

# Circles of Relation: Community-based Performance-as-Activism in *Salmon Is Everything*

*Taxayam* (Hello). *Nayka nim* Marta Lu Clifford and *nayka nim* Theresa May. We write from Kalapuya Illihi, the traditional homelands of the Kalapuya people, in what is now the state of Oregon. As the authors of what follows, we want to introduce ourselves in a manner consistent with the aims of the recent conference of the Western Humanities Alliance held at the University of Oregon in November 2019. “Engaged Humanities: Partnerships between Academia and Tribal Communities” set out to “explore the challenges and opportunities of such work as it relates to partnering and collaborating with the First Peoples and Nations of the lands our institutions occupy.” Presentations included diverse modes and forms of knowledge-sharing—not only keynotes, papers and panels, but also prayer, conversation, reflection, testimonial, storytelling, drama and film. In this article we want to tell you about our contribution to that two-day conversation—a concert reading of a play entitled *Salmon Is Everything*. But first, our introductions. We share a partnership born through creative collaboration, and it is because of the ongoing-ness of our relationship that the reading of *Salmon Is Everything*, and others like it, have been possible. We begin with this, our connection, because it shows how relationship is at the center of Indigenous ways of working. I (Marta) am Chinook and Cree, a registered member of and *ulman Tilixam* (Elder) with the Confederated Tribes of Grande Ronde. I am an Elder in

Residence at the University of Oregon, an actress and storyteller. I met Theresa when I played the role of Rose in the 2011 production of *Salmon Is Everything* at the University of Oregon. I (Theresa) am a non-Native/settler-descended theater artist, professor and ally. My research focuses on place-based community-engaged theater-making. Following an historic fish-kill on the Klamath River in 2002 (which we discuss in more detail below), I developed and directed *Salmon Is Everything* in collaboration with Karuk, Hupa, Yurok, and Klamath-Modoc community members. Since 2011 we have worked together teaching courses and presenting public programs focused on plays and performances by Native and First Nations dramatists.

In the context of the Western Humanities Alliance conference, the concert reading of *Salmon Is Everything* brought home the power of stories to transmit the lived experience of Indigenous communities as it demonstrated Indigenous ways of knowing and approaches to knowledge production. *Salmon Is Everything* highlighted Indigenous place-centered knowledge and demonstrated creative connections between and among the academy and Indigenous communities. But perhaps more importantly, the reading made the research live in the present as palpable experience rather than information. As activism-through-storytelling, *Salmon Is Everything* makes use of lively, present, immediate, and communal art of theater to envision and embody ecological justice and resilience on stage. The play not only promotes an awareness of a confluence of concerns in a single watershed, but also serves as an invitation for theater-makers and Native storytellers to work together, as the authors here have done, to raise our voices and put Indigenous methodologies into practice in everyday life.

As powerful forces of transformation, stories help people remember and reclaim the past and call forth new visions of the future. Stories carry layered knowledge about place, histories, and values, and as such are central pillars of Indigenous research

methods. Choctaw scholar and dramatist LeAnne Howe argues that among Native people storytelling is understood as an action that can generate material change.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, stories *do work* that often cannot be done by procedural, legal, or scientific efforts alone. Stories can build relationships, intervene in long-standing ideologies, open new possibilities, and reshape the social, political, and ecological landscapes of our lives. The work of stories is relational awareness. Laguna Pueblo poet Paula Gunn Allen understands stories as dynamic, ongoing phenomena, circles within circles within circles that unfold outward like a tide of connection across generations, cultures, and species, and exist within and outside of time. Stories have a life of their own, she argues.<sup>2</sup> They command our attentiveness to relationships and track the consequences of relationships disregarded. Like circles that draw us together even as they widen across time and place, stories bring us into relation with one another, with the land and its communities, and with the past and future. To the extent that it is possible in written form, we hope to bring our readers into the living circle of this story. To that end, we have included numerous excerpts from the play to show how Indigenous principles of respect, responsibility, reciprocity, and interrelatedness become not only frameworks that shape scholarship and creative work, but a lifework that forges and nourishes an ongoing *process* of coming into relation. As a means to tell Native stories, theater also makes real for its audiences the way that Indigenous knowledge arises from and then informs human actions and relations.

*Salmon Is Everything* is a story about a watershed in crisis. In Autumn of 2002 over 60 thousand salmon died in the Lower Klamath

1 LeAnne Howe, "Tribalography: The Power of Native Stories," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 14, no. 1 (1999): 117–30.

2 Paula Gunn Allen, "The Ceremonial Motion of Indian Time: Long Ago, So Far." In *American Indian Theater in Performance: A Reader*, ed. by Hanay Geiogamah and Jaye T. Darby (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA American Indian Studies Center, 2000), 69-75.

River in Northern California—one of the largest fish-kills in the history of the western United States. An ecological catastrophe that destroyed a primary source of first foods, it also caused lasting emotional, spiritual, and cultural trauma to Indigenous tribes that have depended on the river for economic and cultural sustenance since time immemorial. As a result of twentieth-century agricultural and urban development brought by Euro-American settlers the health of the Klamath, which runs from the base of Crater Lake through central Oregon, through the Siskiyou and Marble mountains, to the Pacific Ocean, is compromised. The northernmost region of the watershed is referred to as the Upper Klamath Basin because, like a vast sink, it holds the source waters that sustain the river's human and non-human community. The river's headwaters in central Oregon provide water for the Klamath Tribes, including Klamath Yahooskin, and Modoc peoples, as well as farms and ranches established primarily by Euro-American settlers under the Reclamation Act of 1902, and post-World War II homesteads. As it winds south and west through the Siskiyou mountains, the Klamath runs through and sustains the Karuk and Hupa tribes. In "Salmon Feeds Our People," Ron Reed and Kari Norgaard note that the Karuk tribe was among the wealthiest and healthiest tribes of California due to the abundance of salmon and other foods in their homelands' abundant ecosystems. Today, they point out, the Karuk are among the poorest as a result of the depletion of salmon in the Klamath River system.<sup>3</sup> The mouth of the Klamath River is located in Yurok homelands in what is now northern California. Together with the Karuk, the Yurok were the hardest hit by the fish-kill of 2002. Meanwhile, all along the river's winding path, small towns, unincorporated villages, private mines, farms, ranches, and homes derive their living

