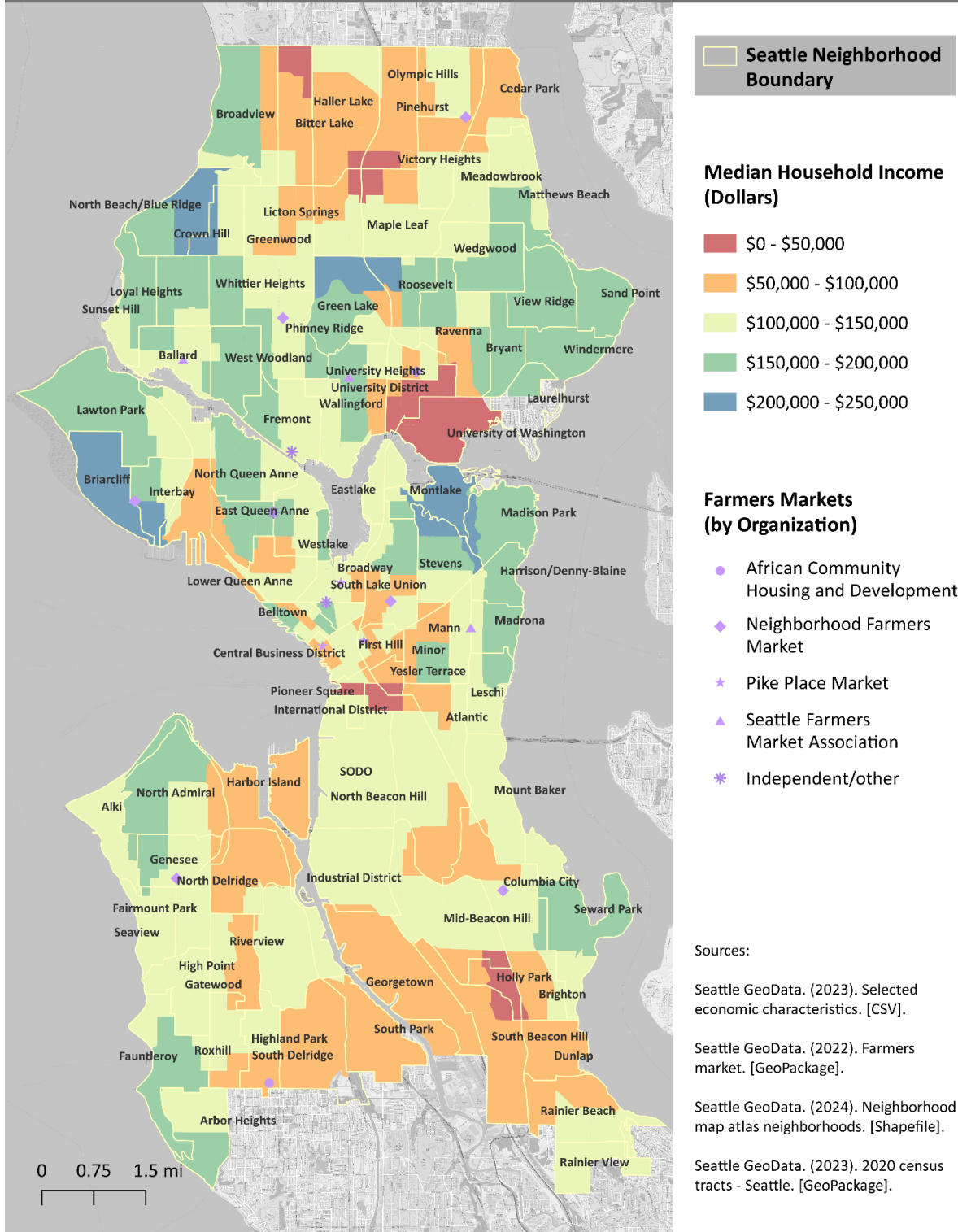
When Seattle was supporting a primarily mobile labor force, this region of Seattle, alongside Pioneer Square, were places where racialized and marginalized workers lived and constructed “fluid social worlds” (Asaka, 2022, 20). Borders between the various communities here were not well-defined and were ever changing over the city’s history. Here, people slept, shared meals, socialized, gambled and built dynamic social and commercial networks. Indigenous workers had substantial purchasing power, and would stop in the city to buy supplies, including food and clothing, in advance of picking season at hops farms, or would sell their own wares. Japanese leaders also held substantial power in the city until anti-Japanese sentiment drove the entire community out in World War II, building thriving hotel businesses in Pioneer square and strawberry farms on Bainbridge Island where they employed (and exploited) Filipino and Indigenous workers.

These histories of migration, relationship building, solidarity and antimony amongst Seattle’s migrant working-class have had a lasting impact on the city as we see it today, despite the vast shifts that have taken place within the city’s political-economy. While Seattle’s initial economic development centered primarily around agriculture and Salmon, it has increasingly turned toward aerospace over the 20th century, and grew as a tech industry hub in the early 2000s. This industry shift has brought an influx of middle-class white workers to the city over the past several decades and raised the cost of living in the city while pushing people of color further towards the south. Though the city is still predominantly white, it continues to hold a diverse community of people. Despite Seattle’s increasing industrialization and corporatization (easily viewable if you visit the city and witness the ever-constant

construction of sky-scrapers, workspaces, and convention centers) there have also been efforts to shorten supply chains and establish more relational systems of food. One example of this has been the establishment of permanent or seasonal farmers markets in urban spaces in Seattle. These are not simply places to purchase food, but have also served as places to socialize, wander, and build relationships. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many of these farmers markets stayed open, and organizations such as the Neighborhood Farmers Market Association mobilized community support to provide \$380,000 in relief funds to vendors whose businesses were substantially impacted by the pandemic closures.

Farmers markets, however, render a particular vision of food and community building in Seattle that reinforces the city's patterns of gentrification and pushes people of color out towards the fringes of the city. Though farmers markets have typically been seen as a way to achieve food security and environmental sustainability in urban spaces, scholars such as Joassart-Marcelli and Bosco (2017) have shown how farmers markets have catered primarily to white consumption habits and fostered social and economic exclusion for people of color and lower-income residents. Farmers markets further serve as a trendy attraction for the surrounding neighborhoods, which then displace businesses owned by people of color and draw wealthier white residents to the area, pricing-out long-standing communities with rising rent costs. Demonstrated in the map below, which I constructed using Seattle's open access GIS data-sets, farmers markets have typically been established near wealthier or gentrifying neighborhoods in the city. In the CD, the only farmers market in the area is the Madrona farmers market, which runs from mid-May to the end of October, and is located within one of the whitest and wealthiest neighborhoods in the area.

Seattle Median Household Income and Farmers Market Locations (2024)



While segregation was a primary displacing force in Seattle in the early to mid 1900s, gentrification has replaced it as a displacing force pushing racialized people farther out of the city. As the growth of the tech industry drew middle-class workers to the city, they increasingly invested in the city's more "affordable" housing options, including the CD. While the area formerly was home to 70% Black residents in the 1970s, that percentage has decreased significantly to 13% in 2020 (Yoon, et al., 2017). The displacement of people of color are tied far beyond the choices of individuals and employers, but embedded within a broader system of racial capitalism that purposefully assigns and differentiates the value of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) from white people through state-sanctioned violence. Within the U.S. racial capitalism is intimately tied to the displacement and dispossession of Indigenous peoples through settler colonialism. As I wrote earlier, the city of Seattle could not have been constructed without the displacement and labor of the Duwamish. Still, Asian, Black, Latinx and Indigenous peoples living in the city have continued to reconfigure the city's geography and refuse imaginations of a white-settler Seattle through concerted organizing efforts and occupations of space—often in solidarity with each other's movements.

While farmers markets are highly visible in Seattle, and thus my first exposure to the city's attempts to shorten supply chains, there are many other places, projects, and collectives I learned of in the years since then, that build towards food systems that are centered around relationality and intentionally engage power and difference in the city. Many of these, I found out about through relationships I held myself, and as I continued to pursue engagement in food justice spaces. Through these connections, I learned about grocery stores that did also serve as places to eat and socialize—one in particular that was very exciting to me was a Thai and Laotian grocery store in South Seattle, named

Vientiane Grocery, where I could find Thai and Lao ingredients I could not get anywhere else. In addition, the small set up of tables and chairs and a kitchen in the back meant that I could experience the dishes I missed the most, while conversing in a mixed dialogue of Thai, English, and Lao with the cashiers. Other places blended the concepts of restaurants, mutual aid, and community together, such as Musang (a Filipino community-driven restaurant in Beacon Hill), or ChuMinh (a vegan Vietnamese restaurant in the CID), which have both worked to provide mutual aid and feed communities in times of crisis and need. Ramirez (2014) also elaborates on the practices of Clean Greens, a Black food justice organization based in the Central District, which seeks to address food insecurity by centering the embodied knowledge of Black people living in the Central District and their experiences of Black and low-income geographies in Seattle. These places, rather than seek to obscure racial differentiation in their organizing, explore the deep, complex, and racialized histories and geographies of Seattle to build better food systems through their communities.

Food as a relationship

Food is not simply a commodity or a means to survival—underlying all food are embedded sets of relationships and transmutations. The commodification of food happens when industrialized food systems intentionally obscure these relationships. As food progresses through lengthy supply chains, it goes through continuous transformation from one state into another in an effort to prepare it for mass consumption. Seeds are grown into crops that are harvested, processed, and distributed to people who will mostly never be aware of the lives or working conditions of those involved in bringing that food to their plates. Rather than examining supply chains, however, I am interested in thinking through how communities of color, grassroots activists, environmental justice organizations, and Native Nations

strive to build relational systems of food. I am also interested in exploring how their refusal and opposition of capitalist frameworks of food production disrupt racial capitalism and settler colonialism, by undermining corporate and state strategies that seek to maintain control of food systems to further racial differentiation and Indigenous dispossession as a way to accumulate power and control.

While farmers markets do allow for a closer relationship between people who consume and produce food, their placement within urban spaces tends to exclude people of color from being central participants, gentrify lower-income neighborhoods, and reinforce white supremacy and neoliberal ideologies around food. Racialized and lower-income communities in Seattle have instead had to negotiate their relationships to food outside of institutional systems of care. Grassroots activism and mutual aid efforts demonstrate one of these ways in which communities have taken care of each other, and was amplified when crisis struck during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic deeply affirmed the structural racism embedded within our institutions. People of color in the U.S. suffered far higher rates of death from the virus, with Asian Americans being among the highest population affected, alongside Hispanic Americans (Flagg, A., Sharma D., & Fenn, L., 2020). While the virus was spreading fervently across the country, state and federal governments remained inactive in terms of support for communities and workers—simply issuing lockdown orders while hospitals filled and death tolls rose. Many people, especially people of color whose jobs could not accommodate remote work, were laid off without state-measures in place to aid them in supporting themselves and their families. Many faced evictions and food and supply shortages at grocery stores. The pandemic exposed the state’s engineered abandonment of marginalized communities in times of crisis, and how “we are put in competition

with each other for survival, and we are forced to rely on hostile systems—like health care systems designed around profit, not keeping people healthy, or food and transportation systems that pollute the earth and poison people—for the things we need” (Spade, 2020, 12). In Seattle, communities responded to this in several ways: hand-sewing masks to sell or gift to others who were not able to isolate at home, and coordinating with food producers, distributors, and other organizations, to provide meals, fresh produce, and supplies to families across the Greater Seattle Area. For example, the Black Farmers Collective has contributed tons of produce to mutual aid networks during the pandemic and beyond, sourced through Yes Farm, an urban farm located on Yesler Terrace. These mutual aid efforts, organized quickly and outside of institutional and corporate channels, demonstrated how collective care and community organizing could fulfill people’s needs, radically subverting the condition of forced dependency imposed by the state.

