

GOATS, POTATOES, & LAKES

Reflections on Adaptation, Learning, and Leadership
in Rural Minnesota

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LiA Report

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Emma would like to extend her immense thanks to the Laidlaw Foundation for the many experiences, friends, and lessons that have been enabled by the generosity of the program and staff. She is deeply grateful for the staff, coordinators, and mentors that have guided her along the way and ensured her personal and professional growth through this unique opportunity. Emma would also like to thank her fellow scholars for their love and support throughout the program—their friendship, intellectual contributions, humor, and empathy have been invaluable along the way.



When I attempt to recount the activities of this summer to colleagues, friends, and family, the expression on their faces often begins with pure bewilderment.

It probably doesn't help that I answer questions about my time in Minnesota with broad remarks about goats, potatoes, and lakes. These three things have occupied valuable real estate in my mind, and time, over the past couple of months. Humorous and light-hearted as many of these conversations were, the work that I became a part of this summer was deeply meaningful and transformative. Living and working, for the first time, on an Indigenous reservation, learning from the community, and contributing what I could to an ongoing fight for life and environmental justice made for an unforgettable and invaluable experience.

My work this summer involved the researching and writing of an updated report on the assault of industrial agriculture and potato production on the people and environment of the Pineland Sands region in Northwestern Minnesota. In this report, I outline key findings of my research this summer, also reflecting on the nature of the work itself and lessons learned from living in a space that was both didactically valuable and challenging. I describe the context from which this work is derived and where my involvement with it began, also discussing how the work might continue upon my departure.

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

I first became interested in working with Winona LaDuke after reading a journal article that she had co-authored with Toronto-based geography scholar, Deborah Cowen. In the article, titled *Beyond Wiindigo Infrastructure*, Cowen and LaDuke describe how settler colonial systems are premised upon and enacted through the creation of infrastructure. Comparing settler colonial infrastructure to the Ojibwe cannibal of legend, the Wiindigo, the authors describe how the monster can be slain—through the rejection of destructive systems for infrastructure that replenished Indigenous communities, while preserving the land and environment and ensuring sustainable and equitable futures. Some of the many examples provided of such projects were run by LaDuke herself on the White Earth Reservation.

Prior to my arrival, LaDuke had shared some information about an industrial farmer who had severely impacted the ecosystem and threatened ways of life on and around the reservation. The document that she sent me was entitled, *Potatoes, Frogs, and Water*. Written in 2002, it described how R.D. Offutt, an integrated potato grower, processor, and equipment retailer (among other things), had poisoned water, harmed life, and contributed to a long legacy of land dispossession and environmental degradation in Northern Minnesota. Twenty years later, the same patterns are still evident all across the regions, and to make matters worse, the tribe faces a lawsuit from the company for a water ordinance that they passed in 2023. As such, the task at hand was to update this report with new stories, evidence, and material—carrying the throughline from the original narrative, while providing a compelling, contemporary document.

Going into my time at White Earth, I didn't want to be overly prescriptive about a project. Instead, over the first few weeks, I spoke with my host, learned from being on site, and continued to read and research as prompted. It was not until around the third week that I began working more intensely on the aforementioned report, using the experience of the first weeks' adjustment to situate myself in the broader geography and context of the subject.

WORK & IMPACT

My work this summer has involved the research and writing of a multifaceted report. This comprised many steps, akin to investigation carried out in former research projects—from project definition (and continuous re-definition and refinement), to reviews of existing articles, reports, and information. The report comprises nine chapters, divided into three sections on context, impacts, and ways forward. Between treaty rights and legal doctrines, pesticide usage, and covert business strategies, each section focuses on different aspects of the issue. Structuring the report in this way allows for each chapter to be read as either a part of the whole, or as a topical article—creating potentials for future authors or contributors to elaborate on topics of interest, or modify sections of the report for different audiences. In its final form, the document will be disseminated in the community and network, with hopes of further challenging Offutt through spreading awareness of their impacts in the region and future campaigns.