3 Ron Reed and Kari Marie Norgaard, "Salmon Feeds Our People," in *Indigenous Peoples and Conservation: From Rights to Resource Management*, ed. by K. Walker Painemilla, A.B. Rylands, A. Woofter, and C. Hughes (Arlington: Conservation International, 2010), 7-16.

in some fashion from the river. As demands on water resources, along with pollution and development, compromised the health of the river, populations of salmon declined (as much as 95 percent according to some estimates). Karuk and Yurok tribes stopped fishing spring runs in order to protect the salmon. In 2001 this ongoing environmental degradation was exacerbated by a drought in eastern Oregon and precipitated a new battle in the region's water wars as farmers and ranchers demanded that agriculture take priority over fish. In September of 2002, as thousands of coho and chinook salmon began their long journey home, river water had warmed as a result of reduced flows from the dams upriver where water was reserved for agricultural. As the salmon entered the mouth of the Klamath River tens of thousands died from gill rot caused by warm water temperatures. Salmon corpses lay floating and putrefying along miles of riverbank and news of the fish-kill spread through north coast communities like wildfire. A climactic episode in the generations-long conflict over water use along the Oregon-California border, these events threw a national spotlight on water policies and politics in the region.<sup>4</sup>

We will now share key moments of *Salmon Is Everything* to provide a taste of what transpires through the deep listening that Native stories demand. Three fictional families represent the diverse residents of the Klamath River watershed. At the center of the story is Julie, a Yurok-Karuk biology student and mother; her partner Will, a Yurok subsistence fisherman; and their family including Julie's mother Rose and Auntie Louise, and children and cousins Johnny, Zeek and Little Mary. The community of farmers and ranchers in the Upper Klamath Basin is represented by Tim, a third-generation

<sup>4</sup> For histories of the fraught politics of the Klamath watershed, see, for example, Stephen Most, *River of Renewal: Myth and History in the Klamath Basin* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006) and Holly Doremus and A. Dan Tarlock, *Water War in the Klamath Basin: Macho Law, Combat Biology, and Dirty Politics* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2008).

rancher in the Upper Klamath Basin, and his mother, Alice, the daughter of Euro-American settlers who came to Oregon in the early twentieth century. Other central characters include Kate, an environmental activist and fish biologist, and her partner Rachel, a photographer of Jewish heritage. Minor characters, including members of the Klamath Tribes, a reporter, commercial fishers, white-water guides, teachers, farmers, and tourists fill out the diverse constituencies of the watershed. The plot follows Julie's family as they cope with the devastation of the fish-kill, a loss that is at once emotional, cultural, and economic. A town hall brings Julie and Tim together; slowly they find a reason to trust one another, and over time they build a working relationship that represents a future still unfolding on the Klamath River.

The play begins with a procession that emerges from the audience. Imagine, if you will, that the person next to you stands up and calls out, "I am Karuk!" and then another "I am Yurok!" More than a dozen people, coming from all directions in the room, stand, speak and walk to the stage to take their place in this community story. Their identities range from a full spectrum of Indigenous peoples of the region—not only the federally recognized tribes of Oregon and Northern California, but also tribes that do not have federal recognition. In this way the play begins as an affirmation of resilience and presence. Still others call out, "I am a farmer!" "I am an artist!" "I am Chicano!"—an acknowledgment that people locate their identities in many ways, including by heritage, occupation, and relationship; still others call, "I am a mother, a grandmother, a daughter!"<sup>5</sup> The procession gathers the diverse community of the Klamath watershed together, in the present communal space of the theater, to tell their collective story.

<sup>5</sup> Theresa May, "Salmon Is Everything," in *Salmon Is Everything: Community-based Theatre in the Klamath Watershed*, ed. by Theresa May (Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press, 2019), 34-35.

Theater's immediacy requires us to be attentive and responsive to others. As stories play out in real time and physical space, theater invites us to *live into* the world of the play in order to examine together the consequences of human actions. Doing so we experience the ways we are unexpectedly connected and implicated. The ruse of the play allows for open-minded, playful consideration of possibilities actualized as sensorial experience so that we might taste and feel those possibilities and glimpse the wisdom that otherwise only comes from lived experience. Theater thus exercises our capacity to listen, to acknowledge worlds of experience different from our own, to simultaneously hold multiple and conflicting viewpoints as plausible and real, and to give the audience values that may conflict with our own. At the heart of theater is a willing-suspension-of-disbelief in which audience and performers together engage in what is often called the magic of "what if?" This fundamental willingness to take an imagiNative risk in community with others is precisely what leverages theater's potential as an activist form of storytelling. For the short period of the performance audience members set aside their firmly held belief systems to entertain, as imagiNative possibilities, the perspectives, needs, struggles, and realities of others.

With the second scene, the play telescopes into the lives of Julie's family as they smoke and can salmon that Will has caught that season. The scene introduces the centrality of family, the idea of first foods, the importance of ceremony, the respect for and responsibility to care for Elders, and the challenges faced by Julie and other Native young people functioning within settler institutions.

JULIE: This Anglo student in my class said to me, "How can the Salmon be your relative? You eat them?"  
JOHNNY: What an idiot!

JULIE: And I told him, Salmon are our relatives because we have lived in an amazingly bonded way with them since the beginning. The connection goes much deeper than food. It's a relationship created from thousands of years of coexistence.

WILL: Tell him that all the river tribes—the Klamath, Modoc, and our people—the Yurok and Karuk—we all believe the Salmon are the spirits of our ancestors, *c̣'iyals* come back to give life to everything.