Though not all social movements are described as mutual aid, the values that inform it—an understanding that our current systems harm and kill us at worst and fail to support us at best, collective care, and the belief in building alternative worlds through collective action—are central to creating lasting, transformative change. In this Introduction, I explored a fraction of Seattle’s history as a crossing-over place for Indigenous peoples, white settlers, and Asian and Black workers, as well as some of the ways food has shaped economic and social relationships in the city over time and through periods of crisis. For the remainder of this thesis I explore the convergence between people, place, and food through a relationship that is inextricable from the identity of Coast Salish territories: Salmon. Relationships with Salmon span across the Salish Sea (and far beyond), and have facilitated a constellation of political, economic, and social relationships for Tribes in the Pacific Northwest for

many thousands of years. Salmon have informed the creation of fluid borders and trade routes that have shifted alongside the seasons and migration routes of Salmon across time. Alongside that, thousands of years of spiritual and ritual protocols to honor Indigenous relationships to Salmon and its key cultural and ecological presence in the region have allowed Salmon to remain abundant throughout the years up to and through Western colonization. Native Nations and their management of the Salmon fishery have always been key to their continuous and abundant cycles of life and return (see also Fujikane, 2021).

Colonization and the industrialization of the Pacific Northwest and its food systems, however, has changed our relationships to Salmon and seafood broadly. Hydroelectric dams, pollution, overfishing, fish-farms, and industrialized landscapes have made it increasingly difficult for Salmon to return and survive the journey home, resulting in Salmon fishery collapses across the region. This has been devastating to ecologies and communities across Coast Salish territories, and for Indigenous peoples in particular who regard Salmon as central to their physical, social, and cultural wellbeing. Tribes and Native-led organizations have witnessed and fought against the commodification⁴ of Salmon and their watersheds from the time that their own fishing rights were forcibly impeded upon by white settlers through today. Environmental justice organizations such as Community Alliance for Global Justice, the North American Marine Alliance, and Uprooted and Rising have also taken up the call to respond to the Salmon crisis in solidarity with Northwest Tribes. In this thesis, I examine the

⁴ Commodification is a reductive act or process that treats entities, including lands and waters, as valuable objects to be used in service of production and the accumulation of capital. This process attempts to turn Salmon and their watersheds into desirable “resources.” Curley (2023) also notes how the concept of resources itself is a colonial concept. The commodification of more-than-human beings is both a capitalist and colonial project in the way that “resources” become sources of wealth and power over others and erases Indigenous peoples’ ways of life by transforming landscapes to accommodate colonial uses for them.

efforts of one campaign that emerged from the solidarity work between these organizations:

BlockCorporateSalmon (BCS).

BCS is a BIPOC-led grassroots campaign oriented around fighting for food sovereignty and exposing the capitalist and settler colonial violence embedded within the rapid expansion of industrial aquaculture and genetically engineered (GE) salmon. The campaign primarily critiques and opposes genetically engineered salmon as a low-cost healthy protein source, and encourages institutions such as the Food and Drug Administration and the broader public to consider the ramifications of this product on the environment, communities and wild Salmon populations across the U.S. and abroad. While the campaign originated in Seattle in 2020, it expanded rapidly through the pandemic to become a national campaign. As it has continued to grow and shift over the past four years, the campaign has transformed from one that was primarily reactive and oppositional to ongoing developments in industrial aquaculture and GE salmon, to one that is centered around building future-looking narratives around healthy watersheds and relational food systems for Black, Indigenous, and other people of color.

I have been a core member of this campaign since its beginnings, and took part in doing some of the original research that spurred its creation. Since I moved to Seattle in 2014, I was searching for ways to re-engage in food as a relational practice. I found a lot of joy, frustration, and ease in food justice work, which combined and expanded my knowledge of food and its material, spatial, and spiritually connective properties. Through the BCS campaign, I have learned from Salmon People and Indigenous elders about the role Salmon plays in their creation stories and the ways in which large-scale corporate fisheries and infrastructure has reduced Salmon stocks for Indigenous fishers. Food is sacred

in all of its life-giving properties, from allowing us to survive, to making meaning and holding kinships with our community and loved ones.

Methodology, methods, and embracing messiness

As an uninvited guest on Indigenous lands, I carry my own kinships here and seek to be respectful and accountable in my actions as I navigate relationships with people, institutions, waters that touch my own but are not my own. My goal is to be a researcher who works within academia to be accountable to the lands and waters I reside on and the Native Nations that steward them. In doing so, I lean heavily on the work of Nagar and Shiraz (2019), in learning to practice radical vulnerability as a way to engage struggles that are deeply grounded in place and touch many peoples who hold different motivations, dreams, visions, and stakes within.

It is on such turbulent terrain—deeply grounded in, and responsive to, space, place, and time—that radical vulnerability works as the ethical basis of building collectivity *as* situated solidarity, one that actively embraces the ongoing and uneven risks and potentials of forging shared visions and journeys in an ever-unfolding political struggle, that is inevitably marked by both critical convergences and divergences in the positions and aspirations of those who commit to walking together. (Nagar & Shiraz, 2019)

Just as Seattle is a city built around Salmon and through the collisions and solidarities forged between peoples through living, working, and organizing alongside each other, building a future that abolishes the violent systems that oppresses Indigenous peoples, Black people and other people of

color—and reasserts relationality to Salmon, and all our more-than-human kin⁵—requires intentional co-travelling. While Indigenous scholarship informs much of this work, my positionality as a non-indigenous scholar and my contexts of activism within racially diverse groups means that this work is situated among many identities, intersections and solidarities. Co-travelling entails that we are attentive to the fact that we all carry different stories with us, experience different risks, and hold different stakes in this work.

This research with BCS is intended to deliver tangible products to our communities that further their and our collective work. As a non-indigenous scholar who is researching issues particularly relevant to Coast Salish Indigenous peoples, it is essential that my work draws from Indigenous scholarship and from my relationships with Indigenous activists and community members that are embroiled in struggle against genetically engineered salmon and industrial fish farming for their food sovereignty. My relationships emerge from the food justice spaces that I have organized in for the past four years, with BCS, which is composed of organizers that are Indigenous to the Northwest Coast, as well as diasporic people of color who have settled on these lands and across the United States. BCS has worked and collaborated with peoples from organizations such as Salmon Defense, as well as Indigenous chefs, and members from the Muckleshoot, Nisqually, and Cayuse Tribes. It is important to distinguish here, however, that the work BCS has done has been explicitly with Tribal members, and

⁵ The term “more-than-human” is one of several (e.g. “nonhuman”; “other-than-human”) that refers to the plants, animals, objects, lands and waterways that constitute our shared worlds. This phrase calls into question the construction of the “human” and its “other” and the distinctions that have historically been made between them in service of constructing a concept of (white, male) humanness that exceeds and thus should be able to manage, control, and colonize nature (Wynter, 2003; TallBear 2015). The naming of more-than-human kin pushes back against colonial, human-centric onto-epistemologies and asserts that nonhuman beings are active agents within social and ecological networks that include and shape human lives (TallBear, 2015). Indigenous peoples have always recognized the agency of more-than-human kin within their cosmologies, and hold ancestral and relational ties to them that blur the distinction between human and nonhuman (TallBear, 2015; Todd, 2018).

not with Native Nations. While these individuals are integral parts of their communities, their desires, reflections, and decisions, do not necessarily reflect the desires or decisions of other Tribal members or those of the Tribes they are a part of.

In pursuing this research, I have been able to deepen my relationships in BCS, form new ones outside of the campaign, and remain accountable to these relationships throughout this project and beyond. I draw from scholars who write extensively on diverse and situated Indigenous methodologies (Wilson, 2008; TallBear, 2014; Tuck and Yang, 2018; Smith, L.T., 2012). Ethnographic research, which I engage with as method in this project, is rooted in a history of colonialism and has perpetuated many harms against Indigenous peoples and other people of color—through objectification, classification, and violent racial differentiation to support Western hegemony and white supremacist narratives. I care about how, by drawing on scholars who center Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies in the production of knowledge, we are able to resist these dominating narratives, build knowledge that unearths power and grounds itself in desire, and tend to relationships that are based instead on mutual respect and relational accountability (Wilson, 2008). I argue alongside feminist scholars that, by grounding ourselves in care and a critique of power, ethnographic research may be able to move beyond violent classification and extraction, and allow the research process to be generative, creative, and iterative—resistant to easy categorization (Nagar & Shirazi, 2019).

This project employs an ethnographic approach that offers an analysis of recent developments in industrial aquaculture, along resistance from Indigenous peoples and environmental justice organizations. For this project, I conducted two semi-structured interviews around industrial aquaculture and GE salmon, as well as food sovereignty activism, with key informants in the BCS

campaign: Carl Wassilie and Estefania Narvaez. Carl is a Yup'ik biologist and has been an organizer with BlockCorporateSalmon for the past 3 years. Estefania is a founding organizer of the BCS campaign, who has been involved in food sovereignty work for the past 10 years in Seattle. In addition, as an organizing member of BCS, I have traveled with them all across the country, staging actions and building relationships with people from many different contexts and ties to lands and waters. From these various gatherings I have written and analyzed field notes on several important events that were critical to BCS's trajectory.

For the semi-structured interviews, I constructed a detailed interview guide that began with an explanation of the intentions of the research, and the participant's rights as an interviewee. I made it clear that they were welcome to stop the conversation at any time, as well as to move on from any question that they did not wish to answer. I also made it clear that I welcomed their feedback on any element of the interview process or materials. The interview guide also contained a set of questions under the following sections:

Building Context (Work, Activism, Community).

Here I explore the participant's everyday lives and how Salmon shows up (or does not) in the spaces that they regularly inhabit. How does Salmon inform their worldviews?

Framing Issues (Industrial Aquaculture, GE Salmon, Declining Salmon Runs).

In this part of the interview, I ask participants to elaborate on their understanding of these ongoing issues, how they feel about them and make sense of them, and how they have or have not personally experienced impact from them.