As a student of architecture and urban planning, the majority of my training focuses on urban subjects. From zoning and building heights to public plazas and monuments, I have been broadly exposed to urban theory, concepts, and research, but almost never to ideas about rural life or environment. In other words, this experience effectively removed the aspect of “building” from a “built environment” student, much to my initial hesitance. And yet, the work intersected with many of the ideas that I had formerly engaged with in environmental geography and political ecology—ideas about governance and who controlled power in a given system, about how society and nature work hand-in-hand to influence each other, about evaluating industrial actors against artisanal ones in conversations about climate change. All of these ideas found real-world parallels in the investigations of this summer.

Throughout this project, I was also forced outside my disciplines of comfort—making gradual explorations into legal precedence and hydrogeological reports. At first, eager and perhaps a bit overconfident, I dove headfirst into primary sources—believing that I could immediately digest and somehow output the hundreds of pages that comprised some case files and reports. It wasn’t long before I became overwhelmed and discouraged by the terminology, new quantitative models, and extensive details. Finding secondary sources and articles allowed me to find essential context and begin to understand how different stories, perspectives, and data fit together.

Working with LaDuke proved to be a chaotic whirlwind of excitement, confusion, and the occasional epiphany. The plethora of organizations she has been involved in founding, operating, and directing is extensive. From hemp-growing to Indigenous agriculture to land-back movements and a treaty museum, there was never any shortage of work to be done. I quickly found that while establishing clean energy and solar infrastructure is one thing, creating organizational and social infrastructure can be equally as important. Between my main project for the summer, I also assisted with the designing of packaging and labels for a farmer’s market, interim accounting and invoicing, along with a number of administrative tasks that I quickly developed a skill set for. Being part of this environment required a sort of flexibility that I was only partially prepared for, but stretched me nonetheless.

Goal-setting in this context proved to be immensely challenging, as it often felt that deliverables could be fluid, or not yet fully-defined. Rather than making longer-term SMART goals, much of the strategic planning of the summer involved the iterative creation of digital to-do lists, complemented by scratched out items on a notepad. Beyond the chaos of the moment, I eventually developed a timeline and plan for the creation of the report. Planning out days that I needed to research, read, and write, I marked off days in my calendar as ‘focus time,’ eschewing activities with others to work. This ended up backfiring, as I eventually learned—the hard way—how to manage my energy. Eventually, this led me to return home to write up the majority of the report and process my findings—a decision that fell far outside the scope of my initial goal-setting, but one that proved deeply necessary.



EVERYDAY LIFE & LESSONS

One aspect that I far underestimated was the difference in day-to-day life. Everything from my circadian rhythm to my (already floundering) exercise routine and eating habits shifted. In this context, maintaining my mental health and productivity became a variably difficult task—some days felt much easier than others, but in the end, almost every day felt significantly more challenging than life at home in the city. Being in the middle of the country, necessities were less accessible, as were “third spaces” outside of my bedroom and the main house. Being a chronic pedestrian, I had almost no means of leaving the property, which often left me feeling incapacitated, or at the very least left me dependent on others.

I’ve long struggled with mental health and being in a challenging environment pushed me further than I am used to. Prior to my time in Minnesota, I hadn’t anticipated significant friction and had thought that I would (somehow) perfectly adapt to my new environment in record time. In hindsight, I don’t think I ever adjusted to the degree that I had initially imagined. I had spoken with a friend on the reservation about learning and processing, and how these two acts—both integral to the learning process—often had to be done independently. Being on site exposed me to a number of lessons and environments that I don’t think I fully processed and reflected upon until after leaving the state.



Beyond everyday challenges, I learned much from the three subjects of my recurring conversations: goats, potatoes, and lakes.

Goats were a ubiquitous presence—with an initial population of seven growing to a herd of fifteen over the course of a few weeks. The goats, lovingly raised by the interns on site, were part of a halal meat cooperative that aims to close the gap between new immigrants and their cultural food supply. As LaDuke puts it, connecting Indigenous farmers with the growing Muslim community is a way to build relationships, while also realizing food sovereignty together. From the goats, I not only learned reciprocity, but also what aspects of care look like. Pruning tree branches, shaking pans of grain, and feeding the animals with a specialized ‘pepto bismol’ (don’t ask) were all part of daily rituals that I sporadically partook in, but mostly observed. Caring for goats was a process full of laughter, joy, and the occasional meme (envision brat, but with goat instead).