[...]

JULIE: I don't think he'd get that. [...] He said if there are no more Salmon, just go to McDonald's!

WILL: Andy was tellin' me that they found bones of giant Salmon way up in the Upper Klamath—until then the Fish and Wildlife guys didn't even believe there were Salmon up there. They found the bones.<sup>6</sup>

Will refers here to a longstanding debate in the region as to whether salmon were ever found in the Upper Klamath Basin. This passage argues for recognition of oral tradition as historical records.<sup>6</sup> Farmers and ranchers, as well as federal agencies, long denied what Klamath legends told, until a group of researchers found fossils of giant salmon in Upper Klamath Lake.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, young Zeek presses to be part of the important work of catching salmon with his uncles:

<sup>6</sup> In 1998 the Supreme Court of Canada recognized Indigenous oral tradition as constituting historical records. See, for example, Cindy Kenny-Gilday, "A Village of Widows." *Peace, Justice and Freedom: Human Rights Challenges for the New Millennium*, ed. by Gurcharan Singh Bhati (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2010), 107-118.

<sup>7</sup> Klamath Tribal member Gordon Bettles was part of this research and relayed this information orally to me in 2009. See also, Jeff Barnard, "Salmon Once Spawned Far Up Oregon River, Biologists Find," *Seattle Times*, 2 April 2005.

ZEEK: When do I get my boat?

WILL: Yeah. That's how I learned, from watching my uncles, my cousins, people that are older than me. I just watched. People don't have to tell me how to do stuff step-by-step. I just watch.

JOHNNY: If you're a good listener and watch everything, you'll be good at it.<sup>8</sup>

In *Indigenous Storywork*, Stó:lō scholar and educator Jo-ann Archibald argues that listening is a key aspect of Indigenous methodologies. "Patience and trust are essential for preparing to listen to stories. Listening involves more than just the auditory sense. We must visualize the characters and their actions. We must let our emotions surface. As the Elders say, it is important to listen with 'three ears: two on the sides of our head and the one that is in our heart'."<sup>9</sup> The exchange between Zeek and his uncles implicitly reminds the audience that they too have a part to play in storytelling.

The next scene moves to Upper Klamath ranching country where Alice and Tim struggle with news of water allocations during the drought year of 2001. Alice, a representative character of settler entitlement to land in the west, recognizes that she stands on the threshold of change:

ALICE: We woke that morning to three feet of snow around the house, and the roads drifting shut within minutes of plowing track. My husband worried about feeding the hungry calves. Timmy spun circles in the deep snow, spinning and spinning in bright red boots until his blue

<sup>8</sup> May, "Salmon Is Everything," 37.

<sup>9</sup> Jo-Ann Archibald Q'um Q'um Xiim, *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit* (Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press, 2008), 8.

coat spun off in the wind . . . When I married, I married this land. In my mind it was all about coming to this ranch, the natural beauty, and fixing the River. Fixing everything. Paint the old dingy house. Fence the River. Dig thistles. Clean the shop. Chainsaw down the old fence, build some new fence. The hardest realization for me this season is that what's really changing is me.<sup>10</sup>

Alice's reflection on her predilection to control and alter the environment, and the scene that follows in which we learn about the legal struggles over water allocation between the region's ranching community and industrial agriculturalists, are intended not only to introduce those representative constituencies of the watershed, but also to seed the willingness to change within the imaginations of the audience. By the end of the play, Alice's fixed position will transform.

Klamath Tribal Elder Gordon Bettles, who wrote the foreword to the published version of the play, was fond of teaching a traditional song, sung as a round, which translates as "I change you, you change me." All the characters in the play provoke changes of heart in one another, resulting in realizations, deepened understandings, newfound compassion, and reparative action—even when those characters are Native allies and think they are already on the right side of justice. In the next scene, we meet Kate, a fish biologist and environmental activist doing research on the Klamath. She responds to Rachel who has asked why the Trinity River, a tributary of the Klamath, runs clear and blue, while the Klamath is not so pristine. Kate's response calls attention to a century of colonial ecological impact that includes multiple decades of industrial agriculture.

<sup>10</sup> May, "Salmon Is Everything," 39.

KATE: [...] Most of Trinity River is dammed up at Shasta and sent down to central California for big ag; but on this side of the Shasta dam the Trinity runs through protected wilderness. [...] The Klamath on the other hand has to be everything to everybody. You have farmers and ranchers in Oregon using the headwaters—all the cattle crap, and the pesticides. Then through seven or so dams. Then logging and mining along the midriver—more silt. What you see there, at the confluence, is the result of the river’s long, toxic journey: the clear, cold Trinity running into the warmer, greener, dirtier Klamath.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, the character of the Reporter, provides the audience with needed context, explaining the nexus of issues that contribute to the explosive political climate in the Klamath watershed in the year prior to the fish-kill in 2002:

REPORTER: Good evening. I’m standing on the border of Oregon and California in some of the most beautiful country I’ve ever seen, but that beauty disguises a troubled landscape. The Klamath River Basin has become a prime example of a problem facing the entire West: how to share limited water with farmers guaranteed irrigation rights by the federal government, fish protected by the Endangered Species Act, and Native American tribes with treaties promising their fisheries will go on forever. In the early twentieth century, before the United States government drained Tule Lake and began “reclamation” of the land, this whole area was underwater, and the natural fishing grounds of the Klamath and Modoc people. The Klamath were salmon people

<sup>11</sup> May, “Salmon Is Everything,” 42.

