

*It would have taken the sharpest ears to catch the sound
of [the] unheard voices of the [water] and the water's edge.*

– Rachel Carson, *Under the Sea Wind*

Here is a map of our country:

I promised to show you a map you say but this is a mural

– Adrienne Rich, *An Atlas of the Difficult World*

Assembled as a series of encounters within and around watery terrain, *DESCENT ≈ An Atlas of Relation*, looks to the fish – who have occupied our planet for millions of years in a constant struggle for survival – as a means of thinking through how human and more-than-human beings find ways to live alongside one another within the midst of a globally shifting climate impacting our shared spaces and, subsequently, our relation(s). As a collective of (often) transitory occupants, how do “we”¹ persist, together, within the relentless ongoing-ness of our worlds?

Using time-based reproduction methods, both routine and remarkable situations occurring between plant and animal cohabitants of distinct aquatic ecosystems are repeatedly observed and recorded. Digital photographs, scans, and video documentation are combined with UV-sensitive direct contact printing methods requiring multiple minutes, hours, or days to construct an image of/with the natural world. Together, these recording techniques visualize shifting interspecies relations as slow, unpredictable, and dynamic, corresponding with feminist perspectives on Darwin’s theory of descent, emphasizing anti-essentialist understandings of matter and nature as forever transformed by and within time.

With recognition of my response-abilities as a white woman from settler ancestry, I approach land and water tentatively, with care and patience. Cultivating methods of respectful engagement with place led me to begin this work by visiting lands most familiar to me – the shorelines surrounding my hometown of Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan², formed by Lake Superior and the St. Marys River³. As re-shaped by colonial powers, this vital aquatic habitat has become commonly known as a maritime border between what is now the U.S. and Canada, encompassing the shipping lanes within the commerce driven Soo Locks. Disruptions to this biodiverse ecosystem mirror those of other waters altered by industry over time, leading to a need for contemporary “species management” that has become irreversibly and paradoxically connected to maintaining healthy fisheries and waters.

Though the rich histories and fish populations of The Great Lakes⁴ are foundational to the project, the work extends from this region to consider bodies of water with comparable cultural and ecological characteristics, where relationships to land and water are disputed, revered, mourned, misunderstood, or unacknowledged. Connecting the unimaginable span of deep time embedded within the lives of fish and their watery homes to varied understandings of descent – as passage, downward movement, decline, sinking, legacy, lineage, origination – I visualize our human-made worlds as a continuum, suggesting both the promise and peril of ecological longevity.

This project offers gratitude to the many land and water beings whose labor and knowledge contributed to the production of these works, with respectful acknowledgement that all territories imaged within are Native Land - the present and ancestral homes of Indigenous citizens throughout what are currently known as the North American states and provinces of Michigan, Ontario, Alaska, Washington, and Oregon. Learning of and with these lands is an ongoing process, greatly informed by generous conversation. I offer special recognition and thanks to Tyler Dettloff and Ashley Moerke (Lake Superior State University, Sault Ste. Marie, MI); Heather Dawson (University of Michigan-Flint, Flint, MI); Amber Morseau and Martin Reinhardt (Center for Native American Studies at Northern Michigan University, Marquette, MI); William Hollingshead (Sault Ste. Marie Museum, Sault Ste. Marie, ON, Canada); Karena Schmidt and Evelyn Ravindran (Keweenaw Bay Indian Community Natural Resources Department, L’Anse, MI); Katy Bresette and Jerry Jondreau (Dynamite Hill Farms, L’Anse, MI); David Fyfe (NW Indian Fisheries Commission, Olympia, WA); Fred Swanson (H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest, Blue River, OR); and Liz Perkin (Native Fish Society, Oregon City, OR).

¹ Thinking in terms of “we” requires consideration of individual, place, and situation-based specificity as referenced in texts by theorists including Max Liboiron and Astrida Neimanis (drawing upon Adrienne Rich and Donna Haraway) emphasizing the lack of a universal “we”, and compels mindful consideration of shifts in meaning as noted in Anishinaabemowin teachings, as conveyed by scholar Martin Reinhardt.

² Bahweting is one version of an Anishinaabemowin name for Sault Ste. Marie (as noted by The Sault Tribe of Chippewa Indians).

³ Anishinaabemowin names for Lake Superior and the St. Marys River are Anishinaabe-gichigami, and Baawiting, as noted in the Anishinaabe atlas and map made available by the Great Lakes Indian Fish & Wildlife Commission (GLIFWC).

⁴ One version of an Anishinaabemowin name for the Great Lakes is Nayaano-nibiimaang Gichigamiin meaning, The Five Freshwater Seas, as noted in “The Great Lakes, an Ojibwe Perspective” in the Decolonial Atlas. These waters have long served Indigenous nations as a sacred source of life and continue to provide for local Anishinaabeg who rely on fishing for sustenance, income, and culture.