Building Solutions.

Finally, I ask the participants to elaborate on their analysis of power and resistance around ongoing developments in industrial aquaculture and GE salmon. Who has the power to make decisions in these industries, and how do organizations and communities build power to influence them and build towards other types of relationships with water and Salmon? What types of futures and relationships do they imagine and desire for themselves, Salmon, and water?

In my interviews with Carl and Estefania, another critical element of the research process was having unstructured time prior to and following the semi-structured interviews. Having this time was critical to bringing myself and the interviewees into what Wilson names as mutually respectful relations. In reflecting on his own research process, Wilson notes how “it allowed us to see how others were feeling, to express whatever was on our minds that might be distracting us and to get ourselves thinking on the same wavelength” (2008). For Carl, Estefania, and myself, this looked like sharing food together, taking time to check in with one another, and allowing ourselves to meander around both the physical and metaphysical. Carl and I took long, winding drives around Vashon Island together, talking about the landscape and the fullness of the moon, prior to sitting down at his residence to do the interview, and we shared two meals throughout the course of the day. Estefania and I shared spring rolls that they had brought with them from an action at the Tacoma Port, went to the hardware store together, and allowed each to decompress after the interview by playing video games and laughing together late into the night.

The comfort, safety, and care Carl, Estefania, and I established together through our separate interviews, allowed us to bring our full selves to the interview process. Though our close relationship outside of the research relationship made some aspects of the interview challenging, particularly in unpacking our shared assumptions, they were comfortable in sharing their feedback with me in all

stages of the interview and helped shape my interview materials along the way. For example, Carl expressed a desire to see more intentionality around sharing and protecting data, particularly Indigenous data, and to be mindful of the histories of oppression that are tied to classification when using words such as “activist,” noting how some Indigenous community members do not identify with the word. For some, Carl elaborated, their work around lands and Salmon is centered in relationships and obligation, and labels such as “activist” do not accurately capture that relationship. Terms such as “Salmon protectors” or “Salmon peoples” have been more often used by Indigenous peoples who hold deep relationships to Salmon, and signal both towards their kinship ties, as well as the obligation that Coast Salish peoples have in defending Salmon and their watersheds.

After the interview process, I transcribed the two interviews with the assistance of Otter.ai. Otter.ai is a relatively accurate transcription service, and while it was incredibly useful in establishing a base transcript to build off of, it struggled to capture place names, names of individuals, and the flow of conversation (inaccurate punctuation). This meant I needed to comb through the data word by word, to ensure the accuracy of the transcript, and to capture significant non-verbal moments of the conversation. After the transcripts were completed, I analyzed and coded them, searching for common words, phrases, ideas, and storytelling techniques. I then combed through the transcripts for similar themes. Some shared themes that emerged were: magic, energy, and spirituality; Salmon as sacrificial; embodied wisdom; values based in sharing; relating to more-than-human kin; circular storytelling; centering traditional practices and ways of knowing; corporate ownership and greed; and Western commodification.

In Chapter 1, the themes of corporate ownership and greed and Western commodification are apparent in the ways that the salmon fishery has been industrialized and constructed around Coast Salish peoples' displacement and dispossession. In this chapter, I discuss the formation of the BCS campaign and articulate some of the defining challenges it faced as an emerging solidarity movement rooted in food sovereignty. I also explore key concepts, including settler colonialism and racial capitalism, and their relationship to the Salmon crisis and the commodification of water-based food systems. I do this in two parts, first exploring the management of capture fisheries in the Pacific Northwest, followed by an exploration of industrial aquaculture and genetically engineered salmon and its roles in maintaining systems of racial capitalism and settler colonialism.

In Chapter 2, I recount organizing a mural action in Seattle, Washington, on October 12, 2020, at the University of Washington to bring attention to the risks and impacts of genetically engineered (GE) salmon and industrial aquaculture. I also expand on the travel that members of BCS and staff at the North American Marine Alliance (NAMA) embarked on from across the country on October 1-3, 2022, to gather in Girdwood, Alaska for a conference, the Local Catch Summit, which was oriented around building relationships and strategies to cultivate strong local and regional seafood systems. Immediately following the conference, we also traveled to Homer, Alaska, to build connections with independent fishers and fishing gear producers, which I also elaborate on in Chapter 2 to illustrate key moments of relationship building that transformed the ways in which the BCS campaign organized.

This chapter focuses on BCS and its transformation as a campaign that's formation coincided with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. It explores how the pandemic prompted virtual

organizing strategies that expanded the campaign beyond the geographic boundaries of Coast Salish territory and how Salmon and water protection became a point of convergence for people of many backgrounds. I wrote detailed field notes around my two interviews, capturing some of the essential time that we spent simply being together. With both the interviews and the field notes, I intend to bring Carl and Estefania's perspectives around GE salmon into context with the organizing strategies they employ while in the field themselves. One framework that I explore to think about this is *embodied spirituality*, and its potential as a connective force that draws lived experiences and intergenerational memories together to build towards situated solidarities with each other and our more-than-human kin. I use the initial seven themes from the interviews ("magic, energy, and spirituality" to "centering traditional practices and ways of knowing") to inform the concept of embodied spirituality, and how leaning into embodied spirituality can facilitate reflexive and dynamic solidarities that draw knowledge from our convergent and divergent pasts, presents, and futures. These solidarities, explored in depth through moments of the BCS campaign, center relationality, care, creativity, and refusal to assert decolonial futurities.

In the Conclusion, I turn to thinking through a five-day excursion, in which members of BCS, fishermen, and other environmental justice organizers traveled from around the U.S. to meet in Indiana, from September 20-25, 2023. Here organizers and fishers met, built relationships with each other, and participated in Farm Aid, a benefit concert to raise funds for family farmers. On April 17-20, 2024, NAMA hosted a Black and Indigenous fishers gathering in Savannah, Georgia, that I was invited to participate in and contribute to.

Chapter 1: Grief and Hope: Contextualizing the BlockCorporateSalmon campaign

Beginnings

I was incredibly excited when, in the summer of 2019, I received a message from an old friend who I had worked on several food justice campaigns with as an undergraduate student at the University of Washington. They had invited me to join a community dinner at their friend's house, along with other people in the Seattle area who had been involved in various kinds of nonprofit or grassroots organizing around food. In simple terms, the community dinner was intended to be a space for people from many kinds of backgrounds and experiences to gather, share about the importance of food to them, and envision what types of food systems they wanted to build towards. These dinners were the first community building efforts of an emerging national organization, Uprooted and Rising (UNR), that asserted itself as a BIPOC-led campaign for food sovereignty, oriented around defending people's rights to environmentally sustainable and relational food systems, specifically by holding major food and beverage companies accountable to the exploitation of food producers and the environment in higher-education institutions.

Eventually these dinners culminated in a series of more focused trainings across the U.S., intended to build distinct chapters of UNR across many different cities. Many of the formative staff of UNR, including those with more administrative roles, were already organizers for UNR's sponsoring organization, Real Food Generation, which similarly worked on food justice issues by mobilizing youth and university students to challenge their institutions purchasing practices. Thus, many of the cities in which UNR chapters were built were already places in which these staff had lived and held ties to students and communities there. Chapters emerged all over the country, and yet our spread

geographies were not intentional. Rather, UNR worked through the underlying (and vague) assumption that food insecurity and the corporatization of our food systems was present in each of our locations in different ways, and each chapter's goal was to identify these regionally specific issues and build campaigns to address them.

This non-profit organizational approach that centered on existing staff and infrastructure later revealed clear limitations to our organizing. Through 2019 to 2022, I met many paid and volunteer organizers who worked with UNR, and were deeply invested in building food sovereignty within their own communities. The organizers came from a diverse constellation of backgrounds, and their investment was deeply situated within their own stories and relationships to food. It was through building relationships with UNR organizers who were living in very different contexts and realities that I was able to engage with food sovereignty as a malleable idea—something that was able to re-frame how communities engaged with urban and rural spaces alike.

Food sovereignty is a powerful, but fraught concept that was defined by La Vía Campesina (LVC), an international movement of peasants and farmers, who claimed:

“the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations.” (2021)

This understanding of food sovereignty encompasses building healthy food systems in the present, but also imagines a future where all the elements of our collective cosmos (lands, waters, and our more-than-human kin) come together in unity to define our everyday lives and obligations. LVC

makes a significant distinction between itself and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). LVC is a grassroots, *people*-based movement—built through the shared struggles and collective visions of peasants and farmers in Latin America. Instead, LVC maintains a tenuous relationship with NGOs, building alliances only with a select few (Desmarais, 2010). While UNR could possibly be considered a blend of NGO and grassroots organizing, much of its structure was ultimately determined by the latter, including its financial structure and its geography. In part, community members who volunteered with UNR had the freedom to organize around the food justice issues closest to them, and mobilize the structural support of the organization to complement those efforts. The strategies that were employed to organize around those issues or train grassroots members, came from a centralized place, and did not always align with the situated issues that community members sought to address. The NGO structure of UNR also ultimately escalated conflicts and tensions within the organization, and led to its eventual disbandment in 2023.

For the UNR Seattle chapter, I was a part of the team building content for the training. The content team, mostly grassroots members, collectively identified key concepts and issues to situate Seattle's landscapes of food. Inevitably, Salmon and marine food systems came up, which I was excited to take on and understand further, based on my own interests in marine ecologies. As a starting point for the research, I and a UNR staff member, Estefania Narvaez, met with the director of the Community Alliance for Global Justice (CAGJ)⁶, Heather Day, who had been organizing in solidarity with the Muckleshoot Tribe, Friends of the Earth, and the North American Marine Alliance (NAMA)

⁶ CAGJ is a Seattle-based nonprofit organization that supports global food sovereignty movements through community-based organizing and education. They have built coalitions with other environmental justice organizations to oppose unjust trade deals, support union workers in food production and distribution, and support policy and research that protects farmer food sovereignty locally and abroad (e.g. CAGJ's AGRA Watch campaign). See: <https://cagj.org/>

and Indigenous organizations such as the Muckleshoot Food Sovereignty Project and New Canoe Media to raise awareness around the risks of genetically engineered (GE) salmon⁷ that were being farmed in both the U.S. and Canada. NAMA⁸, who was also interested in the potential of the grassroots organizing capacity of community-based UNR members, expanded our focus from just GE salmon to the industrial aquaculture industry and large-scale corporate fishing fleets, and the impacts of both on Indigenous peoples, Black fishers, and small-scale independent fishers in the Pacific Northwest. Between these meetings and the UNR Seattle training, I and members of the content team oriented the training around the stakes of building a robust food sovereignty movement in Seattle, and building an understanding of our current food systems as constructions that were engineered to further marginalize, differentiate, and harm those most impacted by settler colonialism and racial capitalism⁹. Under such a framework, the training was open exclusively to BIPOC community-members living in the Greater Seattle Area.