too—some Elders have claimed that salmon existed even in the Upper Klamath. Recently, Tribal anthropologists found bones of a huge salmon. But salmon were not the only “big fish” in these waters. The suckerfish—or *Cwaam* [chwaam] as the Klamath call it—is a sacred resource to Tribal communities. It can grow to four feet long. Historical records indicate that the Klamath fishermen brought in ten thousand pounds of suckerfish in one season. Now, like the salmon before it, this once plentiful fish has dwindled. Suckerfish are, like the coho salmon, protected under the Endangered Species Act. Last year farmers in the Klamath River Basin saw their crops shrivel as the federal government cut irrigation water to protect the suckerfish. Downriver, the Hupa, Yurok, and Karuk tribes consider the salmon a critical part of their livelihood as well as spiritual life, and now this fish, which used to be so plentiful that Tribal Elders claim “you could walk across the river on the backs of salmon,” is threatened too. This year the Yurok Tribe of northern California has warned the federal government that a fish-kill of unprecedented magnitude could devastate the salmon runs. President Bush has repeatedly pledged to do all he can for the farmers, but full irrigation means less water for the suckerfish and the salmon.<sup>12</sup>

Underscoring the need for the Tribal communities of the watershed to speak for themselves (and for Elders to be consulted), once she is off camera, the Reporter chats with her Karuk cameraman: “Hey, was there really a time when you could walk across the river on the backs of salmon?”<sup>13</sup> “Heck yeah,” he responds, “just talk to my

<sup>12</sup> May, “Salmon Is Everything,” 42-43.

<sup>13</sup> May, “Salmon Is Everything,” 43.

Gram!”<sup>14</sup> Indigenous scholars underscore the importance of Elders as culture-bearers whose ecological knowledge can illuminate not only how the environment has been impacted by colonialism, but how healing should proceed. The scene also underscores that Tribal scientists had already conducted research that warned of a potential fish-kill but were ignored by key federal agencies.

Kate works closely with Tribal scientists conducting research to protect salmon. She understands herself as an enlightened ally and activist. She is brought up short, however, in a conversation with Julie, who calls her out for thinking that her concern for the salmon is equivalent to generations of kinship ties understood by the river’s Native communities. Kate has been invited to attend a watershed stakeholder’s meeting and encourages Julie to attend:

JULIE: I’m sorry, I just wish you wouldn’t tell me what I need, or what I should do. You don’t have the kind of stake in this issue that Native people do, and you shouldn’t be telling us what to do.

KATE: Excuse me, I care about the river and the fish. It’s what I’ve chosen to do with my life.

JULIE: It’s different for my people. For us, Salmon is everything—subsistence, culture, history, identity. It’s who we are!

KATE: Ordinary citizens can’t have the same investment in caring for the planet?

JULIE: All I’m saying is that for you it’s about being right; it’s about winning; about “saving the environment” as if that’s something other than yourself. For us it’s about being whole, staying alive.

KATE: It’s about being alive for all of us. Everything we do in our culture has an impact, every choice [...]

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14 May, “Salmon Is Everything,” 43.

JULIE: But for us the threat of extermination is immediate, just like it is for the fish. You come here doing your research that will eventually get you some good agency job. You care, sure, but if the Salmon go extinct, you’ll find some other species to save. For my family, if the Salmon don’t survive my grandmother will die of a broken spirit. You called that fish “Brother” [...] a couple minutes ago—but it’s a metaphor for you. It’s *not a metaphor* for us! My people have lived here for ten thousand years or more. My people live here. They die here! They are the trees, the water, the fish. That the Salmon are brothers is not some kind of myth; the Salmon are not symbols of life, they are life. We have maintained a healthy balance with the River and the Salmon and everything else because it’s all one body, one family. If the Salmon die, we break apart; the Salmon make life make sense!<sup>15</sup>

Kate’s assumptions are laid bare: who are those “ordinary citizens” she defends? And what would it require of her to step back, to understand that her own perspective, however passionate, is limited by her white privilege and settler heritage? What will it take for her to think outside her own box, and grant that both Julie and the salmon have knowledge to which she does not have access?

In *Research as Ceremony* Shawn Wilson suggests that knowledge takes many forms, not only discursive or quantitative, but embodied, prayerful, playful, ceremonial. As news of the fish-kill began to be reported by local and national news agencies the numbers of dead salmon continued to rise. First reports estimated twenty-five thousand; within a week, those estimates had doubled.

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15 May, “Salmon Is Everything,” 46-67.

Today estimates range from fifty to eighty thousand.<sup>16</sup> Representing the facts of the fish-kill does not, however, communicate the impact of the loss on the people whose lives have long been intertwined with the salmon. In a scene called Lamentation, the actors share the weight of the tragedy through a ceremonial spoken-word poem:

LOUISE: Forty thousand salmon dead.

ALL: As they return.

JOHNNY: Sixty thousand salmon dead.

ALL: As they return.

WILL: Gill rot! [...]

REPORTER: The question now is: What will they do with the bodies? Dead fish lie decomposing along thirty miles of the river. Last weekend a handful of volunteers gathered some of the debris. It was later composted with sawdust and woodchips. [...]

ROSE: Who picked up these dead and dying ones?

ALL: As they return.

ROSE: Who laid them to rest, mixed their flesh with woodchips and ash?

ALL: As they return.

ROSE: Carried them one at a time, for some were three feet long.

ALL: As they return.

ROSE: Who witnessed, who was not driven back by the smell?

ALL: As they return.

JULIE: We carried them in our arms, on our backs, in our hearts. [...]