Potatoes truly formed the majority of my involvement in the community—a simple staple gone wrong. Similarly to the goats, writing about industrial agriculture required me to be more mindful about where my own food came from and which systems I support with my consumption. Witnessing the labor and the many growing processes that went into small-scale farming, I learned that crops are so much more than the manifestation of their harvest. Of course, this is easy to forget when one bags root vegetables at the grocery store, but having the opportunity to understand how a simple choice or designation—rather organic, non-GMO, or locally grown—can impact the environment and people who are involved where the food is grown, is invaluable. Writing about potatoes—and everything that goes into their industrial growth—has opened my eyes to a system that I was not formerly as aware of, and allowed me to learn, on a firsthand basis, the many ways in which food production and social justice intersect.

Lakes came to symbolize a newfound appreciation and connection with nature. From my initial discomfort and avoidance of lakes to an eventual embrace of their presence, my relationship with the water changed immensely over the course of a few weeks. Where I was first fearful of the murky shallows, the aquatic life, and the seemingly endless forests of kelp and algae, I grew to associate this environment with the joy that felt spending time with my friends and colleagues on the water, and the life that the community had fought to protect. Learning about the wild rice and sturgeon that grew and flourished in the lakes due to the persistent action of the Indigenous community and our own organizations instilled a sense of awe for the greater project that we were part of.

Despite spending the majority of the time at one location—at a lake house farm location in Ponsford, Minnesota—we visited many locations. The two closest, Park Rapids and Detroit Lakes, were not only the destination of grocery trips and days out (sometimes working in a cafe for a change of scenery), but also the subject of the report I was writing over the summer. Familiarizing myself with these geographies allowed me to better understand and situate the places and people of this work. Within Park Rapids, a forty minute drive from the main location, LaDuke also curates a museum—with exhibits about treaty rights and Anishinaabe culture. Originally a library before it was claimed by the energy company Enbridge, the reclaiming of the building as a museum is not only symbolic, but a literal reclaiming of space for the community on a prominent corner in a town owned by the potato company.

Finally, I don't suppose an account of daily life would be complete without a recognition of time spent in the car. Whether long road trips to Fargo or Red Lake, or shorter rides to nearby towns, drives were opportunities for reflection. Sometimes alone and many times with others, I often benefited from conversations about difficult situations, encounters, or problems that I was facing. While driving in the city typically feels claustrophobic and draining, trips along the country roads often felt liberating and peaceful—a space of transition, as well as one in and of itself.



CONCLUSION

Working on and alongside members of the White Earth community proved to be an eye-opening experience. Learning about Indigenous ways of life and knowing from tribal members and leaders themselves was enriching and educational. It was incredible to hear their accounts of how the land has changed, and to be present as they describe the rehabilitation of the landscape, the wild rice, and fish of the lakes. In addition to real-world land-back activism and practices, Winona LaDuke speaks often about what it means to be a water protector—to stand for the life that is reliant upon and existing within critical bodies of water. While we visited the reservation, we became familiar with some of these—Shell Lake, Round Lake, the Straight River. Still, we learned of even further instances in which protecting water was necessary—in the cases of leaking pipelines, industrial farming practices, and cattle ranching. To be a water protector has always been LaDuke’s calling, and it was a privilege to learn from her activism and work.

In the end, I am grateful. Despite hardship, unexpected circumstances, and perpetual uncertainty, I have learned more than I could have imagined and am better for it. It is my hope that the short time that I spent in the unincorporated community of Ponsford, Minnesota, might contribute a valuable drop in the bucket for the people of the broader region. For those fighting a larger, longer fight against the unrelenting force of industrial agriculture, I hope that this work contributes to the turning of tides away from environmental devastation and towards regeneration and rebirth. Agriculture and food systems are a backbone for all that they supply—I learned that much this summer. Knowing where food comes from, the different ways in which it is grown, and how it can potentially alter the climate—for the better or worse—are all valuable lessons that I have experienced firsthand through parallel experiences with small farmers, and in research for the report.

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White Earth Reservation, MN

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