The UNR Seattle chapter training and the relationships we formed with food producers and environmental justice organizations leading up to and during the training itself informed the beginning of the BlockCorporateSalmon (BCS) campaign, with the support of UNR. UNR eventually collapsed as a national organization, primarily due to internal conflicts that harmed UNR's organizing staff—who were primarily people of color—and reflected the white supremacist structures

⁷ Muckleshoot Food Sovereignty Project, CAGJ and New Canoe media collaborated on the production of the short film “Salmon people: The risks of genetically engineered fish for the Pacific Northwest” that describes the stakes of protecting wild Salmon and stopping GE salmon from being sold in U.S. markets. Viewable here: <https://vimeo.com/256846667>

⁸ NAMA is a fishermen-led nonprofit organization that works to resist corporate domination of North American fisheries and supports the economic development of community-based fisheries, particularly for BIPOC fishing communities. See: <https://namanet.org/>

⁹ I detail these frameworks and their implications within catch-share fisheries, industrial aquaculture, and GE salmon more in the following sections.

and priorities of the organization, despite their claims of holding institutions accountable for perpetuating white supremacy and exploiting BIPOC communities. In a public statement released by UNR organizing staff, who quit in solidarity with three other UNR staff whose jobs were unjustly terminated, they wrote:

“Our public statement here today aims to share our story as former staff, but also weave our narrative into a larger history of paternalism, white supremacy, exploitation of labor, and maintenance of the nonprofit industrial complex. For years, Real Food Generation and Uprooted and Rising have mistreated Black and brown workers, undermining the very local food sovereignty efforts that give national legitimacy to this organization” (UNR Now, 2023).

Despite UNR’s collapse, the BCS campaign was able to continue without much adjustment. This was primarily due to the campaign’s network of relationships internally and outside of UNR, that allowed it to remain mostly independent and grassroots-driven throughout its existence. What BCS lost through the disbandment of UNR amounted to a several thousand dollars that the campaign had raised through community donations, as well as access to virtual resources such as the BCS website (hosted on the UNR site that was taken down after the organization discontinued) and a database of contacts (that was recovered in the year following). The BCS campaign, due to its decentralized and grassroots leadership, has been able to transform and be reflexive across time, especially due to its focus on relationship-building as a central aspect of the campaign. This relationship-centric model of organizing allowed the campaign to expand geographically, and deepened its potential as a food sovereignty and solidarity movement that could weave the desires of many Indigenous and Black and other fishers, workers, and community-members together while staying grounded in place.

Coming to terms with terms: Food sovereignty, settler colonialism, and racial capitalism

LVC's work to bring the concept of food sovereignty to the international stage in 1996 through the World Food Summit was an extremely powerful move for the liberation of communities from global capitalism. It explicitly articulated the social connections embedded within the production, consumption and sharing of food and the appropriation of that by transnational corporations. It emphasized the essential relationship between food, lands, and those who live on or cultivate it. While the original framing of food sovereignty affirms the need to imagine food systems through a closer relationship between producers and consumers, this rights-based approach often has neglected the Indigenous onto-epistemological roots that underpin the relatively recent term. LVC's original formation did not conceive of lands in terms of territory. This evolved ten years after LVC's founding, at the second World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2002, where Indigenous peoples' organizations demanded that LVC expand their understandings of agrarian struggles to include Indigenous peoples' access to their traditional territories (Rosset, 2013).

Indigenous peoples across the world have worked towards further expanding the concept of food sovereignty. As Dawn Morrison (2011), the founder of the Working Group on Indigenous Food Sovereignty, names, Indigenous food sovereignty has been a lived reality for Indigenous peoples for thousands of years prior to contact with European settlers, and continues to describe the way that Tribes have strategized around sustaining traditional harvesting, hunting, fishing, and distribution practices to sustain physical, cultural, and spiritual well-being of their communities, and resist capitalist projects that have sought to commodify land and water-based resources. Charlotte Coté, a Nuu-chaa-nulth scholar, states that "the Indigenous food sovereignty movement embodies a

decolonization framework and through action and practice seeks to heal the wounds of colonialism and repair our relationships to the natural world” (2022, 36). The act of choosing to eat traditional foods is in itself an act of resistance against colonialism (Coté, 2022). In Coast Salish territories, the appropriation of Indigenous peoples’ knowledge of Salmon and fishing practices was also accompanied by histories of Indigenous erasure and forced assimilation through violent institutions such as residential schools, and settler land-grabs over treaty-protected Indigenous territories and ancestral fishing sites (Coté, 2022; Wadewitz, 2012; Wilkinson, 2024). For coastal Native Nations, Indigenous food sovereignty extends beyond typical discussions of food sovereignty as access to lands and seeds, but also to watersheds and the ocean. The reclamation of these spaces, the assertion of Indigenous fishing rights, and the continuation of traditional fishing and harvesting refuse settler colonial imaginaries of domination.

Both water and land-based conceptions of food sovereignty in the U.S. work to disrupt corporate domination of our food systems, however, it is impossible to do so without unpacking the ways in which our food systems and ecologies have been shaped through the violence of settler colonialism. Glen Coulthard explains settler colonialism as a system rooted in a type of domination, in which power “has been structured into a relatively secure or sedimented set of hierarchical social relations that continue to facilitated the dispossession of Indigenous peoples of their lands and self-determining authority” (2014, 7; see also Wolfe, 2008; Stasulis & Yuval-Davis, 1995). In the Pacific Northwest, water and Salmon are of particular importance to the ways that colonial states have attempted to assert domination over Indigenous peoples and separate them from their lands, water, and more-than-human kin. For scholars such as Patrick Wolfe, settler colonialism is also rooted in the

racial differentiation of Indigenous peoples who must be “disappeared” and marked for genocide to uphold white supremacist nation-making (2008). The decline of Salmon themselves, who many Northwest Indigenous peoples consider as relatives, also falls under the logic of genocide. This manifests not only in their physical extermination through overfishing and the destruction of their habitat, but also in the cultural genocide taking place with the attempted erasure of Indigenous peoples’ traditional food systems. According to Whyte (2018), Indigenous peoples’ food systems and the relationships embedded within them hold powerful foundations for tradition, culture, identity, resistance, and decision-making. The erasure of food systems becomes a common strategy for the erasure of Indigenous peoples’ sovereignty, as “food systems are one of the major vectors in which settler societies can destroy the relationships required for Indigenous collective continuance” (Whyte, 2018, 358-359).

While detailed histories of settler colonialism in the Pacific Northwest may be beyond the scope of this thesis (see Reid, 2015; Thrush, 2017; Wadewitz, 2012; Whyte 2018) , I am interested in exploring how settler colonial strategies have shifted in this region over time. Specifically, I am interested in how understandings of settler colonialism as a shape-shifter, allows us to trace how the settler logic of genocide has persisted across time in different forms. Andrew Curley introduces the concept of shape-shifting colonialism as a way to better understand how settler colonialism operates, and “refers to the legal-judicial challenges to tribal sovereignty that try to reduce, contain, and weaken the inherent rights of Indigenous nations” (2023, 35). In the context from which Curley speaks, colonialism embeds itself with the projects of development and “modernity” in the Navajo Nation, with coal mining at the center of it. Because of this desire for coal “resources” by white settlers, Diné

leaders leveraged their access to coal to resist settler colonial processes and forge a path to self-determination through building carbon sovereignty. In the following sections, I am interested in exploring how Salmon is constructed as a “resource” by white settlers to further this concept of shape-shifting colonialism in the Pacific Northwest.

Intimately tied to settler colonialism in the U.S. is racial capitalism. To define racial capitalism, I draw primarily on Cedric Robinson (1983) work in *Black Marxism: The making of the Black Radical Tradition*, which develops the concept of racial capitalism so that the production and exploitation of racial difference was essential to the construction of capitalism. As Pulido asserts, “differential value is also produced and extracted via racialized labor systems—black chattel slavery being one of the most profound examples” (2017, 528). Racialized labor systems sustained white supremacy in the Pacific Northwest by limiting the opportunities of Indigenous, Black, Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino workers, placing them in competition with each other and excluding them from labor unions to ensure a supply of cheap labor for the Salmon canneries or other fisheries. The racial violence exerted on these workers, or the designation of who were workers and who were not, was not experienced evenly, however. Though capitalism has always depended on racial differentiation to produce an exploitable workforce, racial ideology extends its harms beyond the accumulation of capital (Pulido, 2017; Smith, A., 2012). Racial capitalism commodifies all workers, however through the logic of slavery it positions Black people at the bottom of the racial hierarchy, as property—so that non-Black workers benefit more and have a material interest in keeping the logics that sustain racial capitalism intact.

Capitalism’s internal drive is accumulation and expansion. It continuously seeks to increase power and wealth by finding new resources to exploit (crucially including labor and lands) and more

efficient ways to exploit those resources. Parallel to the desire for endless expansion through economic growth, capitalism also craves geographic expansion. David Harvey (2001), describes this as “the spatial fix” in which places are both secured or “fixed” for capitalist production and extraction, and also serve as a solution or “fix” for a problem. Ruth Wilson Gilmore applies this concept of the spatial fix to the California prison system, in which prisons are proposed as a solution capable of addressing several problems: the need to stimulate economic growth and provide jobs to a town’s struggling working-class, as well as the need to uphold white supremacy and produce racial-difference by containing Black people and other people of color within a fixed, controlled location, separate from their communities (2007). In producing this racial-difference, prisons position people of color and Black people in particular as lesser in value, and thus more exploitable and in need of control and domination. These geographic solutions propose to maintain the system of racial capitalism by solving the problems it generated through uneven extraction and violence across bodies, lands, and other beings. As Harvey (2001) notes, however, these modes of geographic expansion shift depending on what is being sought after: markets, labor, resources, or technology. When the concept of a spatial fix is applied to Salmon, we see how settler-colonialism and capitalism work in tandem across capture fisheries and even more explicitly through industrial aquaculture and genetically engineered salmon—from securing access to Coast Salish peoples’ traditional fishing sites, to fencing up and farming salmon in fixed places in the Pacific ocean, to manipulating the genes of salmon to create a more efficient and controllable product.

Capture fisheries management and the collapse of Wild Salmon

In Coast Salish territories and beyond, Salmon is a cultural and ecological keystone species. Stretching from California, north to Oregon, Washington and Alaska, Indigenous peoples have fished and lived alongside abundant Salmon for thousands of years. Salmon are sacred for many coastal Native Nations and Indigenous communities who regard Salmon as close relations and revere them as part of the creation stories. Among these tribes, there is a mandate to protect these fish and honor their contribution not only to human lives, but to a fully functioning ecosystem. Here, Tribes with treaty-reserved fishing rights are able to fish in their “usual-and-accustomed places” and are entitled to half of the harvestable surplus of certain fish stocks, including Salmon in Washington and Oregon. From 1854 to 1856, these treaties were formed between Tribes and the emerging settler state of Washington.