ROSE: We carry them still. In our arms, on our backs, in our hearts.<sup>17</sup>

As the Lamentation is spoken, a replica of a thirty-pound salmon is gently passed among performers and then to the audience, who continue to pass it one to another as the scene continues. Karuk Elder Kathleen McCovey, one of the collaborators in the play's development and whose words became those of Rose, describes this moment in performance:

We reached the middle of the script, the place in the story where the Salmon die and are found downriver in Yurok country during the Jump Dance, one of our most sacred ceremonies. This is the part of the production where the people realize what is happening to the Salmon; the people realize that their relatives are lying along the riverbank suffocating and there is nothing the people can do to help the Salmon People. As I read Rose's lines describing the agony and astonishment that happened on the River, I became overwhelmed with sorrow. My mind split. One half was reading the words; the other was reliving the nightmare. I know the Yurok people well and I know the geographic area where the Salmon died, so I could imagine the scene that I was reading. As I read, I became very angry, especially with the government that is charged with managing the water in the Klamath River. Like the play says, before this disaster the Yurok biologists had warned the basin managers about the probable impact of low water on the fish, but their research was ignored. As I read the words aloud, many emotions and images flooded through my mind, and I began to cry. I felt a heavy pain in my heart that comes from

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<sup>16</sup> Stephen Most, *River of Renewal: Myth and History in the Klamath Basin* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006).

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<sup>17</sup> May, "Salmon Is Everything," 54.



the frustration of being misunderstood.<sup>18</sup>

I (Marta) can also attest to the palpable emotions I felt. This is the way that stories provoke the empathy that lays the foundation for right action. Kathleen McCovey, who had never performed in a play before, and I both experienced the unique potential for theater in Native communities to empower us. She observed that

In the theatre, a person is free to express herself, and that's not usually the case for Indian people. I have a lot of emotion when I talk about the Salmon kill and its effects on the River and the River communities, and in the theatre that emotion was welcomed. [...] My voice and my tears help people understand, because then they feel it too. In *Salmon Is Everything* we had a scene where a Salmon symbolizing the thousands of Salmon that had been killed was passed around the stage from one actor to another around a semicircle, until it came to me. I was the last one to hold the Salmon. Every time that the Salmon came out, I would start to cry, because I knew that one Salmon represented thousands of Salmon and other fish and other species that died that year and every year due to the unhealthy condition of the water in the Klamath River. The pain of what had happened and is still happening today to the River and the Salmon is heartbreaking for Klamath River people. I heard some of the audience say that my reaction to the Salmon helped them to understand the depth of pain this event caused us.<sup>19</sup>

Kate and Rachel pay a visit to Julie's home to offer their condolences after the tragedy. Rose and Louise are stripping willow and preparing it for basket-weaving. In this scene Rachel asks Rose what she is making. Earlier suggestions in the play ("I learned by listening" and "just ask my Gram") have prepared the audience to

listen:

ROSE: This is the willow root. We use willow roots to make our baskets and the caps like this one we wear in the dances. When I go down to the River and pick the willow roots, I'm on my hands and knees. My hands and fingers are in that dirt pulling on that long twine to pull the root out, and then going home, soaking it and peeling it—like Louise is doing. You know that's a whole process with the earth.

[...]

ROSE: To make the red, I use the bark of the red alder tree. The black color comes from the stems of the five-finger fern and the white color comes from beargrass. When I want to make a really fancy basket, I put yellow in it. I dye porcupine quills yellow with that mountain moss, you know, that one that grows high up in the trees in the high country.<sup>20</sup>

Through Rose the play asserts the way in which Indigenous traditional ecological knowledge intertwines cultural material practice and spiritual understandings of kinship.

ROSE: ... to the Karuk people everything and everyone has a purpose. The spirit people taught the Karuk how to live on the land, what to do, what to eat, how to behave, and how and when to conduct ceremonies. Then when the Karuk people knew what to do the spirit people went into the sky, the earth, the trees, the animals, the rocks, and into the plants. You see, when I am in the forest, I am never alone, I am surrounded by spirit people.<sup>21</sup>

When the fish-kill occurred, many in the Tribal communities felt that this sacred bond had been violated. Rose makes a distinction that helps the younger people sort out their feelings of anger and grief to find action consistent with

18 May, "Salmon Is Everything," 97.  
19 May, "Salmon Is Everything," 100.

20 May, "Salmon Is Everything," 58.  
21 May, "Salmon Is Everything," 58.

kinship ties.

ROSE: There is a difference between blame and responsibility. We have a relationship that needs tending. When I was a child the River gave me a prayer and I sewed it into my Brush Dance skirt.<sup>22</sup> Let me show you something. [...] Get me my Brush Dance skirt. In that suitcase there. No, not that one. The blue one there. That one. Bring me that here. This skirt Little Mary will wear. [...] My grandfather and I took this deer when he was about eighty and he could not see anymore. After my grandfather passed away, I took these two hides out of the freezer and had them tanned. I then made a skirt from them, to honor my grandfather. I picked up almost all of these abalone and olivella shells myself. This skirt took a few years to make. Almost everything in this dress comes from nature and from my memories.<sup>23</sup>

By the time Kate and Rachel leave they have learned directly from an Elder that ceremony is ecological practice.

In the next scene the Reporter, who has taken the hint from her Karuk cameraman, speaks with an Elder about the recent events:

REPORTER: I'm standing high above the mouth of the Klamath River looking down on the site of the 2002 fish-kill. This is where Yurok and Karuk Tribal fishermen make their livings, and this is where they are losing that living. The situation really hits home for one Tribal Elder ...

ROSE: I wonder how many generations of people these rocks

<sup>22</sup> In Karuk tradition, the Brush Dance is a ceremony to heal a sick child or other community member. The Jump Dance, mentioned in the play and by Kathleen McCovey in her essay, "My Voice as Rose," is for the purpose of world peace and community healing. See Kathleen McCovey, "My Voice as Rose," in *Salmon Is Everything: Community-based Theatre in the Klamath Watershed*, ed. by Theresa May (Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press, 2019), 95-104.

<sup>23</sup> May, "Salmon Is Everything," 60.

have seen. They never get tired of watching their friend the ocean roll in and out. I bet that these rocks and ocean are good old friends and take in all that they see. These rocks are the first to see the Salmon returning. These two old friends, the rocks and ocean, must have wept and grieved when they saw the Salmon floating on their sides, gills rotting, devastated spirits. You'd see dead fish from time to time, but I've never seen what's going on now. It's real hard to take, seeing them die like that.<sup>24</sup>

Klamath Elder Gordon Bettles similarly reflected on the magnitude of the shock:

The loss of thirty-four thousand lives in such a short time in September 2002 was nearly inconceivable to us. We knew something was terribly wrong. The Klamath, Modoc, Yahooskin, Karuk, Hupa, and Yurok people have sustained ourselves and our environment for thousands of years. The newcomers brought different values and definitions of success to our homeland, but at what cost? The death of thousands of chinook was a signal not only that the manipulated Klamath River could not sustain the Salmon (who were simply doing what they were created to do), but also that the newcomers' perspective and way of treating the world is unsustainable.<sup>25</sup>

Settler colonialism is the root cause of such ecological violence, Bettles observes, pointing out a distinction that can only be revealed in the Klamath language itself:

<sup>24</sup> May, "Salmon Is Everything," 63.

<sup>25</sup> Gordon Bettles, "When Cultures Collide," in *Salmon Is Everything: Community-based Theatre in the Klamath Watershed*, ed. by Theresa May (Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press, 2019), xiv.

Death has particular cultural meanings for the Klamath people, and the deaths of so many Salmon must be understood in light of two Klamath words. *Gleega*, “death,” means literally to change into or become something else. This is a natural process, a change that transforms life into life. In contrast, *č’ooq’atk* means “dead ones,” or corpses, and refers to unnatural loss, such as a murder, or multiple deaths that are outside the natural order. The distinction lies in what *caused* the death. Was it caused by the Creator and part of a natural phenomenon, or was it caused by human action or error? In the case of the fish-kill, we asked, what could take *hoqis*, or life, away from this many Salmon at once? We could see that this was an unnatural event, caused by human values and practices. ... the assault on the River and its environs was tantamount to a mugging—*č’ooq’atk*.<sup>26</sup>

Like Kate and Rachel, the Reporter’s worldview begins to change as a result of her relationship with Rose. The language that each uses in the subsequent scenes reflects a change from understanding the salmon as object, to understanding the salmon as autonomous, sentient, possessing knowledge and agency. Here, the Reporter credits the salmon with convening authority:

REPORTER: Salmon are amazing. Born knowing this river and their place in it. Traveling the same way their ancestors have done for centuries. Now, here at the mouth of the Klamath River, the salmon themselves have called a Town Hall meeting. Farmers and ranchers from the Upper Klamath Basin, mid-river folks, and Lower Klamath Tribal fisheries experts and community members have come together in a series of stakeholder meetings to discuss what must be seen as a shared future.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Bettles, “When Cultures Collide,” xiv-xv.

<sup>27</sup> May, “Salmon Is Everything,” 63.

In a scene entitled Town Hall—a fictionalized rendering of actual stakeholder meetings that occurred in the Klamath watershed over several years, and which led to the landmark agreements in 2010—Julie meets Alice’s son Tim, an Upper Klamath rancher.<sup>28</sup> While they do not share common ground on the issues of water allocation, they do share something more vital: children and the future that they represent.

TIM: How old is she, about twelve months?

JULIE: Eight months.

TIM: She’s beautiful. Babies are like little ambassadors from another world!

JULIE: They are.

TIM: ... do you think we’ll solve anything here?

JULIE: I doubt it. I’ve heard a lot of this talk before.

TIM: So what would help?

JULIE: I don’t know. I guess if people up there understood that this is not only our livelihood that’s at stake, it’s our culture, our traditions, our way of life.<sup>29</sup>

Again, the play extends the invitation to listen to Indigenous concerns and honor Indigenous ways of knowing. Tim accepts Julie’s invitation and in a subsequent scene travels to the Lower Klamath region to meet with Julie and her family. There he encounters the very real sense of betrayal that tribes on the river felt during the fish-kill, and he has an opportunity to grant the emotional impact of that loss as reasonable and justified anger when Will speaks:

<sup>28</sup> Between 2001 and 2003, the Klamath Basin Ecosystem Foundation organized several watershed conferences that only served to increase the watershed’s polarized politics. In 2004, a second series of stakeholder meetings, led by Bob Chadwick and Terry Morton of Consensus Associates, brought watershed residents together under conflict resolution framework. Stephen Most describes these stakeholder meetings in detail in *River of Renewal*.

<sup>29</sup> May, “Salmon Is Everything,” 69.

WILL: I've lived in the Klamath River system my entire life. The River is part of me, the lifeblood of my people. The Klamath is my home, my church, garden, highway, counselor, friend, brother—hell, provider. The carnage I've seen over the weeks is so utterly disgusting I can't sleep. I close my eyes and the images of dead, rotting fish—maybe you've seen photographs, but you cannot begin to imagine the smell. The smell of death and decay messes with my mind. I can't eat because food, no matter what it is, reminds me of the smell. Come walk along the banks of the River with me. I dare you. Come and walk with me and cut open the bellies of rotten salmon to detect their sex. Come and walk with me. Count with me. Hack their tails so they won't be recounted. You can't escape the smell. This is a real-life situation. It's not a book; it's not pretend. It's not something you read about that happened a hundred years ago. It's happening right now, today. To people in my life. Maybe all your rancher and farmer friends up there don't understand that. You tell them to get the hell down here and help us clean up this mess that they helped make.<sup>30</sup>

While there is nothing that Tim can do or say in the moment, he is affected by Will's words, and the play maps this change in several subsequent scenes. In one, Tim explains to Kate, who has come to visit to advocate on behalf of Karuk water rights, that settler/Indigenous relations are complicated by generations of violence:

TIM: People up here are just scared, Kate. A lot went down during the time of Termination. [...] Klamath Tribal land used to extend "from mountain top to mountain top."

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30 May, "Salmon Is Everything," 76-77.