When white settlers initially began exploring Coast Salish territories, many of them relied on their relationships with Tribes and the knowledge of Indigenous peoples’ to survive. Coast Salish Tribes that had access to fishing locations with abundant Salmon runs had many different ways of harvesting and processing the fish, and were able to process large quantities of Salmon quickly and efficiently to feed their communities well beyond Salmon harvesting seasons (Wadewitz, 2012). Methods of fishing, processing, and sharing Salmon amongst communities different greatly depending on regional access to the fish, as well as individual Tribes own customs, beliefs, and protocols. As Wadewitz describes, “these attitudes and related customs radiated into respect for all living things and, with regard to Salmon, were meant to show appreciation to ensure their return” (2012, 29). Settlers, by contrast, did not know the landscape, nor how to hunt and harvest Salmon. This knowledge, guarded

by Coast Salish peoples, allowed them to maintain a strategic advantage over settlers who, in addition, were also not trusted to follow appropriate protocols to sustain an abundant and thriving fishery.

The arrival of white settlers to Coast Salish territories did incur some violence between them and Indigenous peoples, however these resulted in minimal deaths on both sides (Wilkinson, 2024). Instead, the introduction of diseases and epidemics, by unknowing white settlers, killed and disabled many Coast Salish people who had no immunity to them (Wadewitz, 2012). These epidemics devastated Tribes in Coast Salish territories through the nineteenth century and weakened their communities militarily, while settlers set their sights on their own economic and geographic expansion in the Pacific Northwest. Despite these huge losses for Coast Salish Tribes, they continued to control the Salmon fishery for a long time and forced white explorers to abide by their protocols around Salmon consumption and preparation (Wadewitz, 2012). As white people continued to arrive on Coast Salish territories seeking to settle and build trade networks, United States leadership began to push for treaty-making with Tribes in Coast Salish territories. The Treaty of Medicine Creek, the Treaty of Point Elliott, and the Treaty of Point No Point, were some of the treaties negotiated for Washington State, that forced Coast Salish peoples to give up over sixty-four million acres of land and move into reservations—which many Indigenous peoples refused to do because they were either too far from their ancestral lands and fishing sites, or too far from places of work (Wadewitz, 2012). Despite the mass-displacement that resulted from the treaties, Washington treaty-Tribes were able to secure a crucial article that would ensure the collective continuance of their peoples:

“The right of taking fish, at all usual and accustomed grounds and stations, is further secured to said Indians in common with all citizens of the Territory, and of erecting temporary houses for the purpose of curing, together with the privilege of hunting, gathering roots and berries, and pasturing their horses on open and unclaimed lands” (Treaty of Medicine Creek, 1854).

These treaties were soon betrayed as more and more settlers continued to arrive in Washington, and opportunistically claimed Indigenous lands and fishing sites for themselves, including places that had been designated as reservation lands (Wilkinson, 2024). The settler state enabled this through the General Allotment Act of 1887 and its “surplus land” provisions. “An astounding 60 million acres went straight to settlers because they were ‘surplus’ to the needs of these hunting and fishing tribes who would not need so much land” (Wilkinson, 2024, 103) as the Act pushed tribal members to become farmers by parceling tribal lands and providing them to individual tribal members. The state also pushed other violent forms of assimilation, one particularly egregious example being the implementation of assimilationist and abusive boarding schools (Coté, 2022; Wilkinson, 2024).

The introduction of canneries and new fish harvesting technologies, which vastly expanded the commercial production of Salmon, exacerbated tensions between Coast Salish peoples and settlers as Salmon runs began to decline (Wilkinson, 2024). With the increasing encroachment of settlers into the Salmon fishery, sport fishers who wanted access to more Salmon also began to seek ways to restrict Coast Salish peoples from fishing at their traditional sites, by working to pass legislation that banned traditional methods of fishing at locations that were frequented by Coast Salish peoples (Wilkinson, 2024). Indigenous peoples were fined, arrested, and beaten by Washington police for fishing at their accustomed locations. This onslaught of violence, racial discrimination, forced assimilation, the decline of Salmon runs, and the betrayal of their treaties spurred Coast Salish Tribes to resist the settler state’s

genocidal endeavors. Inspired by the organizing of Black people and the advancements made in the Civil Rights Movement, Tribes also saw an opportunity to make use of these shifting social tides, though their desires were distinctly different.

“Black people wanted equality and assimilation while the tribes wanted, not assimilation, but recognition of the treaties, tribal sovereignty, and strong reservations, places where tribal governments and citizens could administer justice and protect their land, fishing and hunting rights, cultures and traditions” (Wilkinson, 2024, 129)

The approach that Tribes took was organized fish-ins. These took place on March 1, 1964 on the Puyallup River, followed by another on March 2 on the Nisqually River. The final day, March 3, Tribes marched on Olympia to confront the state legislature. These fish-ins received widespread attention, and also served as a place for coalition building between Indigenous peoples, Black people, and other influential actors. Their organizing brought about a major lawsuit, *United States v. Washington*, in which Tribes in Washington defended their right to fish Salmon at their usual and accustomed locations, as their treaties designated. In 1974, after a lengthy case, Judge Boldt, who was presiding over the case, declared that not only were Tribes entitled to fish at their traditional locations off reservation lands, but that they were entitled to *half* the harvestable catch—this came to be known as the Boldt Decision. Prior to this decision, Indigenous fishers were taking closer to five percent of the catch, while the settler commercial fishery was taking closer to ninety percent. The Boldt Decision came to be one of the most impactful legal decisions for tribal sovereignty in Coast Salish territories, and spurred a new system of fisheries co-management between treaty-Tribes and the state of Washington.

Despite this huge win for Coast Salish peoples, capture fisheries management has remained a fraught process as settler commercial fisheries continued on its path towards technological development and industrialization. Salmon today are still living in a state of crisis, suffering from polluted and industrialized waters and overfishing by factory trawlers. When factory trawlers fish and harvest certain species to sell to consumers, unwanted marine life often end up trapped within their nets as bycatch, and are typically killed and disposed of as waste. Trawler bycatch disposes of millions of pounds of fish every year. In 2021 alone, Alaskan Trawler bycatch killed thousands of Chinook Salmon and hundreds of thousands of Chum Salmon. While at the same time coastal and Indigenous fishing communities on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta were surviving through fishing closures on Chinook and Chum Salmon for the entirety of the summer season (Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADFG), 2021). Indigenous peoples in Alaska and the Pacific Northwest, including the Quinault, Duwamish, Muckleshoot, and many more, depend on the Chinook and other fish species as a source of nutrition, livelihood, and cultural well-being.

Through fishing closures for Indigenous and subsistence fishers, commercial fishing has been allowed to continue. Carl Wassillie, a Yup'ik biologist, Bering Sea fisherman, and organizer with BlockCorporateSalmon (BCS) gave a heartfelt account of the current Alaska Salmon crisis during an action on November 20, 2021, outside Lumen Field at the Pacific Marine Expo:

“Even though Indigenous people have stopped fishing, there’s the continuation of industrial processes that are causing extreme harm to Native people. It’s a human rights issue, it’s an insult to the spiritual beings, an insult to the spirit of the Salmon. We are in a time of grievance. There’s vigils happening right now across the entire Pacific Northwest because of the collapse of the Salmon. Entire cultures have a relationship with the Salmon that goes so deep that they are our relatives, they’re our family.” (BlockCorporateSalmon, 2021)

The subsistence fishing closures in the summer of 2021 prompted Alaska Native leaders to co-author a letter to Congress, demanding a hearing. The authors of the letter were Vivian Korthuis, Alaska Village Council President, Chief PJ Simon of Tanana Chiefs Conference, Melanie Bahnke, President of Kawerak Incorporated, and Julie Kitka, President of the Alaska Federation of Natives. In response, Senators Murkowski and Sullivan and Congressman Young hosted an emergency Salmon Roundtable on December 8, 2021. During the roundtable, Brandon Ahmasuk, Vice President of Natural Resources for Kawerak Inc. and a longtime subsistence fisherman stressed the deep inequity within fisheries management. He noted that while Indigenous communities were not allowed to harvest any Chum or King Salmon during past subsistence closures, commercial fisheries were allowed to bycatch and waste hundreds of thousands of these fish (Murkowski, 2021).

Fisheries management has thus remained a site of contention between U.S. governing institutions and Indigenous Tribes over the past fifty years. In the United States, capture fisheries have been largely regulated through catch shares, or individual transferable quotas (ITQs). An individual transferable quota is a portion of a total catch limit that is allocated by the government to an individual, company, or (less frequently) a community for the right to fish. This regime of fisheries management emerged largely out of neoliberal capitalist logic, with the tragedy of the commons being a dominant narrative in fisheries since the 1950s (Carothers & Chambers, 2012). This narrative

positions fishers as self-interested actors primarily focused on out-fishing their competitors who, in the absence of regulation around catch limits and entry into the industry, would generate an excess of capital, thus diminishing profit and laying waste to the ocean's fish stocks. From this narrative, enclosure and privatization are not only posed as a solution, but an inevitable, "commonsensical," and natural process—one that would both maximize profits for the fishers and firms that are allowed to remain in the industry and act as a necessary measure for environmental conservation (Carothers & Chambers, 2012).

Bycatch has often been overlooked in ITQ fisheries, resulting in overfishing and exceeding quota allocations, with fleets sometimes deliberately counting target fish towards bycatch so that fleets could selectively populate their quota with larger, premium fish (Knott & Neis, 2017).

Privatization and ITQ fisheries have also lent themselves well to increased marketization and commodification, where the right to fish – a way of life, and a source of culture, food, and economic security in Indigenous and coastal fishing communities –is commodified as an object that can be bought and sold. For decades, Indigenous communities have demanded that there be Tribal representation in fisheries management, mostly to no avail, including in the case of the Alaska Salmon collapse (Murkowski, 2021). The North Pacific Fishery Management Council, which dictates the fisheries policy for the North Pacific Ocean has no Tribal representation, but instead is dominated by stakeholders in Factory Trawling (Murkowski, 2021).

This current iteration of fisheries management exemplifies the shape-shifting nature of settler colonialism. Initially, the logic of genocide was applied through epidemics and the displacement of Indigenous peoples from their lands. After the treaties, this logic continued through the further

division and occupation of Indigenous lands, the commodification and overfishing of Salmon, and through violent cultural erasure and assimilation. Though Coast Salish Tribes were able to assert their sovereignty through collective organizing and legal push-back, the continued decline (and genocide) of Salmon threatens Salmon peoples' ways of being.