Then came the Dawes Act that tried to make Indians into farmers. Whites like my great-grandfather started buyin' up allotments; that's how we came by these acres. Then in the 1950s the federal government terminated the last of the Klamath Reservation. [...] We have a history of violence at a level no one talks about. There's a lot of shame around it.<sup>31</sup>

Here Tim demonstrates his knowledge of settler history and its impact on the people on whose homeland he resides. This and a later scene also demonstrate the obligation of settlers to teach one another that history, and to work through their own settler grief toward reparative action.

That action comes in the acknowledgment of reciprocity not only between humans and the land, but also between Indigenous and settler communities. The play comes full circle back to Alice's original story about coming to the land.

ALICE: In my mind it was all about coming to this place, the natural beauty, and fixing the River. Fixing everything. Showing, in some way, with an angry determination, that really agriculture and rivers could live together. The opportunities to change the place were unlimited. Drag tires and washers out of the spring. Paint the old dingy house. Move cattle from here to there and then back over here. Don't let them eat the new willows. Fence the River. Dig thistles. Clean the shop. Chainsaw down the old fence, build some new fence. Bring people together. Change the place. The hardest realization for me is that what's really changing is me. This is a bit *unsettling*....<sup>32</sup>

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31 May, "Salmon Is Everything," 78.

32 May, "Salmon Is Everything," 81.

This time, she remembers whose land she shares. Alice begins to unsettle herself with the memory of the generosity of a particular Klamath neighbor who gave her a traditional cradleboard to calm her child:

ALICE: How does one put into words the special nature of such a gift? How does one begin to give back? [...] I know what it's like when the sandhill cranes return to the Sycan Marsh—a marsh we irrigate. It's like a miracle. Miles of silver shining wings. A visitation of spirit. I'd grab you and little Greg and say, "Look! There they are! The good Lord sent the cranes back to us again!" But I don't know what it's like when the Salmon return. [...]

TIM: We can imagine. We can imagine what it might be like to have those Salmon returning, not just to the Klamath River, but to the Sycan River. I can feel the excitement for what it might be like to have them come. To be a hungry seven-year-old boy—and have them come.<sup>33</sup>

In the end, a play that was purposed to tell the story of actual events and accurately represent history, even if through fictional composite characters, returns to imagination as a location of activism. Empathy, after all, is an imagiNative act. As First Nations dramatist Monique Mojica affirms, this envisioning potential of theater is actualized in the embodied, present-time performance itself:

[B]y performing possible worlds into being . . . by embodying that wholeness on the stage, we can transform the stories that we tell ourselves and project into the world that which is not broken, that which can be sustained, not only for Aboriginal people, but for

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<sup>33</sup> May, "Salmon Is Everything," 85.

all people of this small, green planet.<sup>34</sup>

As Alice and Tim discuss their financial options in the ongoing drought, they make a radical decision to place their land under a conservation easement in collaboration with the Klamath Tribes. Even when the play was written in (2004-06) this was not as fantastical as it may seem. Indeed, a ranching family in the Upper Klamath was already pursuing such a plan.<sup>35</sup>

In the next scene Tim calls Julie and makes a promise, sealing it not with legal documents, but with a symbolic, performative act:

TIM: When that first salmon comes, I want you to call me. Call me and tell me, okay? Would you do that? And on that day, I'm going to go down to the pivot field and turn off my irrigation for the day. And if the main pump is running, I'll turn it off too. Then, we're going to call our friends who irrigate down in the Scott Valley and they're going to turn their pumps off. And I'm going to call Walt in the Klamath Project and he's agreed to turn his water off for a day. And he's going to call the members of the Water Users Association and they're all gonna turn their water off on that day. A dozen admin folks who work for the City of Klamath Falls are going to fill milk jugs with water from the tap in their house and drive it down to the edge of the Klamath River and dump it in. Don't laugh. I know it's more an act of love than of water. It's holding another place tight, holding other families tight.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Monique Mojica and Ric Knowles, "Creation Story Begins Again: Performing Transformative, Bridging Cosmologies," in *Performing Worlds into Being: Native American Women's Theater*, ed. by Ann Elizabeth Armstrong, Kelli Lyon, and William A. Wortman (Oxford, OH: Miami University Press, 2009), 2.

<sup>35</sup> Mary Christina Wood and Zachary Welcker, "Tribes as Trustees Again (Part I): The Emerging Tribal Role in Conservation Trust Movement." *Harvard Environmental Law Review* 32:1 (2008), 373-432.

<sup>36</sup> May, "Salmon Is Everything," 85.

Tim casts a vision of a possible world to the audience, inviting them to imagine the watershed (or the world) as it might be. This too is the activism of theater as storytelling, to collectively imagine and to stand and speak for a different, more holistic, future.

REPORTER: Here in the Upper Klamath, some say a handful of farmers and ranchers have lost their marbles. What will one day of water do for the salmon struggling up the Klamath? Spokespersons say that this show of solidarity with fish and Tribal people will be symbolic at first, but that others who hear the news will do what they can, in their way, on that day, when the fish come back.

With this vision of a revitalized future seeded in the imaginations of the audience, the play concludes with a return to the words of the Elder as she gathers her family in prayer:

ROSE: When I was a child, the River gave me a prayer: “I am alive in you and I am the source of your hope. Every time someone appreciates my stillness, my beauty and peace, eats the food that I offer, cares for the vegetation and the wild animals that I sustain—every moment of your gratefulness is my renewal.”

LOUISE: Sacred were gifts that were given to us by Creator at that time of the spirit people.

JULIE: Sacred are the stories that we were given from our Elders.

ROSE: Sacred is our prayer medicine.

ZEEK: Sacred is my relative, the Salmon.<sup>37</sup>

The play closes here with an affirmation of kinship preserved

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<sup>37</sup> May, “Salmon Is Everything,” 89.

and honored through ceremony.