The expansion of industrial aquaculture and GE salmon

Exploring the ways in which privatization, marketization, and commodification have been articulated in capitalistic neoliberal economics, and its reliance on Indigenous erasure, is critical to understanding of the recent rapid expansion of industrial aquaculture and GE salmon as an extension of settler colonial and capitalist projects. Distinct from capture fisheries, which retain largely undefined borders, industrial aquaculture more easily fits into privatization and marketization schemes as a physical space that can be sold or leased to companies for fish production and harvest. This physical allocation of space provides for the capitalist desire for (the illusion of) infinite growth and profit accumulation (Pinkerton & Davis, 2015). This shift from the capitalist rhetoric of extraction associated with capture fisheries and tragic narratives of overfishing to intensive production practices that did not draw from wild fish stock led to industrial aquaculture's increasing representation as the up-and-coming replacement for capture fisheries (Wilkinson, 2006). It leans into Harvey (2001) and Gilmore's (2012) conceptualization of the 'spatial fix' that capitalism is constantly seeking, particularly as Salmon runs have rapidly declined and incurred major concerns over the collapse of the fishery. Capitalism must continue to expand, and in securing these physical locations in the ocean or on land (the physical spatial fix), corporations propose to "solve" the issue of the Salmon crisis by controlling their production entirely.

Alongside the vast ecological concerns and harms, industrial aquaculture threatens the livelihoods of fishers and Indigenous peoples who must now compete with fish farms for access to marine space and resources. In some cases, industrial aquaculture has completely degraded entire fisheries in small coastal communities (Milewski & Smith, 2019). Robyn Heaslip (2008), who has written on salmon farming in Canada, notes how Indigenous peoples have continuously voiced their concerns about waste pollution, including feces, unconsumed feed, dead fish, cleaning products, and antibiotics polluting watersheds, and impacting Indigenous ecologies. Dead fish, unconsumed feed, and feces result in eutrophication, or organic enrichment of the water surrounding fish farms, which lead to algal blooms that render the water toxic to many native species of fish (Martinez-Porchas & Martinez-Cordova, 2012). As industrial aquaculture continues to expand as an industry it threatens further enclosure of marine spaces.

Another great concern for Indigenous communities, particularly for tribes that have a deep connection to Salmon as a sacred species, is the risk and realities of fish escapes and net pen collapses. Large-scale industrial salmon aquaculture regularly introduces both invasive and feral species into the ecosystem, often through small repeat leakages, though sometimes in massive episodic events (e.g., full net pen collapses or storm breaches) (Naylor et al., 2005). Tribes in Washington alone have already expended hundreds of thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours of labor to recapture escaped farmed fish and have demanded accountability from aquaculture companies for violating their treaty-recognized traditions (Dougill, 2020). Though the ability of escaped fish to survive in the wild are dependent on a variety of biological and ecological conditions, many compete with native wild fish for mates, food, and space. This raises alarms for Tribes and Salmon Peoples who consider wild Salmon

to be inextricable from their identities and ecosystems, and who have long been fighting to restore Salmon populations from the devastating effects of ocean degradation and trawler bycatch as a result of global capitalism. The life cycle of Salmon sustains not only Indigenous peoples, but thousands of animals along the way who depend on Salmon as a source of food. Salmon People have a relationship with Salmon that is deep, intimate and familial (Carl Wassilie, Block Corporate Salmon, 2021). The Nisqually Tribe, the Quinault Nation, the Lower Elwha Klallam, the Lummi Nation, the Muckleshoot Tribe and many other Coast Salish peoples consider themselves to be Salmon people, with ontologies centered around Salmon and their cycles.

The salmon bred and raised in net pens are not only exposed to trauma, violence, and chemicals that alter their growth cycles and affect their ability to survive in the wild, they do not have a Salmon's life cycle. Wild Salmon are not fixed in space, but live across expansive geographies. They traverse many regions of the Pacific Ocean and bring these stories home with them when they return to their home rivers to spawn – they return these stories, along with their spirit, to the lands and the more-than-human beings that depend on them (Todd, 2018). Farmed salmon's lives are forcibly contained to their tanks and net pens, and the capitalist modes of production they are subjected to restrict them from following the life cycles embedded within their DNA.

Genetically engineered (GE) salmon is a type of Atlantic Salmon that includes genes from Chinook Salmon and ocean pout. This GE salmon was developed in the 1990s by Choy Hew and Garth Fletcher, who were studying the genes of Atlantic Salmon and working on ways to help farmed Atlantic salmon survive the frigid winter waters of the North Atlantic (Martin, 2018). Typically, wild Atlantic Salmon would migrate out of these waters prior to this seasonal temperature drop, however

farmed Atlantic salmon are unable to do so, as they are kept static in offshore cages throughout the year. Fletcher and Chew were experimenting with antifreeze proteins to help these farmed salmon survive. They also incorporated a growth hormone gene from Chinook Salmon, as well as an activator gene from ocean pout. The combination of these genes produced a salmon that would eat constantly, grow twice as fast, and require less feed than wild Salmon. In 1992, Fletcher and Hew made a deal with an entrepreneur named Elliot Entis, who founded the company AquaBounty Technologies, to grow and sell GE salmon.

As AquaBounty Technologies works to introduce GE salmon to the global market, BIPOC communities and organizations have continued to voice their objections and resist these efforts. For reasons similar to industrial salmon aquaculture, GE salmon poses a serious threat to wild Salmon in the event of fish escapes. Despite the lack of research on the environmental risks that a fish escape could bring, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved GE salmon for mass retail in 2015, without the precedent to do so, or arguably the authority. Environmental justice groups and Indigenous Nations mobilized immediately to protest this decision, initiating a four-year lawsuit between the FDA and coalition of organizations including Center for Food Safety (CFS), Earthjustice, and Quinault Nation that ultimately ended in a ruling that the FDA violated core environmental laws in its approval (Federal court declares GE salmon unlawful, 2020). Community and non-profit organizations, such as Community Alliance for Global Justice (CAGJ), Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance (NAMA), Friends of the Earth, and BCS continue to work with Tribal governments and activists to oppose and block the release of GE salmon into restaurants and grocery stores. In addition, Latinx, Black, Indigenous organizations such as Front and Centered and Sea Potential LLC have been working in

coalition to protect the health and quality and futures of Northwest waters via a diverse array of actions (institutional and on-the-ground) that are situated in community and place.

Chapter 2: Waves Collide: Building relationships from one coast to another

Organizing during the pandemic

On Indigenous Peoples' Day, October 12, 2020, about fifty people—community organizers, Muckleshoot Tribal members, and other Coast Salish activists—gathered under the bridge between the North and South wings of the Allen libraries, at the University of Washington Seattle campus. People trickled in slowly, some carried buckets of watered-down tempera paints and stacks of empty yogurt containers, while others came with chalk, brushes, and paint rollers. Stretching across the brick from wall to wall was a chalk outline of a giant Salmon, marked with Coast Salish triads and crescents, swimming upstream and framed by the words “Honor Indigenous Knowledge” and “#BlockCorporateSalmon.” Throughout the afternoon, organizers and community members painted, and Muckleshoot Tribal members sang and drummed to bring energy to the space and articulate a connection to the earth. This action was one of many coordinated demonstrations across the U.S., in Washington, California, Massachusetts, New York, and Florida to call attention to the rapid expansion of ocean privatization through commercial aquaculture. In addition, these actions also sought to highlight the development of genetically engineered (GE) salmon as a recent technological development for commercial aquaculture, and its ties to colonialism, white supremacy, and racial capitalism.



I recall how the process of coordinating these actions across the U.S. required a balance of flexibility and purposefulness from each of us in the BlockCorporateSalmon (BCS) campaign. This was the first direct action the campaign had organized, and its geographic scope was ambitious. In the weeks leading up to these events, we had multiple weekly calls—preparing cohesive messaging for social media and press to tie our geographically distant actions together. We were skill building as well. Though most of the actions involved gathering, a banner drop, chanting, and a spoken program, the creation of a mural was an element of the direct actions that was unique to Seattle. The Community Alliance for Global Justice (CAGJ)¹⁰, who had worked to aid in the formation of the Block Corporate Salmon campaign, invited BCS organizers to a virtual meeting with David Solnit, a longtime activist

¹⁰ CAGJ is a nonprofit organization dedicated to cultivating global food sovereignty movements through community education and mobilization. (<https://cagj.org/>)

and artist who has helped to bring an abundance of art to mass mobilizations across the country (including Seattle, during the 1999 World Trade Organization protests). Through this meeting, David shared his experiences in creating collective murals for direct action, and the preparation, experimentation, and facilitation that was required to make the action successful. I created a piece of art (shown above) with the aid of other BCS and community members, carefully teasing out a simple image that would serve a literal and metaphorical purpose: We were gathering to honor wild Salmon, to acknowledge its importance to Coast Salish and other Indigenous peoples on Indigenous Peoples' Day, while also acknowledging that, like Salmon's return to its homewaters, addressing the issues that wild Salmon were facing would be an uphill (upstream) journey. We practiced a small-scale version of the mural on the concrete outside of CAGJ's office until it became muscle memory. At the same time, we made many phone calls and sent texts to our respective friends and loved ones to gain local support and attendance for our actions, knowing that the COVID-19 pandemic would present a unique challenge for gathering in each of the spaces we were based in.

Everyone at the action wore a mask. For many of us, we had not been to a gathering that large since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns in Seattle. This simple action of care and acknowledgement of the tense and unfamiliar situation we found ourselves in served to create a tacit grounding of safety and trust. Though the intention of the action was to oppose GE salmon and expose the harms and risks associated with its development, the space itself resonated with joy and connection. Once basic instructions on how to paint the mural were provided, people picked up brushes and immediately began painting, adding their own creativity and interpretations to the art. This included texturing the waves to make it look more like water. Paul, a Coast Salish musician and

performer, and member of Defenders of the Salish Sea, added Coast Salish crescents and triads to the body of the Salmon, to emphasize its relationship with the Coast Salish peoples of the Pacific Northwest. As we painted, we chatted, shared stories about our lives, and why we had decided to show up to this gathering. The energy that was present throughout the action soon illuminated an upcoming challenge that the BCS campaign would soon have to face: how to cultivate and sustain the energy and relationships from these actions for the long-term.

Though the virtual meetings leading up these actions allowed for some space between the organizers to build connections with one another, connected through a common motivation, the challenge remained that these Zoom meetings were constricted by time, distance, and a dissonance with each others' lives. We did not know much about each other, nor the day-to-day lives that people held, or the varying capacities and motivations they were carrying with them into the meeting space. Organizers came from all over the United States, reflecting the sites where we carried out our initial set of direct actions: Washington, California, Massachusetts, New York, and Florida. People who lived in similar regions had more of an opportunity to meet with and connect with each other, but for many years, that opportunity to build relationships with one another was limited by lockdowns and restrictions for COVID-19. While the virtual meetings remained an exciting space for people to think about organizing tactics and strategies up to and after the direct action, these varying capacities and commitments to the campaign resulted in waxing and waning interest over the couple years. A few people entered the organizing space, and many left, until calls of twenty people or more became calls among three or five regular (or core) organizers, with a few who also committed time to the campaign asynchronously by early 2022. The mass departure of people from BCS was not because the issues of

GE salmon or industrial aquaculture had disappeared or become less urgent. Many who left had cited that they were simply at capacity, and were not able to continue working on the campaign. Those who persisted in the weekly calls were then coming to reckon with the question—why did things fall apart, and how do we pull them back together?