As Indigenous activism *Salmon Is Everything* actualizes and embodies Indigenous methodologies not just as critical frameworks, but as *lifework*. In *Research as Ceremony*, Shawn Wilson writes, “if your research does not change you, you’re not doing it right.”<sup>38</sup>

Demonstrated as modes of being-in-relation, Indigenous ways of working are evident in the relationship among characters in the play, but also, importantly, in the methods employed in its creation and in the many public readings and performances of the play. The spirit of collaboration, consultation, and reciprocity during the development of *Salmon Is Everything* lives on in the current circles of relation that the play continues to open between those who play the roles and those whose words and actions created those roles; between the stories of loss, reclamation and sovereignty that make up the text of the play, and those who speak those words now, nearly twenty years later. In “Becoming Rose,” Marta observes:

As we learned our lines and remembered where to stand or sit; as we learned our dances, and practiced the Lamentation, we began to feel the importance of the story we were telling, right down to our bones. The responsibility of telling the story of the people on the Klamath River, and the Salmon they depended on for their physical, spiritual, and cultural existence had the power to take this group of 17 people who didn’t know each other and make us what I started to call a “Salmon family.” Once we all truly understood and had faith in the purpose of the production, learning my lines was so much easier. It was a huge amount of work, but a labor of love.<sup>39</sup>

Like salmon swimming upstream Klamath River tribes today

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<sup>38</sup> Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing), 83.

<sup>39</sup> Marta Lu Clifford, “Becoming Rose,” in *Salmon Is Everything: Community-based Theatre in the Klamath Watershed*, ed. by Theresa May (Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press, 2019), 107.

are still engaged in a struggle for water rights, traditional lifeways, and legal jurisdiction. As Gordon Bettles writes, “the play is only part of a larger drama that is still unfolding, one that will not be complete until the dams on the Klamath river are decommissioned and taken down, and the Salmon that once flourished throughout the watershed are allowed to return.”<sup>40</sup> After a decade of struggle and negotiation, two agreements were reached in 2010; but when these failed to gain Congressional funding, the Karuk Tribe, together with other river stakeholders, formed the Klamath River Renewal Corporation, a 501(c)3 nonprofit corporation that would take ownership of four dams and carry out the project of dam removal.<sup>41</sup> No federal funds required. The new KRRC is a dynamic example of Tribal sovereignty, civic tenacity, and common sense working toward a more just and sustainable future.<sup>42</sup>

Awareness of the effects of colonialism must be followed by proactive work. In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith urges research and creative work that serve the forward-looking needs and goals of Indigenous communities. It is not enough, she argues, for scholars to name and narrate the injustices of the past. While such recognition “provides words, perhaps, an insight that explains certain experiences ... it does not prevent someone from dying.”<sup>43</sup> *Salmon Is Everything* is an example of how collaborative

40 Bettles, “When Cultures Collide,” xvi.

41 Craig Tucker, “Klamath Update: Dam Removal Under a New Administration.” *Osprey* Vol. 87, 12-14, March 2017.

42 In September 2009, Klamath watershed stakeholders reached two historic agreements designed to lead to the removal of four dams, the restoration of water flow for fish, as well as allocations of water for farmers: the Klamath Basin Restoration Agreement and the Klamath Hydroelectric Settlement Agreement. Some argued that these agreements did not guarantee adequate water for the salmon during drought years, while others claimed that landowners would be deprived of their property rights. Nevertheless, the agreements were heralded by the New York Times on February 9, 2010, as a “stunning example of how cooperation and partnership can resolve difficult conflicts.”

43 Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. (London and New York: Zed Books Ltd., 1999), 3.

art-making (in this case theatre) can contribute to the revitalization of Indigenous knowledge and lifeways. The play works toward many of the indigenizing projects that Smith outlines: it is testament to the way that stories are modes of learning and knowledge-sharing; it foregrounds the voice of community and family; it centers women’s knowledge and experiences; it champions kinship as a responsibility across time and species; it envisions a future in which Indigenous lifeways thrive; and it demands deep listening. As it represents multiple points of view and maps how characters are changed by coming into relation with one another, it asks those who listen to change also.

In telling a complex community story, *Salmon Is Everything* has become not only a play about an historic event, but a vehicle for cultural revitalization in the present. The play emerges from Indigenous knowledge, which include Native languages in the form of prayer and songs, a connection to place that acknowledges the Indigenous history and culture, traditional cultural and ecological knowledge that is centered in your own personal lived history, and stories as the vehicles for sustaining spirituality and values. Margaret Kovach observes that a Tribal-based approach to study or creative work means “start where you are and it will take you where you need to go.”<sup>44</sup> As we organized the reading for the Western Humanities Alliance conference, bringing together students, faculty, staff, and community members both Native and non-Native, we again saw the way the play had a life of its own. Cherokee dramatist Diane Glancy writes that “there are stories that take seven days to tell” and there are “other stories that take you all your life.”<sup>45</sup> Speaking for myself (Marta), *Salmon Is Everything*

44 Margaret Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts*. (University of Toronto Press, 2010), 10.

45 Diane Glancy, *The West Pole* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 70.

will take the rest of my life to tell and share with the world. I never get tired of sharing the words of wisdom from Rose. This is a play that tells the stories of traditional customs and lifeways, a play that will help us to stop self-destructive behavior and return to traditional values of community and family. Or, as Leslie Marmon Silko writes in *Ceremony*, stories “aren’t just entertainment. Don’t be fooled. They are all we have you see all we have to fight off illness and death. You don’t have anything if you don’t have the stories.”<sup>46</sup> Thomas King writes that once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world. This is what has happened with *Salmon Is Everything*. Twice told on stage in fully realized productions, and through numerous concert readings, it is loose in the world. We hope that it has a lasting effect on those who heard it at the Western Humanities Alliance conference last fall. King also reminds us that once we have heard a story we cannot pretend that we haven’t heard it. “Do with it what you will. ... Just don’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You have heard it now.”<sup>47</sup> What will you do with it?

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<sup>46</sup> Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), 2.

<sup>47</sup> Thomas King, *The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 2003), 167.

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