Mapping relationships across porous places

As this thesis is being written, BCS is now continuing on its fourth year as a campaign in 2024. Through this time, though the number of core organizers has not wavered much since 2022, the campaign has changed dramatically as the network of organizers, environmental justice organizations, and community members who have supported the campaign has continued to grow across many different places. Chapter 1 describes how BCS originated in Uprooted and Rising (UNR) Seattle, starting with a series of community dinners centered around building community and creating collective understandings and desires around food sovereignty in the summer of 2019. Many of the people who came to these initial meetings, myself included, were friends or people who had organized with Estefania, who was working for UNR at the time, and had organized around food-related issues in the United States for over fifteen years. These meetings served as a critical space for people who were passionate about food justice issues to come together, share their personal connection to food, and dream broadly about the food systems they were interested in cultivating in the future. The culminating training that resulted from these meetings, in February 2020, was meant to bring a broader audience of BIPOC community members together to discuss food sovereignty issues around Seattle and the Pacific Northwest (including GE salmon and industrial aquaculture), while also being nourished and cared for with locally produced food, music, creative writing, art, and places to rest. The

COVID-19 pandemic, however, quickly prompted a restructuring of how we went about doing so only a month later—and it was a messy process.

The inability to gather changed a few key things about how BCS structured its campaign over the next few months. While preparing for the UNR Seattle training, all the planning meetings were carried out in person. We ate together, played music, and made time to check in with each other about ongoing happenings in our lives. After the training, however, the BCS campaign—one of several projects that emerged from the event—was immediately moved to an exclusively virtual space. This was done in an effort to adhere to the safety and social norms set by the pandemic lockdowns: limiting the amount of people we came into contact with, maintaining practices such as masking and keeping a 6-foot distance from others, and finding ways to gather for people who were facing different levels of risk (i.e. meeting over zoom). Lockdowns presented a wide-range of challenges for each of us. While we were trying to continue to think about building up the BCS campaign from Seattle, many of us were also grappling with isolation, caring for friends and family in-person or from afar, and finding ways to build systems of mutual aid in our own communities as we witnessed how the state was systematically abandoning them.

In many ways, because of the collective understanding we shared around our own situated experiences living in the pandemic, the virtual meetings became a space centered primarily around care. It required that we made room to hold each other's lives. BlockCorporateSalmon campaign now in its fourth year as this thesis is being written. Through this time it has changed dramatically as our network of community has continued to grow across diverse places. In the beginning our central focus was building a deep understanding of the complex issues in conversation with our struggles. And how we

marry those understandings with our own unique narratives and stories. While the campaign kept close track of who we were organizing against—AquaBounty, in particular—it started from and was primarily built through our relationships with workers (including a former AquaBounty worker), Black and Indigenous fishers, environmental justice organizations, and community members across the country who felt and were resisting the impacts of industrial water and salmon projects. As our relationships have expanded through our organizing, our focus has also shifted less towards opposition, and more towards one of intentional relationship building, and exploring how fluid futures (in the literal sense, around water, but also in the metaphorical dynamicness of fluidity) are constructed through “intense relationality” (Nagar and Shirazi, 2019).

While virtual organizing allowed for the quick geographic expansion of the campaign and convenient collaboration, finding ways to come together physically has been essential in building towards more intense and intentional relationships. At the center of these gatherings and moments of connectivity were sharing meals and creating collective art. I argue that these gatherings and moments cultivate an embodied spirituality that allows for the translation of desires and pains across individuals, places, and more-than-human kin. In the following section, I will discuss several of these moments from trips to Alaska and Indiana, where BCS members were able to gather in person and build intimate relationships internally and with others through shared moments, meals and art. In addition, the interviews with Carl and Estefania illuminate some of the many ways in which the core members of BlockCorporateSalmon came into this work, and how the stories and relationships they carry with them cultivate embodied spiritualities that converse across people and more-than-human kin, and

co-create futurities that resist the material power of institutions and corporations and their desires for power and domination.

Embodied spirituality

Prior to the Local Catch Summit Conference in Alaska, members of BCS had been meeting and organizing this way for three years, but had not yet gathered in person as a collective. While Carl, Estefania and I had been able to gather semi-regularly over that time, as had organizers in the Northeast of United States who were located close together, this conference was the first space in which almost all of the members of BCS were in-person together. Our initial interactions were a mix of joy, excitement and awkwardness. Celia, Carl, and I had arrived in Girdwood, at a local Brewery where conference go-ers had gathered the night before the Local Catch Summit's opening day. Already there were Jon, Brett, and other organizers from the North American Marine Alliance (NAMA) who were part of conference planning, as well as foundational supporters and allies of the #BlockCorporateSalmon campaign.

While the conference provided many opportunities for learning and sharing amongst fishers, non-profit organizations, small-scale fishing and aquaculture operations, and environmental justice organizations through many workshops and meetings, long-lasting relationships were formed in the slower times in-between and after the conference had ended. These in-between times allowed BCS members to share stories with other attendees at the conference—their pathways into their work, the contexts that inform them, and their desires and hopes for where their work would go. Crucially, these in-between times also allowed BCS members to, for the first time, experience unstructured time with

each other, allowing for moments of spontaneous joy, connection, and context building that would set up a foundation of trust and care for the following work to come.

I remember, the day after the conference ended, making the long five-hour drive to Homer, a town close to where Carl grew up in Seward. We were packed into two separate cars, and spent the majority of that time together sharing intimate details about our own lives, cracking jokes, playing music for each other, and debriefing the conference. Occasionally, Carl would suggest a stop for us to observe the landscape, describing how he had seen them over twenty years prior and how things had changed. Over the conference, the drive, and our time spent in Homer, we built a level of felt trust, intimacy, and joy to each other and the lands that we were on, that previously we did not have access to. This shared trust allowed us to dive into reflections about the joys and frustrations our collective and separate work had brought to us thus far. The trip was infused with renewed commitments to the organizing we were doing, desires to gather and meet people in-person (which we pursued and made happen many times since then), and focus on building deep, context-full connections like the ones we were able to cultivate during our shared time together. Sharing these moments with each other in-person, grounded by the place that we were in, generated a sense of what I am calling embodied spirituality, which was apparent in the interviews I conducted with Carl and Estefania, as well as our future shared times together.

A central theme that frequently arose in the interviews and fieldnotes is the idea of embodied spirituality and its centrality to resistance movements for Salmon, water conservation, and broader movements for liberation. Spirituality is not merely an intellectual concept, it is a felt and lived experience that is imbued in everyday interactions, relationships, and extends as a physical experience.

While understood and explained in many ways, embodied spiritual energy is a way of being that allows one to experience and empathize with temporalities and energies beyond one's own and beyond the human. Embodied spirituality is a strong element of resistance for people of color and Indigenous peoples who are actively refusing and re-negotiating their experiences under racial capitalism and settler colonialism, as it resists the commodification of lands, humans, and more-than-human kin and instead widens possibilities for building solidarity across diverse energetic and ancestral forces. Carl explains that:

“When relatives give you Salmon, whether it's dried Salmon or fresh Salmon, it's a joyous time and gives the spirit world joy as well. It connects to our culture - which everything has spirit, everything is connected. Even the water has spirit, ice, the rocks, the mountain, the landforms, landscape, the stars, the planet, the sun, the moon, it's all part of our mindfulness in the universe. That's why the mind is so powerful, we are able to communicate with all the beings - the existence of these beings, not to exist, but to be a human being.”

In sharing Salmon with his community, Carl is connected to broader landscapes of spiritual energy that define his own understandings of how to live respectfully and relationally with the natural world as a human being. The communal consumption of wild Salmon is an essential component in BCS's organizing and relationship building as well. When BCS traveled to Indiana in September, 2023, to meet with and build relationships with family farmers and independent fishers from across the country, the organizers (me included) worked to prepare fifty pounds of wild Salmon for two hundred people. The Salmon was caught in the Columbia River by a Yakama elder who had meticulously packed and brought the Salmon over two thousand miles for the Salmon bake. While I worked to slice three large bags of lemons into small wedges, other members of BCS cooked the Salmon over apple-cider-soaked cedar planks on a charcoal grill. Salt and pepper were all that was needed, Carl

assured us—the flavor of wild Salmon speaks for itself. The cooking process was hot, grueling, but also joyful as people wove around the cooking area, making conversation and watching what we were doing, and snagging small bites of succulent Salmon meat as we were taking the few extra filets off the grill.

Earlier that day, we had gathered in a playground less than a mile away from the GE salmon facility, run by a company called AquaBounty. It was for a press conference, in which a former employee of AquaBounty, independent fishers, environmental justice organizers, and I spoke about the violent environmental, economic, and community impact of GE salmon and industrial aquaculture. In some ways the press conference was a joyful experience—we were making new connections with each other and returning to old ones—yet the undercurrent of the event was agitation. Right next to where we stood, a stream of effluent from the GE salmon facility flowed by us. The wind was asserting its presence, almost blowing our protest materials into the ammonia-polluted water. In my interview with Carl, when describing the energies of farmed salmon and genetically engineered (GE) salmon, he contrasts it to his experiences with wild Salmon and describes it as a cultural “abomination” to keep salmon (or any animal in cages) mechanically separated from the rest of the physical/spiritual world. They are impacted psychologically, and energetically, which in turn impacts humans as well when those beings are consumed. “When it’s eaten, what’s happening with that energy? Does it cause us cancer? Does it kill us? I don’t know.” Farmed salmon experience settler colonial and capitalist violence through their own commodification, and are made to live exclusively for production, separate from their traditional ecologies and spiritual worlds. In these conditions they become physically injured and ill – how is the impact of that violence felt across both human and non-human kin?

Estefania discusses how escaped farmed salmon are often easily identifiable by fishermen because their fins are eroded, and the salmon look to be in rough shape, compared to wild Salmon. For GE salmon, they also experience the physical harm of living in crowded cages, but also of their altered DNA, which compels them to eat constantly.

“We know that their stomachs are bursting because of the accelerated growth rate [...] even though they are made in a lab, they’re little creatures that are getting sick and really suffering in those tanks, right? In a different way, I think we’ve talked about this on our calls too, is that the salmon might be protesting themselves, right? They’re like ‘Nah, nah, this is not okay. You shouldn’t be doing this to us.’ I actually believe in those fronts of the resistance as well, that salmon are actually really sacrificial. That’s something that you learn, hopefully, you know, people learn when they move to the Pacific Northwest. As settlers, learning about Salmon means learning about the route of the Salmon, right? Salmon have a huge relationship with the Pacific, they leave their watersheds as juveniles, and they travel all over the world, right? Getting the best nutrients from the best places. They’re literally eating gourmet food all over the ocean for their entire lives. And then they come back as adults and they go back to the exact same place that they were born, and that’s where they spawn. And then they perish, right? They basically give their bodies to decay on the land, which means the land gets those nutrients, or they get picked by animals and dragged into the forests. And so the forest gets to have the nutrients that the Salmon went to gather from all over the Pacific Ocean, right? This journey, when you think about a farmed salmon, right—the farmed salmon was born in a lab, immediately put in a fish tank. Once they’re able to swim, once they spawn, that’s their life. The contrast between a wild Salmon’s life and that life is so big that I believe, you know? In the Salmon. We carry a lot of our wisdom in our DNA, right? That’s not meant to be like a big scientific thing or anything, it’s just, it’s real, right?”

They suggest that even salmon that have been separated from their traditional lifeways since birth are still connected to the spiritual energy of Salmon that is embedded within their DNA, indicating a wisdom of what is natural for Salmon and what is not, which they express through their bodies in a similar way that wild Salmon do—though sacrifice. But rather than sacrificing their bodies to sustain their ecologies and reproduce, GE salmon sacrifice themselves as a spiritual act of refusal.

In the latter part of our conversation, Estefania also talks about the spiritual world, naming it as “magic,” and describes it as a connection to spirits, ancestors, and energies that you can feel within the world. They state that because capitalism is invested in disenfranchisement, resistance movements will never “have the same level of material resources that the opposition has [...] But what I think about magic is that I feel like one way to counteract those resources—I do think that computer geeks and hacking is a totally legitimate way to create some of this magic [laughs]. But also I’ve been interested to see how we can come together in terms of energy.” They go on to describe how solidarity can seem challenging, because in the U.S., many of the people who are resisting capitalism and settler colonialism are bringing many different ancestries, and so it can be difficult to get people to act in unison. At the same time, these connections to different ancestries feel so powerful to them, as a guiding force, and they are witnessing more and more solidarity between “all the people and all of our ancestors.” They complexify embodied spirituality in holding that many diverse peoples experience connections to the broader world and temporality within their own specific cultural identities, and that spiritual energy can be channeled through creative engagement and infiltration of resources that were once created to serve the purposes of capitalist accumulation (e.g. hacking). Across many diverse contexts, the solidarities that emerge from our embodied spiritual energy informs us through felt and lived experience, through our deep ties to nature, and encourages us to challenge our current conditions and capitalist promises of the future. They emphasize this point at the end the interview by saying that,

“Right now we’re kind of living in cognitive dissonance because in many ways that we have to live this world or are incentivized or forced to live in the world, it probably contradicts a lot of the innate values that we carry from our ancestors. And so, I think in general for humans and non-humans, I feel like all that wisdom will come together. The animals will be fighting on their front. We’ll be fighting on our front, the plants are gonna be fighting on their front. And then we’ll sync up because we’re all part of nature. And at the end of the day, what’s happening is that nature is really being dominated, right? By corporations, by capitalists, by white supremacists. And so, I think that’s part of the future. Part of the magic is all of the creatures of this earth fighting and pushing back.”

Embodied spirituality is an essential component to not only understanding how we relate to lands, waters, and our more-than-human kin in the present, but how all beings are able to situate themselves and theorize on their unique, situated, or shared experiences within broader contexts of global capitalism and settler colonialism. The emotions that are deeply tied to how people interpret both individual and collective pain and trauma moves embodied spirituality into what Dian Million names as “felt theory” (2009). Anglo-narrated histories fall under the same fallacy of objectivity that many positivist and quantitative methodologies do, writing-off emotional interpretations as subjective and ahistorical, however Million argues that such interpretations are not only essential as moments in history, but as a framework for perceiving deep underlying and overt truths about the embodied effects of colonialism. If such emotions are felt across all beings that are harmed by capitalist and settler colonial processes across time (rivers that are dammed, fish that are crowded in cages, communities that are harmed, separated, and controlled by carceral, genocidal systems, or are otherwise waged-war against), embodied spirituality is the plane where these beings perceive each other, converse, and move together. Oceans, in collaboration with shellfish and coral, rip industrial offshore net pens apart . Wild

Salmon choose whether they will return to their home rivers or refuse to traverse increasingly polluted and industrialized waters. Genetically engineered salmon burst in response to the calls of their altered biology, and they refuse the demands of production they are being asked to meet. Across geographically distant spaces, people with shared hopes around building towards food systems that center community and Indigenous ways of knowing, decide to come together for meals that honor the sharing spirit of salmon.

Conclusion: Building towards fluid futurities

Breaching absurdity through art

When we come together, in moments or through movements, what worlds become possible? What does it mean to attend to embodied spirituality, and how do we bring that attention forward into translatable, material spaces—ones that people can see, touch, and feel, especially when gathering is not possible for everyone, or does not lend itself to mass-movement building? These are some of the questions that I am carrying with me as I think about how BlockCorporateSalmon (BCS) will continue to move forward as a collective, and how it might also co-travel with others committed to thinking about futures that dismantle settler colonialism and racial capitalism and center accountability, care, and relationality instead.

These global systemic forces—racial capitalism, settler colonialism, white supremacy, environmental destruction and climate change—are continuously reinforced by states, institutions, corporations, and individuals that hold and desire vast and unequal amounts of power. Despite the survival and resistance of Black people, Indigenous peoples, and other people of color, these systems have remained locked in place as dominant realities, ever-shape-shifting and adapting, and seemingly insurmountable. When we spend all our efforts analyzing these oppressive narratives and experiences, it becomes either too hard, too exhausting, or we forget to spend time thinking about what could be—what other possible futures exist (Imarisha, 2015).

We forget that the maintenance systems of racial capitalism and settler colonialism have also always relied on speculation too. For example, Pasco, Anderson, and DasGupta (2016) discuss how medicine is invested in speculation—imagining new cures, ways to navigate and eradicate illness, and

extend human life. These speculations are also deeply embedded in racialization, which we can see in, for example, the US & European eugenics movement, that imagines “a certain kind of futurity based on the celebration of white, able-bodied reproduction in things like ‘fitter-families contests’ alongside the sterilization or killing of racialised or disabled ‘undesirables’” (Pasco, Anderson, and DasGupta, 2016, 246). In similar ways, “bio-innovations” such as genetically engineered salmon or other genetically modified organisms play upon this speculative desire to “improve” upon the genetic qualities of beings to create “products” that are more efficient and controllable.

In building our own speculative visions, particularly through creating visionary fiction and art, we are able to move past reformist conceptions of justice (that do not shake oppressive systems and keep racialized hierarchies in place) and into futures that are liberatory and revolutionary. Imarisha (2016) explicitly addresses social justice movements and encourages them to engage with visionary fiction as a process of engaging with desire, without imposing a boundary of “realism” that ties us to the existing social, political, and legal orders of the state:

“Visionary Fiction offers social justice movements a process to explore creating those new worlds [...] This term reminds us to be utterly unrealistic in our organizing, because it is only through imagining the so-called impossible that we can begin to concretely build it. When we free our imaginations, we question everything. We recognize that none of this is fixed, everything is stardust, and we have the strength to cast it however we will.”

There are many ways to lean into imagination, though what can sometimes be more challenging, especially for organizers, is to invite others into that process. BCS has navigated this by hosting visionary fiction workshops (including during our first ever UNR Seattle chapter training), creating collective murals and paintings, and bringing art into many conversational spaces. When BCS

members gathered with the North American Marine Alliance (NAMA) and the Community Alliance for Global Justice (CAGJ) in Indiana to attend the Farm Aid concert and gathering, we acquired a table alongside other visitors who were speaking on various food, farming, and environmental justice issues. At our table, we set up a screen printing station, where we taught attendees how to screen print using art that Morgan Brown, a Ts'msyen artist, had contributed to CAGJ. Alongside our table, we had two canvases that I and Jon, NAMA's food justice organizer and a close friend of mine, had prepared by painting an outline of salmon. We invited attendees who were passing through and conversing with us to pick up a brush and paint something on the canvas that helped them imagine the types of food systems they wanted to build.



BCS, NAMA, and CAGJ members posed in front of our shared exhibit table



Screen printing instruction at the BCS Farm Aid table



Collectively painted Salmon canvas at Farm Aid

Months later, in April, 2024, a few members of BCS gathered once again for several days in Savannah, Georgia, to take a supportive role in hosting a Black and Indigenous fishers gathering organized by NAMA. Jon, who was the primary person responsible for organizing the event, had wanted it to be a space where Black and Indigenous fishers from many parts of the United States could come together and share their experiences, stories, and struggles as fishers in a corporation-dominated, white supremacist industry but, more importantly, to find connection, solidarity, and hope in

imagining what the future could look like. Prompts were set up across the various spaces we gathered in, including a room for zine-making, a room for canvas painting, and a room for conversing.

Immediately prior to the gathering, I met up with Jon in Boston, Massachusetts to think through aspects of the Savannah gathering together¹¹. What would the roles of non-Black and non-Indigenous attendees such as myself and a few other organizers be in the space? How might we contribute our own stories, perspectives, and ideas in an effort to co-travel intentionally and not voyeuristically, while also attending to the importance of spaces for just Black and Indigenous attendees (sometimes by simply leaving the space, or picking up food, etc.)? The day before our flight to Savannah, we spent it painting a piece that reflected the emotions, energies, and embodied spiritualities we wanted to bring to the gathering. It took about twelve hours in total to paint, and when it was finished, we cut it into small pieces and brought it with us to the Savannah gathering. At the end of the multi-day gathering, our imaginations infused with days of talking about the future, eating food, and laughing and connecting with each other, we brought those pieces back out and asked each person to write words, reflections, or feelings that they had on the backs of the pieces. Later that day, we sat around a table and collectively pieced the image back together (depicted below—though I took this image prior to it being cut into smaller pieces), before finally asking each person to take a few pieces of the image back home with them, different to the ones they had written their reflections on. Now, across Georgia, Massachusetts, Washington, Oregon, and Louisiana each person holds a physical piece of this gathering with them.

¹¹ I have to express my gratitude to Jon here as an extremely important collaborator, artist, musician, and person of inspiration for me—without him, I am not sure I would be able to imagine these other worlds so clearly.



Art can be made in many different ways, but I primarily think of art as an opportunity to imagine, express creativity, and be absurd—all of which are necessary in the effort to build another world. What I have learned from making art in spaces with others is that to be able to foster imagination, creativity and absurdity in social movements requires that we revisit embodied spirituality alongside it, and work towards a radical vulnerability that cultivates trust and care. I hope to continue to explore what possibilities art and absurdity can bring us as BCS continues on its journey with other

co-travellers towards envisioning worlds where Indigenous food sovereignty, accountable relationships, and healthy Salmon and watersheds are not only possible, but imminent.

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